

Saturday, February 27, 2010

Comment | Columnists / **Salim Mansur****Long, bloody road to Islam reform**By **SALIM MANSUR**, QMI AGENCY

Last Updated: February 27, 2010 2:00am

Two notable Muslim leaders died late last year.

Though the deaths of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, 87, of Iran, and Indonesia's Abdurrahman Wahid, 69, were widely reported, the significance of who they were and what they represented in life was not fully appreciated in the West that is rightly bewildered with the violence tearing apart the world of Islam.

Montazeri was a student of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic in Iran, and his designated successor. But when Montazeri questioned the direction of Khomeini's politics, he was demoted, stripped of his title and banished.

In exile from power, Montazeri became a symbol of rebuke of what Khomeini built. His popularity soared, especially among the young, as he defiantly repudiated the entire edifice of political Islam by providing the religious and intellectual support for reform and freedom.

Wahid became Indonesia's first democratically elected president in 1999 following the fall of Suharto's dictatorship. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country, the world's fourth largest by population and the third largest democracy after India and the United States.

Under siege

Though Wahid's stint as president was short, his role as a Muslim religious leader was much greater than that of any politician. He was the head of the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, the Nahdatul Ulama (NU), with membership estimated around 40 million.

The NU belongs to the mainstream majority Sunni sect and is characterized by a history of tolerant, humane, inclusive practice of Islam as a faith tradition. This tradition is under siege by those who have perverted Islam by turning it into a political ideology with totalitarian characteristics.

Wahid devoted his life in opposing Muslim fundamentalism, and since 9/11 spoke and wrote with increasing urgency against political Islam and the fanaticism, bigotry and violence of the Islamists.

Both Montazeri and Wahid insisted true belief could not be divorced from freedom. They preached tolerance, as the Qur'an teaches, "for you, your religion; for me, my religion," and that there can be no compulsion on matters of faith.

They understood freedom is at the core of Islam's moral teachings — a value that needs rediscovering for Muslims to live in peaceful coexistence with people of different faiths and cultures and, equally important, for Muslims to tolerate and respect each other.

They did not represent just another face of Islam; instead, they were its true face. Their efforts stood for renewal of Islam through reform consistent with modern times in terms of science and democracy.

Wahid repeated the words of Muhammad Iqbal — a poet-philosopher from undivided India in the early decades of the last century and one of Islam's greatest scholars — who wrote Muslim progress required ridding Islam of the stain of Arab imperialism from its early history.

Petrodollar

This stain became, in our time, the full-blown eclipse of Islam as religion and civilization by the petrodollar Islam of desert Arabs, primarily the Saudis, and their tribal culture.

Montazeri and Wahid recognized the struggle for Islam's reform would be long and bloody as we are presently witnessing. Perhaps even harder than the reform of Christianity and Europe's renaissance about which many in the West seem to have forgotten.

http://www.torontosun.com/comment/columnists/salim_mansur/2010/02/26/13042216.html