

Book Review

**Graham E. Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam*
New York: Palgrave, 2003
272 pp. \$29.95**

The book under review, *The Future of Political Islam*, reflects not only the author's thoroughgoing examination of Islam but also his personal experience of having lived in five Muslim countries in the span of fourteen years and travelled to many more including the Muslim areas of China and the former Soviet Union.

Graham E. Fuller provides an insightful and comprehensive analysis of the present and future of religio-political phenomenon of political Islam. He tries to portray a comprehensive scenario and thus producing a work useful for both the beginners as well as the experienced scholars seeking an authentic overview of political Islam.

The events of September 11 have brought in their wake a whole spate of books on the Middle East and Islam, but few of them have focused on the subject of how the Islamic faith serves as a sub-text for the ordering of society and its powerful appeal for responsible and ethical government based on the basic principles laid out in the Qur'an and the traditional Islamic culture.

Fuller focuses on the forces of religion, political, economic and social pressures that determine Islamism. The title of the book indicates author's judgment that political Islam has a future however, what that future would be is still an open question. With the writing of this book, Fuller has attempted to fill the gap in the understanding of the diversity of political Islam and its place in the world politics. His thesis is that the political Islam is not an exotic

and distant phenomenon; both liberals and fundamentalists can understand it in the context of the universal struggle in the contemporary world politics.

According to the author Islam will be alive and the subject of central debate in global politics of the 21st century. He reveals his useful insights about the contemporary issues pertaining to political Islam. He sees political Islam as a driving force for the restoration of the identity and dignity of Islam's glorious past for an equally befitting future by Islamists. He talks about Muslim grievances, many of which are not adequately known in the West while many of them are very legitimate, others may be misconceived and misinterpreted. As a result, political Islam is the major political opposition movement sweeping across most of the Muslim world today that may prove partly good or bad for the future of the world politics. He points out that Islamists have taken up the role of "left" after the end of the cold war in the Muslim as well as international politics. Usama bin Laden or the Talibans are simply violent and extremist parts of the spectrum but political Islam or Islamism is growing and diversifying as events proceed in the Muslim world and global politics.

The author holds that while political Islam is the dominant intellectual current, a focus on radicalism and extremism blinds west from viewing another trend of liberal political Islam. The book is written in lucid style and contains a highly thought provoking analysis of different aspects of the issue. It provides new insight into the pathologies of both western viewpoint and Islamic viewpoint on the issue of Islamic Revivalism as a major political actor in International politics after September 11. Generally speaking the book encompasses two streams of thought, first the role of Islamism in the Muslim society and second its role in the world politics. First chapter demystifies Islam and its relationship to the affairs of state and civil society in the broad survey of Islamic political movements and discusses the "anguish" of Islamic history with a glorious past, its decline and remarkable evolution and future possible actions and directions of change. Chapter two deals with the present and future multiple roles of political Islam within the Muslim world. Chapter three discusses radical versus liberal Islamism. Chapter four places Islam in the

context of global politics. Chapter five discusses relationship between Islamism and terrorism. Chapter six looks at Islamism in power in Iran, Sudan and Afghanistan. Chapter seven focuses upon Islamism in the context of democracy. Chapter eight looks at the problem of Islam and the west. The author portrays Islam as a peaceful religion but he blames Islamists of using it as a vehicle of conflict. Chapter nine discusses domestic and international determinative factors for the influence of political Islam in the future. Chapter ten concludes with examining future paths and problems in development of political Islam. In the end the author ventures to give his forethoughts on the nature and directions of political Islam for the next two decades.

The author attributes the rise of militant and fundamentalist Islam to centuries of Western colonialism, imperialism and cultural domination. He points out that in most Middle Eastern countries, politicized Islam is often the only alternative to repressive, authoritarian regimes. He treats it neither as an excuse nor as a justification, but as a simple reality. As with all other religions or political movements, according to him, Islam also takes on a variety of forms. According to the author Islamism comprises a variety of political movements, principles and philosophies that draw general inspiration from Islam but produce different agendas at different times and of different natures. The author tries to explain that Shari'a, or Islamic law, as less a form of governance than a personal code of conduct. He brings many arguments against radical and repressive interpretations of the Quran.

The work under review is considered by western thinkers as an illuminating read and a welcome addition to the growing literature on contemporary Islam. The author deals with existing and increasing tensions between Islam and the United States. He focuses on the aspects of revenge, growth of the issue and of more future Islamic political movements in response to the United States' oppression of Muslims after September 11, 2001, which he fears may develop more dangerously affecting relationship between the West and the world of Islam. He further states that it is easy to believe Islam and Muslims are enemies of the West; but it is also wrong.

The book provides survey of trends in the Muslim world and contends that the issue is not whether Islam plays a central role in politics, but what Muslims want to do and achieve. He further believes that radicalism and extremism blind west from viewing another trend of liberal political Islam in the Muslim world. He further adds that proponents of liberal political Islam emphasize human rights, democracy, tolerance and cooperation. They face an uphill struggle as authoritarian regimes oppress opposition and use Islam to justify their undemocratic rule. As people are denied avenues to participate and criticize, religion comes forward to play a central role in the politics of Muslim world. The author predicts that outcome of the struggle between the extremists and the liberals will determine the future of political Islam.

The Future of Political Islam may be termed as a constructive thought in an exercise of generating appeasement between Islam and the west. The term, Political Islam has continued to attract and redefine the relationship between the Islamic and non-Islamic world. Islam has, for so long, been considered in the Western world as an instinctive fanaticism, backwardness and pathological terrorism. The author tries to explain that there is nothing inherently fanatical, backward or terroristic about Islam *per se*. The problems of colonial and undemocratic governance in Islamic societies during the last century exercised a bad socio-economic-political influence on the Muslim civil society.

Be as it may, the political Islam continues to be associated in the public mind with terrorism and fundamentalism in the west. The author provides a corrective to those of a certain persuasion in the west who characterize political Islam as invariably reciprocating and dangerous and defines Islamist as someone who believes that Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world and who seeks to implement this idea in some specific fashion. He is concerned to show how the future of political Islam may be either dark or bright, depending on which Islamist groups emerge the stronger.

In general, Fuller offers a cautiously optimistic analysis of political Islam. He points to the creativity of certain modernist and liberal political thinking on questions of government, representative

democracy, economic and social policy, the nature of state-society relations, the scope and place of Islamic law, and the rights and responsibilities of the individual Muslim. Groups like the Nur movement in Turkey, which abstains from formal political activity but has assumed a significant presence in civil society, have advocated an interpretation of Islam that directly confronts the realities of religious and cultural pluralism. He identifies Iran as the place where the most significant advances have been made in the reinterpretation of Islam (*ijtihad*) with regard to political theory, despite the clerical theocracy that has dominated that country since the revolution of 1979. He maintains that disparities in wealth, privilege and power lead to the growth of tensions which take political form for “intercivilizational conflict”. He points out that lack of any workable theoretical and practical policy to handle the problems of multiculturalism and globalization has caused rise of ethnicity within Islamic states. He especially points out the change in Egyptian and Pakistani youth who are more interested in professionalism than in ideologies of war and clashes. The author maintains that the Muslim societies are closed and terms those as *Dar al-Harbs* due to ideological, religio-ethno-sectarian conflicts and repression. According to Fuller, West is now *Dar al-Islam* where Muslim live in political and social peace. He quotes Palestinian thinker Ismail al-Faruqi, who says we go to West, as Muhammad migrated to Madina for missionary da‘wah, peace and strength of Islam. The author maintains that diverse socio-economic, political forces and anti-Western views of the Muslim world are serving much more than Islam as a vehicle for operating present Islamist movements.

He describes that science is unable to answer the philosophical questions as to why we are here on Earth; what the purpose of individual life should be and what the meaning of death is? He tells that religion comes to help both modernists and scientists about these issues. In modern era individual decides through his thoughtful choice what is the most appropriate belief for his own life.

He maintains that political Islam has ability to integrate Western political thought and experience, as he admires some of the moderate Islamic intellectuals whom he sees as having made

considerable progress in this direction. He is particularly supportive of those liberal Islamists who perform modernist trick of reinterpreting Islam as an ethical system, value system and as a private faith that offers considerable scope for dispensing with modernist aspects of its social, economic, political and legal dimensions.

The author proposes to Islamists to review and re-interpret Islamic *fiqh*, through modern scholars and intellectuals to live in modern era instead of living in the sixth century Arabia to deal with their contemporary socio-econo-political problems. He refers to Turkey as a modernist, Islamist state, which has successfully interpreted Islamist and western liberal democratic traditions through the Kemalist secular elite.

He suggests to the United States to abandon harsh peremptory policies towards the Muslim world in the context of the war against terrorism to help resolve the Palestinian issue equitably and to support socio-econo-political reforms in the Muslim societies in order to develop a sympathetic cooperation and co-existence with the Muslim world. He advises Islamists to rise up to the challenge of abridging Islamic past with Islamic present in a constructive and productive manner to overcome their socio-econo-political and modernizational problems.

The Future of Political Islam may attract attention and possibly criticism for its conceptual approach about Islam from the Muslim world. The choices of the author about parameters of his discussion of the Modern Islamic Intellectuals, Secular Islam, Shari'a and Islamism may also expose him to questioning from Muslim thinkers. The title of the book contains the term "Political Islam", but the author has not defined its corollary, the Non-Political Islam. It looks unlikely that the future of Political Islam will belong to those Islamists whom the author supports. The Non-Political Islam may look like a secularized, individualistic, privatized, and a quietist Islam, but supposedly, if all these Islams exist, and have devotees what share will they have in the fundamental tenets of power, sovereignty, authority and legitimacy which are central to Islam? Besides, Fuller's argument that Islam as a faith is merely the vehicle for the ideology of Political Islam seems somewhat naïve and vague because Islam is different and

distinct in this respect from other faiths. Non-Political Islam may be a political appeal to Islamists but the question remains what kind of politics the Muslims should embrace which does not alienate them from the basic tenets of their faith? The terms like political Islam, modernization and democratization may be much more than just academic issues. This may signify the secular-liberal wish of the West but the same may not be the case with the Muslim world. As a result of modernization Islamic democracies may develop in time, but they may not necessarily resemble the liberal democracies of the West.

Despite above weaknesses the book offers a valuable contribution to the study of western viewpoint on the issue. This short review, far from doing justice to the significant contribution made by the author offers only a glimpse into the insight running through the book which calls for its most careful study by the Muslim and Western scholars, policy makers and students of international studies in order to evolve an agenda for improving inter-cultural and inter-national relations.

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