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A voice across the divide

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IN this part of the world, his name is undeniably Muslim. In the United States, it is considered exotic. As such, most Americans are not likely to know that Fareed Zakaria, Newsweek International magazine's editor and columnist, is Muslim.

Even colleagues in his workplace may not be aware of this, he says, which seems rather odd given the prominence he has gained since 9/11.

For Fareed stands on the frontline of Newsweek which has, to date, 3.4 million readers around the world. His views are clearly significant, especially since the attack on the Twin Towers.

Perhaps to underscore the importance of his opinions and, possibly, the success of America's reverse discrimination policies, Fareed's picture appears with his column. Not a tight little mugshot but a picture showing a non-white journalist, listening intently to the person before him.

A nice touch. But the cynic may wonder if there is an *udang sebalik batu*, or hidden agenda to this.

Nevertheless, I am grateful for the picture for I would not have been able to identify the man who flew into Kuala Lumpur recently to interview our new Prime Minister.

The interview was to have taken place a few hours before I turned up, but it fell through because Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's voice - due to a stubborn cough and too many speaking engagements during Ramadan - had been reduced to a whisper.

Back to the topic of his name: When it was suggested that his high profile worked to Newsweek's advantage as it helped to have a discernible Muslim presence, he says he was an editor and columnist well before 9/11.

"I have gained prominence (since Sept 11) but it is largely because Americans suddenly became interested in the world. They now want to know more about US foreign policy."

"In addition, I write about the Muslim world, the Middle East and the complications and problems.

"You could say that I brought added authority, notoriety or interest to the issues. But it isn't largely because I am Muslim," he insists.

For someone who is used to asking the questions, he also appears comfortable answering them.

So I try an unpleasant one: has anyone accused him of being a Muslim apologist for the Bush administration?

The stern-looking 39-year-old takes a fraction of a second to absorb this and then coolly states that "this betrays an ignorance of my writings and of America".

"There is a genuinely free media in America. People write pretty much what they want to. We (at Newsweek) have accused Vice President Dick Cheney of deceiving the American people. The White House has even said that we were vicious."

Fareed says he does not shirk from saying that the Bush Administration is right when it is right. "You can get into a trap if you say everything they do is wrong. You must evaluate issues on a case-by-case basis. You lose your independence when you fail to do this."

Not surprisingly, the man has strong views on many issues.

Terrorists, he says, are annihilists who want to destroy people who want to live and thrive in the modern world.

He says former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad is right to say

that "it would be a mistake to see them as religious. They hijacked Islam. They are not fundamentalists, they use violence for a radical end."

By refusing to stand up to extremists, he says moderate Muslims are cowards because they have allowed them to monopolise the interpretation of Islam.

They have tended to shy away from battle because they do not want to come across as attacking people who seem pious and religious.

Fareed wants Muslims to not fear what people might say.

"It's time to recognise the extremists for what they are, which is to say they are not better Muslims. In many ways they are worse. They argue for things that are incompatible with the values that Islam promotes."

Fareed is a keen observer of Malaysia's "modernising experience". He has high regard for the "bold, provocative and combative" Tun Dr Mahathir and already knows that the new PM is less confrontational.

The frustration and rage in the Muslim world, he says, "has to do with people not seeing that they can prosper or be a part of the modern world."

"I am not asking Muslims to give up on Islam; just don't give up on the modern world."

His writings, he says, attempt to bridge the gap between Americans and the rest of the world. "I probably see what many Americans may not see. But I also see where Americans are coming from, which non-Americans may not understand."

Married and with two young children, Fareed has lived longer in the US than he has in India, which he left at 18 to study history at Yale University. He has a Ph.D in international relations from Harvard University.

Before he joined Newsweek, he worked at two well-established magazines: The New Republic and Harper's. He was also an editor at Foreign Affairs, a quarterly publication of the Council on Foreign Relations which has close links to the US Government.

Fareed's column - World View - pays close attention to US foreign policy. "Anyone who thought Iraq would be an easy fix would know how wrong they are now and this includes the Bush administration."

He says it will take a long time to establish order, especially in the Sunni belt. "This doesn't mean we should give up. Iraq is a long-term project and the US should assist Iraq for decades. All countries should help.

"Iraq won't succeed on its own. In the interest of the world, and countries like Malaysia, it would be good to help another Muslim country modernise."

Fareed's view on whether the US should have gone into Iraq is intriguing for it conceals as much as it reveals:

"If the US can leave behind a decent Iraq which is politically stable and economically vibrant, then in historical terms, the decision to evict Saddam will be justifiable.

"Twenty years from now, what people will remember is that the US and its allies used military force against one of the worse tyrannies in the world and left something better in its place."

On whether the US and its allies will pull out soon, he says "there are no signs that they are losing faith. They recognise the difficulties but I don't get a sense of a fundamental loss of faith".

With the body count going up, can the American electorate force the US to pull out of Iraq?

"It is worth remembering that we have a globalised and 24-hour media. The US has lost 500 troops in Iraq and this is terrible and tragic. But it was worse in Vietnam where we lost 500 a week.

"The difference is that media places emphasis on every aspect of the war

and dramatises it. This creates a political crisis around each of these events which would not have happened 20 years ago.

"If we had had this kind of media coverage in World War II when US lost several hundred thousand and Russia lost a few million men, I don't know how they would have fought the war."

On the Bush Administration, he says style is significant.

"The Administration comes across as bullying, hectoring and uncaring. When you are as powerful as the US is, style is important."

"It may seem a small thing but it isn't. If you are the most powerful person in the room, you must pay attention to how you are being perceived because everyone else knows how you can affect them."

"The stylistic blunders are a very large part of the problem which can change but it is not happening fast and fully enough."

Anti-US hostility, he says, is due in part to the Bush Administration specifically and the mobilisation of power.

At one time, the world was comfortable with an America which had latent, unused power. Then it gathered this power and used it in Afghanistan.

"The US military today is larger than the next 20 countries put together. Its economy is larger than the next three countries put together. Its universities are leagues ahead of other universities in the world."

Such a gap has never existed before and this has generated suspicion, resentment and envy towards the US.

Even if the US were to adopt a more cooperative approach, he is not sure that there would be zero-hostility towards it.

"Like the guy with the biggest house in the neighbourhood, the US has to live with the fact that no one will ever like that person."

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