

Understanding anti-Americanism USA

BY SHAHID ANWAR

Pakistan is both "a vital US ally" and perhaps the "most anti-American country" in the world today, says a recent report by America's Congressional Research Service.

This apparently contradictory assessment actually reflects the dichotomy that exists between state-policy and the sentiment of the people of Pakistan. At the level of state, Pakistan is 'frontline state' in the war against terrorism. However, at the level of society, anti-Americanism is being propagated as an obligation of a true Muslim or patriotic Pakistani. What are the reasons of widespread anti-American feelings in our society? Does anti-Americanism serve any interest of state or the people of Pakistan? Who are playing, deliberately with the raw sentiments of people to make hate-America as symbol of national self-assertion and solidarity with the Muslim causes?

Before trying to find out the causes of strong anti-American feelings in Pakistan, we need to look at the contemporary global public opinion. According to the US-based research centre PEW, the people around the world despise the unilateralist, militaristic, and aggressive policies of Bush administration.

Even among the traditional allies of Europe, America has lost much of its prestige and respect. As a part of the world, Pakistani society also shares these concerns. But it doesn't tell the whole story, as our home-grown anti-Americanism is radically different from the global opinion.

For instance, world public opinion maintains certain distinctions: between being anti-Bush and anti-American, also between opposing GW, and sympathising with Osama. In the wake of attack on Iraq, millions of anti-war demonstrators poured out in the capitals of the world. Nowhere had they carried the portraits of Osama or Saddam – as 'victims' or 'heroes'. It was only Pakistan, where the MMA-led demonstrations hoisted the pictures of Osama as hero of Islam. All this makes our anti-Americanism unique, much deep-rooted, and misdirected.

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anism to survive and to serve their isolationist, and conflict-oriented Jihadist agenda. They capitalise on ignorance, emotionalism, and anti-American feelings.

On every public policy issue they point to 'American hand'. Probably it has become a convenient tool to discredit any policy – they dislike. From the issue of Agha Khan Board to the inclusion of religion column in the passport, every reform is termed as compliance of 'American agenda'.

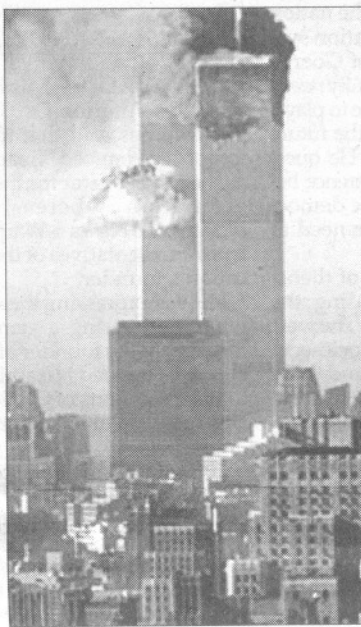
Interestingly, the same Mullahs have enjoyed a long courtship with the state (Pakistan) and the US, until recently. Then they were jointly fighting a sacred war against 'God-less' Soviets in Afghanistan. In collaboration of Ziaul-Haq regime, they not only distorted the public priorities, but also the collective memory, history, of the people.

The Mullahs scored the greatest strategic victory in Pakistan by reversing the roles. For instance, from the opposers of creation of Pakistan, they became self-appointed guardians of the ideology of Pakistan. Their unholy co-option with Ziaul-Haq gave them opportunity to change the consciousness of the people regarding politics and history. Emphasis on ideology instead of socio-economic reforms and people's basic rights instilled hopelessness and radicalised the society.

After the demise of the 'evil empire', the fundamentalist lost their utility for the Americans. However, in the meantime a culture of Jihad had developed to sustain the infrastructure and aspirations of international Jihad. The Islamist gained confidence from self-gratifying explanation of defeat of the USSR and the subsequent collapse. If they could rub the nose of Russians, why could not Americans.

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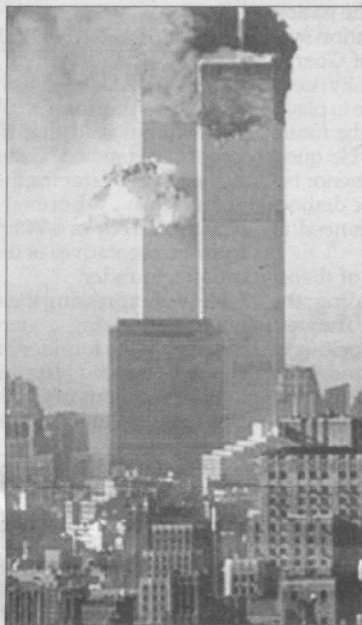


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Roots of anti-Americanism in Pakistan lie deep in various psychological, religious, and political factors. On psychological plane, our fanciful self-image is based on myths, ill-interpreted ideology, and a false sense of history. We do not see ourselves as a nation-state with powers and limits proportionate to its capabilities and size. Rather we have an exaggerated self-image based on certain myths instead of realities. In fact we live in a modern nation-state with specific geographic boundaries.

But we conceive ourselves as a



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stan, given the Hobson's choice by America, changed the course by serving the alliance with the Taliban. Reaction of the society was mixed to this major strategic shift. The radical Islamists understandably reacted angrily and termed the change as betrayal. The majority generally perceived that the regime changed the course under the US pressure. As the people have been fed on myths and concocted history.

part of much larger but unreal Muslim Ummah. This imaginary entity transcends territorial boundaries and somehow supersedes immediate real reference – the state. It's how we become more concerned about the issues of Muslim world rather than the problems at home. One may argue that an average common Pakistani remains pre-occupied with the issues of bread and butter. Its true, but paradoxically the moment this common man enters in political domain, he/she frames the problems in Ummah paradigm.

These modes of thinking distort our national priorities and unnecessarily raise the level of expectations as well. The kind of response we expect from the world does not match our capabilities. While the others treat us 'as we are' not as we 'wish to be' it becomes hard to accept the realities. The gap between our expectations and the real world creates resentment and frustration. Here we look for some one to blame.

Being not prepared for introspection we find some foreign oppressors and a few local 'traitors', who often conspire to fail us. Such kind of easy explanations suit our myths and self-conceived high profile. Thanks to America we do not have to do much for putting blame. It does all the dirty work for us; relieves us from taking any responsibility for our actions or inaction. It is not to deny the US influence in our domestic affairs. But to put it in the context, America is not the first and only superpower, which tries to impose her own values and priorities.

In political arena, our holy men religiously oppose America. To them it is the duty of every Muslim to be against America. As the MMA chief Qazi Hussain Ahmed recently said, 'General Musharraf is the biggest ally of the west against Islamic world and it is the duty of every Muslim to oppose him'. What are the reasons for establishing this linkage between religion and anti-Americanism?

The religious parties' hostility towards America is both philosophical/ideological and political. First, they simply reject modernity by equating it with westernisation and infidelity. Second, they have been unable to present a dynamic, progressive, and practicable alternative to modern democracy. Therefore they have left with no choice but to reject every element of modernity that marginalise their own role. So they willfully promote anti-Ameri-

This partly explains the dichotomy between the state policy of partnership with the US and anti-American feelings in the public. The Islamists lost their decade's long collaboration with the state apparatus but found the populist platform to highlight the 'loss of sovereignty'. Of course we must 'guard our sovereignty'. But we need to understand that sovereignty is a political myth, and in reality it is relative capability of state. Anyway, we must guard our sovereignty that includes internal dimension of sovereignty too. At this juncture, Pakistan's sovereignty is threatened from within, the militant groups who want to put the state on self-destructive collision course.

Unnecessarily provoking the emotions of the people against perceived or real conspiratorial American role combined with total denial of domestic dynamics, breeds desperation and inaction among the people.

Regrettably, the mainstream political parties and civil society organisations have not been able to do much to educate and lead the people. They have been put on defensive in the name of religion. At times they also preferred to play to the gallery for political reasons or sheer lack of courage.

In the nutshell, anti-Americanism in Pakistani society is outcome of various inter-related factors. Inflated self-image, resultant over-expectations from the world, emotionalism coupled with wilful misinterpretation of religion, disproportional political and social clout of the Mullahs, and the relative impotence of moderate forces, have created a political climate, in which wild anti-Americanism is becoming either a 'religious obligation' or a political compulsion.

We need to think a little rationally. We cannot reorder the world according to our wishes, no matter how noble we think these are. We can put our own house in order. Our strength or weakness lies within ourselves. Of course, we are not an Island but a part of the world.

International environment offers both challenges and opportunities. How we conduct ourselves on the world stage will determine our future. Let us seize the moment to channelise our human resources for development instead of draining them by hate-driven emotions.

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