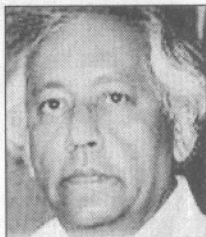


Dr. USA *Sherif*

Why I won't visit the US

LETTER FROM LONDON



IRFAN HUSAIN

Until things change, I am not going to risk being locked up because my surname is Husain. Right or wrong, I feel somebody who grew up on Archie Comics and Elvis Presley should not be subjected to current demeaning INS procedures

me of being pro-West, but I have never made any apologies for my views, as I firmly believe that until the Muslim world undergoes a reformation, it will remain stagnant and backward.

Before and after 9/11, I have condemned extremism of every stripe. Long before the first Gulf War, I was attacking Saddam Hussein for his brutal dictatorship, and criticising the West for supporting his thuggish regime. Immediately after 9/11, I was flooded with emails from American readers who had chanced upon my column in the Internet edition of Dawn, and asked me why people in the Muslim world seemed to hate the Americans so much. I spent hours writing to them to explain what was happening in my part of the world and why people felt as they did.

IN A FORTNIGHT, WE ARE FLYING TO Montreal, and then driving to Toronto. The shortest route takes one through the United States, but we are adding several hours to our journey because I refuse to enter the States and risk getting hassled at the border, although I have a valid, multiple-entry visa.

This is a pity as I have always enjoyed visiting America and have some very good friends there. As kids in the fifties, my brothers and I were regular visitors to the USIS library in Karachi, and would cart books back home by the armful. Over the years, I read everything from the Hardy Boys to Faulkner, Steinbeck and Hemingway. Earlier, we traded Archie comics for Superman and Roy Rogers.

Around the same period we watched the latest Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis comedies, and queued to see Elvis Presley in Jailhouse Rock. Our generation in Pakistan heard as much mushy teenage music as our counterparts in the States did. The first car I sneaked out of the garage was the family Chevy. As I grew older, I followed American politics and was as shocked and saddened as any American on that grim November day when JFK was gunned down in Texas.

But despite my affinity with American culture, I did not actually travel to the home of Coca Cola until the late eighties when I went as a diplomat to Washington. Although I didn't know my way around in the beginning, I never felt a foreigner: the language, the cultural icons and even the food were as familiar as if I had grown up there.

After my son Shakir had graduated from high school in Lahore, it seemed perfectly normal that he should go to college in the States. And when I visited him for his 21ST birthday and later for his graduation, I found him happy and surrounded by a wonderful bunch of friends he shared a house with.

Of course I disagreed with many American policies over the years: Vietnam, the Middle East and Nicaragua come to mind. But over all this time, I have been writing consistently in favour of democratic and secular values: the very values at the heart of the American constitution. Indeed, many readers of my columns have often accused

I sympathised with America over the horror it had been subjected to and supported its campaign in Afghanistan, drawing much flak from readers in the process. But as time went by, and the Bush administration used the attack on the Twin Towers as an excuse to unleash the worst kind of witch-hunt against law-abiding Muslims, I became more and more uneasy.

While every state has the right to protect itself from terrorism, the Patriot Act seemed to undermine the same fundamental rights America was so admired for. Many countries have suffered from terrorist attacks over the years, although none on the same scale as America did on 9/11. However, Pakistan has suffered more casualties in vicious sectarian and ethnic assaults over the last quarter century.

The INS has a list of 28 or so mostly Muslim countries whose citizens have to go through special procedures to visit the States. They are not only photographed and fingerprinted on arrival, but must give their itinerary and then register with the local INS office in all the cities they visit. A well-known Pakistani journalist with this newspaper, invited to work with a Washington think-tank, was first grilled at the airport and three months later arrested for not appearing for an interview even though he had done exactly as the INS helpline had told him to do. Luckily for him, his American colleagues raised hell and got him released.

Others have not been as fortunate. Human rights groups have documented hundreds of cases of wrongful detention. Pakistani publications have run scores of horror stories about the fate of people locked up for the most minor visa infringement. Students often cannot get visas, and businessmen have been humiliated.

Under the circumstances, when close American friends urge me to plan a trip to visit them, I reluctantly say that until things change, I am not going to risk being locked up because my surname is Husain. Right or wrong, I feel somebody who grew up on Archie Comics and Elvis Presley should not be subjected to current demeaning INS procedures.

The writer is a freelance columnist