



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (111/2006)

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## **Muslim States' Response to Pope's Controversial Speech**

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THE Sept 12 speech by Pope Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg in Germany has triggered different reactions. While many agreed that the Pope held no malicious intent against Islam, he was heavily criticized for evoking medieval viewpoints rooted in an era when a Christian empire was at war with a Muslim one. His speech, to some, manifested the pontiff's true feelings about Islam and the Muslim world in spite of his call for dialogue. This notwithstanding, one neglected aspect of this episode over the Pope's controversial speech is why Muslim governments reacted the way they did.

While it comes as little surprise that radical Islamists were quick to react to the Pope's statement with massive demonstrations, the responses of the Muslim governments were unusually strong. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the Prime Minister of Malaysia and chairman of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), described the Pope's remarks as being insensitive to Muslim feelings and damaging good relations between Islam and Christianity. The OIC countries also registered a call on 26 Sept for a formal retraction by the Pope. The OIC chairman's statement is noteworthy because only a week earlier, Abdullah had accepted the Pope's apology. Pakistan's General Pervez Musharraf, known for his secular views, said that the Pope's comments on Islam were unfortunate and irresponsible. Notably, the strongest denunciations came from Turkey, a moderate democracy seeking European Union membership. Salih Kapusuz, deputy leader of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Islamic-rooted Justice and Development party (AKP), said the pontiff's remarks were either the result of pitiful ignorance about Islam and its Prophet or, worse, a deliberate distortion. He even went as far as to categorize the Pope with dictators like Hitler and Mussolini. It is indeed significant that such strong statements were issued by Muslim leaders who are by orientation generally associated with moderation.

### **Reflecting the Muslim Ground**

For the Muslim masses, the Pope's remarks were consistent with their belief that there is a long-standing attempt by the West to destroy Islam, a campaign which began with the Crusades. Since the decline of Islamic civilization in the 17th century, the feeling that Islam is under siege has been a feature of the Muslim mind. For many in the Muslim world, the Pope's statement convinced them that an open war is being waged against them in the realm of religion. Many feel that the West is waging a crusade against them in the form of an alliance between the United States, Israel and the Vatican. This attitude was displayed in the massive protests held outside various US embassies throughout the Muslim world. Cartoons and editorials published in newspapers in the Arab Muslim world also portray Jews as the instigators behind Pope's remarks. Some argue that the reaction of the Muslim masses reflect

their nonchalance towards the essence of the Pope's message even though the speech was available on both the BBC website (right after the controversy started) and that of the Vatican City. Some who have read the speech may also not have understood the highly academic nature of the speech. On the other hand, many believed that the Pope's statement was inherently problematic because it had tendentiously linked violence to Islam despite his claim that he did not mean to defame the religion. Understanding the reality of the Muslim ground, Muslim governments had reacted by portraying themselves as defending Islam and thus are the true representatives of the Muslim masses.

### **Failure in Lebanon**

The failure of Muslim governments to react decisively in the recent Israel-Lebanese conflict had caused them to lose ground to the Islamists in their respective countries. It was the Islamists who were in the forefront of massive demonstrations, political lobbying and providing humanitarian aid to the victims of the war. The Muslim masses felt that the OIC has become an irrelevant entity governed by US-backed Muslim regimes. The failure of Israel's campaign in Lebanon has left many in the Muslim world convinced that Islamic movements such as Hizbullah and Hamas have been more successful in restoring the dignity and honour of the Muslim world by facing up to Israel and US hegemony. An indication is the outpouring of newspaper columns, cartoons, blogs and public poetry readings showering praise on Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the Hizbullah leader, as a hero of the Muslim world in many Middle Eastern countries.

### **Domestic Problems**

By reacting strongly to the Pope's remarks, Muslim governments are seen as trying to regain their waning political support. For instance, President Musharraf's strong remarks against the Pope reflect his anxiety of the deepening political crisis in Pakistan. Various domestic developments such as the Pakistani Islamists' campaign for the maintenance of *hudud* or Islamic penal laws in Pakistan and the killings of Nawab Akbar Bugti, a nationalist leader from the province of Baluchistan, brought Musharraf's popularity to an all time low. With elections expected to be held in 2007, Musharraf cannot afford to estrange the electorate. By taking a strong stand against the Pope, Musharraf presents himself as a defender of Islam and thus boost his standing amongst Muslims in Pakistan.

Similarly, for the Malaysian prime minister, the perceived inability of Malaysia and the OIC under his chairmanship to react decisively to the conflict in Lebanon had dented his image as the exemplary leader of a strong, progressive and moderate Muslim country. Faced with growing criticism at home from Islamic groups, Abdullah has been on the defensive. In addition, he is facing constant criticism from former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamed for being a weak Muslim leader. This aside, Malaysia is also awaiting a court ruling on an application from a Malay woman, Lina Joy, to renounce Islam, a case seen as crucial in determining religious freedom in Malaysia. Already, Islamic groups in Malaysia were infuriated by the government's decision to allow the case to be brought to court, which they saw as an attack on the status of Islam. Abdullah's firm stand against the Pope, as well as the strong stance adopted by the OIC under his leadership, could win him crucial Muslim support at home.

Turkey perhaps presents the best example of how domestic politics is reflected in the reaction of the country's leadership against the Pope. Since the rise of Erdogan's AKP party to power, the government has adopted a populist foreign policy of defending Islam and Muslims to boost its domestic standing among the Turkish people. This could be seen in its defence of

Iran against concerns about nuclear proliferation and the Prime Minister's invitation of Hamas leader Khaled Meshal to Ankara. However, the Turkish government has been on a collision course with the Turkish military, which pride itself as the defender of a secular Turkey. The appointment of the new Turkish military commander General Mehmet Yasar Buyukanit, an anti-Islamist and fierce secularist, has intensified the differences between the government and military. With its unusually strong stance against the Pope, the Turkish government seems to be seeking to buttress its political standing vis-à-vis the Turkish military.

In the end, the Pope's controversial speech may have assisted Muslim governments by distracting attention from the domestic problems of these states. By stoking a sense of a clash of civilizations between Muslim and Christians, both the Pope's controversial speech, as well as the strong responses of the Muslim states, could undermine the prospects of interfaith dialogue at a time when the enhancement of understanding between members of different faith communities is most needed.

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