

Rationalising religious ext

By Dr Mutahir Ahmed

The destruction of the statues in the Bamiyan province of Afghanistan, and the recent edict issued by the Taliban against religious minority of Hindus to wear yellow badges as a mark of their religious belief-system has sent a clear message to the world community: present-day Afghanistan is in the grip of a theocratic regime that is ruling in the name of religion; but behind the curtain it practices a sectarian religious belief-system.

The US lawmakers, in a resolution by the powerful House of International Committee, have condemned the Taliban edict. The resolution sponsored by 74 legislators was approved unanimously by the committee and sent to the full house for vote. During a discussion session in the House of International Committee on the subject, the former Chairman of the Congressional Caucasus on India and Indian Americans, Gray Ackerman asked all the US congressmen to wear yellow arm-bands carrying the slogan 'I am a Hindu'. Ackerman also displayed a copy of the placard that the German generals of the Nazi Army had issued in 1943, ordering the Jews in Denmark to wear around their necks. The placard read 'I am a Jew'. According to Ackerman, the then King of Denmark had sabotaged the German plan by asking all the people to wear the placard, thus making it difficult for the Nazi Army to identify the Jews who could be taken to concentration camps. Ackerman stated that he would campaign for the issue among the congressmen so that most of them wear the yellow arm-bands on that day. He stated: "On that particular day, we will all become Hindus, so that the minority Hindus in Afghanistan will have a source of strength."

This development is not only alarming for Afghanistan, but also for Pakistan where religious extremist groups — allied with anti-democratic forces — have blocked any positive move that may lead towards peace, security and prosperity in the region. Today, these religious extremists have become a major factor in Pakistan's political life. They

have militarized the Pakistani society that is ridden with extreme sectarian and factional divisions, thus institutionalizing violence in the name of religion.

In the backdrop of the Gulf War and the exit of Najibullah from the Afghan political scene, Islamic extremism gained ground. The off-shoot of these fundamentalist groups can be seen in Pakistan. These groups emphasise the point that Pakistan was created in the name of religion and, therefore, Islam must be implemented in all the social, political and economic spheres of the state and society. They hold an ideological grip on Pakistan's establishment and are now challenging the very institutions of the state. This shows how strong they are.

Basically, armed Islamic radicalism was institutionalized and nurtured during the Zia regime. Regional and extra-regional powers have also played an important role in dividing religion along sectarian lines. Recent years have seen the Pakistani society divided along Shia-Sunni lines. Moreover, a rising trend has been the confrontation between traditional rivals that are the *Barelvis* and *Deobandis*. Previously, there was an ideological tussle between these two groups, but now the element of violence is indoctrinated amongst them that is significant to note.

At present, the Pakistani society is facing a proliferation of violence. The extremist forces are promoting sectarian violence that is destroying its very fabric. Violence has traditionally been accepted as an important element of our culture. The main reason is that a majority of the people value and honour those who take revenge. They do not believe in democracy, thus the essence of tolerance is lacking in their approach. Sectarian clashes, therefore, have become the order of the day.

Currently, Pakistan is facing challenges at regional, national and international fronts. On the domestic front, harsh politico-economic and social adversities are looming from one corner to another. Regionally, with the exception of China — that also has some strong reservations against Pakistan with regards to the religious extremist forces active in the Xinjiang province — Pak-

Religious extremists have become a major factor



istan's relations are not exactly rosy with any of its neighbors. Internationally, it is not carrying enough weight to convince the international community on the issue of terrorism. In this grim scenario, General Musharraf's speech in the recently held Seerat Conference is not only timely, but also an indication of a strong section of the ruling hierarchy's realization of the ground realities.

Musharraf's criticism against the clergy — and those adventurous elements who want to see Pakistan's flag at the Red Fort and thus make a mockery of Pakistan within the international community — clearly shows his liberal

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views on the matter. One recalls that when he assumed power, he praised the Turkish secular model and Kamal Ataturk as his

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Extremism in Pakistan

Factor in Pakistan's political life



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cates that he knows that many dangers lie ahead, and that there is no viable alternative but to improve relations with India in order to strengthen Pakistan's position internationally.

At the same time, it is not an easy task for Musharraf's regime to handle the matter of religious extremism because the religious elements are now in a position not only to criticize him, but also to confront him. The chief of Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, Hafiz Mohammad Syed warned the General that his new-found friendship with Vajpayee could cost him dearly. The strong language of Lashkar's chief and the implied

suggestion that the latter could compromise the interests of Pakistan on the vital issue of Kashmir is a sign of how powerful the Pakistan-based militant and religious organizations have become in recent years. Another speculation is whether the militant outfit is speaking on its own or it has the backing of influential sections within the Pakistani establishment that has its own vested interest.

Religious extremism in Pakistan cannot be seen in isolation. It flourishes because there exists within the country an economic hardship and political unrest, and because the poor section of the

society is a victim of injustice. These groups provide the disillusioned shelter and a new meaning of life. Religious extremism in Pakistan is a direct reflection of the politico-economic condition of the Pakistani State. The wide gap between state and society is increasing with the passage of time. There is no viable and durable long-term policy of the government regarding political and economic sectors. This, naturally, leads towards social disorder.

The solution of the problem lies in creating short and long-term policy initiatives on domestic, regional and international fronts. A long-lasting and durable peace in Afghanistan is crucial for stability in Pakistan. It has been said that the Taliban have brought peace to Afghanistan. But the basic argument is that thousands of refugees have come to Pakistan; the Afghan minorities have been treated badly and women have no status in the Afghan society. This is not peace; in fact, it can be called a 'violent peace' that is not only disastrous for the Afghan society but also for Pakistan. Pakistan must try to work for a genuine broad-based solution that has the confidence of the regional states, and of the various segments of the Afghan society. The sooner peace comes to Afghanistan, the better for the entire region including Pakistan.

As far as the issue of terrorism is concerned, the international community firmly believes that Pakistan is promoting and providing help to the terrorist groups in Kashmir, Afghanistan and Central Asia. It is important to take this matter seriously because Pakistan cannot afford to become a terrorist state. All the sectarian groups must be controlled politically. Though religion played a vital role in the formation of Pakistan, today it has become sectarianised in the country. Dozens of sectarian groups are operating in Pakistan in the name of religion and promote terrorism inside and outside the country.

Viable democratic, genuine political and economic infrastructure is the only possible solution to contain these religious extremist elements. But whether the Pakistani government is thinking along these lines is a million-dollar question.