

## **Women & Political-Religious Fundamentalism: An International Perspective**

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### **Introduction**

#### **Religion and Politics: Then and Now**

Religion has always been a highly political affair. The formal separation of religion and politics, in the form of the secular state, is a recent historical phenomenon. The feudal state of Western Europe had Christianity as its state ideology. The church was a formidable feudal power, which along with the aristocracy, owned vast quantities of land. Thus the interests of the feudal aristocracy and the church inevitably came together in the form of the autocratic-aristocratic feudal state. Christianity, which began as the religion of the poor and oppressed in the Roman Empire, after enduring savage persecution, some 250 years later, became the official religion of the very same empire. The Feudal state ideology of Christianity was subsequently imposed on the populations that it enslaved through colonial conquests. Women's bodies, or the Christian need to cover them up, was a big part of the "civilization" of the "natives" carried out by the clergy who were 'embedded' in the armies of Spanish conquistadors.

The justification for colonial conquest was the thoroughly racist notion of the superiority of Western -- which was then synonymous with Christian -- civilization, over those of the native populations. Civilizing the 'natives' became synonymous with conquest and the subsequent religious conversion of the conquered. The fundamental political purpose of the clash of civilization ideologies then, as today, was to serve the building of Empire.

The first major criticism of religion took place during the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment advocated reason and rationality as the primary basis of all authority, including the state, and the movement argued for a break from tradition, irrationality, superstition and the tyranny of the Middle Ages. These views also coincided with the interests of emergent capitalism, which had private property interests which were starting to clash with the interests of the Church. Thus the demand for the separation of church and state became the cry of the liberal bourgeoisie, along with the freedom of worship, the separation of the church and school and the freedom of thought.

The ideas of the Enlightenment had a profound and far-reaching influence in India, China and parts of the Muslim world. The Enlightenment's appeal for rationality against religious fanaticism, however, was at odds with the violence of European colonialism. And while French philosophers did take humanity forward by recognizing no external authority of any kind, there was a darker side to the movement. Voltaire: "Blacks are inferior to Europeans, but superior to apes." Hume: "The black might develop certain attributes of human beings, the way the parrot manages to speak a few words."<sup>1</sup> There is much more in a similar vein from their colleagues. It seems that it's this side of the Enlightenment that is increasingly reflected in today's "clash of civilization" propaganda, especially targeting the Muslim populations.

George Bush's first war speech, referring to a "crusade" against the "enemies of civilization", was a crude appeal to the propaganda line of the superiority of Western

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<sup>1</sup> Tariq Ali, "This is the Real Outrage", TheGuardian, UK, February 13, 2006.

civilisation over the rest. The “clash of civilizations” thesis put forward by right-wing intellectuals such as Samuel Huntington, which argues that Western civilization is under siege by “nations and groups of different civilizations” and that the West should maintain its military and economic superiority so as to win the “clash of civilizations”, was seized upon for its obvious war propaganda value by George Bush, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and Tony Blair.

The “war on terrorism” propaganda today echoes the line of the “clash of civilization” thesis. Its primary purpose is political -- the building of Empire. It’s used to justify military intervention against non-compliant governments in the South, especially in strategic areas such as the oil-rich middle-east, as well as the quashing of peoples resistance at home and abroad.

It is based on the stereotyping of cultural identities along narrow religious lines and is politically motivated. Thus all Muslims are caricatured as being a “potential terrorist threat”. Countries with majority Muslim populations are now referred to as Islamic countries – made Islamic. Thus religion becomes the defining element of the culture, society, political outlook and beliefs of Muslim peoples. Such stereotyping of Muslim populations, which is taking place today, is purposefully misleading as it refuses to acknowledge the complexities of the life of people living in these countries.

It is nonsensical to suggest, however, that the reality of the life of Muslim women in Malaysia, Indonesia, India and Mindanao are identical. Their lives are different, and in significant ways. If they are religious and pray five times a day, they may share common protocols of prayer etc, similar to other religions. And, most significantly, they do suffer commonalities of oppression and discrimination as women. But the degree and the specific forms of this oppression are conditioned by their specific national contexts: historical, socio-cultural, political, etc, and not solely or even decisively by their religion.

Ironically the “clash of civilization” thesis also mirrors the line put forward by the likes of Osama bin Laden. While Huntington and his ilk blame this on the dilution of Western-Christian values due to misguided multicultural policies of Western government, bin Laden and other Islamic fundamentalists blame it on the predominance of Western-Christian values. Islamic fundamentalists also want to ‘Islamize’ the societies they live in, which according to them, are not Islamic enough.

### **Secularism, Women’s Emancipation & the Unfinished Revolution**

The politicization of religion has historically and in general, been detrimental to the progressive cause, such as during the anti-colonial struggle for independence and nationalism. At the heart of the anti-colonial struggle for independence was secularism, an absolute pre-condition for the building of a modern state. Secularism, in essence, is the rejection of religion and religious interests in organizing the affairs of the state. However, the secular state everywhere has been the product of profound political and social transformations – from the bourgeois revolutions in Europe in the 1800s to the democratic revolutions against colonialism and for national liberation last century. The secular state was a by-product of struggles for democracy and emancipation which profoundly impacted on *all* aspects of the social-cultural and economic life of a society, bringing about profound changes in the lives of the masses of women and men.

The diluting of secularism is a reflection of the unfinished character of this social transformation. This also intersects with the struggle for women's emancipation.

The incomplete resolution of the women's question, as well as the dilution of the secular character of the state in the post-colonial nations of the Third World or South today, is an expression of this unfinished character of the struggle for democracy and social transformation. The struggle for women's rights today, in several countries, has to directly confront these 'unfinished' or non-secular aspects of the national state *and* society.

A study of the history of several Muslim societies after WWII will show that most of them were extremely open to and in fact heavily influenced by secular ideas, including socialism and Marxism. Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, as of 1965 also had the distinction of having the largest communist party outside of Russia and China, and the country was led by Sukarno, a left-nationalist leader of the anti-colonial movement and architect of the non-aligned movement.

Nasser, who carried the hopes of the Egyptians and the Arab world for many years was a staunch supporter of the non-aligned movement. The next major event after the Bandung<sup>2</sup> Conference, the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Conference, was held in Cairo in December 1957. What separated this conference from Bandung, was that it was marked by women leaders of the struggles for independence and national liberation. The linkage between the struggle for women's emancipation and national liberation was described by Aisha Abdul-Rahman, Egyptian women's rights activist and a leader of the struggle for independence: "The renaissance of the Eastern woman has always coincided with liberation movements ... The success of these revolutions depends on the liberation of the enslaved half ... and eliminating the differences between the two halves of the nation – it's men and women."<sup>3</sup>

At the 1957 conference women stipulated that they must have choice over marriage: if, when and whom to marry. The conference demanded "planned parenthood" supported by the state and "drastic measures to be taken to abolish polygamy." Also "working women should be entitled to free medical care during pregnancy and childbirth and to a suitable holiday with full pay during childbirth." The 1957 conference called for "equal pay for equal work", as well as equal distribution of land for women in agriculture.

Anti-colonial nationalism, even its' more reformist versions, did worry about the women's question. Nehru in 1928: "I should like to remind the women present here that no group, no community, no country, has ever got rid of its disabilities by the generosity of the oppressor. India will not be free until we are strong enough to force our will on England and the women of India will not attain their full rights by the mere generosity of the men of India. They will have to fight for them and force their will on the menfolk before they can succeed." To the revolutionary Che Guevara: "The part that the woman can play in the development of the revolutionary process is of extraordinary importance. It is well to

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<sup>2</sup> A meeting of Asian and African states which took place April 18–24, 1955, in Bandung, Indonesia. In all, 29 countries representing more than half the world's population sent delegates and the Nonaligned Movement of nations was established, establishing the supposed neutrality of the newly independent nations from the Western powers and the Soviet Union.

<sup>3</sup> Prashad, V. *The Darker Nations*, The New Press, N.Y. pp 54.

emphasize this, since in all our countries, with their colonial mentality, there is a certain underestimation of the woman, which becomes a real discrimination against her.”<sup>4</sup>

The struggle for independence and national liberation was also envisaged as being cultural inclusive, as opposed to European nationalism. In Indonesia the motto of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* or “Unity in Diversity” was adopted. The new states adopted a multicultural perspective, knowing that their countries were culturally and ethnically mixed societies and could not be easily homogenized. This was a pragmatic and practical approach. A more principled view was also expressed by others. Ho Chi Minh insisted on including the right to preserve the language of ethnic minorities in the constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Franz Fanon in *Racism and Culture* argues that rather than turn inwards, away from Europe or any other cultures, the nationalist culture will explore other cultures in order to enrich itself: “The two cultures can confront one another, enrich one another” was the hope and the vision.

Cultural cooperation was actively promoted by the non-aligned movement. The promotion of a multicultural perspective, lay in the promise of the anti-colonial struggle for independence.

The Empire, in alliance with some of the old-social classes, reacted to squash the promises held in some of the most significant progressive anti-colonial struggles of the last 100 years. Dividing the movements along religious lines and ethnic lines were some of the main tactics used. This laid the basis for the rise of some of the most influential religious-political fundamentalist movements in the world today.

This paper presents three examples of political-religious fundamentalism: Political Islam; Communal Fascism based on Hindu fundamentalism India; and the Christian-fundamentalist right in the Bush administration in the US.

The term political-religious fundamentalism is used to describe movements which are essentially political in nature, which use religion or religious theology as their main ideological and propaganda vehicle. A common and principle characteristic of religious-fundamentalist movements is the control of women -- their bodies, their sexuality, their physical movements and participation in public life, dress codes, as well as family relationships. Women’s bodies and sexuality are an ideological and political battleground, fiercely contested, to promote a range of vested interests dressed in multiple religious garbs.

The paper presents a *political* analysis of these movements and not a theological critique. These movements or phenomena are products of certain social and historical developments. And to understand these phenomena we need to pay attention to history, as well as the social-political contexts, and not base it on some essentialist interpretation of religion.

The examples presented also warn us against a dangerous deception – that of stereotyping these threats as coming from particular religions or religious organizations,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp 294.

i.e. the Islamists, or being limited to particular countries and regions of the world, i.e. 'Islamic' countries and the Middle East.

### **Political Islam**

Theologically, political Islam embraces both historically progressive and reactionary positions: those which assert that Islamic tenets are compatible with values such as freedom and democracy, and those which advocate going "back to the past" and a revolt against history.

The Islamist movement is complex and multi-layered, with competing *Sunni* and *Shia* divisions. It's not an all-purpose category, whose members are mutant fanatics engineered by some essentialist feature of Islam. They are products of certain social and historical developments in particular countries and regions. So to understand these phenomena we need to pay attention to history, as well as the social-political contexts.

Historically, fundamentalist political-Islam has traditionally joined hands with the old colonial masters and the United States against the progressive movements, including the women's movement.

The 'West' helped these movements flourish over a period of some fifty years. They recruited, funded and built it as a force against left-wing movements and secular-nationalist regimes which refused to tow the line of imperialist policy, such as Nasser in Egypt and Sukarno in Indonesia. By thus narrowing the space for a secular, progressive or left politics, they ensured the rise of these Islamic fundamentalist movements.

The defeat of Egypt under Nasser in the 1967 war against Israel (which led to Israel occupying the rest of Palestine) significantly weakened the secular-modernist project in the Middle East. The 1967 defeat heralded the rise of Saudi Arabian monarchy, with its *Wahhabi* interpretation of Islamic law, which includes stoning women adulterers, amputating limbs of thieves and public beheadings for other crimes. The ideals of a secular, democratic and egalitarian national project, was an anathema to the Saudi monarchy, who favored and promoted puritanism and tribalism. Not surprisingly the Saudi Monarchy, along with Israel, became one of the key partners and pillars of US policy and intervention in the region.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, with the support of the CIA, Saudi Arabia organized an "Islamic front" as an "alternative" against pan-Arab nationalism and socialism. This network included the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas in Syria, Sarekat-e-Islam in Indonesia, the Front for Islamic Salvation (FIS) in Algeria and Jama'at Islami in Pakistan.

In Indonesia, Sarekat-e-Islam provided many of the foot soldiers in the coup against President Sukarno, wiping out the Communist Party and murdering as many as two million leftists.

In Egypt and Syria, Islamist organizations like Akhwan-ul-Muslimeen were used to destabilize progressive regimes. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat protected the radical Islamists in the 1970s to neutralize the Nasserites and the Communists, and later to recruit to the anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan.

In Pakistan, during the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq, Jama'at-e-Islami was the main tool of the state to curb the anti-dictatorship movement.

In Iran the post-war opposition to the monarchy was led by secular nationalists and communists. They formed a government headed by the National Front, which carried out the first oil nationalization in the history of the Middle East, under Mossadegh. The US reacted with a CIA-executed coup, restored the Shah to his throne and established one of the most brutal intelligence forces in the world, the SAVAK. The progressive and secular forces were either destroyed or seriously weakened, while the religious elite were left almost untouched. The clergy faced no other serious rivals, thus consolidating their hold on state power after the 1979 revolution against the Shah.

The women's movement was the first to organize in opposition to the clergy's anti-women laws. They mobilized on March 8, 1979, in their tens of thousands in opposition to the attempts by the clergy to enforce the wearing of the *chador*. They took over the Ministry of Justice demanding equal rights in jobs, family affairs and the right to choose what they wore.

When women's organizations, which sprang up everywhere and flourished in the immediate aftermath of 1979, started to struggle and fight back against the clergy's attempts to roll back any and every possible social gain of the revolution, feminists point out that the secular and progressive movement did not break the alliance with the clergy and come to the defense of the women's movement.

The feminist critique of the left for making such a 'historic compromise' with reactionary, anti-women forces on the basis of struggling against imperialism, is one that reverberates in the experiences of progressive movements in many countries. It needs to be taken on board by the left in its practice of building anti-imperialist alliances. How does the left participate in such united fronts and implement an independent position on the women's question? The women's question is far too central to politics today and can no longer be 'traded off', without serious consequences, in the tactics of alliance building.

Of course there were other challenges for the women in Iran. The clergy set up its' own women's organizations, thus dividing women along religious lines. Organizing women along religious lines, or turning women into religious subjects, is a tactic that has been effectively used by fundamentalists against progressive women's movements. In Pakistan, under the dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq in the 1970s, this tactic was utilized by the fundamentalist forces to smash the resistance of the well organized women's movement in that country.

Today, as the US saber rattles and trains its military power against the Iranian regime, the dilemma posed for the progressive movement and the women's movement in 1979, of the positioning of the women's question in the struggle against fundamentalism and empire, resurfaces today.<sup>5</sup> The Bush administration has spent five years, in secret, preparing for "Operation Iranian Freedom". Forty-five cruise missiles are primed to strike. According to Russia's leading strategic thinker General Leonid Ivashov: "Nuclear

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<sup>5</sup> The "threat" from Iran is entirely manufactured, aided and abetted by a corporate media campaign, just as in the case of the non-existent WMD in Iraq. The real aim is to install a compliant regime that kowtows to the wishes of the Empire and provides easy access to Iran's oil resources.

facilities will be secondary targets ... at least 20 such facilities need to be destroyed. Combat nuclear weapons may be used. This will result in the radioactive contamination of all the Iranian territory, and beyond.”<sup>6</sup> How should the women’s movement, while campaigning against the Iranian regime, position itself on this “war on terror” campaign targeted at Iran?

Progressive feminists have already stated their case. The war on terror campaign aimed at the Iranian regime makes it much harder for democratic forces inside Iran, including the women’s movement, to struggle against this patriarchal dictatorship against women. In fact, the Bush administrations’ campaign serves to only *reinforce* this dictatorship. Progressive feminists have argued that we now have to struggle on both fronts: against empire *and* against the fundamentalist regime.

The 1979 revolution in Iran, gave political Islam a major boost. It was followed in the late 1980s and early 1990s by the Soviet Union’s retreat and Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the US attack on Iraq in the 1990-91 Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. These developments changed the political landscape once more.

## **Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is estimated to be the largest covert CIA operation involving Islamic fundamentalists. In 1987, US military assistance to the *mujaheddin* reached \$700 million—more than Pakistan received—much of it sent via Saudi Arabia to keep the extent of US support hidden.

The government of the *mujaheddin* was the first Islamist government in the history of Afghanistan and it represented the war lords and the urban elite. The second wave came in the form of the Taliban. These were Afghan refugee children who had been students in the Islamic seminaries or *madrassas* in Pakistan. These *madrassas* were funded by the US and were run by Pakistani Islamic parties. In the early 1990s around 4000 *madrassas* sprung up, mainly around the Afghan border inside Pakistan.

As the US project of the *mujaheddin* government collapsed under the weight of corruption, orgies of rape, murder and mutual self-destruction, the Pakistan government, overseen by the US, organized these former students into an intervention force. Thus the Taliban were born. The Taliban turned the country into a mass prison for women, with no public life and in conditions of mass destitution and even starvation.

Today, the new constitution of Afghanistan formally grants equal rights to women and men. The government has also endorsed the UN CEDAW. The first time I arrived in Kabul the women I saw on the streets were wearing scarves on their heads and those wearing full *chador* were a minority. Maybe, at a superficial glance, the situation had improved for the women of Afghanistan?

The propaganda of the NATO occupation forces made the ‘liberation’ of women synonymous with the ‘liberation’ of the country from the Taliban. The Ministry of

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<sup>6</sup> Pilger, John. “We cannot look from the sides as we are led towards crisis over Iran”, The Guardian, UK, April 13, 2007.

Women's Affairs was set up and much publicized for international consumption as the changing face of a 'liberated' Afghanistan.

Afghanistan ranks 173 out of 178 on the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index.<sup>7</sup> Life expectancy today is approximately 44.5 years. One out of five children dies before the age of five and maternal mortality is amongst the highest in the world. In some provinces maternal mortality rates are as high as 65 per 1000 live births. Some 82% of women and girls between 15-24 years old are illiterate. Some 70% of girls attending primary school drop-out before grade five.<sup>8</sup> Newly re-opened girls schools are closing down due to violence against women and girls. Stories are told of how young women today are less educated than those belonging to their grandmothers' generation. Sexual violence against girls, institutionalized through 'traditions' such as child marriage, continues to be rife. Suicide amongst young women is said to be increasing. A May 2006 UNIFEM survey on violence against women in Afghanistan indicates that it's widespread, extreme, systematic and unreported. Women development staff working outside Kabul, frequently receive death threats. Some have even been killed.

The Taliban used the "women's question" to enforce its' own agenda. The occupation forces have also used the agenda of gender equality to ultimately pursue their own interests: the occupation of Afghanistan for strategic geo-political reasons.

### **The imposition of *Sharia* law**

The control of women under Islamic fundamentalist regimes is based on the *dictatorial imposition* of *sharia* law, backed by the state. And, in so doing, some of the traditions and even principles of Islamic jurisprudence are violated. These include the *moral* authority of *sharia* in contrast to the dictatorial imposition of the law, the various interpretations of the law through the use of juristic reasoning or *ijtihad* and the methodology of consensus through which the various interpretations should be reconciled or *ijma*. The fundamentalists ignore these methodologies and structures. For them there is only one, narrow (and pragmatic) interpretation of Islam.

Some scholars correctly argue that many of the provisions of *sharia* law, specifically in relation to women, are still in the framework of the tenth century. *Sharia* is not based on the concept of a nation, for example, but on a society of Muslims and non-Muslims. The application of *sharia* law, as it stands, will effectively drive the social conditions of women back to a regressive past.

### **The new enemy, but temporarily**

The process initiated by the developments in Iran was internationalised by the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan. With US and Saudi support, the Taliban's influence also spread into the former Soviet central Asian republics. The long-term consequences of this US strategy was a loose network of seasoned cadre, which continued to operate even after

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<sup>7</sup> UNDP Country Program for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2006-2008, pp 2.

<sup>8</sup> "MDGs in Afghanistan", <http://www.undp.org.af/index.htm>

they were de-commissioned at the conclusion of the Afghan jihad. Thus the al-Qaeda was born.<sup>9</sup>

After the US's departure from Afghanistan, once the Soviet "threat" was removed, the US became political Islam's main target. During the 1990s, Washington's war and blockade of Iraq, its military implantation in Saudi Arabia and its support for Israel's continued occupation of Palestine, fuelled the anger of the mass of ordinary Muslims and Arabs. The Islamists capitalized on these developments.

The response of several Islamic fundamentalist organizations was to resort to terrorist attacks targeting the US and Israel. However, the current enmity between the US and Islamic fundamentalism will not necessarily be long lasting. As soon as left and progressive movements begin to seriously threaten the interests of empire, the old anti-progressive alliance is likely to be re-established.

### **Hindu *Rashtra* & Communal Fascism in India**

Communal fascism in India, with Hindu fundamentalist revivalist trends, has several heads. The most significant of these is the RSS movement (*Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh*) which is the main spring of the Hindu fundamentalist right and it's political party expression, the BJP (*Bhartiya Janata Party*), collectively known as the *Sangh Parivar*.

Under the BJP-led coalition government (which was defeated in the 2004 elections after five years in government), India witnessed a rise in communal violence, especially pogroms against the Muslim population, instigated by the Hindu right. The most vicious pogrom to-date was carried out in the state of Gujarat in 2002, under a BJP state government. Whipping up communal hatred is part of the mandate of the *Sangh Parivar*. While the BJP lost government in the 2004 elections and has not recovered from that blow, it still remains a formidable force.

The BJB/RSS are characterized as communal fascists because of their ideological past. The RSS stands for a *Hindu Rashtra* or Hindu Nation. This philosophy was heavily influenced by Nazism. The founders of the RSS were opposed to the independence struggle against the British. The "patriotic" "nationalist" line of the RSS was directed not against the British colonial power in India, but against past memories of Muslim domination. Thus the RSS served the divide and rule tactics of the British colonialists who tried to sabotage the independence movement by encouraging the Hindu-Muslim divide.

The RSS cadre were deeply involved in instigating communal riots during the struggle for independence. Mahatma Gandhi, a devout and practicing Hindu, was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic, because he along with the majority of Indian people rejected the RSS ideology. However, the Hindu bias of the independence struggle, and within the leadership of the movement for independence, including the Gandhian practice of invoking Hindu symbols in the freedom struggle, did contribute significantly to Muslim alienation. This was subsequently utilized by the British to divide the country along Hindu-Muslim lines, leading to partition and the creation of Pakistan.

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<sup>9</sup> The name al-Qaeda originally referred to the ledger /register kept during the Afghan jihad for entering names and allowances of the fighters.

*Hindu Rashtra*, or the popularized slogan “Proudly say we are Hindus”, is a direct negation of the composite Indian identity. India provides a classic example of Islam’s co-existence with Hinduism. India has the second largest population of Muslims in the world, next to Indonesia. At the grassroots the people share a common life, common beliefs and aspirations. The extensive research published by the Anthropological Survey of India demonstrates that Muslims living in any particular region of the country share well over 80% of their daily cultural practices with their Hindu neighbors and very little with Muslims of distant regions within the country.

Today, the nationalism and patriotism of the *Sangh Parivar* is not aimed at the IMF/WB/TNC and neo-colonial domination, but focused on the Muslims instead, through their campaigns against past symbols of Muslim rule. Those in the progressive movement argue that the *Sangh Parivar* actually sabotage India’s struggle against neo-colonialism and economic domination.

BJP governments, both central and state, have aggressively pursued neo-liberal policies, opening up the national and local economies to rapacious capital. The BJP-led central government also conducted a staunchly pro-US foreign policy. The “war on terror” rhetoric of the US administration provides an ideal political environment for the BJP in its aims to further marginalize and terrorize Indian Muslims.

The emergence of this communal fascist movement has posed one of the greatest threats to women’s rights. Despite the large number of women MPs in the BJP, the RSS has been known for its long-term opposition to women entering politics. While BJP women MPs have voted against bills and legislation which promote women’s rights, the *Sangh Parivars* main focus is mobilizing women on communal grounds, to stand by their Hindu ‘brothers’ in communal assaults on minority communities. Infamously in Gujarat “Hindu” women watched on as “Muslim” women were gang raped and burned alive.

BJP/RSS propaganda glorifies the feudal custom of *sati* (where the widow commits suicide by burning to death on her husband’s funeral pier), illegalized in India, as a glorious Hindu tradition by which devout Hindu women protected themselves from the Muslim conquerors. BJP women leaders have also mobilized women in favor of *sati* as a glorious Hindu tradition.

The BJP’s advocacy of a Hindu state and its religious fanaticism has contributed to strengthening fundamentalist forces amongst Muslims in India.

### **The Christian-fundamentalist right & the Bush Administration – Serving the Empire**

A major centre of active and growing political-religious fundamentalist movements today is the United States. The Bush administration policy is the epitome of the politicization of religion to serve the interests of Empire, and on the domestic front, to serve the interests of the US corporate elite, especially those sections tied to oil interests.

The Christian-fundamentalist right was George Bush’s base. It got him elected in 2000 and re-elected in 2004, and the president has remained steadfastly loyal to this political force. He has gone out of the way to serve their political interests, in the process antagonizing a big proportion of the population in the US and much of the world.

In 2000, when George Bush actually lost the elections to Al Gore by more than half-a-million votes through the deliberate disenfranchisement of mainly black working class voters in Florida, the Christian-fundamentalist right was in an extremely weak position as a political force. But through the course of the Bush presidency the Christian-Fundamentalist Right grew to have political influence higher than at any point in its history.

The Bush presidency is said to have embraced Christian right-wing fundamentalism and geared the national and international policies of the administration to the demands of the Christian fundamentalist right. Hence, the September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre, instead of being treated as a heinous international crime, was transformed into a "war against civilizations". Iraq and Afghanistan, whose governments had nothing to do with the crime were invaded. Meanwhile Israel was given full support in its' murderous occupation of the Palestinian territories.

As a consequence of this division of the entire world along religious lines, Osama bin Laden, who was an unknown to most of us, was catapulted into fame and became a household name. Osama, instead of being seen as a common criminal, was now awarded the highly exaggerated but enhanced status of the enemy of Western-Christian civilization, and therefore de facto, the champion of the Islamic world. Foot-loose Muslim youth were now given a symbol of the jihad against the US and the West. Thus the Osama phenomenon was created.

On the domestic front nationally legislation was enacted to drive back gay rights, women's reproductive health interests, medical research such as stem-cell research and almost every other progressive social policy. On the economic front he has followed a brazenly pro-corporate, pro-rich economic agenda, literally giving away billions of tax dollars to corporations while undermining unions and driving back wages and working conditions, as well as creating massive unemployment.

The Bush administration also revived the movement by injecting tens of millions of federal dollars directly into the coffers of Christian right's grassroots organizations, while at the same time starving their most vigorous political opponents of funds. Family planning and AIDS organizations were singled out for special punishment.

International Planned Parenthood, long a target of the Christian right (described by them as a "leftist organization" engaged in an "assault on religion" and the promotion of "rampant sexual promiscuity"), lost \$12 million a year when Bush reinstated the Mexico City Policy, which denies funding to any organization that even takes a pro-choice position in public policy debates. Though Congress had approved the funding in a bipartisan vote, Bush withheld \$34 million in 2002 from the UN Population Fund after Christian right groups inaccurately claimed that it supported coerced abortions in China.

In April 2007 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the first ever federal ban on an abortion procedure. The ban outlaws certain second-trimester abortions and has no exception for cases when a woman's health is in danger. This decision effectively eliminated one of *Roe v. Wade's* core protections: that a woman's health must always be paramount. President Bush's appointees to the Court cast the critical votes to uphold the ban. The ruling is part of a larger agenda to outlaw abortion entirely in the U.S.

Despite the set-back in the mid-term election in 2006 which saw the election of a Democrat controlled congress, the Christian fundamentalist right in the US continue to remain a formidable force.

### **The Christian Right and Dominion**

There are a variety of ideological tendencies within the Christian Right. Most prevalent amongst these is Dominion Theology. According to Dominion Theology only Christians have the Biblical right to occupy and control all secular institutions – until Christ returns (and of course there is no consensus on when this may be), i.e. a *theocracy*

In their America, churches, rather than government, will provide social services. Tax dollars will flow to churches, where believers can preach and practice religious discrimination as they care for the poor. Conservative Christian faith will be considered an important qualification for public office. Policy on everything from media to medicine will be guided by conservative evangelical moralism, and not by social values such as universal human rights and gender equity, public health policies, pluralism and egalitarianism.

### **Anti-women Family Values**

For 'family values', is the main propaganda line of the Christian Right. They argue that the root of the problems facing society is the disintegration of the nuclear family. They hark back to an 'ideal nuclear family' such as that which existed in the 1950s or during the Victorian era – with father as the main breadwinner, mum as the housewife, with obedient children, etc.

But research in to the history of the North-American family shows that this model of the family, as a happy and contented homogeneous unit during any time in US history, is pure myth. Stephanie Coontz in her book "The Way We Never Were" points to research which shows the exact opposite about the state of the nuclear family in those periods of US history idealized by the Christian Right.

She includes many fascinating facts about marriage such as: In the nineteenth century, the age of sexual consent in some states was nine or ten; teenage pregnancy peaked in the 1950s; abortions peaked in the mid-nineteenth century; pioneer marriages did not last as long as modern day marriages; over the past 50 years ties between grandparents and grandchildren have become stronger.

And the stability which existed in US families in the 1950s was based on a healthy dose of government spending.

### **Liberation Theology**

If Afghanistan was the site of confrontation between the Empire and 'godless' Communism, in Latin America liberation theology was identified as the culprit which was in alliance with the revolutionary movement. In the 1980s under the Reagan administration, the Christian Right was mobilized by the US, funded and even armed,

with the blessing of the Vatican, to crush liberation theology which was largely viewed by the Latin America poor and oppressed as a more liberating trend in Christianity. Those who are intolerant to other religious views, expressed the same intolerance to different interpretations of and within their own religions.

## **Conclusion**

### **Women in the Frontlines**

The rise in political-religious fundamentalisms coincided with the universalization of neo-liberal globalization. Neo-liberal globalization is not only universal, but it is universally applied in form and content: subservient states carrying out the economic and ideological dictates of the dominant states through global institutions such as the IMF, World Bank and the WTO – privatization; economic liberalization; the dogma of the free market – the father of all fundamentalisms. God, we are told, also supports the mythical 'free' market.

Neo-liberal globalization and this extreme socio-cultural chauvinism exist together, side-by-side. They are inter-dependent and feed on and off each other. The holocaust created by neo-liberal globalization – one child dying every few seconds – and conditions of extreme social dislocation, are then blamed on religious and ethnic differences.

There are important fronts of struggle taking place against these economic and religious fundamentalisms around the world today. Some of the most heroic and inspiring struggles are taking place within countries whose societies are in the grip of fundamentalist movements and regimes. The Pakistan women's movement, for example, is one of the most inspiring movements that I have had the privilege to work with. These brave women, some working in semi-legal and even clandestine conditions, from the middle-class urban centres of Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, to the women brick kiln workers in Punjab and the peasant women in the Sindh province, to the girls who struggled to set up an all-girls cricket team in a village in Kasur, risk their lives as they challenge and confront the fundamentalists.

Women are in the front lines of the storm against neo-liberal globalization in Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador, Brazil and Venezuela – the continent that might defeat Uncle Sam. Women in the barrios in Venezuela are the backbone of the social transformation taking place in that country today.

And women are involved in the Iraqi resistance fighting against the US-led occupation. We better believe this, despite the propaganda images in the corporate media, which use the smiling faces of women supposedly welcoming the occupation armies in the name of women's liberation, to promote wars of occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Women are involved in unprecedented numbers in all progressive arenas of struggle. Many of them don't describe themselves as feminists, but they are politically active and large numbers are influenced by the basic aims and visions of the women's movement. Feminism has made a significant and permanent imprint on progressive thought and praxis.

Today no movement can effectively struggle against fundamentalism of any form without a feminist perspective – this means placing the women’s question at the centre of the agenda for social transformation.

While the rise of religious fundamentalist movements, especially in the last three decades, pose a significant threat to women’s rights, we are also witnessing a generalized assault against women by state and non-state institutions and political interests -- an assault which is especially focused on a women’s reproductive health choices and their right to control their own bodies. On this assault the Christian right, the Islamists, assorted religious fundamentalists and the right-wing political establishment form a united front.

One of the most significant defeats suffered by the women’s movement against reproductive health choices in recent years is in Catholic Nicaragua – where a blanket ban on abortion was reinstated as a ‘historic compromise’ between a former left-wing President Daniel Ortega and the Catholic Church. The call for the UN to place a moratorium on abortions comes from the heart of ‘enlightened’ Europe, the Vatican in alliance with the right-wing political establishment in Italy. And the U.S. government under George Bush poses a far greater threat to women’s reproductive health choices today, than Osama bin Laden.

This ‘war on women’ belies the ‘war on terror’ propaganda of the West. For feminists the reality is simultaneously more complex and straightforward. All religions have buttressed patriarchal systems and ideologies. Conversely all patriarchal systems and ideologies have used religious reinforcements. The tactics of our struggle against this ‘war on women’, however, are complex. They have to be varied, grounded and context specific. Most importantly, it requires the organization of a strong women’s movement, guided by a democratic discourse and the active participation of the masses of women.

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