

Democracy, secularism

A PUBLIC MEETING OF THE MUTTAHIDA Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in Lahore on the occasion of Pakistan Day on March 23, attended largely by seminary students, was remarkable because of the participation of Imran Khan. He extended his support to the alliance and congratulated it for launching a movement for the restoration of democracy in the country.

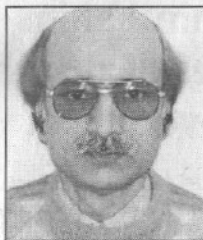
Imran accused President Pervez Musharraf of seeking to implement a Western agenda in Pakistan in the garb of enlightened moderation. "We need dignity, respect and honour in the comity of nations but the General wants to make us slaves", he is quoted as saying.

Those who have been watching Imran Khan's headlong descent from a Westernised socialite and cricket idol to a West-bashing Islamised nationalist, will be saddened but not surprised at this denouement.

In response to a critical editorial in this newspaper ("Imran Khan, the MMA and Two-Nation Theory," March 25, 2005), his information secretary, Akbar S Babar, published a rejoinder ("Imran and Two-Nation Theory", *Daily Times*, March 26, 2005), in which he accused "these 'enlightened moderates' [of] conveniently ignor[ing] that Pakistan's descent to chaos was led by secular and liberal-minded Harvard and Sandhurst-educated ruling elite who denied justice, education, and basic healthcare to the majority."

Some members of the Pakistani ruling elite Mr Babar alluded to may have gone to Harvard or Sandhurst, but they most certainly cannot be accused of being liberal or secular. Education and appearances can be deceptive. Imran Khan himself is a case in point. For all his Western education and lifestyle, it is now impossible to distinguish him from typical Pakistani dema-

THINKING ALOUD



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Besieged by the mullahs and infiltrated by their allies, sympathisers and opportunists, the Pakistani cabinet has just cast away "enlightened moderation" to reinsert the column for religion in Pakistani passports. Undoubtedly, it is a defeat for the liberal forces. So, too, is the Great Khan's joining forces with the MMA

gogues and bigots. Like them, he is denouncing the West, using nationalism and religion as political props and prescribing the hangman's noose to abolish corruption.

The ease with which Imran now mingles with the likes of MMA is self-evident. Not a trace of Oxford, Sussex or London in him! He's all Lahore

— that too of the obscurantist variety — with Peshawar added for good measure.

To set the record straight, Pakistan's "descent to chaos" occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, during the period of the country's accelerated Islamisation, first under a mullah masquerading as a general and then under his civilian protégé who lived in another planet from Harvard or Sandhurst.

Looking beyond Pakistan, Turkey and Malaysia are the only two Islamic countries that stand out in terms of economic and socio-political progress, rather than being an embarrassment to the Ummah. The former is secular by conviction and the latter by compulsion. On the other hand, the Taliban's Afghanistan and the Ayatollahs' Iran, overtly anti-secular theocracies, are nothing to brag about.

In fact, the world remembers the Taliban regime as a blot on mankind. It had no constitution, no rules of governance and no policy that we know of. Mullah Umar viewed himself as Allah's representative in God-damned Afghanistan and, as such, he claimed to know what was good for his nation. In Iran, the elected government has less authority than the mayor of a large Western city, while real power is exercised by an unelected Council of Guardians consisting of Ayatollahs and their appointees.

Both the Taliban and the Ayatollahs are the unadulterated products of Islamic religious schools, graduates of Akora Khattak and Qom, to be precise. None can accuse their governments of being in the least infiltrated by Harvard and Sandhurst-educated liberals.

In the same speech, Imran Khan said that General Pervez Musharraf's policies went against the grain of the Two-Nation theory. Over 50 years after the creation of Pakistan, the debate about this theory and what the founder of the nation envisioned for Pakistan is only a matter of academic interest.

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ith However, Mr Jinnah's oft-quoted speech of August 11, 1947 makes an emphatic case for a secular state and cannot be juxtaposed against his other statements that have been quoted by Imran Khan's information secretary in support of an Islamic polity. Firstly, in this speech, Mr Jinnah unequivocally and unambiguously spelled out his secular vision for the future state. And, secondly, it was not a casual remark to the press or a public speech to mobilise the masses or win their votes, but a well-considered statement to the Constituent Assembly intended to impress upon lawmakers his thoughts for the new state.

But far more important is what the people of Pakistan want and need in the 21st century. It can be assumed that they would like to live according to the time-tested principles of free and fair elections, federalism, minority rights, women's rights and equality before law, all of which are successfully practised and safeguarded under what is broadly known as the democratic secular model first evolved in the West but now accepted — though not always followed — around the world. If, as we are repeatedly reminded, Islam invented and guarantees all the above, it's all the more reason to adopt them.

Some obvious facts are incontrovertible. The secular West is an example of success. Even next-door India, which began life with a secular constitution, is hailed for its achievements. We embarked on our journey at the same time with the Objectives Resolution, with its emphasis on religion, and immediately began to teeter on the brink of collapse. Years of sporadic Islamisation from the beginning, followed by high-potency doses of the same in the 1980s, led to a situation where Pakistan began to be seen as a "failed state".

A successful socio-political and economic system can only flourish where reason reigns and there

are checks and balances, particularly a free press and an independent judiciary. These are incompatible with a religiously-oriented government with theocrats controlling the organs of the state.

It is an irony of Pakistani politics that the religious fundamentalists aligned in the MMA are now pretending to be champions of free and fair elections and insisting that President Musharraf cease to be army chief, although there is nothing particularly Islamic about either demand. Elections based on the principle of "one man, one vote" and civilian supremacy in politics are both Western inventions.

Elections put the MMA in power in two provinces and they reckon that, with the presidency weakened, they will be able to enter the portals of power in Islamabad, with or without elections. Once ensconced in power, their professed belief in "one man, one vote" will mutate into "one man, one vote, one time". The history of succession in Muslim countries and the recent experience of Afghanistan and Iran testify to this.

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Before proceeding further down this path, the Oxford-educated Imran ought to spend some time in Peshawar or speak to people who fled the tyranny of the Taliban or the rule of the Ayatollahs and honestly ask himself whether that is the future he contemplates for Pakistan — for its youth, women and minorities, in particular.

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