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*From the Los Angeles Times*

## Moderate Islam on the March

Intolerance is grabbing the Middle East spotlight, but there's good news from Muslim reformers too.

By Irshad Manji

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A LOT CAN HAPPEN in a week. We all know about the bombs, rockets and bullets ripping through the Middle East. Same week, different inferno: Terrorists, reportedly Islamist militants, blew commuter trains to shards in India.

Amid the hostilities, however, something else happened. Reform-minded Muslims made progress in reclaiming their future, both in the Islamic world and in the West.

Let's start with the Islamic world. For almost three decades, Pakistan has followed a controversial set of laws called the Hudood Ordinance. Supposedly based on the Koran, these decrees determine punishment in cases of rape and adultery.

Ready for the good news? The Hudood laws are finally being seriously challenged, and not a moment too soon. Under them, more than 4,600 Pakistani women have been thrown in prison for charges that include adultery. By contrast, virtually all men accused of rape have gotten off.

Thanks to a vocal but religiously respectful campaign by civil society groups, Pakistan's influential Council of Islamic Ideology recently recommended changing the Hudood laws. That move set the stage for President Pervez Musharraf to begin releasing the 1,300 women currently awaiting trial.

Even Muslim clerics in Pakistan now hint that the Hudood laws aren't divinely created. The politics behind them tell us so.

In 1977, a U.S.-backed coup installed Gen. Zia al-Haq as Pakistan's president. To cement his tenuous grip on the nation, the strongman surrounded himself with sycophantic mullahs who referred to him as "commander of the faithful," a term reserved in Islam for the Prophet Muhammad's successors.

To curry favor among village leaders, Zia mixed a selective reading of the Koran with tribal customs. In this way, stoning arose as a legal punishment for adultery, and it was required that a rape be witnessed by four men before any offender could be charged.

But suppose a rape doesn't have the benefit of so many male eyes or male voices willing to testify? Then it would be a case of adultery committed by the woman, who in turn could be condemned to jail, lashing or stoning. The injustices that followed have slandered not only women but Islam itself.

As more and more of Pakistan's Muslims recognize that the Hudood laws emanate from humans, they also acknowledge that the duty to rethink them rests in their hands, not God's. Muslims believe Allah is perfect. We're learning to appreciate that Allah's interpreters are not.

At the same time, the liberal reformation of Islam picked up speed — in Copenhagen, the city that served as ground zero for worldwide riots over cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad (a Danish newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, first published the caricatures.)

Two weeks ago, I joined 99 other "Muslim leaders of tomorrow" who gathered in Copenhagen to debate how Islam and the West could enrich each other. We came from the United States, Canada, Australia and across Europe. Brace yourself, the statements made may shock you:

Man from the Netherlands: "We, as Muslims, need to look in the mirror instead of blaming everybody else!"

Woman from Germany: "I don't have an identity crisis. I'm Western and Muslim and grateful to be both."

Organizer from the United States: "None of my fellow Americans signed up to speak about integration. They don't see it as their priority. I think this means Muslim immigrants have it better in the U.S. than in Europe."

Imam from Britain: "The minute a woman becomes an imam, I will be the first to pray at her feet."

One delegate tested the young clerics. "Is Islam the only way to salvation?" A Danish imam gripped the microphone. "The short answer," he said, "is no." A British imam disputed that response, and an Italian took the middle road. Remarkably, they never accused each other of being evil or insincere. For the first time in my life, I heard the message that in Islam, unity isn't uniformity.

Maybe the most compelling insight came from a surprise guest: Flemming Rose, publisher of the reviled Prophet Muhammad cartoons. After addressing us and responding to our challenges, Rose confided that the reception we gave him was more civil than anything he'd experienced at the hands of humanist groups.

Any liberal reformation of Islam will have at least two features: the empowerment of women in the Islamic world, and the willingness of Muslims in the West to exercise our freedom of conscience. In one week this month, both got a promising boost.

We need to remember that as bombs grab the spotlight.

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