

# Democracy <sup>News</sup> versus hypocrisy

Iran is under threat and the ummah remains silent. Meanwhile, President Bush is out to change the world — for better or worse

## Outsider Insider

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**E**id-ul-Azha has come and gone, and with it the prayers for the progress and prosperity of the Muslim *ummah*. Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, addressing *hajj* missions in Mina, called on Muslims to spread the message that Islam is a religion of tolerance. And he described the *ummah* as united. No one can possibly argue with him on the first point. But I cannot help feeling that his second point is to a very large extent the result of wishful thinking.

Where is the *united ummah* when it comes to Kashmir? When did you last hear an Arab state come out strongly in support of the people of Indian-occupied Kashmir? By contrast, Pakistan's stand on Palestine is admirable, not least because it remains unreciprocated with regard to the comparable issue of Kashmir. I suppose many Arab states do not want to jeopardise their business and trade ties with India, while Pakistan has nothing to lose vis-à-vis Israel. But what about its relations with Israel's number one protector, the United States? Well, strangely enough they don't seem to be adversely affected by the Palestine issue. On the contrary, President Bush has invited President Musharraf to take a leading role in trying to resolve the Middle East conflict.

Be all that as it may, where is the *united ummah* when one of its members finds itself at the receiving end of Iraq-style threats by the United States? A week ago, Pakistan's ambassador in Washington Jehangir Karamat urged the US to use diplomacy to work out differences with Iran. He said military action would have wide-ranging negative effects in the region after the US-led wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. His words in God's ear, as we say in German. The words would, of course, have had more impact if they had been uttered in public by President Musharraf.

The ambassador also speculated that recent talk of a military option was intended to put pressure on Iran, both with regard to its nuclear programme and to next Sunday's elections in neighbouring Iraq. Well, that remains to be seen. Seymour Hersh, whose article in *The New Yorker* magazine triggered talk about the military option, is not an irresponsible journalist. And I haven't come across any watertight denial of secret US missions inside Iran to help identify potential nuclear, chemical and missile targets. Military action need not mean a full-scale invasion like the one in Iraq. For that the US military would certainly seem to be over-stretched at the moment. Nor should we lose sight of the possibility that Israel could be drafted into any hit-and-run adventure in Iran.

Why do we suffer so often from such a short memory? After his re-election last November, George W. Bush put us on notice that he had gained political capital during the campaign, and that he now intended to spend that capital. And then there was his inauguration speech last Thursday: "So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."

Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek* magazine speaks of the chasm between rhetoric and reality, noting that "the Bush administration has not

been particularly vociferous in holding dictators to account." He mentions, among others, Vladimir Putin in Russia and Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan. It is by no means a new phenomenon in American foreign policy. Remember, for example, the ouster of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973 and the following 17 years of repression, disappearances and killings under Augusto Pinochet? You claim to support democracy and liberty, but close your eyes to the opposite when and wherever it suits your short-term or long-term objectives. Hypocrisy is the name of the game.

And we haven't even begun to question the strange idea that western-style democracy can be exported at will like cheeseburgers and certain caffeinated soft drinks. I am convinced it cannot - and should not. Quite apart from historical, social and religious differences between, say, Germany and Pakistan, there are institutions that need to be in place before something like democracy can gain hold and begin to flourish. A coun-

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try like Pakistan needs time to develop a democratic culture after more than half a century of misrule by civilian and military administrations.

The United States, for one, shows absolutely no recognition of such facts. Bush & Co believe that the overthrow of a bad regime by military force is all it takes. And they also believe in the case of countries to be "converted" that elections, never mind if they are flawed for various reasons, are the be-all and end-all of democracy. Well, they are not. They are only the beginning. Let's see where Iraq will be in relation to democracy after next Sunday's vote and the bloodshed likely to be associated with it.

Another thought on the fallacy of democracy being an exportable commodity. Writing a few days ago in Britain's *The Guardian*, Eric Hobsbawm pointed out that the idea conveys to those who do not enjoy this form of government the illusion that it actually governs those who do. The US and Britain are without a doubt democracies. But how, for example, were the decisions to go to war against Iraq taken in those two countries? According to Hobsbawm, "among small groups of people in private, not very different from the way they would have been taken in non-democratic countries."

One could almost come to the conclusion that *democracy* must rank as one of the most misused and overused words in the vocabulary of politicians both in democratic and non-democratic countries. Someone who seems to have known a thing or two about hypocrisy was 17th century French moralist Duc de la Rochefoucauld. Writing in his *Maximes*, he tells us that "hypocrisy is a tribute which vice pays to virtue."

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