

Who will build Quaid's Pakistan?

Revolution", "a new Pakistan", "Quaid's Pakistan". These are some of the popular catch-phrases that Pakistan's politicians have taken up in recent years to reassure the masses that they are working on getting the country out of its present difficulties. If they really want to make a "new Pakistan", then they should look back in the past, when the country really was new, and reconsider Quaid's founding vision.

After all, his dream of a tolerant, liberal, democratic Pakistan where all people of all religions could live side by side has failed to materialise. I was surprised to hear MQM leader Altaf Hussain referring to Quaid's Pakistan in a speech on October 2, in which he quoted from Quaid's most famous speech of all — that to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly in 1947.

It was this part that Mr. Hussain re-quoted: "You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed — that has nothing to do with the business of the State... We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State... I think we should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that in due course Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State."

Looking at the politics of the last few decades, one could be forgiven for thinking Quaid's brilliant vision had been quietly swept under the carpet by powerful people with a different agenda. It is one thing to quote from Jinnah.

It is quite another to lobby and argue and advocate in Parliament for legislation that will make democracy and freedom a reality in Pakistan. In the hostile, anti-liberal climate of Pakistan today, it is to Mr Hussain's credit that he spoke so openly of the ideals of freedom, and particularly the religious freedom Jinnah spoke of.

In particular, Mr Hussain noted that Quaid's vision was of a progressive and secular nation where all people would have equal rights, not the theocratic, distorted suppression of rights that some have advanced with far more success than they should have been allowed. Mr Hussain is

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honest enough to admit that his party cannot turn Pakistan into a Britain or France overnight. But if anyone else has the guts to speak up for democratic ideals, perhaps there is an ally in the MQM.

No one can doubt the urgency with which Pakistan needs to progress. For far too long, intolerance towards minorities has been allowed to foment into a radical, illogical and deadly hatred, while successive leaders have failed to eradicate the activities of terrorists using our country as a base for their wicked machinations. A seedbed of anger, inhumanity and radicalism was hardly Quaid's vision. This sadly is the fruit

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of decades of distorted and deceitful rhetoric from political and religious leaders who were happy to use Islam to legitimise their own rule, strengthen their positions of power, and enforce policies which benefited the nation little. It is little wonder that Islam took a radical turn in Pakistan and that it is seen today as a place for jihadists and terrorists. Mr Hussain has good reason to be concerned.

Recommendations of Justice Munir's report in which he stated that religious groups should stay out of the constitution, while the government should stay out of trying to define who is a Muslim and trying to enforce Islam as a state religion. Even the Pakistan Peoples Party, the most liberal

party of the lot, has been guilty of this. Technically, we have a democratically-elected government, but in reality there is no democracy. Most of the parliamentarians inherit their power dynastically through their families. Consider the transfer of power from Bhutto to Bhutto, Sharif to Sharif, Khan to Khan, and Chaudhry to Chaudhry. This does not come close to the vision of Quaid or the tradition of the world's established democratic countries.

In addition, one of the tests of a real democracy is its treatment of its religious minorities and there has been very little impetus from the politicians to do anything at all to improve this.

In an important symbolic gesture, Quaid appointed a Hindu as a law minister. By contrast today, Hindus are fleeing the country for India because of the harassment and abductions they are suffering. This is the 21st century and it is simply not acceptable to treat our minorities like slaves.

There is a lot of ill feeling towards India but these should be put aside so that the lessons of this growing democracy and economic powerhouse can be learned and applied to Pakistan's context. India also still has some work to do with regards to equality, but it strides ahead of Pakistan. The Prime Minister is a Sikh.

The Minister of Defence is Christian. The Vice President and Chief Justices are Muslim. The head of the ruling party is a Roman Catholic. The message that this sends to wider society cannot be underestimated. They are not of the dominant faith but nobody has ever questioned their loyalty and integrity.

Can we say with sincerity that we have attained any of the ideals envisioned by Quaid or the assurances of liberty that he gave personally to the minorities of Pakistan? The MQM have professed a desire to build a Pakistan that echoes these ideals and if they are serious, this would be a welcome change to the impotent rhetoric we have seen in the last few years.

Building a new Pakistan is not as difficult as we think. Our country is full of natural resources and the people, with the right support, have so much potential — potential that can be unlocked to raise up a proud and prosperous country. It is all there in the founding vision, if we only apply ourselves to making it happen.

We can hardly expect anyone else to make it happen for us.