

Serves 'em right!

Human rights
19/1/02 DAWN

By Irfan Husain

ARE human rights divisible? Are certain people more deserving of sympathy and support than others? Or, to draw from George Orwell's "Animal farm", are some animals more equal than others?

To judge by the treatment of Taliban and Al-Qaeda prisoners at the hands of American forces, the answer to these questions would have to be an unqualified 'yes'. As scores of prisoners are transported, drugged and with their heads in burlap bags, to a base in Cuba, human rights groups in Pakistan have been curiously silent. Whatever protest there has been has been limited to the western media. Similarly, the current draconian crackdown on suspected Islamic activists has not been met with any objections from any quarter except for a handful of religious leaders despite the dubious legality of these widespread arrests.

Similarly, when hundreds of prisoners were bombed to bits in Mazar-i-Sharif, or when detainees in Kandahar, transported in sealed containers, suffocated to death, there was very little anger or indignation at these gross human rights abuses. Collateral damage? Civilian casualties? Forget about it. We have stopped counting the innocent men, women and children in Afghanistan who have paid with their lives for the September 11 attacks.

Our callous attitude is a reflection of the polarization in our society between a small, vocal and scattered secular minority that is confronting a violent and well-organized fundamentalist lobby. For decades now, they have been trying to set their own agenda for Pakistan and over

the last twenty years, it seemed that the liberal cause was lost. However, the reactionary parties overreached themselves in their arrogance over both Afghanistan and Kashmir, and suddenly find themselves without official patronage and at the receiving end of the army's jackboot.

After years of being hounded by these elements, the liberal and secular forces can perhaps be excused their barely-muted glee over the predicament of the mullahs. Despite their relatively small numbers, it is these people who have developed whatever human rights activism has taken root in the barren soil of Pakistan. Reviled and condemned as 'western agents' by government ministers and fundamentalists, these brave souls have long been the conscience of this nation against great odds. So if they quietly mutter "serves them right!", they can be forgiven this expression of malice.

It is true that we are all highly selective in our support of the downtrodden and our condemnation of the oppressor. Thus, while our blood boils at the barbaric treatment meted out to the Palestinians by Israeli authorities, how moved are we by the plight of, say, the Tutsis in Rwanda? In numerical terms, this tribe has suffered far more casualties than the Palestinians, and yet I do not recall a single demonstration in their support.

History, religion and geography often combine to determine our sympathies. But more importantly, we tend to rally round a victim if he is 'one of us'. Thus, when Najma Sethi, editor of Lahore's *Friday Times*, was picked up one night three years ago by Nawaz Sharif's goons and illegal confined for nearly a month, there was an uproar. There were demonstrations, editorials and protests from govern-

ments and organizations abroad. Eminent lawyers, journalists and human rights activists jumped into the fray. And rightly so, as the free press in Pakistan was seen as being under attack.

But when religious extremists are subjected to such high-handed official action, there is little or no outcry. The reason, of course, is that they are viewed as the biggest human rights violators themselves. Indeed, these people have scant regard or respect for democratic norms and resort to vilification and violence to forward their agendas. Loud, vociferous and often dangerous, they drown out and intimidate the voices of liberalism and secularism.

Mercifully, religious parties have been rejected time and again whenever elections are held in Pakistan. Indeed, they have yet to gain over five per cent of the popular vote or have over half a dozen members in the National Assembly. Their repeated electoral failure has made it clear that they cannot come to power through the ballot box, and hence their readiness to hitch their star to military juntas and right-wing political groupings. But fundamentally, they have no respect for democracy. Indeed, Islamic groups the world over have shown their contempt for the rule of the majority as well as parliamentary institutions. They feel they have a God-given right to trample over individual liberties to further their cause.

Given these attitudes, it is difficult to see how such groups and individuals can be accommodated in a democratic dispensation. Since they do not recognize the right of elected, secular parties to govern, they are an immensely destabilizing force, and one that has been used in the past by the ISI as well as disgruntled and defeated politicians to topple

elected governments. Their assumption of a divine mandate makes it difficult to conduct a dialogue or a debate with them.

And yet, despite their limited numbers and support, they have managed to shift the politics of Pakistan towards the religious right. This is as much a victory for them as it is a defeat for secular elements which, largely through their own incompetence and lack of spine, have been pushed into a corner. The current drive to contain extremism is an opportunity for them to get their act together and fight the forces of darkness. Basically, they need to emerge from their drawing rooms and actively engage in the political process.

It is entirely fitting that a military ruler should put the fundamentalist genie back into the bottle after a predecessor had let it loose. Zia, in order to create a constituency for himself, had cynically encouraged the rise of the most fundamentalist elements in the land. After his unlamented exit, his civilian successors sucked up to these parties instead of marginalizing them. The ISI behind the scenes used them in Afghanistan and Kashmir, thereby strengthening them in every way.

But just as we thought all was lost, a conjunction of external and internal forces and pressures has given us one last opportunity to cleanse the system of this clear and present danger. A precondition is that the political party that forms the government after elections this year must ensure that it supports the current crackdown, and does not knuckle under to extremist rhetoric and threats.

Meanwhile, if any human rights groups are planning a demo for the release of the hundreds of jihadis in unlawful confinement, I hope they won't wait for me to turn up.