

Book Reviews

Inescapable Questions: Autobiographical Notes. By Alija Izetbegovic (translated by Saba Rissaluddin and Jasmina Izetbegovic). Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 2005. ISBN 086037 367 3. Pp: 550.

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At the end of the Second World War when the allied forces reached the Nazi concentration camps and the world became fully aware of the savagery of what was happening in the heart of Europe, they cried “Never again”! However within fifty years of this tragedy, another atrocity began to unfold under the very nose of the “civilized” Europe, and in full media glare.

Bosnia, a predominantly Muslim area, that had remained a separate political entity for about 600 years - at one time under Ottoman rule and then under Austria, and finally as a part of Yugoslavia - became a battle ground for ethnic cleansing by Christian Serbs. In 1992, after the breakup of Yugoslavia into many component parts of the federation, Bosnia declared independence, along with other parts of the federation and was recognized as such by EU and UN.

Alija Izetbegovic, born in 1925, was raised in a religious family, but as he grew up, he found communist propaganda all around. However, before the end of WWII, he came in contact with a group of young Muslims that was anti-fascist as well as anti-communist. This group called “Young Muslims” provided Izetbegovic his main political and social ideals. As a student, Izetbegovic was interested in philosophy but later on studied Agronomy and finally moved on to Law, the subject in which he graduated. His activities as a member of Young Muslims caught the attention of the authorities. At the age of 21, he was arrested and detained from 1946-49 by the communists.

During this period of detention (1946 to 1949), he was banished to a hard labour camp where he was assigned to chopping wood. When he came out of prison, the country was in total disarray. The economy was completely shattered, unemployment was soaring, and the ordinary people were starving. However, the elite had their privileges safeguards in Yugoslavia (as their brethren in socialist equality had done in USSR): there were special stores where everything was available for them.

Having experienced fascism and communism at close quarters, Izetbegovic started thinking more in terms of Islam. In 1970, he published *Islamic Declaration* in which he argued that only Islam can reawaken the imagination of Muslim masses and make them active participants in the remaking of their history. The book also advocated increased allocation for education and advocated a new position for women and minorities. It was during this period that he started developing his thoughts which appeared later in his more famous publication, *Islam between East and West*. This book was finally published in 1984. In this book, Izetbegovic says that the place of Islam is somewhere between East and West, not only geographically but also intellectually. Islam, according to him, offers a solution to the problems of mankind by showing a middle path, thus avoiding the extremes.

In 1983, Izetbegovic was arrested again, along with many of his friends for conspiring against the state and for verbal "delict" (insulting and attacking the state). He was sentenced for 15 years in jail. By now Izetbegovic was quite a famous person. There were world-wide protests against the unfair trial and harsh sentence. He was finally released in 1988. The next few years brought new changes on the global scene: the fall of Berlin wall, the breakup of communist states, and dissolution of Yugoslavia. Izetbegovic played an important role in the formation of a new political alliance in Bosnia, the Democratic Action Party. However, the war did not remain confined to Bosnia, it engulfed the whole region. It was a brutal war in which genocide, ethnic cleansing, rape and torture, and the killing of non-combatants became the chief methods of intimidating the civilian population. Christians Serbs had dominated the Yugoslav army for a long time, and this was the fourth largest army in Europe. Muslims took a lot of losses. This was happening in the limelight of media.

War in Bosnia and the role of Izetbegovic as a war leader occupy the major portion of this book. It was clear from the very beginning that while Serbs and Croats had or were getting from abroad all the weapons that they needed, Muslims were denied anything that they could use for self defense. Izetbegovic gives gripping details of how he was able to acquire meager amounts of small arms. This along with the steely resolve and ingenuity of Bosnians enabled them to overcome the aggression. One important source of moral and diplomatic support was that of OIC which tried to provide political support and probably a little military aid. However, the most important asset of Bosnians was the steely determination of Izetbegovic that was almost Churchillian. As a public leader, motivator, strategist and civil administrator, military leader and diplomat, he kept the nation together till the end. He was a Muslim but this did not stop him from reaching out to the other communities within Bosnia and outside.

Sarajevo, the capital city, remained under siege for a long time, with electricity and water supply cut off, and Serb forces occupying the neighbouring hills from where they constantly bombarded the town. It was one such bombardment (on August 27, 1995 on Markale Market) that finally forced the world to take some action and within a few days, Serbs were hit by air and their grip on Sarajevo eased.

Srebrenica is a name that would not be easily forgotten by the Bosnians, or humanity, for that matter. Srebrenica was declared a safe area by the UN in 1993. It was under siege by the Serb forces and was attacked quite often by them in spite of the warnings issued by the UN. It was in early July that a well coordinated attack took place to over-run the whole area while the UN troops looked the other way. Between July 6 and 9, more than 7,000 unarmed people were killed. This information was available to the headquarters of great powers through satellite images at the time when it was happening. But no actions were taken. The Dutch who were responsible for this area, meekly surrendered to the Serb forces. To this day, the full extent of this genocide is not known.

The last part of the book deals with the Dayton accord. The author describes the arm twisting and blackmail that the Bosnians were subjected to, and which led to the acceptance of an unjust peace. Izetbegovic says:

My problem was that I could neither win a satisfactory peace nor lead a satisfactory war. Negotiations were held in conditions of blackmail and a Democles sword held over Bosnia's head. People, attacked, outnumbered, and out armed, were subject to terrible sufferings, and the offered peace was opposed not only to my principles, but to elementary justice as well. I could hardly accept such a peace, and it was even harder to go back home carrying a message of the war's continuation. My dilemmas were difficult. I felt crucified (pp. 289-90).

He decided to accept the unfair terms offered to Bosnia. He also had to take his own people in confidence. To them, he explained, "... this might not be a just peace, but it is more just than a continuation of the war. In the situation as it is, and in the world as it is, a better peace could not have been achieved. God is our witness, that we have done everything in our power so that the extent of injustice for our people and our country will be decreased." Upon his return from Dayton, a journalist asked him for the meaning of these words. He answered: "It is a world in which it is possible to lead an unjust war and impose an unjust peace" (pp. 327-8).

In the end, Bosnia-Herzegovina maintained its existence, with Sarajevo as its capital but almost totally land locked and without proper access to sea. One can say that although guns were silenced, peace was not established with justice. Most of the major war criminals (including Milosevic, who recently died while still under trial) have gone unpunished. Many of the criminals continue to find refuge among their supporters. On the other hand, guns have been silenced and the area is seeing economic activity and reconstruction. It will take some time and more effort by the world powers to see the society becomes integrated, the war criminals brought to justice, and the process of truth and reconciliation started.

Izetbegovic's leadership has shown a model, different from what we have seen in other conflicts, in which Muslims have refused to accept less than what is due to them. Thus, there is a conflict between justice and pragmatism. If peace with justice is not attainable, should peace be accepted with injustice? Izetbegovic seems to say yes, after a certain point. No community can allow itself to bleed constantly. It is brave to fight, but it is far braver, and wiser to know when to accept peace.

While reading the book I could not help comparing Izetbegovic with Jinnah and Iqbal, two Asian Muslim leaders of the 20th century. Like Iqbal, Izetbegovic was a philosopher, a man with a vision. He thought that the Muslims could provide a leadership that would help solve the problems of the region by creating a state based on the Islamic principles of justice and fairness. But Izetbegovic was also a practical man, like Jinnah. Hinnal, again a lawyer, wanted to realise the dream of Iqbal by creating a new state for Indian Muslims when all avenues of justice within a unified India were denied to them. He was left with little choice but to accept, what he called, “a moth-eaten and truncated” Pakistan. Of course, Bosnia is very different from Pakistan; the comparison cannot be carried too far.

Inescapable Questions is well written, documented with verbatim quotations from the speeches and writing of the author. It is a major document of our time, and one must accord compliments to the late author for leaving such an important document for Muslims in the age of conflict.

Parliaments and Political Change in Asia. By Jürgen Rüländ, Clemens Jürgenmeyer, Michael H. Nelson and Patrick Ziegenhain. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. 2005, pp. 323. ISBN 981-230-273-5.

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Despite its over-ambitious title, Jürgen Rüländ et al., should be acclaimed for providing the researched information pertaining to the parliaments of Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea, the Philippines and India. The legislatures of these countries have been understudied and the few that exist show no linkage between parliamentary performance and the system of government. The main objective of this study is to examine the contribution of legislatures to the consolidation of new democracies and the stability of older democracies in Asia. The data for this study comes from interviews, press analysis, secondary sources and literature review. The study, however, does not provide a time frame and hence the data collected