

# POLITICS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

---

## TERJUMAN-UL-QURAN

June 2001

PROF. KHURSHID AHMAD



## POLITICS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

by Professor Khurshid Ahmad

Allah's grip is swift. The most abominable behavior in the eyes of Allah, the Creator and Lord of the universe, is of arrogance, haughtiness, and conceit. This was the affliction that turned Iblis into Satan. This can be safely said without the risk of being refuted that in every devilish act in the entire history of humankind has had a key-role for these despicable curses. For individuals as well as nations, if humility, humbleness and realistic approach are the steps to progress, then arrogance and haughtiness take ultimately to confrontation and disaster. According to the Sunnah of Allah, pride has a fall, sooner or later. This is quite another thing that those who are imbued with the sense of righteousness take up the upright and straight path when admonished, while those who are dominated by evil and who are destined to humiliation and destruction become more disobedient and astray with every admonition and warning. They are no different from the people of Noah (Alaihi Salam) as they are warned time and again yet every warning only adds to their disobedience. "We give them warning after warning, but it only increases their transgression." (Asra 17:60)

### Two Warnings for the United States

The United States has been served two such warnings in the first week of May 2001 by countries of East and West alike. This reflects the trend of international opinion, besides being a waking-up call for America provided that it tries to understand which direction the wind is blowing and learns a lesson from history.

America has been proud of its power since after the Second World War. Though this conceited self-view has always been on the swell, yet it shot up to new heights after the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan, fall of Communism, and demolition of the Berlin Wall. During these 12-13 years, there has been great commotion about some New World order and claims about the beginning of an American Century. The American leadership began to hold that America has become invincible, that it represents the total wisdom, and that it has assumed the role of 'the Emperor' of the world.

The new American President George Bush Jr. and his team started giving signals for solo-flight and got themselves busy in Americanizing the globalization. They also got bogged down in ripping off the veil of consultation with the United Nations and other international bodies and friendly countries that was used to conceal naked American aggression. Whether it is about nuclear defense shield or global warming, dangers emanating from million of landmines or humanity's war against AIDS and other deadly and contagious diseases, issues of nuclear policy or of energy policy and its implications, honoring the past agreements or seeking concord and consensus in the international community for new ones, trade sanctions or interference in the internal affairs of a country and espionage, loyalty with old friends or search for new ones – the Bush administration

adopted in the very first four months such an approach of self-indulgence and one-way activity that raised great apprehensions in the ranks of nations, Western or Eastern all alike. This new aspect of the alarm got itself manifest during the elections to two important commissions of the United Nations. The first week of May 2001 thus heralded a new era in history.

The UN Human Rights Commission is an active and prestigious body that was established in 1947 on American motivation under the leadership of former American President Roosevelt's wife. It is not only the most important Human Rights platform, but also one of the few UN bodies whose mandate is not confined to passing resolutions but also to carry out investigations into complaints and suggest policy measures. America has been playing a key-role in it for the last 54 years; rather, it used to call shots. In elections (held on secret-balloting basis in which 14 new members were elected, including three exclusive seats for the Western countries) to such a body America tasted defeat for the first time in the course of half a century. United Nations Social and Economic Council was the Electoral College. In the contest, France got first position with the highest tally (52 out of 54 votes), Austria was second (with 41 votes), and Sweden third (32 votes). Against these successful countries, America could secure only 29 votes, and lost the election. This is the first American defeat in the UN bodies during the half century, which has astonished all – including America itself.

America could not have yet recovered from this humiliation of 4 May 2001 when it had to swallow another defeat. It lost its seat in yet another important UN body, International Narcotics Control Board. Expulsion by the international community from two such bodies that were instrumental for the so-called most important pillars of the American foreign policy is a humiliating defeat for America's reputation around the globe, retribution of Nature according to those who are endowed with insight, and an eye-opener for the American leadership itself.

### American Reaction

The reaction of the American leadership, media, and interested elements provides a mirror that shows different facets of America as a super power.

Quite naturally, the first reaction was of shock, astonishment and surprise. American leadership was astounded by this unbelievable happening. Shock was followed by lament and reproach, anger and fury. The most anguishing was that even the Western nations did not side with America and their deserting precipitated the defeat. Sweden and Austria refused to quit despite being pressured. As 43 countries had promised to vote for America, victory looked likely; but the secret ballot showed only 29 votes. Adding to injury was the fact that Sudan, Bahrain, South Korea, Chile, Mexico, Pakistan, and Uganda became members of the commission after winning elections from their respective regional constituencies. Saudi Arabia and Iran are among the losers along with America, although the commotion is on American defeat. A great debate is raging through

newspapers, magazines, and electronic media around the world as to how impossible became possible and how a super power like America, which the French delegate has generously described as the 'hyper power', was subjected to two successive political defeats. In the context of defeat, the whole spectrum of America's political and global role is under discussion and debate and analysts are trying to make a picture of the coming days. One of the good feature of a free society is that it allows open discussion and debate on all such important issues rather than trying to superimpose only the official version and viewpoint!

An analysis of the debate in the American and international political circle and media brings to fore four distinct reactions:

**Anger and Fury:** The first and immediate reaction is of 'playing down' and 'ridicule'. Some influential circles in America and a few responsible individuals and their followers are posing to say 'so what?' with a measure of disdain and indifference as to suggest that they do not care much about one or two commissions of the UN. The UN itself is nothing but a place for insipid meetings and prattle. If it goes without as important a country as America, this would degrade the UN rather than doing any harm to America.

The American delegate in the UN Social and Economic Council, James Cunningham said that they were very much disappointed. The American President and the Congress expressed anger and rage along with their disappointment. Congressional spokesperson said: "This really hurts the credibility of the UN in the congress."

To National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice, it is not only humiliating to America, but also harms UN's own standing. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has described it as "notably unwise". Not just official figures but also a great number of political analysts and newspapers has expressed great shock and anger over the turn of events lamenting that while America was expelled from the commission after 54 years, countries like China, Cuba, Libya and Sudan are still present there!

The majority leader in the House of Representatives Dick Armey has called it ridiculous. Congress as a whole is posing to ask as to who would now take the UN seriously. Congress members have taken it as an 'insult'. **(Time, 21 May 2001)**

Florida Rep. Elina Ross said: "It is a travesty that undermines the integrity and legitimacy of the United Nations system."

**Revenge and Retaliation:** Along with disappointment, anger and fury, another kind of reaction is of vengeance. The UN and allied countries are not only subject to complaint; it is rather being asserted that it is time to give a lesson to the UN by stopping the monetary obligations to it. America is already a defaulter of the UN to the tune of \$ 1.7 billion. After years of altercations, it was decided during the Clinton presidency that American liability would be reduced to 22 percent

from 25 percent (which was its obligation and promise) of the total UN budget and that America would thus have to pay \$ 1.7 billion instead of \$ 2 billion. Out of this amount, it had to pay \$ 582 million this year. But after the defeat, the Congress stopped, as a punitive measure, payment of \$ 254 million, the amount that was due to be paid by the fateful month. Congress has also declared not to make any payment to the UN until America is restored its seat on the Human Rights Commission (this stands a chance of being realized only in the new elections due next year). The U.S. administration had beseeched the Congress not to take this punitive measure, but it did not care and deemed it necessary to express its revengeful reaction to the development.

**Censure and Accusation:** Third reaction is accusative in which America and Israel are in the forefront. They hold that this all happened because America was raising the issues of Human Rights, which did not go well with others. They are especially targeting China and France. Official spokespersons and American newspapers are forwarding the same message and thus are trying to cover up the defeat. The State Department holds that the fiasco is the result of American policy on human rights. The Financial Times, London, writes:

"The outcome is being portrayed in Washington and the UN as a rebuff of US toughness on human rights, especially relating to China and Cuba." **(5 May 2001)**

Ms. Condoleeza Rice says:

"The setback came because US leadership on rights had been too strong for some countries. I suspect that this was a backlash of those who don't like being judged, that perhaps the United States has been a little too active on the human rights commission."

Washington Post, New York Times, International Herald Tribune all are coming heavily on other countries that they become ready to compromise on the issue of human rights while America remains steadfast and has, therefore, been booted out from the commission. France is being taunted for trade interests. Evidences for China, Cuba and other countries being 'criminal' in the human rights context are piled up. Tossing in anguish, the Israeli lobby holds that America has been punished for its siding with us and becoming a wall against punitive activities against Israel. The reality (as the editorials of the Economist admit), however, is that Sweden and Austria, who emerged successful unlike America, have been among those who have adopted quite a strong stand on human rights. If the issue is about adopting strong position on human rights, then Sweden's record is far better than that of America. The former won and the latter lost.

Not just the Third World countries are the target of the accusative reaction, even the European allies are subject to criticism and censure. While writing in the International Herald Tribune, a pro-Israel writer William Sapphire has gone to the extent of saying:

"Led by Communist China and Communist Cuba, and with the support of French diplomats currying favor with African and Arab dictators, the United Nations threw the United States off the Human Rights Commission."  
**(8 May 2001)**

The fact is that European countries played a decisive role in precipitating American defeat and the same writer has admitted that the 14 countries that had promised to vote for America deserted at the ripe time. He has demanded that all the rules of secret-ballot be done away with to identify these countries, even if it needed CIA's help or carrying out investigative media exercise after giving up all norms of journalism. Claims for being principled on human rights issue and a call to shatter established democratic norms – all in one breath!

**Self-Accountability:** Along with these three streams of reaction, another is the one where this defeat is considered an admonition. America is being asked to do self-accountability and the world at large is being invited to carry out thorough examination and unmitigated analysis of American policies. The defeat is viewed as a reflection of international community's disapproval of American viewpoint. The US Senator John Keri in his address of 6 May said that there is a wave of anti-Americanism in the world that exposes lack of a sense of honesty in the US government. In his essay "America gets a Wake-up Call on Human Rights" in the International Herald Tribune, Herald Hong Joko, Professor of international law at Yale University, has in a strikingly moderate and logical way asked America to hold its own accountability:

"The world was properly stunned last week when the United States was voted off the United Nations Human Rights Commission for the first time. Clearly the world was trying to teach the United States a lesson. But will the Americans learn the right one?"

Let us first of all discuss two possible American reactions. First, that the humiliating diplomatic defeat does not matter because the Commission is just a meaningless talk shop. A second more pernicious reaction would have the United States teach the United Nations a lesson by withholding back dues on taking other punitive actions against it.

Last week's vote is a wake-up call that the era of automatic global deference to U.S. leadership on human rights is over." **(9 May 2001)**

Then, he touches on various international issues about which, according to him, America did not care about the feelings of the international community – these include help to AIDS patients, provision of food to poor countries, rectification of international agreements, American apprehensions about international military tribunal etc. Prof. Herald has advised America to adopt the course of cooperation and mutual trust with other countries, not an approach of indifference and anger. He has concluded his essay with these words:

"Even after last week's debacle, the world still wants American leadership on human rights. The question is: Do Americans still have the courage and vision to provide it?"

The Financial Times' correspondent too thus sums up the debate and message of political and diplomatic circles:

"This incident would serve as a wake-up call to the Bush administration to become more engaged with the world today."  
**(5-6 May 2001)**

The New York Times' scribe Leonard Garment, who has experience in both fields of law and diplomacy, writes:

"We don't know what larger phenomenon the vote reflects. Was it merely an electoral flirter? Have America's allies, as unreliable on human rights, replaced their appeasement of the Soviets, with appeasement of the Chinese? Was the vote a protest against globalization? Or, an expression of primal envy, a collective unwillingness to see this country formed in the American image? Are we seeing the beginning of a pattern of provocation that will have the effect intended or not of fostering an isolationist politics in the United States?"

**(International Herald Tribune, 16 May 2001)**

Former American representative to the UN Jane Kirkpatrick raises some important questions about the future:

"The vote in the Human Rights Commission makes one wonder if the United States has reliable friends and allies among the democracies. There is little question that the distance between the United States and its NATO allies have grown in the last decade. The European press shows its displeasure in a steady stream of articles highly critical of the United States and the "American way"."

**(International Herald Tribune, 9 May 2001)**

The New York Times has admitted in its editorial that:

"But the administrative failure to detect and defeat the brewing rebellion was only one element of an embarrassing defeat. Even more important was the rising resentment abroad about America's often patronizing treatment of the United Nations and Washington's disdain for international compacts on issues ranging from the environment to the use of land mines."

**(International Herald Tribune, 7 May 2001)**

Another scribe David Ignatius has thus given expression to his anxiety:

"The United States accustomed during the 1990's to thinking of the global economy as a kind of American sand box. Americans had the money and ideas, and other nations would just have to play the game America's way. But those days of easy American hegemony may be ending. It is payback time in foreign policy too. A striking example was to vote to exclude United States from the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Some circumstances said the vote reflected the fact that other countries were tired of unilateral stand by the United States – in favor of missile defense and against keynote treaty on climate change, to cite two permanent recent examples. The lesson for the United States is that globalization is a two way street. And as another old saying has it: "you'd better be nice to people on the way up in case you meet them on the way down."

***(International Herald Tribune, 7 May 2001)***

The French ambassador attributed his country's success to their policy's being based on dialogue and mutual respect. The British ambassador Jeremy Greenstock said in his characteristic style: "The recent votes were a comment on the US relationship with the rest of the world." (Time, 21May 2001). China said rather openly that: "The vote was a strong rejection of the US attempt to use so-called human rights issues as a tool to pursue its power politics and hegemonism in the world."

### Importance of America's Global Role

In the light of these reactions of intellectuals and diplomats of America and other countries, it would be right to say that America should not take its defeats in the UN only superfluously. It can be dismissive under its egotism or by giving justifications and excuses, but ground realities cannot be overlooked. American global role is important not only for itself but also for people around the world. Concealment, taunts, revenge, and accusations are though understandable, but an obsession with self-justification and a propensity to avoid deeper analysis of the feelings and aspirations of the international community would be a mishap for America itself. This would be the way to self-illusion and it would have to bear its brunt, along with the others. These elections to the important UN bodies not only indicate the direction of the wind, they also highlight the problems and challenges at the global level. Justification and concealment can only aggravate the situation, not improve it.

In many respects, this presents a great opportunity where peoples of insight around the world should move forward and clearly tell American and Russian leadership what ails the situation? Where and How? America is not the other name of the US government or establishment. It is an important world power and a country of 300 million people, is rich in material resources and hub of best skills in science and technology. No doubt that those who call shots in America have particular mind-set and safeguard special interests. It is this establishment that is the source of



peoples' problems around the globe. Its noose is tight also on the American population and it has been playing havoc for its own interests. A large part of the American people is victim of its vagaries and moves and it is quite possible that they aid their voice against oppression along with the oppressed of the rest of the world. After all, the silent majority had risen up against American involvement in the Vietnam War. The number of Muslims in America is ever increasing and 7-8 million Muslims can be significant in awakening the conscience of the nation. Today, the media is so powerful that people all around the world can be addressed from any corner. In these circumstances, it is in the interest of America to come out of its shell of self-indulgence and take out a cool-headed examination of all those factors and causes that are isolating it from others in the world and are paving the way for confrontation. Likewise, the interest of the whole of humanity lies not in confrontation and conflict but in mutual understanding and dialogue and in identifying, with evidence and proof, the causes of rot.

### American Hegemonism

No doubt that America has raised voice for democracy, freedom, and human rights, yet the majority of international community finds it as lacking in sincerity, honesty and transparency. America itself has undergone periods of British and French colonialism. It achieved independence by breaking the shackles of colonial powers and that is why the oppressed nations of the world began to take it as their companion in the journey to freedom. Why the same nations consider America a colonial power and are distancing themselves from it. America used to be reckoned as a champion of the right of self-determination, why it is no longer trusted in matters of human rights. The problem is not restricted to cold-shouldering landmines issue, slackness on issues of environment and global warming, or endeavors aimed at getting rid of international obligations. Those who have identified these issues as causing the rift have shown a propensity to oversimplification. We think that by carrying out an open analysis of the circumstances at this critical juncture without any let-up and diminution, the Muslim world's political and intellectual leaderships should bring into the notice of American leadership and those who ponder and reflect the reasons and causes of rot in world affairs as well as exploitation and corruption in human society.

### Need for a Radical Change

No doubt that America is the most powerful country in the world today, politically, economically, and militarily. Yet, it is also a reality that it is not the favorite or is especially liked by the world. However high might be the level of its prosperity, it weighs little in the scale of humanity. Good people are found in every country and society, but America's image in the world is more of 'the ugly Americans'. While accepting its claims of championing the cause of democracy, freedom, and human rights and admitting a few good results of experimenting with these values on the American soil, it cannot be denied that the countries that have had or are under American

influences have lost much and gained little. Naked aggression, subjugation, plunder and pilferage that were the hallmarks of the game of the past colonial powers, are the features of the American game, albeit garbed under illusory dogmas and good-sounding avowals. Exploitation has changed its forms, but its substance is the same. The need, therefore, is to unveil the facts and uncover the real features of the global role of America without diminution so that real problems of today's humanity and its troubled soul are understood. America should realize that sentiments against it are not the reflections of a revengeful politics, but of rejection of its policies and performance. It would have to induce significant changes in its thought and action if it really wants to have relations of friendship and cooperation with the people of the world. The problem is not merely of big and small, or of powerful and weak, it is about the principles and the foundations of inter-state and inter-nation relations that could pave way for establishing lasting peace and justice in the world and world resources are utilized for welfare and betterment of all of its inhabitants, no one is forced to beg for charity and mercy but all live an honorable and dignified life.

This is the yardstick against which a system's success or failure, a society's health or lack of it, a civilization's being ennobling or exploitative, can be assessed.

### Why the Distrust?

The first and most important reason for distrust and unease with America is its resolve and goal of attaining global supremacy. Free competition in the arena of thought and ideologies, trade and cooperation in economic sphere, understanding and cooperation for common objectives and collaboration in the field politics – are desirable and essential for all people of the world. A nation's or a state's attempt to control others by sheer force and forego their stakes and claims for the sake of its own interests is disastrous for international community and a nefarious form of colonialism.

America is the colonial power of the day and its political, economic, cultural, and military policies are all tools for colonial ambitions. This is why its claims for democracy, freedom, human rights, and social uplift neither have any appeal nor do they bring about a change for betterment in the life of nations. A nation's endeavors to control others could only result in confrontation and bickering, and this is what is happening. How can the situation change by mere change of actors, and without changing the way of life. Whether the Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch colonialism or British and French colonial era, whether colonizers are Russians or American, and whether German and Japanese endeavor for supremacy or hegemonic ambitions of Israel and India – the issue is only one and the same: to subjugate others and to rule and establish supremacy on them through sheer use of force. The fact is that America is engaged in establishing its supremacy on other countries for promoting its own interests in spite of its tall claims of freedom and human rights. Unless this situation changes, rosy words and pledges cannot change the yoke of subjugation into garland.

Contradictions in American society and politics are not the subjects of our deliberations, here. Our topic is not the European nations' occupation of American lands, treatment meted out to the original local people (Red Indians), trade in slaves from Africa, or formation of a society on the basis of race and color. We are not discussing their liberation war, constitutional democracy, free market economy, or Monroe doctrine, either. The starting point of our discussion is the 20<sup>th</sup> century post-First World War (1914-1918) era. At the beginning of this era, America had emerged as a champion of certain principles that in particular included independence of subjugated nations and freedom of the international community through international law and world institutions, and peace. President Woodrow Wilson's principles of politics and formation of the League of Nation was a good start, but the era that ushered in after the Second World War (1939-1945) has not been transparent.

Democracy, freedom, human rights, and world peace through the United Nations remained the declared objectives of this period, yet the Cold War turned the world into a wrangle not only of ideological but also of political and economic interests. From a colony, America sprang into a world power. It assumed the very colonial features and traits that were previously the hallmarks of the past hegemons. Apparently, this War was waged to protect the world from the darkness and gloom of Communism and to usher in an illumined era of freedom, but in reality this democratic cloak was concealing despotism and tyranny. The contradictions, disputes, and disasters that mark the politics of past 60 years are traced as propping up from the Cold War.

### Post-WW II Strategy

While the strategy devised after the Second World War for a new world system included establishment of the United Nations, Declaration of Human Rights, formation of International Court of Justice, and new global financial institutions, also very important was the veto power to five countries in the UN Security Council, which was the real authoritative body, and American and Russian planning for their respective global supremacy. George Kenan provided theoretical foundations for American external politics that has three pillars:

- 1. The Status of a Global Power:** The task before America is how to establish itself as global power in the war-infested world. Kenan declared quite clearly that a real foreign policy is about achieving power and consolidating it. The security of America lies in making the gaining of power a focal point and to give up chasing unreal and unclear concepts of human rights, standard of life, and promotion of democracy.
- 2. Economic and Political Supremacy:** The imbalance in economic and political power is a reality. At the end of the Second World War, America accounted for only 6.3 percent of the world population but was in possession of 60 percent of total wealth of the world. In the words of George Kenan the real objective of America in the emerging world order was to devise a system of

relationships where this imbalance could be maintained and perpetuated in such a way that no threat and obstacle comes in the way of America's national security.

To realize this America has to have access to those resources that are needed for its economic and political stability.

The 'protection of our resources' had a central stage in Kenan's political map of the world. It called for safe international routes, open routes for trade and military transportation, cooperative governments in the countries whose raw material and energy is required, and assured functional supply-lines. In this context, the national movements that talk about national and state interests can prove an obstacle. To avoid this it is necessary to purge these countries from 'communist elements' and to recognize such despotic governments as may be useful and under which 'our' interests are safe without any pricks of conscience and with priority. 'We' should promote private investment, inflow of foreign exchange and market economy. **(Ref. *Deterring Democracy* by Noam Chomsky, p 49; and *Brave New World Order* by Jack Nelson, p 43)**

Military Siege: To erect a political and military siege around communist countries so that communist revolution does not reach other countries. This can be done by establishing a labyrinth of defense and economic pacts. This is the strategy of containment in the light of which NATO, SEATO, CENTO, Baghdad Pact and such other blocks were created.

---