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War on militancy will be long

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THE threat that a Muslim nation might one day succumb to an Islamic revolution or even evolution - I think - stems less from the strength of political Islam than the weakness of the ruling party.

If a government were to fall due to radical Islam, the blame should fall largely on the government. It means the ruling party has failed to develop the nation, improve the standard of living of the people, making the militants appear a good alternative. But worse is the hesitation to act against radicalism. President Pervez Musharraf last Saturday took action against radical Pakistani Islamists.

At home, we are fortunate because we have had the same ruling party since independence. More importantly, it has turned out to be largely competent and effective in delivering what the people desired and still want. The Umno-led coalition has generally been a progressive and development-oriented, business and people-friendly and positive government.

This is the reason Malaysian voters keep returning the coalition to power and will do again either in 2003 or 2004. Indera Kayangan is a pointer. Still, much must be done and delivered. The fight against militants is going to be long and weary. The middle class of all races must come out and support the government because the middle ground is the greatest buffer against militancy.

The Malays remain divided, though the situation has improved, by political opportunism rather than doctrinal dissimilarity. I had lunch with a Pas MP on Monday and was rather surprised by his uninduced confession. Still, it will be folly to underestimate Pas. But it can and shall be contained.

Whatever, since the early 70s, Islamist forces have managed to exert political and ideological influence very much in excess of their numbers. The pattern will change only a little during the up to the run-up to elections in 2003 or 2004.

The Pas claim about the Sauk incident being a sandiwara is both untenable and a dangerous syndrome. This is no longer an aberration. There exists a worldwide extremist movement that organises "holy terror".

Malaysia and the Islamic world can resist religious extremism by reaffirming genuine Islam, a religion of peace and moderation, not as portrayed by the politically-motivated self-proclaimed soldiers of Allah.

In this context, Musharraf was courageous to walk the extra mile towards moderation.

The arrests of people here, in Singapore and Pakistan, and elsewhere for terrorism-related activities confirm their international linkage.

Terrorism or "holy terror", as a friend insists on describing it, is no longer just a problem of the United States or the Middle East. It is a death network which the world must collectively wrestle with, the sooner the better.

I have said before and I shall gladly repeat it, that the easy American victory in Afghanistan, or the banning by Musharraf of Pakistani or Kashmiri terrorist organisations and the closing down of madrasahs and barring foreign students have not signalled the end of the holy terror.

It will take decades, much longer than it took to beat the communists, to triumph against these self-styled partisans of Allah dedicated to martyrdom.

They do not lack support, they even command support among some of the Muslim diaspora in the West who are like-minded.

Musharraf acted bravely and just in time against the religious extremists who have ripped at the fabric of Pakistani politics for more than two decades and exported their campaign of hate.

He abandoned the Taliban and survived a wave of protests and demonstrations. I believe he will also prevail against the banning of five militant groups which he stated were stirring up separatist hatred at home, and others who could be using Pakistan as a base for separatist terrorist attacks on Indian-ruled and disputed Kashmir and the assault on the Indian Parliament which killed 14 people.

Had it not been foiled, the outrage would have killed many times that number and probably have caused a devastating war between India and Pakistan.

The Indians have welcomed Musharraf's action. Islamabad has probably understood that the war against terrorism has changed drastically. New Delhi can and will take a leaf from the US example in Afghanistan to justify retaliation against Pakistan for harbouring Kashmiri militants.

Musharraf has forestalled that. The groups which foster terrorism not only must be decapitated but crushed, or Pakistan will simply take over Afghanistan's lost role as a haven for extremist political Islam.

India, for its part, should give Musharraf a good reason to continue eliminating the causes of militancy by demonstrating that there is a better way for a settlement in Kashmir without either losing face. He deserves this chance. The alternative to him, as our editorial stated yesterday, is worse for peace in the subcontinent.

There seems a better chance now than ever before. Some five months ago, a good opportunity was missed because Islamabad would not give New Delhi a pledge to work on the problem of cross-border terrorism. Musharraf has done precisely that now.

India, I hope, will now reciprocate by agreeing to revive the stalled talks, perhaps with Kashmiri participation, after an election in Jammu & Kashmir which is going to be democratic and transparent.

At least for now, I am cautiously optimistic that a war between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan has been averted.

The Malays must be continuously and effectively taught that Islam is a peaceful religion. Westerners and Israelis must also realise that Islam and terrorism are not synonymous; that the promotion of Islam does not inevitably lead to terror and violence. We have led the way.

Whether anyone likes it or not, "holy terror" seems likely to remain a feature of international politics and life for a long time to come.

Whipping up hatred against Muslims, here or elsewhere, especially those in the West, is a myopic policy, a crude and blatant racist ploy which does no one any good because it prevents an objective study of a global phenomenon.

What's it like being a Muslim in the United States or Europe today? Muslims there have endured a barrage of bigotry, anger and suspicion. Worse, mosques and even homes have been vandalised.

White zealots and racists have attacked Muslim men and women and children; 440 hate crimes and cases of discrimination and harassment against Muslims had been reported in the United States alone between Sept 11 and mid-November last year.

Malays must not dishonour themselves. We must tackle and act forcefully against extremists of any kind, sooner rather than later.

Malaysians, of whatever religion or race, who believe the Islamists represent anything other than their distorted selves, will invariably lend their cause credence.

The non-Malays, the middle-class Malays and the women of all races must not be duped by those whose modern faces and modern garb camouflage their mediaeval minds, sadistic and cruel mindset.

The battle now and in future is simply between the middle ground and them, a network of fanatics. Like the communists, they will use force when necessary to achieve their aim.

Dedicated militants with their religio-political agenda consider the use of violence against the "infidel", which includes anyone against them, not only permissible but an act of piety!

Make no mistake, hatred of the "infidel" makes the militants worship death!

An Iranian Islamic revolutionary judge once said that those who were against killing had no place in Islam. If the survival of Islam required that blood be shed, the Islamists were duty-bound to do it without question and as required.

The danger here is the belief that Islam cannot allow a secular power structure (which supersedes Syariah). It is no longer restricted to ustaz and ustazah and their students. It has also attracted Western-educated born-again Muslim professionals.

These Islamists and their militant networks will never accept the likes of Dr Mahathir, Musharraf or Megawati Sukarnoputri. They hated Kemal Attaturk. They want power for themselves so that they can turn their countries into Islamic theocratic hegemonies in which they have absolute power as the Taliban did. They would Talibanise, given half a chance, as they contemplate the wreckage of Afghanistan.

The essence of the militants' theocratic state is conversion of non-ummah who may threaten the unanimity of the believers, repurification of Muslims and the isolation and even killing of anyone who opposes the principle of Tauhid, the oneness of God that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger.

In their understanding of this, oneness means not only oneness in Tauhid or notionally, but in the uniformity of behaviour.

Uniformity and unanimity are cardinal values of militant and radical Islam.

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