



Pakistan is at a highly dangerous crossroads

By Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali

Pakistan occupies a unique position in international affairs. It is both at the epicentre of worldwide Islamist extremism and a crucial ally of the West in combating the terrorism that such extremism had produced.

Time and again, President Musharraf has identified the struggle against extremism as his top priority, and promoted his own doctrine of “enlightened moderation”. He has urged Muslims to discover the best in their tradition and to be open to a fast-changing world.

So it is all the more worrying that much of this seems to have been unravelling in the last few weeks. President Musharraf’s sacking of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court has caused renewed conflict between secular political parties and the religious opposition.

Once again, Karachi, the country’s main port and industrial city, has become the bloody battlefield for these rival ideologies. Even Imran Khan, the former Test cricketer, has become a casualty of this political vendetta and has been banned from entering the city.

The non-Muslim minorities, Christians, Hindus, Parsis and others, are both helpless onlookers and often victims of this battle. Their treatment is an important barometer of the direction Pakistan may be taking. In recent months, various human rights organisations have reported a surge of arrests of Christians on charges of blasphemy against Mohammed, or of desecrating the Koran.

The penalty for the first is death and, for the second, life imprisonment. Numerous Christians and others have been victimised by the blasphemy law and it has also been widely used to silence opposition, prevent free speech and to settle scores.

The irony of all this is that there is nothing in the Koran or the Sunnah (the practice of the prophet) about such punishments. Islamic tradition itself recounts numerous instances of Mohammed forgiving those who had insulted him. When he conquered Mecca, he fully forgave the Quraish tribe for all their hostility and declared a general amnesty.

The only exceptions, it seems, were those who tried to foment sedition or rebellion. How then can there be a law prescribing the death penalty for insulting the Prophet when he is said to have forgiven his tormentors?

A Parsi member of the Pakistan parliament recently tabled amendments to the blasphemy law that would have reduced the sentence to five years' prison and a fine. He also wished to extend protection against incitement to religious hatred to other faiths.

His attempt was, however, resisted and defeated by an unholy alliance of the government and the religious parties. One government minister claimed that such a bill hurt the feelings of Muslims and that Pakistan was an Islamic and not a secular state.

But why should being an Islamic state necessarily involve having such a draconian law? All of this from a government that has frequently signalled its unhappiness with the law as it stands, has sought to repeal it and tried to reduce its impact. Its present stance looks very much like an appeasement to the mullahs.

Such a perception is reinforced when we consider another development: the introduction in the National Assembly, the lower house of parliament, of a bill punishing apostasy from Islam by death (for males) or life imprisonment (for females). It is true that such a punishment exists in mediaeval codifications of the Shariah, but there is nothing about it in the Koran, and the instances given in the Sunnah have been questioned by scholars.

The consensus among Sunni scholars seems to be that there is no punishment for apostasy from Islam in this life. Only if it is accompanied by sedition or rebellion can it be punished. Why then, has the National Assembly seen fit to consider a bill that is not only contrary to international law but also to the spirit of Islam itself?

Such legislation aimed at Christians and others is not an isolated example limited to Pakistan. From North Africa to Indonesia, the rise of Islamist extremism has resulted in terrible persecution for Christians. The recent horrendous torture and murder of Christians in north-eastern Turkey (where, incidentally, the followers of Jesus were first called Christians) is only one example among many.

Christians have been executed in Indonesia, while their Muslim opponents have gone unpunished; churches have been closed and converts arrested in Iran, and Christians killed in Afghanistan. In the West Bank and Gaza, there is pressure on Christians to leave their homes and give up their professions, to such an extent that the Christian community is a shadow of its former self.

Christians are fleeing Iraq and even in "moderate" countries like Egypt, conversion often means "civil death". It is hard not to believe that there is worldwide move to restrict the freedom and numbers of Christians in the Islamic world.

Christians are not the only victims, of course. Another piece of "Islamic" legislation, foisted on Pakistan by a former military rule, General Zia ul-Haq, is the notorious Hudud ordinance, which incriminates women on a charge of adultery if they have reported rape to the police.

There has been an outcry against this law both inside and outside Pakistan and the government's Council of Islamic Ideology has declared it does not derive from the Koran or the Sunnah. The government tried to change the law but had to back away in the face of fierce opposition from the religious parties.

A sign that the country is being increasingly "Talibanised" came with the news that the small Christian community in a town near Afghanistan has been given an ultimatum to convert en masse to Islam or face persecution. How will the government deal with such terrorism against its own oppressed people? Will it turn a blind eye?

Pakistan is at a crossroads: it can take the path of being a sectarian, fundamentalist state ruled by clerics, or it can become an enlightened, moderate country, informed by the best traditions of Islam, tolerant of other faiths and open to change. Procrastination is not an option.

In the present international climate, the direction taken by Pakistan will be of high interest to the global community. Unless the path of enlightened moderation is pursued relentlessly and consistently, Pakistan will not be able to curb the extremism that is giving rise to the terrorism that has become such a danger to the world and which we in Britain are getting to know only too well.

I have always sought the welfare of the whole nation and not just the Christian community. I pray earnestly that Pakistan's leaders and people will see even now the things that make for peace and unity, for the dignity of all, and for just and humane laws. For this, it is essential that Musharraf's original agenda is addressed urgently and directly.