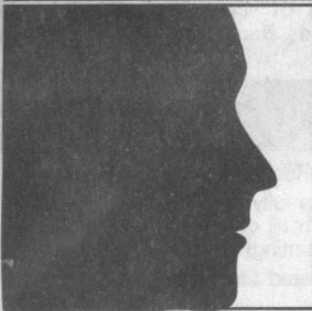


Don't convert shrines into Hyde P

Socially 27/5/01 Nalson

PROFILES IN POLITICS



IKRAM ULLAH

Is holding rallies in a shrine, and using loudspeakers to inflame religious passions, in accordance with the teachings of Islam?

tle, but the truce does not indicate that the government is anywhere near winning a long-drawn war, the embers of which continue to glow beneath the ashes, constantly fanned by vested interests in the pulpit.

As I approached Data Darbar on May 24, at about 6 pm, in accordance with my Thursday-evening routine of paying my respects to the saint and offering the *maghrib* prayers there, I found myself trapped in a huge public meeting in the area between the mosque and the shrine. It was difficult to get to the shrine due to the jostling gathering. The leaders made fiery speeches demanding not only the dismissal of those policemen and others who had violated the sanctity of the shrine, but also death for the SSP Lahore, who had already been removed by the Governor pending an inquiry into the incident. I found many of my colleagues from the press covering the politically charged public meeting. It is up to our guardians of Islam and champions of democracy to determine how far holding such protest rallies inside a shrine, and using loudspeakers to inflame religious passions of the devotees, is in keeping with the teachings of Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh and of Islam. Also how much, if at all, such political gath-

erings interfere with the devotees who flock to the shrine for a purpose other than subjecting themselves to a political sermon, howsoever earnest and honourable. Is the shrine the right place for sermons on a political agenda? Is the choice of Thursday evening or Friday congregation time justified to achieve a political end, however noble?

If the answers are in the affirmative, one such precedent will set into motion a chain of public meetings by all and sundry to air their grievances. Our shrines and mosques will be turned into Hyde Park soon, not just Data Darbar, but all over the country. They will lose their present sanctity. It is up to the religious leaders and politicians to determine how far they wish to involve our shrines and mosques with politics.

It is also up to the government to determine, the sooner the better for the nation's spiritual health as well as for law and order, how far the administration can go to prevent intrusion by political forces into holy places. Clear lines have to be drawn and everyone concerned must understand the line which no one can cross without being penalised.

In the past no effort was ever made to define such a line, for three reasons. (1)

Before independence and for some time after, the administration was firm while handling religious and political matters. All concerned understood and, by and large, obeyed the law. Gradually, the image of the administration has got eroded. Its professional competence has also suffered. The consequences are obvious. (2) Due to politicisation of the administration at all levels, it has lost its bearings and is uncertain of itself. The chains of command have suffered a serious setback. The state of paralysis cannot be cured overnight. The result is that the head of the government is overburdened. Decisions which should be taken by the district administration under normal circumstances pass through different levels, all acting like post offices, ultimately piling up on the Governor's table. The Governor had to personally handle the local incident at Data Darbar last week. (3) Political governments could not draw a line, as they needed votes and support from everyone, most of all from the pulpit. The present regime has no such handicap. It should therefore be in a position to take even unpopular decisions in the long-term national interest.

The police on Thursday registered a criminal case against 464 men of Sunni

The recent painful behaviour at Data Darbar, both by certain religious activists and certain policemen, led to violation of the sanctity of a shrine revered by all Muslims, not only in Pakistan but throughout the Subcontinent. For no valid reason, the interior of the shrine including the mosque was reportedly turned into a battlefield, engulfed with teargas, echoing to bullets and brickbats. The tragedy is that this unseemly episode could have been avoided with a little wisdom by either side. Thanks to Governor Safdar's prompt action, the situation did not get out of control. The Governor's initiative defused a ticking timebomb of religious frenzy with political overtones. He won a bat-

Parks ✓

Tehrik Pakistan and other religious parties for desecration of the shrine, of whom only 14 have been named, and even their names have not been made public. The policemen who chased the crowd into the shrine with their shoes on have not yet been identified as they were presumably acting under orders of somebody and therefore not held guilty of desecration.

The government must play its role firmly to prevent shrines and mosques from gradually becoming Hyde Parks. At the same time no impression should be allowed to be created in the public mind that any scheme is in hand to control the pulpit and ultimately the people through loyalist clergy. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was the first head of government to create a religious affairs ministry under an eloquent khateeb of Masjid Wazir Khan. Zia played the same game under the guise of enforcing Islam. The practice did not stop. Nawaz Sharif tried to achieve the same goal through the 15th Amendment. Let us learn from history and not reinforce failure. The Federal Religious Affairs Minister, Dr Mehmood Ghazi, is working on a draft legislation aimed at Islamising the Pakistani Muslim society. Let the pulpit and the politicians mix as much of religion and politics as they like, but a liberal leader like General Pervez Musharraf is well advised to leave the domain of the soul between the individual and the Creator without any undue interference by the state.