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Probing with a bayonet

By Irfan Husain

Lenin, speaking about moving a cause forward, once said: "Probe with a bayonet: if you meet steel, stop. If you meet mush, then push."

For years now, the Pakistani religious right has been pushing relentlessly. In response, they have continuously met the softest of mush from civilian and military leaders, from civil society, and from every organ of the state. The only time they met steel was when Ayub Khan was in charge.

When the clerics tried to derail the field marshal's family planning programme, they

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did not meet a meek apologia and swift submission. They encountered, instead, a steely resolve. Since then, however, they have had plain sailing as one leader after another has buckled under to their demands, and Pakistan's slide into anarchy and backwardness has continued unchecked.

When Zulfikar Ali Bhutto caved in before the opposition in 1977, and declared prohibition and banned betting, he made Zia's task of ushering in the dark ages that much easier. Although whenever they were given the opportunity, the people have snubbed the religious parties at the polls, the mullahs have been able to move their obscurantist agenda forward without serious opposition from the centrist, liberal parties and politicians. Or, indeed, from the army. Time and again, they have met mush while probing with their bayonets.

Since the biggest asset these clerics enjoy in politics is their pious and God-fearing image, one would imagine they would preserve it carefully. However, over the years, they have exposed themselves repeatedly as being just as self-serving and cynical as any secular politician. Their record in and out of power does not inspire the faithful into believing that they are a different breed of politicians. On the contrary, their track record is a depressing story of broken pledges and appalling ignorance.

Consider the threat issued to the government by the collected might of the religious parties that had assembled recently in Islamabad at the Almi Majlis Tahafaz-e-Khatme Nubuwat conference. At a time when Pakistan and the rest of the Islamic world face huge problems, you would think the meeting of clerics would have devoted some time to analysing post-9/11 events, and how they impacted the ummah.

No such luck. What we got instead was a familiar diatribe about the 'religion column' in the new machine-readable passports. At the risk of confessing my ignorance, I have been unable to comprehend why this is such a big deal. Why should it be the business of immigration officers what faith a passenger follows? Why does this petty, administrative matter get our clerics so worked up? For months now, they seem to have no other issue to discuss. At the recent conference, they threatened to surround Parliament House if the government did not give in immediately to their demand. Considering what they have achieved inside the assembly, they might have better luck outside.

But the real danger is that the government will cave in. The issue in itself is not terribly important. It is the signal it sends: the religious parties have got their way and forced the government to back down yet again. This piecemeal tactic has worked very well for the clerics: seize upon a petty matter, hammer away and push your agenda forward another few steps. In Lenin's words, '?...when you meet mush, push.?'

What other gems of spiritual wisdom flowed from this conference? Qazi Hussain Ahmed, leader of the Jamaat-i-Islami and president of the MMA alliance, alleged that officials 'who associated with Ahmedis' had been given senior bureaucratic positions, and were planning to destabilize the country. Really? Who? Where? So now it's not just being an Ahmedis that can get you into trouble: you can incur Qazi's wrath just by associating with them.

The beauty of these tactics is that you don't have to prove anything when you make an

allegation, no matter how outlandish. Because you sport a long beard, people assume you are telling the truth. For instance, Qazi Sahib accused President Musharraf of 'mocking Islam and undermining Pakistan's ideology.' He failed to tell us how Islam was being mocked, and how the national ideology (whatever it is) was being undermined.

He also accused the government of 'disgracing' the national hero, Dr A.Q. Khan. Not a word about the scientist's alleged role in proliferating for personal gain. Complete silence on the huge embarrassment Khan's freelance activities have caused Pakistan. This is typical of the clerics' tactics: blame the government, and force it on the back-foot, while completely ignoring the tough issues.

Another favourite whipping-boy of the reactionary right these days is the Aga Khan Educational Foundation (AKEF). At the conference, Qazi Hussain Ahmed accused the government of 'handing over' the educational system to the AKEF. I only wish this was true, given the mess the state system is in. But as I have written in this space, and as many others have emphasized in the national press, all that has happened is that the AKEF has been authorized to become one of the examining boards for school leaving students. It is entirely up to the discretion of private schools to affiliate themselves with the AKEF which is to set exams according to the approved syllabus. Considering the limited scope of this innovation, it is hard to see what Qazi Sahib is getting so worked up about. If the AKEF becomes one of a score of examining boards across the country, how is it hijacking the educational system? But once again, our clerics have got away with their falsehoods without being challenged.

And lest anybody is in doubt about the seriousness of the passport controversy, the assembled maulanas at the conference issued a joint declaration, vowing to continue protesting till the religion column was restored. I just wish somebody would tell me why this is such a big deal. Clearly, I'm missing something here.

It all boils down to the importance of truth in our public life. The clerics who have made politics their full-time occupation do not consider integrity to be an important factor. Charles de Gaulle once observed: 'As a politician never believes what he says, he is surprised when others believe him.'

So, too, must our mullahs be constantly surprised when so many not just swallow what they say, but follow them on their mendacious path.

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