

Particular viewpoint

On the political situation in Pakistan, religious extremism and the Left

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Eminent left-wing activist, writer, journalist and film-maker, Tariq Ali is in Pakistan these days. The News on Sunday had a long discussion with him on religious extremism, the status of Left, the role of NGO's, judicial crisis, history of Islam and fundamentalism, at his residence in Lahore last week. [by Aoun Sahi]

Excerpts of the interview follow:

The News on Sunday: How do you analyse the present political scenario in Pakistan?

Tariq Ali: We are caught into the rut of a political cycle, which has dominated the country since October 1958. We have had military coups followed by civilian governments. This is what has been going on in Pakistan for 50 years of our history. Now the question is: Why can't we break through this. I think the one big chance Pakistan had of modernising itself and making a new start was at the time of the break-up of the country. It was a bloody and brutal trauma, especially for the population of the then East Pakistan.

Pakistan had an opportunity to make a new start under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. People were filled with hope; expectations were high with the regime but very little happened. There was a lot of rhetoric. Some things did get done but on the crucial questions facing the country — the institutionalisation of democratic rule, encouraging people to think for themselves, destroying once and for all the power of landed gentry, setting up and establishing a solid educational and health system, cutting down the size of the army and reducing the military budget — nothing happened. That was the only time in the country's history when it could have and should have happened.

When it did not happen you had the military coming back in again and General Ziaul Haq, on the authorisation of the US, executed the country's last elected Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Thus began the worst period in Pakistan's history; the entire political culture was brutalised.

After Zia, Pakistan had roughly 10 years of civilian government, led first by the Pakistan's People's Party, later by General Zia's proteges — the Sharif family — and again nothing happened. Their regimes also led to establishment of a new political elite whose only interest was in making money for themselves and their cronies and enjoying the power of patronage.

Then you had the cockpit coup with General Musharraf taking power in 1999. His first plan of modernisation was welcomed, but then he behaved exactly like previous dictators, went the same way and set up a new political party. You have a Muslim League for every occasion. Then you see

pictures of these new leaders with the military general all over the country. It is now a pattern in Pakistani politics. Meanwhile, underneath, the country suffers.

TNS: Your views on religious extremism in Pakistan?

TA: There are two concurrent events going on. One, the religious extremist groups that were sponsored during the period of General Zia's military dictatorship. These are the jihadi groups, violent, armed, and used by the military in Kashmir and Afghanistan. The number of people in these groups are debatable but are somewhere between 50,000 to 100,000. Then you have the moderate religious parties in the form of MMA. These, in my opinion, are totally legitimate political parties. I may not agree with them. They are conservative parties like those in the west. The MMA and the party currently in power in Turkey are the Islamic equivalents of Christian democratic parties in the west.

Then you have a third phenomenon — the growth of religiosity among the middle and upper middle class within the elite represented by Tablighi Jamaat, organisations like Al-Huda, who take advantage of the fact that there is a deep hole, a big vacuum, in the life of many people. However, in my opinion, it is impossible for religious or jihadi groups to come to power in Pakistan. Impossible, unless the military puts them there.

TNS: How can Pakistan combat extremism?

TA: The answer to religious extremist groups is a series of radical social reforms, including an excellent educational system that is free for the poor. At the present moment, you cannot get proper education in Pakistan unless you have money. The level of education is abysmal and I am not interested in the government giving figures of how many students have been enrolled in schools. Because they can enroll in schools but there are no teachers to teach them and no buildings in which they can be taught. So, that is the only way to combat religious extremism.

There is no military solution; there is a political solution internally and externally. I have to be blunt with you that those liberals from the elite society who think the only way to deal with extremism is to go and kill more people, I find this strategy disgusting, because killing people never solves problems. The problem is deep-rooted in our country's history and it has to be solved. So far no group has emerged from above which is capable of solving it.

TNS: Where does the left stand in Pakistan? Do you think the left is capable enough to act as an alternative political force?

TA: The left is very weak at the moment. There are small groups of people. Some do good work like the Labour Party. They work really hard, they are very sincere, but there is no left in Pakistan. I am not in favour of political parties becoming fiefdoms, whether it's the Awami National Party or the PPP. Pakistan is a republic but in the way political parties function, we have this sort of a strange monarchical idea that if your father formed the party, as the son or daughter you have a right to lead it. Why? So, I think for the health of Pakistani political parties it would be better if relatives or children of those who set these parties up stepped back. That would offer these parties a chance to function.

TNS: How do you see the role of NGOs and human rights movements in this context?

TA: I used to call them the 'human rights industry'. This is an industry largely based in United States and Colin Powell former US secretary of state and many others have publicly said that their new fifth column all over the world are NGOs. This is a big problem that also partially answers your previous

question — that too many people have got money from the West. I called these NGOs WGOs, Western Governmental Organisations. It's not that some of them do not do good work. A few of them do excellent work, which I would be the first to praise. But as an institutional project of the western world, this is designed basically to take people out of politics. And it has done so; some of the best minds are working in NGOs. They are not trying to work politically and the money given to these NGOs is given for specific projects and no intervention in politics is allowed. They have done some good work in some cases but this is not the way forward.

TNS: But they played a very active role in the struggle of reinstatement of the chief justice?

TA: It was not a human rights struggle but a constitutional struggle that insisted on the separation of powers between the judiciary and the state. Historically, judges have been cajoled, bullied, and fired 1958 onwards. I remember Justice MR Kiyani took a very brave step against the first military dictatorship in this country, going around universities, addressing students, speaking in a very subtle way but encouraging us to think.

By and large, judges in our country after all spring from the same milieu as the other rulers of the country. So the decision of this chief justice to fight back was extremely important. You know, the whole world thinks that Pakistan consists of just military, corrupt politicians and bearded lunatics. This particular struggle to reinstate the chief justice gave a completely different impression of Pakistan. This was a genuine civil society struggle being waged by lawyers and by people interested in an independent judiciary to fight against increasing encroachments by the military-political complex of this country, which wants everything under their control.

So, it's a victory, the fact that he is reinstated. But you know he is a mortal human being who has to be replaced by someone else. So the whole question is how should judiciary function in Pakistan?

TNS: You are known to be a non-believer. But some of your best books, especially novels, are about Muslim civilisations in Europe. Any particular reason to choose this subject?

TA: I wanted to ask myself the question on what happened to Islam in Europe. I asked this question in 1992: What happened to the culture that was very strong in Europe? And to answer this question I went to Spain and began studying, researching and travelling and that is the way I produced my first novel. I am not a believer, but culturally I am a Muslim. I have been brought up within the Muslim world, I appreciated its culture. I think the tragedy is that many Muslims do not own the cultural history of their religion. I think it is not talked about. That is one reason I wrote these books to show that there was another side of Islam — in Spain, Sicily, Turkey, even during the crusades which was extremely important to understand.

TNS: What was the reaction of the West to these books?

TA: They had an impact. The books are translated all over the world. I get emails from every where. My last novel 'Sultan in Palermo' is about the period when Islam was culturally still very strong in Sicily. Recently it was translated in Italian and I went to Palermo to launch the Italian version of novel. The people thanked me and told me that I had recovered a part of their history which no one likes to talk about. It is to show the Europeans that who knows how Islam would have changed if it hadn't been physically attacked and driven out of Europe by the Christian crusaders. That is the question. A political one not a religious one.

TNS: You also have depicted Muslim women in a totally different way in your books.

TA: The Muslim women played a very big role. They may not have exercised powers directly but they exercised power behind the scenes. They were very strong women in many cases. After all, the Prophet's wife Khadija was a trader in her own right. She traded and no one stopped her. Another example is of Ayesha who fought in a war.

This intent to completely subjugate women, I think, is challenged by Islamic history in many parts of the world, especially in Islamic Spain where you have Muslim women writing poetry in the 9th and 10th century which would shock people.

TNS: You have written that “the history of Islam is the history of breaking with past traditions.” Would you like to elaborate?

TA: Islam was founded to try and create a unified Arab peninsula and to break with the 'jahiliya', the pre-Islamic traditions in that country which led to a lot of inter-tribal warfare, which was affecting trade in that region.

I always argue that Islam's conquests were brilliant; military came too quickly before the religion had time to form itself. So the religion's growth and the growth of ideas and cultures are largely determined by which country it conquered. From that point of view, Islam is quite an elastic religion.

The tradition of Muslims in Punjab are determined by the Sufi tradition which existed here.

Indonesian Islam is very different from Wahabi Islam. Wahabi Islam is not even in majority in the Arab World. Islam is a diverse religion and it can never be anything else. All attempts right from the beginning to impose one dominant line, if you like, failed completely. Within the few hundred years of its formation you have three caliphs at a time, one in Baghdad, one in Qurtaba and one in Cairo.

TNS: You use the terms 'fundamentalism' and 'fundamentalists' very frequently against US, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Jews in your books, essays and speeches. What do you actually mean by this term?

TA: 'Fundamentalism' is an irrational belief in order to defend particular views and beliefs in the name of something either divine or temporal but which is unchallengeable for 'fundamentalists.'

'Fundamentalists' are people who will not accept any other ideas because of their 'superiority'.

Muslim fundamentalists argue that they are the only ones who know what Islam is and they can interpret it, while other people cannot. They say this even to moderate Muslims. Some of their worst enemies are the moderate Muslims because they offer a different vision of Islam.

Hindu fundamentalists do the same. Christian fundamentalists in the United States say exactly the same. For instance, when 9/11 happened, some people in the US saw it as punishment. When there was disaster in New Orleans many American Christian fundamentalists said that God had punished New Orleans because the people of New Orleans had organised a conference of gays in the city that September.

The body language and frame of reference of all religious fundamentalists is the same. Imperial fundamentalism is not necessarily religious but it has the similar irrational view by conflating its own specific stated interests. So the US becomes the international community to make it easier. Like Benazir says, I support Musharraf because the army and the international community want me to. The international community has become a synonym for the US.

TNS: What subject are you working on these days?

TA: I am working on a new book on Pakistan for a big American publishing house, the one which published General Musharraf's book. It has commissioned me to write a book on Pakistani politics. But I do not want to repeat myself. I thought I would write this book about the US-Pakistan relationship, just one aspect, but a very crucial aspect of Pakistani politics.

To look at Pakistan from that particular viewpoint, from the beginning till now. This country in the beginning decided to work with the west unlike other newly independent countries, first with the British and later with the US. I am going to be discussing the effect this had on our domestic politics. Many people think that domestic politics and foreign policy are not linked but they are, very closely. Each affects the other.

P.S.

* Tariq Ali interview with News on Sunday was published on Sep 9, 07.