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Saudi Arabia: The real terror tyrant

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Social selection plays the same role in the social sciences which the natural selection plays in the biological sciences: it selects the traits, norms and values which are most beneficial to the host culture. Seen from this angle, social diversity is a desirable quality for social progress since when diverse customs and value-systems compete with each other, they take the best and reject the worst from each.

A decentralized and unorganized religion, like Sufism, engenders diverse strains of beliefs and thoughts which compete with one another in gaining social acceptance. A heavily centralized and tightly organized religion, on the other hand, depends more on authority and dogma, than value and utility. A centralized religion is also more ossified and less adaptive.

When we look at religious extremism and the consequent militancy and terrorism, in Pakistan in particular and the Islamic world in general, in the natural evolution of religion, some deleterious mutation must have occurred somewhere, which has infected the whole of Islamic world.

Most Pakistani political scientists blame the Pakistani military establishment for a deliberate promotion of religious extremism to create a jihadi narrative which suits the institutional interests and strategic objectives of the Pakistani military. There is no denying this obvious fact but it is only one factor in a multifactorial equation. The phenomenon of religious extremism is not limited to Pakistan, the whole of Islamic world from Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria to

Indonesia, Malaysia and even the Muslim minorities of Thailand, China and Philippines bear witness to it.

The real culprit for the rise of religious extremism and terrorism in the Islamic world is Saudi Arabia. The Aal-e-Saud (descendants of Saud) have no hereditary claim to the Throne of Mecca since they are not the descendants of the prophet, nor even from the Quresh. They were the most primitive marauding nomadic tribesmen of Najd who defeated the Sharifs of Mecca violently after the collapse of the Ottomans in World War I. Their title to the throne of Saudi Arabia is *de facto*, not *de jure*, since neither do they have a hereditary claim nor do they hold elections to ascertain the will of the Saudi people. Thus they are the illegitimate rulers of Saudi Arabia and they feel insecure because of that; which explains their heavy-handed tactics in dealing with any kind of dissent, opposition or movement for reform.

Religious extremism all over the Islamic world is directly linked to the Wahhabi-Salafi madrassas which are sponsored by the Saudi and Gulf petrodollars. These madrassas attract children from the most poorest backgrounds in Islamic countries because they offer the kind of incentives and facilities which government-sponsored public schools cannot provide: free boarding and lodging, no tuition fee at all, and free books and stationery.

Aside from madrassas, another factor that promotes Wahhabi-Salafi ideology in the Islamic world is the ritual of the Hajj and Umrah (pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina). Every year millions of Muslims travel from all over the Islamic world to perform the ritual and wash their sins. When they return to their native countries, after spending a month or two in Saudi Arabia, along with clean hearts and souls, dates and zamzam, they also bring along the tales of Saudi hospitality and their true puritanical version of Islam, which some, especially rural-tribal folk, find attractive.

Authority plays an important role in any thought system; the educated people accept the authority of the specialists in their respective fields; the lay people accept the authority of the theologians and clerics in the interpretation of religion and scriptures. Aside from authority, certain other factors also play a part in individual psyches: loyalty, purity or the concept of sacred, and originality and authenticity as in a concept of being close to an authentic ideal.

Just like modern naturalists, who prefer organic food and natural habits and lifestyle because of their belief in the goodness of nature or their disillusionment from manufactured fuss, religious folks prefer a true version of Islam which is closer to the putative authentic Islam as practiced in Mecca and Medina: the Gold Standard of Petro-Islam.

Yet another factor contributing to the rise of Salafism throughout the Islamic world is immigration. Millions of Muslim men, women and families from the Third World Islamic countries live and work in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait and Oman. Most are on temporary work permits.

Just like the pilgrims, when they come back to their native villages and towns, they bring the alluring perception of having an Oxbridge degree and an attractive English accent. Not literally but figuratively. Spending time in Arab countries entitles one to pass authoritative judgments on religious matters; and having a cursory understanding of the language of Quran makes you an

equivalent of a Qazi (judge) among the illiterate village people. And they just reproduce the customs and attitudes of the Arabs as an authentic version of Islam to their compatriots.

Shi'ite Muslims have their Imams and Marjahs (religious authorities) but it is generally believed that Sunni Islam discourages the authority of the clergy. In this sense, Sunni Islam is closer to Protestantism, theoretically, because it promotes an individual and personal interpretation of scriptures and religion. It might be true about the Hanafies and other educated schools of thought in Islam; but on a popular level, the House of Saud plays the same role in Islam that the Pope plays in Catholicism. By virtue of their physical possession of the holy places of Islam – Mecca and Medina – they are the ex officio Caliphs of Islam. The title of the Saudi King, Khadim-ul-Haramain-al-Shareefain (Servant of the House of God), makes him a vice-regent of God on Earth. And the title of the Caliph of Islam is not limited to a nation-state, he wields enormous influence and clout throughout the Commonwealth of Islam: the Muslim Ummah.

Now, when we hear slogan like “No democracy, just Islam” on the streets of Third World Islamic countries, one wonders what kind of an imbecile would forgo his right to choose his ruler through a democratic process? It is partly due to the fact that the masses often conflate democracy with liberalism; without realizing that democracy is only a political process of choosing one’s representatives and legislators through an election process, while liberalism is a cultural mindset which may or may not be suitable in a native Third World society, depending on its existing level of social progress in an evolutionary perspective - which prefers a bottom-up, gradual and incremental changes over a top-down, sudden and radical approach.

One feels dumbfounded, however, when even educated Muslims argue that democracy is un-Islamic and an ideal Islamic system of governance is a Caliphate. An ideal Caliphate could be some Umayyad/Abbasid model that they conjure up in their heads; but in practice the only beneficiaries of such an anti-democratic approach are the illegitimate tyrants of the Arab World. They claim to be the Caliphs of Islam albeit indirectly and in a nuanced manner: the Servants of the House of God and the Keepers of the Holy places of Islam.

The illegitimate, hence insecure, tyrants adopt different strategies to maintain their hold on power. They heed to the pragmatic advice of Machiavelli: “Invent enemies and then slay them in order to control your subjects.” The virulently anti-Shi'ite rhetoric of the Salafis and Takfiris is a Machiavellian approach. The Salafis and Takfiris cannot construct a positive narrative that specifies their achievements; that’s why they construct a negative narrative that casts the Evil Other in a negative light.

The Sunni-Shi'ite conflict is essentially political and economic but is presented to the lay Muslim in a veneer of religiosity. Since Saudi Arabia produces 10 to 15 million barrels of oil per day (equivalent to 15% to 20% of global oil production) it can single-handedly bring down the price of a barrel of oil to US\$50 or single-handedly raise it to \$200, a nightmare for the global industrialized economies. With 90% of the Saudi oil installations situated along the Persian Gulf, this sparsely populated region comprises the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and its Shi'ite majority. Any separatist tendency is accordingly met with sternest possible reaction. Saudi Arabia sent its own battalions to help the Bahraini regime quell the Shi'ite minority rebellion in Bahrain, which is also geographically very close to the Eastern Province.

Al-Qaeda inspired terrorism is a threat to the Western countries; but the Islamic countries are encountering a much bigger threat of inter-sectarian terrorism. For centuries the Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims lived peacefully side by side; but now vested interests are provoking inter-sectarian strife to distract attention away from the popular movements for democracy throughout the Middle East and North Africa region.

The ultimate goal of the Arab Spring is to overthrow the illegitimate House of Saud, and this tide will not subside until its objective is achieved. There are ebbs and flows in any grassroots political and social movement. It ebbed in Egypt but it will rise again to flood the whole of region. What's unfortunate is the fact, that the so-called champions of democracy can't even lend a moral support, let alone the material support; because their interests always outweigh their principles and ideals.