

Why Tolerance Is Not On The Curriculum In Pakistan

Daily Telegraph - 01/08/2005

By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

For almost 30 years the most famous words of Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, have been absent from school and military college curricula.

"You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed - that has nothing to do with the business of the State," Jinnah told his countrymen in 1947 as Pakistan won its independence.

He clearly envisaged Pakistan as a democratic, not a theocratic state, but in the 1970s his words were blacked out by the military regime allied to Islamic fundamentalists helping the Afghans and Americans fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Pakistan became an "ideological" Islamic state whose parameters were determined by the army in a bid to differentiate the country from secular India.

Since then the Islamic rather than the democratic and multi-ethnic character of Pakistan has been the thrust of the army and its main allies, the Islamic parties.

Last year Mino Bandara, a bespectacled Zoroastrian businessman and member of the Pakistan national assembly, tried to reinstate Jinnah's words through a parliamentary resolution.

His attempt failed to win support in parliament, even though in the post-September 11 era another military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf was advocating an enlightened and moderate interpretation of Islam.

Pakistan has been beset with an identity crisis since it came into being in 1947. No other country emerging from the British empire has faced the dilemma of whether it is secular or theocratic more acutely than Pakistan.

Although the fundamentalists have always been far weaker than the democratic forces, the backing they have received from the army has given them enormous power. What constitutes an "ideological" Islamic state has veered steadily from identity as Muslims in the 1970s to extremism and jihad in the 1990s as the pursuit of wresting control of Kashmir from India became less of a political struggle and more of a religious obligation.

The other determining factor for Pakistan has been its chronic sense of insecurity with India, with whom it has fought three major wars and several smaller ones. To counter India's might the military used the fundamentalists to pursue a foreign policy based on supporting Islamic extremists in Kashmir, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Pakistan became a national security state where modern reforms, education and public welfare took second place to building nuclear weapons and spending millions of rupees on funding mujahideen of all shades.

The United States shares a large part of the blame as it poured billions of dollars into the Pakistani military in the 1950s and 1960s to fight the Cold War and again in the 1980s to help fund the Afghan mujahideen and Arab extremists.

Saudi Arabia has also been a key ally, providing Pakistan with cheap oil and loans as well as funding for Pakistani extremist groups who were fighting in Kashmir and in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Those groups funded by Saudi Arabia have promoted Wahhabism - an austere form of Islam practised in the desert kingdom - and been largely responsible for the massacres of Shia Muslims in Pakistan.

Gen Musharraf's u-turn after September 11, when Pakistan dropped support for the Taliban and allied itself with the West in the war on terrorism, was considered to be a watershed, supposedly a historical moment when the army and the fundamentalists faced the new reality: that support for Islamic extremism was now considered a criminal offence by the rest of the world.

Gen Musharraf has cracked down hard on the foreign elements that constitute terrorism in Pakistan: Arabs, Central Asians and Afghans, and last week he promised to expel all foreign students from the madrassas.

Pakistan has handed over 500 members of al-Qa'eda to the Americans. But despite periodic crackdowns on Pakistan's home-grown extremist groups, the domestic Islamic extremist infrastructure has remained intact.

The madrassas, or religious colleges controlled by militant groups, have neither been brought under government control nor shut down, the extremist parties have been banned only to re-emerge under new names and state schools have continued to teach archaic hate-filled texts.

The London and Egyptian bombings have demonstrated that extremism is still thriving in Pakistan.

As more details emerge it is almost certain that at least two of the four July 7 bombers were in contact with extremists in Pakistan. Since September 11 almost every senior al-Qa'eda figure captured has been seized in Pakistan. For many counter-terrorism experts Pakistan has now become "al-Qa'eda central".

However last week Gen Musharraf said it was "absolutely and totally baseless" that al-Qa'eda had its headquarters in Pakistan. The network was now "a phenomenon" and "a state of mind" among Muslims rather than an organisation.

Since September 11 the West has helped Pakistan broker a peace process with India and poured in billions of dollars in loans, aid and debt forgiveness, in the hope that Gen Musharraf will deliver by curbing extremism and in the fear that whoever might succeed him would prove less co-operative.

But there is an irresolvable contradiction. Despite his personal sincerity and liberal views, Gen Musharraf is still a military ruler who has stifled political activity, exiled or ousted secular political leaders and given the floor to the military's old allies, the fundamentalists.

He frequently demands that the moderates mobilise under his banner and launch a jihad against extremism, but he forgets that in Pakistan a military ruler has never been able to win mass support or become a popular leader.

Pakistan's problem is not just extremism, but the lack of democracy and the failure of its politicians and military to build democratic institutions. In the 1990s, the decade-long experiment with democracy in which one government was replaced by another, the country's politicians emerged as rapacious and corrupt opportunists rather than visionaries.

But they were also beset by an all-powerful military which never allowed democratic institutions to take root or an elected government to be voted out of office.

Most Pakistanis are conservative Muslims, but the vast majority reject extremism. Many are deeply confused. America's actions in Iraq, notably at Baghdad's Abu Ghraib jail, and at Guantanamo Bay have convinced many that the West is waging a war against Islam.

Yet the car bombs and terrorist acts Pakistanis face at home have made them sick of the extremists. The contradictory statements by government officials about waging jihad in Kashmir but also cracking down on extremism only add to the confusion. For most people the main issue is not the interpretation of Islam, but what kind of governance and economic future they can expect.

Since 1977 no government text book or any of the 20,000 madrassas has taught Jinnah's most famous words. For Jinnah the creation of Pakistan was a means to protect Indian Muslims, not a reason to impose a dictatorship of one religion or a theocracy.

The majority of Pakistanis are still waiting for Jinnah's dream to be fulfilled. Only when the government and military have the courage to reintroduce Jinnah's words into the education curricula can Pakistan make a decisive shift out of its confused state of mind.