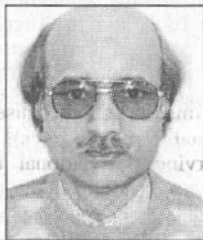


# The elusive Ummah — II

## THINKING ALOUD



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IT IS NOT JUST NON-MUSLIM MINORITIES that get short shrift in Islamic countries, but Muslim ethno-linguistic and sectarian minorities as well.

In 1974, the Pakistan National Assembly declared Ahmadis, who profess to be Muslims, non-Muslims. This must be the only instance in the history of the world where an elected national parliament legislated to excommunicate a religious sect. Powerful mainstream religious parties are now threatening a "worse fate" for the Aga Khani sect. Fringe extremist groups already make no secret of their wish to see Shias expelled from the fold of Islam as well.

Accusing them of rebellion, Pakistan officially unleashed a reign of terror in 1971 against Bengali Muslims inhabiting its eastern province. Despite widespread human rights abuses committed by Pakistani forces in Bangladesh and the recommendations of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report, not a single offender was ever prosecuted.

For its part, Bangladesh, which now likes to advertise its Islamic identity, refuses to grant the 300,000 or so stranded "Bihari" Muslims citizenship rights, although they have now lived there for many generations. Most were born there and know no other country. They are unwelcome in Pakistan, to which they profess allegiance. There is no place for them in the vast Ummah, although some of its member-countries happen to be rich in cash but short of manpower.

The Hazaras of Afghanistan suffered persecution under the Taliban regime on account of their being doubly detestable, an ethnic and a sectarian minority (Shia) at the same time. The Shia minority in Saudi Arabia is banned from building mosques and commemorating Ashura. According to a Shia cleric, "my son studies a syllabus which says he is an infidel."

In Indonesia, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) is fighting a guerrilla war against the government since 1976, seeking independence for the 4.2

million Acehnese. It is believed that GAM had the covert support of both Libya and Iran in the 1980s.

The indigenous Berbers of Morocco and Algeria, who constitute 40 and 30 percent of their respective populations, are struggling to preserve the little that remains of their language and culture. In both countries the Berber language was officially taboo until a few years ago. For the Berbers, centuries of Islamisation has been synonymous with Arabisation, leading to the virtual extinction of their cultural entity.

Iran has so thoroughly been Persianised by the ruling Persian-speaking elite that it should come as a surprise to many readers that only one in two Iranians is ethnically Persian. Among the many Muslim ethnic minorities that suffer discrimination in Iran are the Kurds, Ahwazis, Baloch and Turkmen.

Palestinians constitute more than half of the population of Jordan, but they are by and large excluded from administrative and defence posts, which are held by the native Bedouins. To Jordan's credit, however, Palestinians there have been granted citizenship rights, denied to them in the other Arab and Gulf states, where many of them were born and most have lived and worked for decades.

But while the Ummah works itself into a frenzy over the plight of Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza (numbering less than four million), it remains silent about the discrimination the large Palestinian communities face in the Arab countries, as well as about the plight of such Muslim ethno-linguistic minorities as the Kurds (20-25 million) and Darfuris (over three million) within the Ummah.

Kurds comprise 20 percent of the populations of both Turkey and Iraq and five-eighth percent in Iran and Syria. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein bombed and gassed them. In Turkey it was illegal, until a few years ago, even to sing songs in the Kurdish lan-

guage. In Iran, Kurds survive at the sufferance of the Persian majority. Syria, which perceives them as a security threat, has revoked the citizenship of tens of thousands of Kurds under one pretext or another.

Muslims of the Darfur region of Sudan are presently the victims of a frenetic campaign of murder, rape and eviction organised by the Sudanese government itself. According to some estimates, up to 300,000 people may have died there in the last two years.

It should hardly surprise us that governments which treat their own Muslim ethnic or sectarian minorities so abysmally, are wont to regard expatriate labourers from poorer Muslim countries as only slightly better than slaves.

Usually paid below their contracted salaries and entitlements under one pretext or another and forced to work long hours, they are denied all recourse to legal, professional and personal rights, and virtually kept captives as their passports are taken away from them by their employers. Mass deportations are routine.

In the event of any crisis in relations between two Muslim countries, expatriate workers are usually the first victims. In 1985, according to one report, "for reasons that appeared more political than economic, Libya expelled tens of thousands of workers, including 20,000 Egyptians, 32,000 Tunisians, and several thousand from Mali and Niger. This exodus continued the following year when some 25,000 Moroccans were forced to depart." Many were given only 48 hours to leave and were forced to camp in and travel through vast stretches of treacherous desert.

After the liberation of Kuwait in 1990, Palestinians settled there for decades were expelled en masse as payback for Yasser Arafat's support for the Iraqi invasion. The same fate befell Yemenis living in Saudi Arabia and for the same reason. Hitherto allowed to work and settle freely in the Kingdom,

over 800,000 Yemenis were suddenly expelled after a royal Saudi decree of 1990 subjected them to the standard rules for immigrants.

Of the million or so illegal immigrants in Malaysia, most are fellow-Muslims from relatively poor Indonesia. Preferred by Malaysian employers as they work for lower wages under dismal conditions as well as for their linguistic affinity, Indonesians constitute about 70 percent of the labour force in the construction and manufacturing industries. It is estimated that over a third of Malaysian prison inmates are Indonesians. Malaysia has gone so far as to implement a "hire Indonesians last" policy, regardless of its pronounced preference for the Ummah in everything else.

Bangladeshis in Malaysia have fared even worse. Following a spate of marriages between Malay women and Bangladeshi migrant workers, in 2001 Malaysia promulgated a law banning such marriages. Later, it altogether stopped further migrant worker intake from the "brotherly Ummah" state of Bangladesh.

Contrast this with the West, where legal immigrants are given full rights as soon as they land and are granted citizenship according to non-discriminatory procedures clearly laid down in law. Inter-racial and inter-religious marriages are the norm rather than the exception. Amnesties are periodically offered to illegal immigrants who satisfy certain criteria and mass deportations are unknown. Millions of erstwhile illegal immigrants, Muslims and non-Muslims, now live in Western countries exercising all the rights and enjoying all the privileges that flow from citizenship.

*This is the second in a series of four articles. The first appeared on March 3, 2005. The third episode will look into the issue of succession in Muslim countries. The author is a freelance writer. He may be contacted at [raziazmi@hotmail.com](mailto:raziazmi@hotmail.com)*