

Dialogue among civilisations

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Too much has been written and spoken on the clash of cultures and civilisations and the grounds on which wars in future might occur. Although there are other cultures and civilisations besides, Christianity and Islam, the focus of debate or controversy has remained mainly on the relationship between the West and the Islamic societies. The debate has attracted great deal of attention and invoked tremendous interest because of the changes that have taken place in the world system and the responses or lack of them from the Islamic countries. The changes that we have witnessed are phenomenal, affecting Islam, Muslims and the Islamic countries. The challenges that we confront are greater than does any other community in the new world order for two reasons.

First, conservative sectors of western societies that have grown strong in recent years have launched a campaign to malign Islam and Muslims after the tragedy of September 11. They have put in use many effective channels from media to legislatures, think tanks and influential lobbies. Second, driven by political and security interests, the campaigners against Islam blur the distinction between societies in Islamic countries at large and the minority of Islamic militants among them.

They also deliberately confuse legitimate resistance against state oppression with terrorism. The old stereotypes against Muslim societies have found new expressions that brand them as violent, anti-west, against progress, liberal ideas and democracy. Some of the notorious anti-Muslim scholars have argued that Islamic societies are inherently incapable of transforming themselves according to the principles of democracy. Others extend this irrational line to all developing countries insisting that the western democratic experience and political institutions are unique and that they cannot be replicated anywhere else.

Another reason why the Muslim countries are more at the receiving end of the stick than others is the nature of responses to oppression and injustice against them. How should peoples and societies oppressed and disposed of their land, human dignity and power to control their affairs respond invokes different answers. This is a common dilemma of all of them no matter what is their religion or nationality. Armed struggle for national liberation has been an accepted principle of international law and many nations used this as the most effective means to end colonial domination. National liberation movements in the Islamic lands were no exceptions. With the changes in the international environment, these struggles, however, face greater challenge of acceptance, legitimacy and recognition than before. Not only have their oppressors become more oppressive with a strong sentiment against Islamic militancy, but also the attitude of western nations toward territorial and national disputes involving the Muslims has grown more indifferent than in the previous



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decades. Many of the Muslim political activists, intellectuals and even rulers have argued that the western approach toward territorial disputes involving the Muslims was already biased. They watched brutalities in Palestine, Chechnya, Bosnia and Kosovo on the sidelines and did very little and that also too late to do anything to avert massacres, genocides and ethnic cleansing.

Frustration and deep disappointment with the world bodies and great powers to settle these problems justly and fairly has fuelled radicalism and militancy in the Islamic

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societies. Anti-Americanism has also surged because of its unconditional support to Israel and endorsement of its brutal policies, provoking some of the groups to attack American and western interests wherever they can. This is not a rational but an impulsive response to oppression and injustice, which would further weaken Islamic societies. There is a misperception, particularly in the ranks of the religious groups, that only militancy would force the western nations to reconsider their position on Palestine and other issues. The danger in such thinking is that it would sap the energies of the Islamic societies and make them more vulnerable than ever before.

Cultivating confrontation with the west is a trap. Not only the conservatives in the religious right in the west but also the nations confronting resistance movements of Muslims populations would like to see confrontation between Islam and the west deepen. Only they would benefit and succeed in advancing their interests and political agendas, not the Muslims societies. Internally weak, fragmented, under-developed and ruled by authoritarian cliques and ex-

ternally without bonds of integrative institutions among them, the Islamic countries would collectively stand to lose. The sources of Muslim rage are too obvious and well known, and so are our vulnerabilities.

What we need is cool, calculated and rational response that would contribute to our strength and not weaken and fragment us more. For this, first we must redefine the question of power and how we can attain this. A common folly about power is that it is considered synonymous with military capabilities, both of private groups and the states. Its roots, however, lie deep in the development of science and technology and economic progress. Social cohesion, stable and functioning political institutions and representative legitimacy are the most recognised tools to achieve progress. The present conditions in most of the Islamic societies don't give us much confidence and hope about our ability to restructure and reform ourselves. How to go about them would require institutions through which some consensus or contract can be reached. This would be possible only through empowerment of the people, democracy and rule of law. These essentials of modern polities have evaded most of the Islamic countries, because the vested interests would allow democratic change to take place.

In my judgement, there is no other process that can provide stability, continuity, strength and legitimacy to regimes in the Muslim lands. On the external front, the Islamic countries need to contest demonisation of Islamic and Muslims collectively. One finds the central theme of the recently concluded meeting of the foreign ministers of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference was 'solidarity and dialogue' both interesting as well as intriguing. That partially explains the challenges that the Islamic countries face in the post-Soviet world system. The need for solidarity stems from the multiple divisions that our societies face within and the lack of coherent common agenda among the Islamic nations. There is a sense of disjointedness that has gripped the Islamic countries for long time.

Passing of resolutions has become a ritual. That has not helped us much. We need to create institutions and utilise the existing ones to promote solidarity and economic integration among ourselves. Another important aspect of our external agenda should focus on dialogue with the west. It is equally in the interest of the west to show empathy toward the Islamic societies. So long as the basic injustices against the Muslims remain in place, they cannot buy long term security of the friendly regimes or of themselves. In such a climate they would find it hard to protect their interests in remote areas of the world by coercive means alone. There is lot of common ground between Islamic countries and the west that has to be reclaimed from the religious and political right in the west and Islamic extremists.