

# Freedoms in the Muslim world? “Blaming others”

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The Amnesty International report on human rights for the year 2007 is out. The Muslim world constitutes, as usual, bleakest chapter. Every single country across the Muslim world has been pointed out by the Amnesty International either for executions and torture or discrimination against women and ethnic and religious minorities. Punishments never handed down even during the Stone Age, have been awarded in 21<sup>st</sup> century Muslim world. In one case, two Saudi nationals were awarded 7,000 lashes. Yes, 7,000. And executions? Well, 335 in Iran, 158 in Saudi Arabia and 135 in Pakistan. Violation of human rights, it seems, is the only thing that unites the otherwise divided Muslim world.

The report is no exception. The Muslim world cuts a sorry figure every time a global watchdog releases its findings. Freedom of expression here remains curtailed, Reporters Sans Frontieres annually reports. Regarding freedom of expression, there is a joke often told in Arab world. At a meeting, a US journalist says: “We have complete freedom of expression in the US. We can criticise the US president as much as we like.” The Arab journalist replies. “We also have complete freedom of expression in Arab world. We can also criticise the US president as much as we like.”

Similarly, it is either Bangladesh or Pakistan or Nigeria which is on top of Transparency International’s corruption indexes. However, when Nobel laureates gather in Stockholm every December, Muslim scientists and writers are conspicuous by their absence. In case, as Naguib Mahfouz is crowned, he is stabbed and rendered paralysed. The irony, or tragedy, is that his attacker had not even read his excellent books. Or we disown Dr Abdul Salam just because he belonged to the Ahmadiya community. Salam’s case deserves special mention since it underlines the absurdity that characterises this part of the world.

When all else fails, “Jews” and “Christian” West are there to lay the blame for all our ills. Conspiracy theories instead of scientific, rational thought holds sway across much of the Muslim world. And every time a rights abuse is highlighted in Iran, Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, a typical Muslim answer is: Look at Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and Chechnya. True, imperialism and Zionism have a hand in our predicament. However, there are many wounds one can only describe as self-inflicted.

Take, for instance, the Iran-Iraq war, one of the last century’s bloodiest conflicts. There is no denying the fact that the United States backed the Saddam regime. But it was the Arab sheikhdoms, panicked at the Iranian revolution, that stoked the flames of war. And, ironically, now in the post-Saddam era when the “Christian” West has written off Iraq’s Saddam-era debt worth \$66 billion, Iraq’s Arab brothers refuse to write off that country’s \$67 billion loans.

Similarly, last century’s bloodiest Muslim genocide was not carried out by Serbs, Israelis, Americans, Europeans or Hindus. It was Pakistan’s military that refused to respect a democratic verdict and plunged East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, into an ocean of blood. Millions were killed, maimed, raped and rendered homeless. Luckily, Pakistan has a “Hindu” neighbour. “Hindus are born enemies of Islam’. Hence, Pakistani children are now taught that a Bengali traitor (revered by Bengalis as founder of Bangladesh), in connivance with our “Hindu” neighbour, dismembered

Pakistan. Ironically, of all her South Asian neighbours, Pakistan enjoys most cordial relations with the world's only Hindu state, Nepal. The other big genocide was perpetrated by Indonesia. The target was: its own citizens who were members of the Communist Party.

Figures are not available but Israel perhaps cannot match Iran in executing Arabs. Iran's confessional regime is a champion of the Arab cause in Occupied Territories but Arabs of its Khuzestan province are regularly sent to the gallows. Seizing the opportunity, one may also point out how only recently Afghan refugees were driven out of Iran as if Afghan refugees were not as Muslim as Palestinians. And, by the way in the fallen "Emirate of Afghanistan" itself, Hazaras were slaughtered by the Taliban in their thousands almost a decade ago - mainly because Hazaras are Shia. In Iraq, more people have been killed in Shia-Sunni clashes than in resisting the US occupation. Shia-Sunni clashes in Pakistan have claimed more lives than those lost in its wars against India. Ironically, this only "nuclear power" of the Muslim world is not being occupied on its eastern front by its "Hindu" neighbour but is losing territory on its western front to its own citizens.

One can mention from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to the recent Hamas-Fatah infighting (a shameful tribute to Israel on its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary). The list is long. Indeed, unending. However, the solution to all our problems is always simple: return to an imagined past which, mercifully for the people of the seventh century, never existed. Every time, a scientist in the West is ready with an invention, our readymade answer is: we knew about it 1,400 years ago what the West has found only now. We kill Theo van Gogh when confronted with a film. We burn down our own cities in response to a blasphemous and racist caricature. Still, we refuse to understand that our answer to every "provocation" is either a fatwa or mindless violence - perhaps because creativity is anathema to us. Not because we lack fertile minds, but because we lack liberation and freedom — liberation from self-imposed mental, moral, and cultural censors. And freedom to think and express. Time to heed the great Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani, who said:

*Five thousand years*

*Growing beards*

*In our caves.*

*Our currency is unknown,*

*Our eyes are a haven for flies.*

Friends,

Smash the doors,

Wash your brains,

Wash your clothes.

Friends,

Read a book,

Write a book,

Grow words, pomegranates and grapes,

Sail to the country of fog and snow.

Nobody knows you exist in caves.

People take you for a breed of mongrels.

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**P.S.**

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[http://thenews.jang.com.pk/daily\\_detail.asp?id=118852](http://thenews.jang.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=118852)