

**Interview given by Safdar Hasan Siddiqi to a foreign media in Lahore as
Convener of “Faith in Action Group”**

Q. Can you give me your personal opinion about the Islamization process of Pakistan?

A. In fact, the Islamization process has not yet started in Pakistan. I would say that the process of de-Islamization, instead, has been initiated here. First of all, to substantiate my viewpoint I will have to explain what real Islam is. What we have been taught from our childhood about Islam has been that it is a hereditary religion, a set of rituals and directions. So, we are Muslims by birth and not by acquiescence. Similarly a certain class of religious leaders had come up among Muslims who have classified themselves as “*ulema*” but because of the negative, retrogressive and anti-people role played by them people call them “*mullahs*”. Previously it was a class performing religious rites, imparting biased religious education and giving religious sermons. Of late, this class has, by meddling in politics, formed political parties on religious and sectarian bases and developed itself into a political force. It insists on acquiring for itself the right solely to interpret Qur’an and Sunnah and to make laws of the country on the basis of their faulty concepts of Islam. It poses as standard-bearers of Islam. Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Islam, Jamial-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan, Jamiat –e-Ahl-e-Hadees, Jamial-e-Mashaikh etc. belong to such class of religious and sectarian parties vying for state power. The principle of politics, however, is that political parties should consist of various sections of the society, irrespective of race, creed or religion, and that they should be formed on the basis of the various problems faced by the people.

Another important matter that I would like to bring up is that there is a basic difference between “faith” and “religion. Faith, in fact, means a “way of life” (*deen*). All the prophets advocated the same faith for the guidance of humankind, viz. “firm belief in God and service to humanity” (not to born-Muslims but to all peoples) Religions, on the other hand, are man-tailored and were formed mainly by the vested interests after the departure of the prophets from this world, and these existed at the time of the next prophet’s arrival. At the time of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) various religions existed which the people had inherited from the past, and he had to struggle hard against the religious elite who had formed themselves into powerful groups of vested interests. Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*) did not put forth a new religion of his own; he only repeated what the other prophets had professed of which the basic call was “*la-illaha-illallah*”. This *kalima* bestows the highest form of freedom that can be awarded to any man. It means that there is only one God, before Him alone one should bow and pray and accept willfully His commands. No one is allowed to bow before any other being or to accept his command as against the command of God.

Now, what we, as Muslims, have inherited from the past, in the name of Islam is not the way of life taught by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) but that concept of Islam, which was developed by the Muslim monarchs after the four caliphs of Islam. The Arab imperialism devised by them gave up the democratic approach of governance of the Caliphs. Instead of educating the people about the Islamic principles of life, to make their lives peaceful and fruitful, they concentrated on teaching them how to perform their prayers, ablution and other things pertaining to the rituals alone. They tried to popularize

the narrow concept of Islam in order to safeguard their own interests. The Qur'an is the sole criteria for deciding about the rightfulness or wrongfulness of an approach. If any *hadith* fits in with a simple interpretation of the Qur'anic verses then that *hadith* will help to understand Islam. But the clerics mainly use *ahadith*, and very little of Quranic verses in their sermons because they are more interested in cooking up stories rather than teaching the Islamic faith. Faith,unifies people of different religions whereas religion, divides them into various incompatible groups. No matter how many diverse concepts exist the fact remains that the safe destiny of human beings lies in unity, development and prosperity of humanity. We will have to work very hard to achieve all this, no matter which religious group we may belong to. Future unity of humankind, however, lies in unifying on the basis of faith, not on the basis of religion. Religious tolerance, in any way, should be practiced to allay the bad effects of religion.

Q. Do you think that Islamization, as it has existed in Pakistan about these last years, has been more a political slogan than anything else?

A. Yes, Islamization has been used as a political slogan in Pakistan as it has been used elsewhere in the world in past history. I would say that according to the democratic principles, which of course Islam originally upheld, the people are the deciding factor in any matter of thought and action in the social, political, economic and other fields. But they have been deliberately kept ignorant and illiterate in the Muslim world. In Pakistan the literacy rate is 23 per cent or even less. This has been a criminal negligence on the part of our leaders after Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the only person who was honest in his intentions and knew the true art of politics. After him politics has been managed wrongly all along.

Another important factor is that today there is immense centralization of state-power whereas we need devolution of state-power right to the grass-root level. We cannot make progress unless we do this.

Islamization is being used by the political parties and those holding state-power as mere slogan to hoodwink the masses. Abraham the Prophet called himself a 'Muslim' and 'Islam' is the name given by him for the way of life adopted by his followers and the prophets who came later. Islam, therefore, should be introduced as "faith of the Prophets" (*deen-e-ambia*) because it embodies the same principles as have been introduced by the rest of the prophets in various parts of the world.

Q. How would you relate Islamization to the democratic process in Pakistan?

A. Instead of following the so-called Islamization process, the process of democratization should be initiated in Pakistan in right earnest. One of the basic things in the democratic approach is that all the people living in a certain country (be it Pakistan, India or other countries) should be considered as members of a single nation. The religious minorities in Arabia formed part of the Arab nation during the time of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the four caliphs. The imposition of "Shariat Bill" and the setting up of "Shariat Courts" under cover of Islamization was not a move in the right direction. These will be used to impose such laws as are discriminatory towards women and minorities, and are bound to serve the interests of the landed aristocracy and the barons of trade and

industry as against the interests of the poor and oppressed masses. The setting up of shariat courts, while giving to the President the powers to dismiss or appoint the judges of these courts, is absolutely undesirable. There is no need for separate Shariat Courts as the present judicial system is good enough. The existing judges could be made aware of the Islamic principle and laws for application in decision-making

Q. What would be for you an Islamic democracy?

A. The prime question is always that of changing the existing system of governance, and through it, the socio-economic structure of the country. Soon after the creation of Pakistan the landed aristocracy and the bureaucracy had together usurped state power and gained control of the lands and other means of production. They had also acquired the services of the religious elite to maintain their hold over the country's resources. They will never allow democracy or Islam to take firm roots in Pakistan. Therefore, those who are conscientious and serious about Islam or democracy will have to dismantle the existing socio-economic structure of society. There are two ways of doing this: one way is through bloody revolution and the other way is through a peaceful democratic process, howsoever difficult it may be. In a democratic process you do suffer at the hands of the vested interests in power but at the same time you educate not only yourself but the majority of the people who matter the most in a democracy; for it is their votes that are important for bringing about a radical change in the electoral process and bringing forward suitable candidates from the lower and middle classes to participate in elections as candidates and ensure free and fair elections. It will take some time to mature but it should any way be initiated. The masses all over the country are desirous of such participation in elections as would pave the way for them to enter the assemblies.

The problem being faced by us, however, is how to coordinate to bring about the required human force that could capture state power through democratic means. The only viable way seems to be, first of all, to form an effective core group of politically conscious and dedicated individuals with a clean background, both men and women, who could go to form the nucleus of a new and capable leadership suitable for handling the arduous task of national reconstruction. The next step should be of forming conscious and committed intellectuals that would prepare treatises on Pakistan's basic issues, and create a strong lobby among government and opposition members of parliament as well as other effective members of society. Such a task will have to be undertaken in Pakistan so as to play a major and significant role among the comity of nations in future for giving them a purpose and a direction to follow.

