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The era of true democracies is definitively over | Dialogue | thenews.com.pk

Zaman Khan

12-15 minutes

Professor Piotr Balcerowicz was born in Poland, where he is currently a professor of Oriental Studies and International Relations at the University of Warsaw. He has been a member of the Committee for Oriental Studies of Polish Academy of Sciences.

He was a student of South Asian Studies at Warsaw University in Poland (MA in 1990) and Banaras Hindu University (India, 1987-1988) and afterwards of philosophy at postgraduate level at Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw. He obtained PhD in Indian Philosophy in 1999 (Hamburg University), post-doctoral degree ("Habilitation") in Eastern Philosophies in 2005 (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw).

Prof. Balcerowicz specialises in philosophical traditions of Asia and the West, especially South Asian philosophy and religions, as well as in intercultural relations and contemporary history of Asia, especially South-Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. He is also the founder and president (till 2014) of Education for Peace

(www.edukacjadlapokoju.org), an NGO which carries out educational projects and builds schools and academic institutions in Asia and Africa.

He is a regular visitor of the region of South Asia, including Pakistan, Afghanistan and India, since the mid-1980s practically annually.

He is a polyglot and has a number of books to his credit. He is a regular visitor to Pakistan where he interacts with students of various universities. He was recently in Lahore where TNS had a chance to speak to him.

Excerpts follow.

The News on Sunday: Why did you choose to be an academic?

Piotr Balcerowicz: I always liked to learn new things and explore. I was interested in a few different subjects, primarily in sciences (astronomy, including physics, biology and maths), but gradually developed an interest in philosophy. For me, languages such as ancient Greek, Sanskrit, Pali or Prakrits became the means to discover ideas, thoughts, concepts and theories developed by ancient philosophers and that is why I ended up teaching some of these languages.

Academia provides me freedom to pursue my interests.

Sometimes I say that "I'm jobless, but I simply get paid for my hobbies". In fact, academia and academic research allow me to combine my personal intellectual interests with professional career which helps me make my living.

TNS: What are the areas of your research?

PB: There are quite a lot of them. I've never been able to focus on

just one particular field and have always cultivated interest in various areas of learning. Even though these seem to be quite different, they complement each other and the link between all of them is my philosophical background.

TNS: How did you become interested in Islamic State (ISIS)? Do you think organisations like ISIS and al-Qaeda would succeed? How do you look at the outcome of power struggle in the Middle East?

PB: I've been visiting South Asia and the Middle East for two to three decades, since I was interested in international relations, religions and conflicts, and to follow the developments of such groups like al-Qaeda etc. was unavoidable. The ISIS is in a way a logical development of the destruction of the regime in Iraq by the US combined with the US support for other regimes in the regions, and the complete destabilisation of the Middle East.

I consider the emergence of the ISIS as the most serious problem which the world faces since the end of the Second World War, even bigger than the Cold War, and I call this period the crawling World War III.

I don't think ISIS or similar outfits will succeed in the way they want to, however they may change the political map for decades and pose the most serious threat to humanity ever experienced so far.

TNS: You seem disenchanted with democracy. What do you think could be the alternative of democracy and would it work for the benefit of humanity?

PB: No, I'm not disenchanted with democracy. On the contrary, I consider democracy as the only sensible political system in which the interests of all groups are both represented and respected. It is

in many ways also an extension of the root-level democratic institutions which have been practised in the form of tribal or village shuras etc.

What I am disenchanted with, or rather furious at, is the way the idea of democracy has been consistently abused and misused by the Americans all through recent history. The way they have supported vicious and barbaric regimes such as Saudi Arabia or racist and abusive regimes such as Israel, but have consistently opposed any democratic changes that would result in democratic governments which are not necessarily controlled by the US.

I don't think ISIS or similar outfits will succeed in the way they want to, however they may change the political map for decades and pose the most serious threat to humanity ever experienced so far.

I don't think there is any real alternative for democracy inasmuch as it is the only system which also provides adequate protection of human rights, which are the basic rights of every human being irrespective of his or her ethnic, cultural or religious background. Furthermore, I claim that a truly democratic system is compatible with all religions. Those who claim for instance that Islam is not compatible with democracy either do not understand what real democracy is and confuse it with Pax Americana, when US and some hegemonic power in the world have their own political agenda and want to exert full control over politics and the society.

The problem is, however, that the era of true democracies is, in my opinion, definitively over. We have entered a new era: the era of soft regimes. I call soft regime such states which pretend to preserve certain democratic structures like nominal elections,

certain decision-making processes in the hands of people. At the same time, all the real policies are made by a tiny elite which has resources, power, military force, capital and media [at its disposal].

These regimes will be interested in maintaining acceptable standards of living for most people and in alleviating poverty; however, the sphere of their influence and their wealth will be increasing. Soft regimes will make sure that people are never dissatisfied enough to change the regime but at the same time the power of the regime will make any real dissent impossible: either because all political activists are under permanent surveillance (like all other citizens) or because the advanced weaponry will make it possible to thrash any dissent immediately. And this is what we observe already now.

TNS: How do you look at the relations between Pakistan and India?

PB: I don't see any way of improving them. History shows that they have gone a sinusoidal path within certain limits. The political establishments on both sides are neither interested in complete destruction of their neighbour nor in fully peaceful relations because to maintain tensions helps them garner support of their electorates. With the new political environment created by Narendra Modi's victory, things become even more complicated because extremist, far-right ideas based on Hindutva will inculcate similar values based on nationalism and religious extremism which entered the education system in Pakistan during the Zia ul-Haq era and determined current events in Pakistan.

India managed to ward off such developments for a few decades, but now this has changed and it will negatively impact all their

relations with Pakistan in the future. Also in Pakistan, no one in politics and behind politicians is seriously interested in rapprochement with India because the political power is often based on the fear of the threat which the neighbour poses -- fear which is completely illusory and a fallacious construct.

India has never been interested in destroying Pakistan for several reasons, one of them being very simple: that it would double the number of the Muslim minority in India -- and why should people like Modi like that?

TNS: How do you define the states of Pakistan, India and Afghanistan? Would they survive in the present form?

PB: All three countries have their borders defined in an artificial way which do not reflect ethnic identities, and all of them try to develop the idea of a nation which they ineffectually impose on their citizens. In Pakistan, if the processes which have been responsible for the chaos, terrorism, violence and religious extremism are not seriously addressed immediately, Pakistan may cease to exist within 20 years: it will implode as a state and will become an example of a failed state like Somalia.

Afghanistan faces this fate right now. American occupation of Afghanistan effectively since December 2001 has not solved any problem in Afghanistan, not to mention even addressing the most acute problems of Afghanistan -- failed economy, poverty etc. which are the real processes triggering the violence and motivating people to unrest there and the Taliban movement.

India has best chances of survival, but again with the new far-right, fascist ideologies based on Hindutva, serious communal conflicts may develop to the scale which has never been experienced in

India before.

TNS: Iran was the first religious/theocratic state in the modern world. How did it come into being and what do you think about its future?

PB: The emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran came as a surprise to everybody, not only to Shah Reza Pahlavi, but also to Ayatollah Khomeini and a large group of supporters, including the liberally-oriented bazaar merchants, communists and leftists, liberal democrats etc., without whose support the revolution would not have succeeded. However, the masses and most non-religious groups, so essential in its success, were not aware that they would soon become the victims of the revolution.

In this sense, the Islamic Revolution emulated what happened during the French Revolution of 1789 when the revolutionaries were soon to become its victims during the Reign of Terror.

Against general opinion, Iran is much more modern than most of its critics would think, and it is certainly an improvement upon the era of Reza Pahlavi's brutal regime. Moreover, it does not pose any serious threat to its neighbours -- I would consider the Iranian regime surprisingly responsible, even if it had nuclear weapons.

However, it is far from being a democratic system in which all civil rights of every citizen would be respected and in which every citizen would have his or her say and would be given a real, unrestrained chance to develop his or her potential and talents, because this requires genuine civil liberties and social and political freedom. At the same time, I don't currently see any processes which would significantly change the Islamic system except for a possibility of a change from within which may be gradually triggered

after the demise of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, though I don't consider it much likely.

The possibility of such change may be likened to what happened in Spain after the death of the fascist dictator General Franco in 1975 and a general transition through serious political changes, including the reinstatement of the monarchy, which was initially expected to safeguard the interest of the fascist establishment but which suddenly made a most radical turn and the whole system was successfully transformed into a healthy and active democracy.

TNS: Do you think religion would continue to play a dominant role in the world?

PB: I'm afraid yes. I find it unfortunate because religions should primarily define the relations between the individual believer and God. Once it is used to regulate all aspects of political, social and private life, it is no longer a religion per se but merely a totalitarian ideology used by certain elites who are motivated solely by their desire for power and not by their wish for the well-being of all the citizens.

And I find it likely that religion will play even more dominant role than before because I see that the political discourse in last two decades has become less rational, and more based on various kinds of prejudices, emotions, hatred, populisms etc., which appeal to the uneducated much easier and more successfully than a well-reasoned argument. Besides, the world has become increasingly more complex and more difficult to analyse and many people are satisfied with simplistic answers.