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Calling all liberal Muslims to stand up and be counted!

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THE editor of an international newsmagazine wrote in his column recently: "One of the most troubling realities of the Muslim world today is the cowardice of moderates. Mainstream Muslim leaders - political and religious - do not condemn religious extremism often and vigorous enough." It is hard not to agree with him.

Simultaneously, it is getting more difficult even to claim oneself a Muslim moderate today. All over the Muslim world, the moderates are losing their voices. It is excruciatingly painful for Muslims not to be angered and saddened by the actions of many Western Governments after Sept 11. Call it knee-jerk reaction or blatant ignorance, even calculated reprisals, but for many who are running these Governments, the "Islamic menace" is real.

The over-reaction of the Australian Government to the Bali bombings is a classic example of this collective psyche. The response was nevertheless heavy handed. Muslim homes are raided and the community is under tremendous pressure. That kind of actions added fuel to Islamic radicals all over the region. The West is against us, they say. The fight against terror is a deliberate war against Islam.

Australia, after all, has never been comfortable with "foreigners". But prior to the Bali bombings, Muslims were largely left untouched. Perhaps there were too few of them to attract attention. Even the most racist of their politicians would rather harp on the Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants. But all that have changed after Bali.

Moderate Muslims are a dying species today. Or so it seems. Will the moderates stand up and be counted? Will they be able to answer such questions as: "Is there something about Islam that makes it impossible for Muslims to fit into Western liberal societies?" Is there truly some kind of a cultural schizophrenia when Muslim societies face the West? Or is there such a thing as the crisis of "modern Islam"? Or simply, contemporary Muslims - unlike their brothers and sisters in the glorious days of numerous Islamic empires - are not able to live with "others"?

Sadly, even before Sept 11, many Governments ruling in countries where Muslims are majority would rather play to the gallery. It is safer to play safe than being "unIslamic". That term terrifies even the most rational of rulers and politicians. So in the name of Islam and Islamisation, the noisy minority are allowed to set the agenda.

Indonesia is a classic example. The fourth most populous nation in the world has also the most number of Muslims on its soils. In Indonesia, its Islam is peculiarly "home-grown". For a very long time, religion and the state seldom mix.

They do have a unique culture of village religious institutions - the pondok-type schools like we have in Malaysia - yet more elaborate and structured, known as pesantren. But these schools never became hotbeds of Islamic radicals. In fact, religious teaching has evolved into a system of liberal education - where religion is part and parcel of the making of a good ummah. The other part is his or her worldly pursuits - earning a living, competing with others, and to coexist with the rest.

Even mass movements are never known to extol strict fundamentalist principles. Two of the most prominent Muslim groups today - Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama - boasted millions of followers - but the creation of a Taliban-type Islamic state has never been their rallying cry. No other

Muslim country would be prouder to portray its secularness than Indonesia.

But even Indonesia is changing. Perhaps a country like Indonesia is best managed by dictators like Sukarno and Suharto. It is too far-flung, too diverse and too complex to be ruled by the kind of democratically-elected head of state applicable in most other countries. Indonesians do enjoy unprecedented freedom under Habibie, Abdul Rahman Wahid and now Megawati. Too much democracy and too little discipline, one senior statesman once famously argued, can be bad for some countries.

The tolerant Islam in Indonesia is now being challenged. Islamic militancy is an issue. The doctrine of jihad has taken a new meaning in Indonesia. For the present government, any attempts at just appeasing international pressures would be counterproductive. Megawati has to tackle the problems directly and without fear.

Sept 11 seemed too distant to many of us. But Bali is just next door. The repercussions reverberate beyond Kuta beach. For Muslims in this region, it is a wake-up call. Bali is our own 911. We should be afraid.

It is easy to find fault with someone else. Many would like to believe that it was another sinister plot of the CIA. Of all we will always remember a ground-breaking book titled *Subversion As Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia* by R. and George McT. Kahin. That was then. Now, the conspiracy theory is, the Americans have "to do something" to get President Megawati's attention in its fight against terror.

Sadly there are many among Muslims today who harbour a sneaking admiration for the success of the hijackers last year and the bombers in Bali. It is easy for us to say, "let's teach them a lesson".

We can have a discourse on the reasons behind the attacks, we can blame the Americans for its policies in the Middle East, we can even find fault with the Bush administration and the treatments of Muslims as minorities all over the world.

But terror begets terror. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad rightly pointed out that there will be growing confrontation between Muslims and the West as both sides "play up their anger and hatred to the maximum". Where do we stop?

If the perpetrators of Sept 11 and the Bali bombings wanted to send a message, they have succeeded spectacularly and with a devastating effect. But what about the repercussions on Muslims all over the world?

Americans are more resolved to fight what they labelled as Islamic terrorists than ever before. Look at the Australians now. The British are never comfortable with their Prime Minister's blind support for Bush, but Bali has changed all that. Many Europeans who demonstrated against US's unilateral inclination and the possible war in Iraq, now have second thoughts.

Mary Robinson, the former UN Human Rights Commissioner, reminded the world that the US-led war on terrorism should not slide into a clash of civilisations that pits Islam against the West. But her voice of reason is an exception in the current climate.

Muslims all over the world have to brace themselves for the worst. Unless Muslim leaders and Governments are quick to react and to manage militancy in their own backyards and on their own terms. And the moderates among Muslims are audacious enough to speak up against violence perpetrated by their own kind.

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