

Understanding political islam

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Fundamentalism can be best defined as a counter-thesis of modernity. Eqbal Ahmad defines modernity as "a historical process" that "refers to the development of societies from one mode of production to another, in our age from an agrarian/pastoral mode to the capitalist/industrial mode of production."

The shift from one to another mode of production demands drastic changes in human values and in relations between sexes, classes, individuals, families and communities. Thus, modernity generates a crisis of identity.

Europe went through this experience when capitalism was set in motion. It shifted the locus of labour from farm to factory. Individuals replaced the family as units of production. More and more women were drawn into the labour market. The focus of economic life was transformed from subsistence to mass production and consumerism. It all happened very fast. The culture could not change with the same pace. The fast-moving economic change threatened old values. It was an uncertain, transitory phase between tradition and modernity.

European fundamentalism (the Puritan Revolution, the Catholic counter-reformation) was an attempt for a return to the old order, an endeavour to roll back the wheel of history. Fundamentalists think this can be done through the practice of virtue.

The reformists (Protestant Reformation) endeavoured to preserve the best in their religion/culture, while adapting the requirements of modernity. There was yet another response to modernity that exhibited itself in a number of revolutions, starting from the French Revolution. The Muslim world came across this crisis with the advent of colonialism.

It is possible to distinguish four general causes contributing to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

1. The contradictions of imperialism.

Of late, as the multinationals have stepped up their super-exploitation of the Muslim world, one of the natural reactions is hatred of the headquarters (i.e. the West) of these multinationals.

During the Cold War, imperialism used Islamic fundamentalists against the left. The fundamentalist parties were the closest friends of imperialism in the Muslim world. However, in the post-Cold War era, imperialism does not need them as it did in the past. The CIA has stopped funding Islamic fundamentalists. This changed situation brought Islamic reactionaries into contradiction with imperialism. At the same time, because of the experience of centuries of colonisation and exploitation, a hatred for the West, especially for the USA, is widespread in the Muslim world, as in any Third World country.

In the changed situation of the post-Cold War era, fundamentalists turned to anti-imperialist sloganeering and came to the fore as the forces challenging imperialism. Osama bin Laden became a symbol of anti-imperialism no matter what his tactics or the class to which he belongs. The terrorist methods of fundamentalism were seen by the ranks of the fundamentalists as jihad against the USA, while in general the movement was seen as a challenge to the USA.

2. The inability of capitalism to solve the basic problems.

Islamic fundamentalism is spreading especially rapidly in those countries where capitalism has failed to fulfill the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution, where it has failed to eliminate poverty and ignorance and where class contradictions are sharpening. Poverty and ignorance are concomitant. A society ridden with ignorance is fertile soil for the growth of fundamentalist ideas.

3. The failure of the left.

It was in Iran that the Islamic fundamentalists had their first major victory. The Tudeh Party (Iranian Communist Party) believed in the bankrupt Stalinist “two-stage theory” of revolution. Despite having a mass base, the Tudeh Party, in line with its theory, forged an alliance with fundamentalists instead of offering an alternative to the masses. Not only that, but the Iranian left also failed to present itself as an alternative during the democratic movement against the shah and failed or did not attempt to link the democratic movement to the class struggle to overthrow capitalism and replace it with socialism. The alliance with the fundamentalists proved fatal. The fundamentalists on coming to power went on to the physical elimination of the communists, and did it successfully. A golden opportunity for a socialist revolution was lost and the working class had to pay a heavy price, which it is still paying.

Afghanistan, Algeria almost same stories.

4. Providing an alternative society.

The fundamentalists, through their massive network of social services, have built alternative societies in the Muslim countries where they are strong. They provide hospitals, orphanages, schools and many other facilities, which weak capitalist governments have failed to provide to the masses. This adds to their influence as a social force. Their schools (seminaries) are the most influential tool. These seminaries not only provide religious education but also guarantee food and shelter to the children of poor parents who cannot afford education and food.

Imperialism and fundamentalism

Islamic fundamentalism provides a glaring example of imperialist hypocrisy. Now the USA and the imperialist West pose as the biggest enemy of Islamic fundamentalism and try to fool the working class in the West by presenting fundamentalism as a big challenge to world peace. But it was the same imperialism that used these fundamentalist forces against the left in various Muslim countries.

In Pakistan

Pakistan is witnessing a rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Partly this is linked with international phenomena and the four factors cited above. But there are some local factors as well. Five factors are summarised here.

1. Pakistan is not a nation-state. It is an unnatural and unhistorical country with its borders drawn in the name of religion. Besides Israel, it is the only country founded in the name of religion. Religion was and still is exploited to provide a basis for the country.

After its creation, the ruling class, in order to keep the country intact and run the state in a multi-national country, has constantly used religion as a tool to deny the rights of small nationalities and to justify unelected regimes. This has combined state and religion. Therefore Pakistan has become a semi-theocratic state, if not a completely theocratic one.

2. The ruling class has always exploited religion to justify its regimes or to win popularity. The unelected governments used religion to argue that Islam and Western democracy do not match, while so-called elected governments used religion to gain popularity whenever it was threatened. Even a populist leader like Bhutto used the phrase "Islamic socialism" in the late 1960s, and when he was facing a movement in 1977 he decreed Friday a weekly holiday and other such cosmetic Islamic reforms. After decades of exploitation of religion by rulers, there is a developing view that if Islam is the only solution to all problems, then one might as well give the government to those who practice Islam most consistently, i.e. the fundamentalists.

3. Madaris (religious schools or seminaries) provide a big army of young fundamentalists every year. There are 8000 religious schools, with an estimated 2.5 million to 3.5 million students. These schools are run with money from the Saudi or Kuwaiti governments, various departments of the Pakistani government and local wealthy people, who give big donations from their corruptly obtained money "to please Allah" as well as "to purify" their corrupted money.

Poor parents are compelled by their circumstances to send their children to these schools. Their only options are to send their children to child labour or to these schools, where they will get religious education, food, shelter and a job at some mosque on completing their education. There is an additional factor: it is believed that by learning the Quran by heart at these schools, a boy will secure heaven for himself and his family.

4. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan really began in the 1980s. On the one hand, the military dictator, General Zia ul-Haq, was using religion to justify his rule and was "Islamising" laws and society. On the other hand, Pakistan had become a base camp for the forces opposing the Afghan revolution. Not only were thousands of Pakistani guerrillas operating from Pakistani soil but also 25,000 guerrillas from other Muslim countries reached Afghanistan through Pakistan.

After the end of the Afghan war, the Pakistan Army started using these guerrilla forces to fight a proxy war in Kashmir. It is still going on. The Pakistan Army is interested in using them only in Kashmir, but the way these guerrillas are brainwashed, it is not possible to restrict them to Kashmir. They are taught to fight against all infidels; hence they reach from the Moro (Philippines) to Chechnya to help their Muslim brethren. When their foreign engagements end and they return home, they may pose a big challenge to the state. Already they are flexing their muscles. The attack on the US embassy in Islamabad in 1999 and the hijacking of an Indian plane from Nepal demanding the release of Maulana Massod, a militant leader, show their strength.

5. Pakistan's strategic position also provides a fertile ground for the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. Two Muslim countries with fundamentalist governments, Iran and Afghanistan, lie on its western border. The governments in both these countries have strong connections with the fundamentalist parties belonging to their respective sects. Pakistan borders India in the east. India is experiencing the rise and rise of Hindu fundamentalists, who have been in power now for about three years. These Hindu reactionaries use sloganeering and war mania against Pakistan to seek popularity. As a reaction to Hindu fundamentalism, Islamic fundamentalism gains popularity in Pakistan.

Social base

Fundamentalism finds its roots in the backwardness of society, social deprivation, a low level of consciousness, poverty and ignorance.

Like fascism and national chauvinism, Islamic fundamentalism finds its base in the petty bourgeoisie. But it is not only the petty bourgeoisie that is attracted by fundamentalism; those who have fallen from among the petty bourgeoisie into the ranks of the proletariat and semi-proletariat are also impressed by the movement. Similarly, sections of the proletariat that are newly formed and not yet equipped with class-consciousness and the experience of class struggle are also likely to become supporters of this movement.

They correspond to a section of petty bourgeoisie described by the *Communist Manifesto*:

The lower middle class, the manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant, all these fight against the bourgeoisie to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history.

Pakistan is a case in point.

Anti-imperialism of fools

Anti-imperialism stands for — as anti-imperialism should — national liberation, women's emancipation, democratisation, political and economic empowerment, respect for the religious minorities, self-determination for oppressed nationalities. Anti-imperialism is freedom, for all oppressed, from all oppression.

In contrast, an Osama bin Laden or Ayatollah Khomeini for that matter offer an anti-imperialism that does not tolerate these values. Their's is an anti-imperialism that chokes minorities and strangles small nationalities.

Anti-imperialism represents liberation. One cannot be a liberator and an oppressor at the same time. The anti-imperialism that upholds Osama as its poster boy does not solve this contradiction.