

A PLEA FOR ENLIGHTENED MODERATION

Muslims must raise themselves up through individual achievement and socioeconomic emancipation.

By Pervez Musharraf

Washington Post, Tuesday, June 1, 2004; Page A23

The world has been going through a tumultuous period since the dawn of the 1990s, with no sign of relief in sight. The suffering of the innocents, particularly my brethren in faith -- the Muslims -- at the hands of militants, extremists and terrorists has made it all the more urgent to bring order to this troubled scene. In this spirit, I would like to set forth a strategy I call Enlightened Moderation.

The world has become an extremely dangerous place. The devastating power of plastic explosives, combined with high-tech remote-controlled devices, as well as a proliferation of suicide bombers, has created a lethal force that is all but impossible to counter. The unfortunate reality is that both the perpetrators of these crimes and most of the people who suffer from them are Muslims. This has caused many non-Muslims to believe wrongly that Islam is a religion of intolerance, militancy and terrorism. It has led increasing numbers of people to link Islam to fundamentalism; fundamentalism to extremism, and extremism to terrorism. Muslims can protest however vigorously they like against this kind of labeling, but the reality is that such arguments are not likely to prevail in the battle for minds. To make things even more difficult, Muslims are probably the poorest, most uneducated, most powerless and most disunited people in the world.

The stark challenge that faces anyone with compassion for the common heritage of mankind is determining what legacy we will leave for future generations. The special challenge that confronts Muslims is to drag ourselves out of the pit we find ourselves in, to raise ourselves up by individual achievement and collective socioeconomic emancipation. Something has to be done quickly to stop the carnage in the world and to stem the downward slide of Muslims.

My idea for untangling this knot is Enlightened Moderation, which I think is a win for all -- for both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. It is a two-pronged strategy. The first part is for the Muslim world to shun militancy and extremism and adopt the path of socioeconomic uplift. The second is for the West, and the United States in particular, to seek to resolve all political disputes with justice and to aid in the socioeconomic betterment of the deprived Muslim world.

We need to understand that the root cause of extremism and militancy lies in political injustice, denial and deprivation. Political injustice to a nation or a people, when combined with stark poverty and illiteracy, makes for an explosive mix. It produces an acute sense of hopelessness and powerlessness. A nation suffering from these lethal ills is easily available for the propagation of militancy and the perpetration of extremist, terrorist acts. It is cannon fodder in a war of terrorism.

I would be remiss if, in defense of the people of my faith, I did not trace the genesis of the Muslims' being labeled as extremists or terrorists. Before the anti-Soviet Afghan war, the sole cause of unrest and concern in the Muslim world was the Palestine dispute. It

was this issue that led to a unity of Muslims -- in favor of Palestinians and against Israel. The Afghan war of the 1980s, supported and facilitated by the West as a proxy war against the Soviet Union, saw the emergence and nurturing of pan-Islamic militancy. Islam as a religion was used to harness worldwide Muslim support. Subsequently the atrocities and ethnic cleansing against Muslims in Bosnia, the Chechen uprising, the Kashmir freedom struggle and the invigorated Palestinian intifada all erupted in the '90s after the Soviet disintegration. To make matters worse, the militancy that was sparked in Afghanistan -- which should have been defused after the Cold War -- was instead allowed to fester for a decade.

During this time, hostility among fighters from the Muslim world turned multidirectional, seeking new conflict zones in places where Muslims were suffering. Enter the birth of al Qaeda. Meanwhile, the Palestinian intifada kept gathering momentum, uniting and angering Muslims across the globe. And then came the bombshell of Sept. 11, 2001, and the angry reaction of the United States against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan. All subsequent reactions of the United States -- its domestic responses against Muslims, its attitude toward Palestine and the operation in Iraq -- led to total polarization of the Muslim masses against the United States. It is not Islam as a religion that has created militancy and extremism but rather political disputes that have led to antagonism among the Muslim masses.

This is all history now. What has been done cannot be undone. But this situation cannot be allowed to fester; a remedy must be found. I call on the West to help resolve these political disputes with justice, as part of a commitment to a strategy of Enlightened Moderation.

When I think of the role of Muslims in today's world, my heart weeps. What we need is introspection. Who are we, what do we as Muslims stand for, where are we going, where should we be headed and how can we reach it? The answers to these questions are the Muslim part of Enlightened Moderation.

We have a glorious past. Islam exploded on the world scene as the flag bearer of a just, lawful, tolerant and value-oriented society. We had faith in human exaltation through knowledge and enlightenment. We exemplified tolerance within ourselves and toward people of other faiths. The armies of Islam did not march forward to convert people by the sword, despite what the perceptions may be, but to deliver them from the darkness through the visible example of their virtues. What better projection can be found of these deeper values of Islam than the personal example of our Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H.), who personified justice, compassion, tolerance of others, generosity of spirit, austerity with a spirit of sacrifice, and a burning desire to make a better world.

Today's Muslim world is distant from all these values. We have been left far behind in social, moral and economic development. We have remained in our own shell and refused to learn or acquire from others. We have reached the depths of despair and despondency. We need to face stark reality. Is the way ahead one of confrontation and militancy? Could this path really lead us back to our past glory while also showing the light of progress and development to the world?

I say to my brother Muslims: The time for renaissance has come. The way forward is through enlightenment. We must concentrate on human resource development through the alleviation of poverty and through education, health care and social justice. If this is our direction, it cannot be achieved through confrontation. We must adopt a path of

moderation and a conciliatory approach to fight the common belief that Islam is a religion of militancy in conflict with modernization, democracy and secularism. All this must be done with a realization that, in the world we live in, fairness does not always rule.

The Organization of Islamic Conferences (OIC) is our collective body. We need to infuse new life into it; it is now in a state of near impotence. The OIC must be restructured to meet the challenges of the 21st century, to fulfill the aspirations of the Muslim world and to take us toward emancipation. Forming a committee of luminaries to recommend a restructuring of the OIC is a big step in the right direction. We have to show resolve and rise above self-interest for our common good -- in the very spirit that Islam teaches us.

The world at large and the powers that be must realize that confrontation and force will never bring peace. Justice must be done and be seen to be done. Let it not be said by future generations that we, the leaders of today, took humanity toward the apocalypse.

Gen. Musharraf is president of Pakistan.

© 2004 The Washington Post Company