

## May 15, 2005: U.S. Inquisition and Our Faults - Business Recorder

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The US Commission on International Religious Freedom has declared Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan violators of religious freedom and beliefs. Those already on the list include Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, North Korea, China and Myanmar. Countries on the watch list are Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia and Nigeria. India, erstwhile the only viable democracy that had been on the list, has been removed after Congress (I) replaced the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in government. The basic criterion applied by the commission in preparing its list is said to be that the right to practice any religion is likely to be compromised unless actively supported by the state through political will as well as an appropriate legal framework. But the ruling elite's prejudices and political preferences of the US administration also seem to have influenced the commission's judgement. While we do not grudge India's exclusion from the list of 'bad guys,' though we see no sign of a positive change in its socio-political make-up, how would the American prophets of liberalism explain their condonation of the policies of countries like Turkey and France which have banned the use of scarf by Muslim women as a mark of their faith? Many of the countries on the list would also express strong indignation at the Commission sitting in judgement on the rest of the world given the recent scandals involving US army's torture tactics on prisoners in Abu Ghraib as well as in Guantanamo Bay with what many regard as religious overtones. The alleged desecration of the Holy Quran in Guantanamo Bay as part of the Pentagon's mental torture tactics has been roundly condemned by all including a State Department spokesperson who stated that an inquiry in this regard will be undertaken. With the Pentagon silent on this issue there is concern internationally that the Pentagon may do yet another whitewash as in the case of Abu Ghraib abuse scandal, by allowing only junior staff to take the blame. Be that as it may, the new world order dictated by the world's sole superpower, is, generally acknowledged by the world polity, albeit reluctantly by several countries. For Pakistan to be included in this list of countries where the system of government is predominantly autocratic and corruption remains rampant makes one challenge the claims by our leadership that our style of democracy has been accepted by the world polity in general and the US in particular. Interestingly enough, while the present US administration obviously supports the government of President Musharraf there are other influential fora in the US who consider Pakistan's democracy a sham - fora where the President of the US does not deem it appropriate to interfere. Thus Pakistan is increasingly being seen as a two headed hydra with one face supporting the US war on terror and, therefore, eligible for praise and support; and the other as politically repressive with human rights violations and, therefore, eligible for censure and/or sanctions. It is precisely this Jekyll and Hyde view that has, in the past, allowed the US to summarily cease support for Pakistan as soon as its immediate objectives were met. That this trend seems to also be at work at present, as reflected by the conclusion of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, makes one challenge the view of the present government that this time around the geographic importance of Pakistan will guarantee that our special relationship with the US will continue beyond that of meeting US objectives in the region. There is, however, ample evidence that Pakistan needs to look closely at its laws that are frequently abused. The Blasphemy Law has targeted our small Christian minority. In the much publicised case of Ayub Masih there were allegations that the accuser had a land dispute with the accused. In addition, the Hudood ordinance violates the rights of women in this country. These are all areas where the present government, for all its claims of moderation, has been unwilling to act. As long as the MMA was an ally of President Musharraf's government this hesitation was rooted in political considerations. However, those considerations no longer hold true. In other words there is a need for the government to put money where its mouth is and repeal these laws.