



The Islamisation Syndrome



The last decade has witnessed one Muslim country after another launching an Islamisation programme. There is little doubt that these programmes are in response to popular demand. Whether these programmes are genuine, or just designed to play with public opinion, is much more questionable. **Mohamed Iqbal Asaria** looks at the rationale behind Islamisation and signposts likely developments around the corner

The Why of Islamisation

THE late sixties and early seventies provide much of the background to the pressures which are now leading most Muslim countries to institute programmes of Islamisation. The phenomena of Islamisation has emerged in countries as far apart as Morocco and Malaysia.

With hindsight one may surmise that the late sixties and early seventies were the heydays of westernisation in Muslim countries. Every Islamic tenet, it seemed for a time, was going to be sacrificed at the altar of modernisation and progress. Muslim objections and sentiments were dismissed with an arrogance and disdain which was hitherto unknown.

The onslaught was so systematic and widespread that Muslims were forced into a kind of state-within-a-state. The might of the state

obliged them to pay homage to its dictates, but underneath they continued to yearn for a fuller recognition and implementation of Islamic norms. In a manner similar to Soviet Muslims, who ask to be buried according to Islamic rites, Muslims began to preserve and perpetuate as much of their Islam as possible.

Most Muslim countries began to have two groups of people. The modernisers, who wanted to sacrifice Islam for their objectives and the rest who considered their commitment to Islam to be non-negotiable.

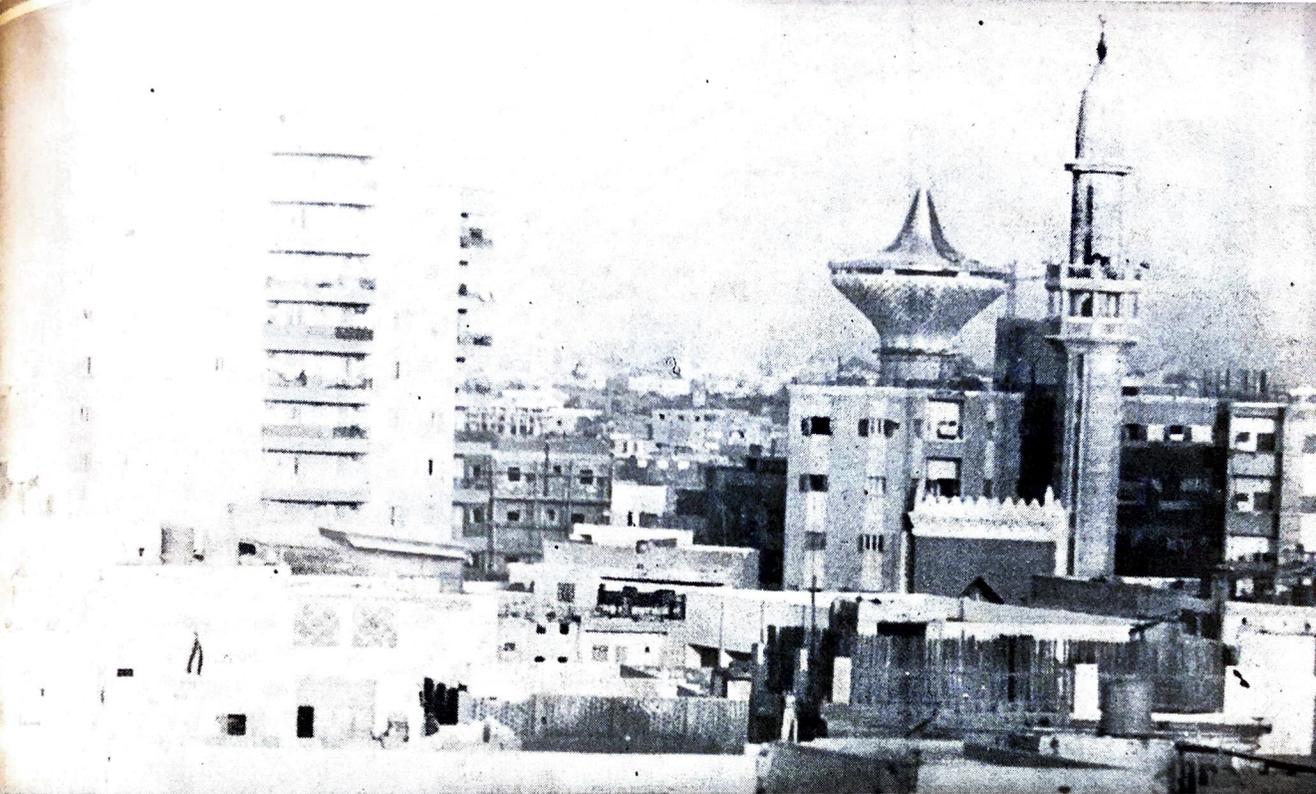
This schism is best illustrated by the author's attempts to pray at various airports in Muslim countries. In Istanbul airport, not only is there no place to pray but most officials respond scornfully when requested to assist in finding a place for prayer. However, upon

approaching a sweeper with the same request, his face beamed up. He asked me to follow him and took me to a changing room where he laid a prayer-mat, found facilities to make ablution (*wudu*) and stood guard whilst I prayed. Indeed, so glad was he that he wouldn't let me go without having a cup of tea with him.

At the old Damascus airport I was faced with the same problem. The officials were busy selling duty-free liquor and it was pointless to ask them. However, upon approaching the sweeper, he promptly produced his overcoat, laid it on the floor and stood guard whilst I performed my *salaat* (prayer)

Even when proper mosques are built, most officials don't want to know about them. At Kuwait airport I had to scout around the massive complex trying to find an official who could tell me where the mosque was. Ironically, it was a Hindu sweeper who was able to guide me to the beautiful mosque.

Examples like this in the daily



A typical city in a Muslim country: alien structures and alien technology raised to the status of demi-gods

lives of Muslims could be multiplied several times. Criminal law was totally westernised and made a tool for the rich elite to keep the demands of the poor in check. Personal law has increasingly been tampered with. Divorce, inheritance and marriage laws came to be regulated by derivatives of western law. Matters went so far that Muslim women wanting to wear the *Hijab* were ridiculed, despised and virtually barred from any educational or employment opportunities.

So obsessed were 'Muslim' leaders with westernisation that people like Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt and the Shah of Iran began to link the histories of their peoples with the European heritage rather than with that of Islam.

Indeed, as these leaders felt in control of the situation and American encroachment in the region grew they even started to make tentative steps to accommodate Zionist Israel. At the time of his ignominious fall, the Shah of Iran was the leading supplier of oil to the Zionist regime. Sadat of Egypt had also launched his capitulation

bid with the signing of the Camp David Accords.

Thus it seemed only a matter of time before westernisation would deprive the Muslims of internal expression of Islam and heap upon them the humiliation of accommodating Israel at the behest of the US. Frustration was clearly at boiling point and the realisation was fast dawning on Muslims that a major *jihād* was called for. This feeling was heightened by the fact that the fourteenth *hijrah* century was drawing to a close.

Whilst these sentiments were being articulated in many Muslim countries, the banishment of Ayatullah Khomeini from Iraq acted as a catalyst which finally culminated in the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran, which, in its wake led to the overthrow of the mighty and despotic regime of the Shah.

It was clear that this was no mere military takeover, where it was only a matter of time before the new generals could be tamed. It was a popular uprising avowedly anti-westernisation and seeking to bring into being a functioning

Islamic polity. Pandemonium broke loose amongst the westernisation camp. The popular pressures which were beginning to build up began to be crystallised. Muslim women wearing *hijab* demanded and got access to education and employment; it became respectable to pray again; airlines began to serve *halal* food and many, like Kuwait Airways, stopped serving liquor. The assault on Islamic law and Muslims was arrested.

Muslims across the globe, who had been demoralised by the heavy blows inflicted by the westernisation crusade, felt able to lift their heads again and demand their rights. In many countries, the left which had claimed the monopoly for "progressive" change, was left in limbo and appeared impotent in the face of resurgent Islam. The initiative for change, both ideological and operational, clearly passed into the hands of Muslims.

No "leader of a Muslim country could afford to ignore the demands of the Muslims. The quest for Islamisation was born. ■

The How of Islamisation



Gaddafi's initial reforms were greeted with enthusiasm



Voting for Islamic Law in Egypt

THE mid-sixties saw the rise to power of Colonel Ghaddafi in Libya. His initial pronouncements were greeted with joy in many Muslim countries. Apart from his anti-imperialism rhetoric, what attracted the Muslim was his championing of such basic Islamic tenets as the ban on alcohol.

Alas the euphoria was short-lived. Muslims soon began to wake up to the Green March, the Green Solutions, the all-encompassing panaceas to global ills and finally the Green Nuns.

With this bitter experience, Muslims became a bit more circumspect and no longer were prepared to give the benefit of the doubt to any odd champion raising the banner of Islam. It took the solid and sustained revival of the seventies to make them responsive again to the calls of Islamisation.

The seventies saw the zenith of blind westernisation. The bifurcation of Muslim societies into the elite bent upon westernisation at any cost and an increasingly unwilling populace fearing the eclipse of Islam altogether, was bound to explode at some time. The Islamic revolution in Iran resolved the tense situation.

Most Muslim governments realised that for survival the Islamic sentiments of the people would have to be upheld. Naturally, each government in its own way, started to implement an Islamisation programme which would add

rather than deter from its legitimacy.

The starting point of most governments response to the challenge was to acknowledge the need for Islamisation. Many then proceeded to outline programmes for the same. Typically, the first avenue of change was in laws dealing with the consumption of alcohol and those dealing with punishment of petty crime and murder.

Thus in Pakistan and Sudan one saw well-publicised episodes of destruction of alcohol stocks. In Pakistan much ado was made about the flogging of petty criminals. Punishments for adultery were also highlighted. In Sudan, publicity has been given to amputation of hands for theft.

At the second level changes were introduced in the media. The whole conduct of media revolving around the western concept of treating women as sex objects came in for sharp revision. In most countries such blatant abuse of females has been toned down.

There are then changes designed to give a sense of permanence to the whole exercise. In this category we have the centralised collection of *Zakat* in Sudan and Pakistan. We also have the setting up of Islamic Ideology Councils, Islamic Banks, and Islamic Universities.

Even those countries which have not formally announced full-fledged Islamisation programmes,

have had to adopt some laws to assuage popular sentiment. Thus, Egypt has adopted Islamic law as the sole law, but then put its implementation into abeyance, by a series of administrative fiat. In countries like Indonesia and Turkey, room has had to be made for Islamic education to be imparted in state schools.

In Nigeria, the whole debate on adopting Islamic Law for the country's majority Muslim population, came to the fore in the constitutional debates that preceded Shehu Shagari's takeover from the military. Then the secularists were able to divide and disunite the Muslims. Now that the country is seeking for a way out from its current impasse, the issue is bound to be raised again.

It is noticeable that in all cases, the attempt is to leave the underlying status quo untouched. As far as possible the attempt is to get away with cosmetic changes. Thus while petty crime and adultery have been brought under the domain of Islamic law, the much more prevalent crimes of fraud and corruption have been untouched. Similarly, areas like education and international relations are also considered to be too sensitive to tamper with.

The major taboo area is of course, the nature of coming into being of the political authority itself. Secular leaders, military rulers, feudal chiefs and dynastic

rulers, have all begun to champion the cause of Islamisation.

With time certain changes like the institution of Islamic Banks and the acceptance of *Hijab* are becoming standard. Blatant westernisation has had to be couched in Islamic terminology, and at least lip service paid to Islamic values and norms.

There is no doubt that even these cosmetic changes have succeeded in absorbing the worst aspects of the frustration of Muslims in many countries. The head-on confrontation of the late sixties and the early seventies has been averted.

The fear now surfacing amongst the inner cabinets of many Muslim

countries is that the tide of Islamisation may become unstoppable and may sweep them away in the process. Urgent studies are in progress to devise ways of calling a halt to the process without resorting to violence, which could be counter productive.

Malaysia: The Politics of Islamisation

MALAYSIA presents one of the most interesting cases of Islamisation. Post-independence Malaysia has been governed by a Malay-dominated coalition. Many government programmes and policies are geared to redressing the imbalance in wealth possessed by the Chinese and the Malay communities. Thus, for instance, the New Economic Order envisages the transfer of roughly 30 percent of the equity in major enterprises into Malay hands.

Until recently, the terms Malay and Muslim were taken as synonymous. Indeed, all Malays are Muslims. However, the increasingly secular and western posture of the country's post-independence leadership gave rise to accusations that the practice of profession of faith had to be looked at in conjunction. Thus if Malays were found to be acting against the tenets of Islam, then they had no right to call themselves Muslims, and certainly not leaders of Muslims.

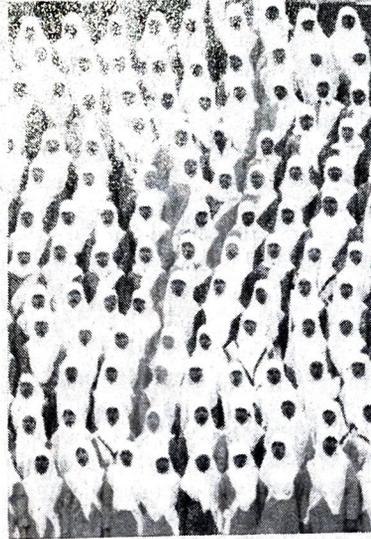
This debate has led to the *Kafir Mengkafir* (Kufr and Takfir) issue, which led to the aborted anti-climactic television debate. Leaders of PAS, in particular, have argued that Malays could fall into the category of *Kafir*, if their life does not conform with the Islamic code of conduct.

In the Malaysian context, this is a truly explosive issue. UMNO, the leading component of the ruling Barisan Nationale (National Front), has realised that the issue has the potential of overturning the whole political balance in the country. This, ironically, is most true of the oil rich state of Trengannu, which also happens to be the stronghold of PAS.

As a result UMNO has had to abandon its outright secularist posture, and present itself as an agent of Islamisation. The resignation of Datuk Hussein Onn, due to ill

health, provided the appropriate opportunity. Datuk Mahathir Mohammed who took over, took a calculated gamble and opened a dialogue with Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of ABIM (the Muslim Youth Movement). Just prior to the first election under his leadership he managed to woo Anwar over.

This had a cataclysmic effect on the whole of Muslim politics in the country. ABIM was thrown into disarray and has yet to recover its credibility. PAS, on its side also detected the difficult path ahead as the government itself stated its inten-



tion of championing the cause of Islam.

Soon after the elections, the government started to implement its Islamisation programme. The necessary processes were put into motion to create an Islamic Bank and an Islamic University. A generalised scheme for 'instilling Islamic values' in the governmental apparatus was also instituted. Obvious irritants, like the serving of alcohol at government functions, and riding roughshod over prayer timings during the same, were

removed.

The public in turn has responded. Questions have begun to be raised about the investment policies of Bhumiputra institutions. Disclosures of the placement of funds by institutions like the *Baitul Maal* (where all zakat collections are deposited) have been demanded.

The trend is clear. Soon there will be demands for scrutinising leading Bhumiputra institutions like the troubled Bank Bhumiputra or the equity conglomerate Permodalan Nationale. This will test the government's resolve and the extent to which it intends to pursue its Islamisation programme. With PAS in the ascendancy in its traditional strongholds of Kelantan, Trengannu and Kedah, the government cannot afford any let up.

The whole episode has given rise to an 'Islamic' wing within UMNO itself, although its strength is as yet minimal. However, it is easy to see that with pressure mounting, this wing will increasingly be called upon to come up with newer areas in which to absorb the demands for more Islamisation.

To be fair, it must be said that the quality of life for a Muslim in Malaysia is much less frustrating than in many other parts of the Muslim world. To be a practicing Muslim does not carry a stigma, as it would in Syria or Algeria or Morocco, for example. Again, although the Malays constitute a lesser proportion of the country's population than, say, the Muslims in Nigeria, they have definitely got a much more amiable environment vis-a-vis the practice of Islam.

It is therefore not surprising to see that despite the relentless pressure from PAS, the political tempo of the country is nowhere near boiling point. A judicious Islamisation policy may be able to keep it that way for a long time to come. ■

The Where of Islamisation

MOST governments have adopted Islamisation to get out of desperate situations to keep popular pressures at bay. The measures adopted have found a receptive chord amongst the people. Some governments have attributed this enthusiasm to their own popularity and have used it to legitimise their political supremacy.

As an example of such response, one may cite the massive turnout of people (estimated at near one million) in the Sudan on the first anniversary of the introduction of Islamic law. Whether this is seen as an endorsement of the Numeiri regime or acclaim for the reintroduction of Islam in the country is a moot point.

Once a programme of Islamisation is started it becomes self-perpetuating. In Pakistan, the government started with the introduction of Profit-and-Loss-Sharing counters in all nationalised banks. The enthusiasm of the people was reflected by the fact that within two years over 25 percent of the total deposits of the banking system were in PLS deposits. The government then extended the PLS counters to branches of non-Pakistani banks in the country. Now there are plans to make the

PLS deposits the norm and eliminate interest-bearing deposits altogether by July 1985.

The argument adduced in favour of such an approach is that to transform an entrenched western system, a learning curve with a longish lead-time is needed. Therefore, in a natural progression all aspects of life would be transformed in a like manner to banking.

Whilst this is undoubtedly true, it is also being argued that this process will stop short of touching any institutions which will affect the status quo. In banking, for instance, little information is available as to exactly how the PLS system is working. Is it merely a case of a clever camouflage of the interest-bearing system? Has any genuine new ground been broken?

It appears that both the regimes and the peoples in Muslim countries are watching how far Islamisation will go. The debate on the application of criminal law is instructive in gauging the state of this tussle. While *hudud* punishments have been adopted in countries like Sudan and Pakistan, their application is much restricted and couched in a torrent of apolo-
gia.

The application of *hudud* punishments for petty crime has given rise to demands that the societal environment should be Islamic before such sentences can be implemented. It is argued that only where an adequate welfare system is operating can petty theft be punished by amputation of the hand, for instance.

It is easy to see that the next stage would be to argue that the entrenched inequities in Muslim societies need to be redressed before any part of Islamic law could be satisfactorily applied. Thus some have advanced the thesis that gains and positions acquired illegitimately should be returned to the state or to rightful owners in order to create an initial operating environment where the

Pakistan: Old Man of Islamisation

THE very *raison d'etre* for the establishment of Pakistan was to provide an Islamic homeland for the Muslims of India. It is therefore, a contradiction in terms to seek a programme for Islamisation in Pakistan. Therein lies the tale of the tragedy of the country's politics since its independence.

The country has always been in the US ambit, and is heavily indebted to it both financially and militarily. No government of Pakistan has tried to change that equation, and this fact has continued to determine the parameters of any political or social change in the country.

The opportunity provided for a civilian administration was squandered by the Bhutto regime. In a like manner to Nigeria, the military in Pakistan has come to view itself as the saviour of the nation. The ineptitude of the civilian administrations, has meant that from time to time it has had the mandate of the people to deliver them from the chaos and anarchy.

With the latest military administration, there has been an attempt to project the military as a champion of Islam and therefore of the whole concept of Pakistan. The strategy of General Zia in achieving this feat has been long in gestation. Now, it would appear, that the time is running short, and he would have to deliver some sort of an election in the early part of 1985.

The formation of consultative councils, and ideology councils, has been seen as gaining support for ensuring a permanent place for the military in a quasi-civilian administration.

Whilst the motive and end result of the Islamisation programme can be questioned, it cannot be denied that the exercise has absorbed a lot of the frustrations of everyday life. As a result and because of its ambivalent stance the Jamaat-e-Islami finds itself out on a limb.



Numeiri: Legitimising Power

introduction of Islamic tenets would have a chance to flourish and take root. Otherwise, it is argued, the application would be truncated and could result in actually exacerbating the existing inequities.

In a very convincing analysis of the case of the removal of *riba* from an otherwise unchanged operating environment, Professor Nawab Haider Naqvi shows that greater benefits would accrue to precisely those sectors of society which need them least. In other words, the total welfare curve of such a society would regress rather than lead to more equitable distribution.

The point being made is obviously that Islam is a complete way of life. As such it embodies a series of interdependent prescriptions for the running of a society *in toto*. In such a system, each element is designed to enhance the operation of the whole. Conversely, a lop-sided implementation could lead to malfunction of the whole system.

The gains from implementing any particular prescription cannot be judged in isolation. The effect on the whole system is the only judgement possible. This argument embodies the idea that Islam is a complete alternative to other systems. Thus some Muslim authors have been led, for instance, to argue that the concept of a Third World is alien to Muslims. They argue that, by definition the Third World is meant to be those peoples who are striving to achieve the status of the citizens of the First or the Second world. Since Muslims are striving to achieve neither, they constitute a bloc on their own. It follows, that given the chance, they would come up with a unique way of life.

Thus as the debate advances, this contradiction between a partial implementation of Islam and the *total* nature of the faith itself would increasingly become the focal point for disagreement.

In this connection it is interesting to see that the Islamic Parties, while welcoming the return of Islam, are seen to be distancing themselves from Islamising regimes. In Pakistan, the *Jamaat-i-*

Islami supported General Zia, when he took power upon overthrowing Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. With time, however, it has begun to distance itself from the regime and now has reached a state of total opposition.

In Malaysia, the Islamisation programme of the government has also served to widen the rift between supporter of UMNO (the United Malay National Organisation) and those of PAS (the Islamic Party).

Clearly, the Islamic parties feel that such programmes are only

designed to lull the sensitivities of the people, and would result in delays in introducing Islamic systems. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that were the existing regimes to go all the way in their Islamisation programmes, they would come face to face with the question of a *total* implementation of Islam. Their very nature precludes such a proposition. And therein lies the crux of the argument likely to surface with increasing force, as Muslims acquire greater awareness and ability to manage a contemporary polity. ■

Sudan: The Problematic Case

SUDAN is very much in the news for its newly-launched programme of Islamisation, under its born-again Muslim leader, President Jafer Numeiri. Numeiri's military and socialist background, and the beleaguered state of the country, have led to speculation that this is yet another ploy from Numeiri's arsenal to ensure his rule.

There is little doubt that the Islamic measures implemented so far have struck a most responsive chord amongst the Muslims in the country. Many have reservations on the nature of the regime as a whole and on the wisdom of implementing Islamic law before attending to more basic problems, but few have any quibbles about the introduction of Islam in Sudanese society in principle.

More than any other Muslim country, the people of Sudan are carrying the Islamisation process much further than intended by Numeiri himself. Indeed, both the US and Egypt - Numeiri's principal allies - have expressed their reservations and warned Numeiri of the dangers of generating an unstoppable move towards an Islamic state. It would seem that as a result, he has begun to distance himself from the Muslim Brotherhood under Dr Hassan Turabi, who have supported him so far.

Numeiri has also drawn a clear line as to where he would like to see the Islamisation process end. By announcing himself as The Commander of the Faithful (*Amir ul Mu'mineen*) and demanding the Oath of Allegiance (*Bay'ah*), he has put the political institutions out of reach of the Islamisation ambit.

There are other constraints on Numeiri. Of particular interest is the country's debt situation. The country owes a total of US\$7 billion to the international banking community. The debt-service alone on this comes to about US\$1 billion annually. The country is hard-pressed to find enough foreign currency to pay the interest component of about US\$500 million, let alone make any repayment of capital.

For the last two quarters, the US has bailed the country out by making last minute loans to avert the declaration of default by the bankers. This kind of timely assistance is unlikely to be given in the event of a basic disagreement on policies. If this happened to be over Islamisation, then the stand of the US is well known. This reality leads many a seasoned observer of the Sudanese scene to watch for an about-turn from the master juggler.

International bankers have also ensured that Numeiri or any other leader of Sudan, would have little room for manoeuvre should matters reach an impasse. The oil wealth is scheduled to be exported in crude form to service the debts and is unlikely to even fulfill the modest energy requirements of the country itself. Already exploration has been suspended by Chevron, to create the necessary environment for a return to the status quo ante.

The sentiments aroused in the Sudanese people will be difficult to dissipate in the event of a turn-round and the whole episode may yet portend a difficult time ahead for them. ■