



Features

Long climb to the moral high ground

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It is time to ask how democracies should respond to terrorism, write Dr **Halim Rane** and Dr Ashutosh Misra

MOST terrorism is motivated by a perceived need to change the existing moral, social, and/or political order, and even if acts of terror are committed with religious justifications, almost all have a strategic and political agenda.

In the case of India, a significant shift in terrorist violence has emerged since 2003, indicating the indigenisation of terrorism in the country. In total, 13 major blasts have occurred between 2003 and September 2008 in eight different states, leaving 648 dead. All were reportedly undertaken by the Indian Mujahideen (IM), regarded as the militant successor of the proscribed Student Islamic Movement of India.

Deccan Mujahideen, the group claiming responsibility for the Mumbai attacks, appears to be a carefully chosen name, perhaps by the leaders of IM, to project it as the representative outfit of the Deccan Plateau in which the attacks have occurred.

But the targeting of Western civilians and financial institutions follows earlier attacks undertaken by IM in other parts of India. The group is allegedly deeply influenced by Al-Qaeda's tactics.

In this context one should examine why democracies such as India, Spain, the UK and US are victims of terrorism. Despite constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights, Indian minorities reportedly feel victimised, citing a structured bias in the application of the country's democratic principles. Whatever the reality, an important question is whether liberal democracies run the risk of fostering extremist tendencies.

There is no academic evidence to prove that the greater the level of democracy the lower the potential for terrorism. That the opposite seems to be true gives much for proponents of democracy to ponder. Unfortunately, in an era when the world has heard much about democracy, freedom, and human rights, instances abound of democracies directly or indirectly involved in the undermining of democracy, suppression of freedom, and commission of gross violations of basic human rights.

Israel, touted as the only democracy in the Middle East, occupies Palestinian land in violation of international law, completely disregards the Fourth Geneva Convention and, along with the US, denies Palestinians the right of self-determination and overturned the results of democratic elections in Palestine in 2006.

The US and UK imposed genocidal sanctions on Iraq for more than a decade, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians, mainly children. These countries' most recent invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, in the name of democracy, freedom, and human rights, have subsequently resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians.

The indiscriminate nature of terrorism is what makes it particularly abhorrent. Unfortunately, the bombs dropped and missiles fired from the hi-tech war machines of democratic nations are no better at distinguishing the combatant from the civilian.

Another irony is that terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and the Indian Mujahideen profess Islam, a faith whose holy book, the Koran, teaches that taking a single innocent life is like killing the whole of humanity, and saving a single life is akin to saving the whole of humanity.

The war on terrorism ultimately will be won by the side that is seen to hold the moral high ground. Unfortunately, key democratic states are yet to reach this pinnacle.

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