

## Reality Begins to Dawn

By Khalid Aziz | From the Dawn Newspaper 26th Aug, 2011

AFTER 10 years of facing an existentialist threat from terrorism inflicted by extremist groups, Pakistan has finally woken up to the seriousness of the situation.

An indication of this came the other day when the cabinet defence committee decided that there was a “need to clearly identify the threat posed by terrorism including the underlying factors such as ideological, motivational, funding, weapon supply, training and organisational support for terrorist groups and those abetting the terrorists”.

At this juncture, this seems a difficult task; nevertheless, one admires the statement as a meaningful one since the gathering included all heads of the military establishment. Maybe, the light of reality is now beginning to dawn.

Clearly, the challenge is huge. The status of minorities and the existence of pluralism in an Islamic state remain insurmountable barriers thwarting any move towards modernity unless the Saudi king helps out by favouring the use of ijihad and ijma.

In his recent analysis, one of Pakistan’s most astute foreign secretaries in recent years, Riaz Mohammad Khan, in his book *Afghanistan and Pakistan: Conflict, Extremism and Resistance to Modernity* identifies the causal relationship between the mediaeval version of Islam followed in Pakistan and its attendant consequences. He thinks that had Pakistan travelled on the path it had adopted in 1960, it could have become an exemplary Muslim nation like the Turkey of today. However, this is still possible if a concerted effort is made.

Pakistan’s tragedy is that the narrative of modernity is viewed with hostility by the religious fraternity; in fact we have allowed the creation of separate minds that have different presumptions and attitudes. Most spurn modernity as if it was a devious philosophy of the West aimed at subjugating the Islamic world. The second suspicion of those harbouring this mentality is that modernity is America’s hegemonic tool. Both these critiques are challenged by the elite. As a result, the state is fragmenting rapidly.

Whatever the criticism of the West on the grounds of global politics or great-power strategy, modernisation is not the West’s property; it is a way of thinking. Islam has as much claim to modernity as the West’s claim in the Middle Ages to the medical knowledge provided by Muslim scholars like Abd Allah ibn Sina or Avicenna.

Forty of his medical treatises were taught in universities in Europe and he was adopted as the father of medical knowledge by a Christian Europe that was in the grip of religious rancour against Islam in the aftermath of the Crusades. Yet, Europe accepted his teachings since as modernists they separated knowledge from religion.

We, on the contrary, have developed a faulty logic that denies the value of knowledge emanating from Hindu, Jewish or Christian sources as being threatening to Islam; this is ridiculous and the very anti-thesis of a modernist mind generated more by paranoia than empirical reasoning.

Clearly, if we want to move Pakistan away from ignorance and bigotry, then a counter-extremism policy must focus on creating a new narrative and vision for Pakistan. It will not be an easy task. The vision must incorporate our history and culture. It must also include global values and respect for others. In order to grow and develop, we need to reform our educational system, and create a trained pool of skilled youth ready to undertake employment. If these attributes are missing then the shift to modernism will be futile.

A transformative vision could be Pakistan becoming “a progressive and a cosmopolitan state that believes in and practises principles of peace, love and brotherhood in its internal and external policies. It will be a society where diversity is respected and where differences of opinion are expressed within a democratic framework functioning under the rule of law and where equity is provided in state policies.”

However, to contemplate such a reconstruction of Pakistan requires major adjustments in the way that our key institutions, particularly the army and the religious political parties, think. Those who have benefited from the previous dispensation will need to be transformed; that will not be easy.

Pakistan may be facing immense difficulties, but its existence is not threatened by India, the Jews or the Christians; its greatest detractors are its own guardians — both civil and military.

Riaz Khan narrates how we took lightly the initial onslaughts by the religious parties when they rioted in Lahore in 1953 demanding that Ahmadis be declared non-Muslims. Later, we kept quiet when Gen Zia introduced the Nizam-i-Mustafa as a political device to win the support of religious parties against the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy.

Gen Zia changed the Pakistani mindset by moving it away from rationality and modernity through these reforms, without understanding what the result of this ill-advised social experimentation would mean for Pakistanis. The two main planks of his intervention were the Hudood Ordinances and the Toheen-i-Risalat (insulting prophethood), blasphemy laws. These measures targeted the Ahmadis and other minorities; simultaneously he increased state patronage for clerics for the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Gen Zia's changes introduced Islamic radicalism as a state narrative. He was assisted in his design by the religious parties, as they were the main beneficiaries of his largesse and that of Saudi Arabia and UAE in the 1980s that was linked to Salafism. It fuelled extremism and embedded it in Pakistan's security paradigm that began to see itself as a protector of global Islam.

Apparently, the task before the defence committee though difficult, is clear. They need to correct the state narrative, make peace with India, repeal regressive laws and instil economic growth. But they also need Saudi assistance for legitimising modernity through ijtehad