

# MUHAMMAD ASAD– THE FIRST CITIZEN OF PAKISTAN

M. Ikram Chaghatai

## ABSTRACT

As deputy secretary in charge of the middle east division of foreign ministry, asad prepared a memorandum for creation of something like a league of muslim nations, and having discussed it with prime minister liaquat ali khan, he officially toured saudi arabia, egypt and syria. Liaquat's assassination, however, put an end to his plans for uniting the muslim nations. On his return, he submitted a report on his middle east tour to foreign minister sir zafarullah khan, who read it through and put it aside.

Leopold Weiss alias Muhammad Asad's (1900-1992) reputed autobiographical travelogue, entitled *The Road to Mecca*, covers only a third of his long life and ends as he enters his home after his conversion (1926), first in Berlin and then in Cairo, with his German wife. Afterwards, he spent about fifteen years in India where he met Iqbal (1934) who advised him to abandon his plans of further traveling and "to remain in India to help elucidate the intellectual premises of the future Islamic State." As a humble young follower, his whole Weltanschauung (world outlook) was changed by Iqbal, who set him out on a path that ultimately led him "to a revival of all the dormant hopes of Islam, the creation of a political entity of the people bound together not by common descent but by their common adherence to an ideology." In view of Asad's intellectual capabilities, scholarly accomplishments, marvelous exposition of Islamic concepts and personal experiences of the contemporary Muslim world, Iqbal tried to appoint him as the chairman of the department of Islamic Studies in one of the local colleges, but for certain reasons Asad could not accept it. Whenever Asad came to Lahore he visited Iqbal, and they spent many an hour talking about the prospect of Pakistan. They discussed in detail the forms in which the future Islamic State of Pakistan should be organized and the ways and means to persuade the Muslim political leaders to stand up boldly for their common ideal. Following Iqbal's advice, Asad wrote a series of articles about why Pakistan had to be established and had them published in various European newspapers and periodicals; some of those articles appeared also in an Urdu

translation in a leading newspaper of Lahore. In addition, Asad delivered some lectures on the same subject in Lahore and Delhi. As stated by Asad himself, it had been Iqbal who was the first to formulate, in clear-cut political terms, the idea of an Islamic State in North India and who thus gave it body and life. In fact, Asad devoted all his efforts to bring into reality Iqbal's dream of an ideological Islamic state.

During the Second World War, Asad's Austrian citizenship put him in imprisonment by the Indian government and the six years he spent in an internment camp made him more conscious about the significance of freedom for all human beings. No doubt, this incident intensified his aspirations for a separate homeland for the Indian Muslims.

Soon he started a monthly periodical named *Arafat* that was primarily a vehicle for Asad's ideas, aiming at a fundamental reconstruction of our approach to the problem of Shariah. This journalistic monologue of Asad was to be a clarion-call at the critical time of Pakistan Movement. Three months before Pakistan came into being, he wrote an article under the title "What do we mean by Pakistan?" in which he emphasized the real purpose underlying the future establishment of Pakistan: that purpose did not consist in merely providing more economic opportunities or posts to Muslims but, rather, in enabling them to live effectively as Muslims and to realize the spirit of Islam in their political forms, in their laws and social institutions. In another issue, published less than a month before the Independence Day, Asad penned a lengthy essay entitled "Towards an Islamic Constitution" and it was the first attempt ever made to outline the principles which must be incorporated in the constitution of any state that claims to be 'Islamic'. Asad's thoughtful studies were destined to become the first step in the development of our modern political thought and for this reason he can be rightly called as one of the intellectual founders of Pakistan.

After going through the harrowing experiences of Partition (1947), Asad reached Lahore and settled here. Two months after Pakistan appeared on the map of the world, Nawab of Mamdot, the first Chief Minister of West Punjab, contacted Asad for establishing a special department to work out the ideological premises on which Pakistan should rest. Asad accepted this proposal and within a few days the scheme was set forth in a formal Memorandum, the budget estimate discussed and approved in conjunction with the Head of the Finance Department, and an official notification issued.

The Department of Islamic Reconstruction— the first government institution with which the word 'Islamic' appeared— came into existence. Explaining the aims and objectives of this newly created Department in a radio talk on 18th October 1947, Asad proposed to make it a sort of “clearing-house” of ideas and endeavours aiming at religious and social uplift of the Muslim Ummah. Though it was his ‘baby’, he had to leave it under the pressure of Liaquat Ali Khan, the Prime Minister, and join the Foreign Service as Deputy Secretary in charge of the Middle East Division.

This Division comprised the whole Arab world, including North Africa, as well as Iran. Asad had very definite ideas as to the policies which Pakistan ought to pursue in that part of the world. Soon he prepared a long, explicit memorandum for the Foreign Minister, Sir Zafrullah Khan, outlining his policy proposals in some detail. On completion, this memorandum contained some outspoken criticism of the policies pursued by the Government until then. In this confidential document, Asad emphatically recommended immediate cooperation with the Arab States for creation of something like a League of Muslim Nations and having discussed it with the Prime Minister, he officially toured Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria with the very first passport marked “citizen of Pakistan”. At the end of this diplomatic mission, he received the news of Liaquat Ali Khan’s assassination (1951), which proved a full stop to his plans for uniting Muslim nations. On his return, he submitted a report on his Middle East tour to the Foreign Minister, Sir Zafrullah Khan, who read it through carefully and then put it aside. Thus, Asad’s enthusiasm for Muslim unity became a file in the archives of the Foreign Ministry.

In 1951, Asad’s work at the Middle East Division came to an end and he was appointed as the second-in-command to the Pakistan’s Ambassador to the United Nations, Patras Bukhari, with the rank of Minister Plenipotentiary. Asad and his boss did not know one another personally and they never tried to be friendly. In consequence, their mutual relations were always strained and they never had the feeling that they were members of one and the same ‘team’ working towards common ends.

By chance, at a reception Asad met Pola, an American of Polish origin who was destined to become his third wife (d. 2007). She was a young, beautiful and intelligent woman. He fell in love with her and when he came to know that she had already embraced Islam he decided to marry her, despite the difference of age and temperament. But under the rules of the

Foreign Office, he was bound to get prior permission to marry a non-Pakistani national. He applied through proper channel but the Governor-General rejected his application. So, he submitted his resignation from the Foreign Service, divorced his Arabian wife (Munira, d. 1978) and in the inspiring company of his new wife, he sat down and wrote his extraordinary book entitled *The Road to Mecca*.

After a lapse of few years, Asad, while living in Beirut, received an invitation from the Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University, Mian Afzal Husain (1869-1970), to organize an International Islamic Colloquium in Lahore. As he had for some time been considering return to Pakistan, he decided to accept the invitation. Apparently, this Colloquium seems to have been the continuation of an International Islamic Conference which was held in Princeton in 1954 under the aegis of the Princeton University and the American Congress. Several eminent Western and Eastern scholars participated in it and emphasized the need for rapid growth of social, commercial and political relationship between Muslims and those others of the Graeco-Roman heritage. They also felt that in the context of an insidious threat of Communism and the hideous distress it caused all around, there could indeed be some enduring value in genuine co-operation with the moral-intellectual force of Islam. Sayyid Amjad Ali, Ambassador of Pakistan in America, was deeply impressed by its scholarly presentations and started thinking about holding such an awe-inspiring assemblage of savants in Pakistan. Afterwards, as a Finance Minister, he allocated an amount of seven lakh rupees for this purpose and a Colloquium Committee, comprising representatives of the six Pakistan universities, relevant Departments of the Government, and distinguished independent scholars, was organized to select subjects for discussion in this Colloquium and decide matters of policy concerning its organization and management.

In March 1957, this Colloquium Committee, with the approval of the Government, appointed Asad at a salary of fifteen hundred rupees per month to make suitable arrangements for holding the Conference and edit/publish the papers submitted on this occasion. In his first meeting with the Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University, basically an agriculturist, Asad had the impression that Mr. Husain disliked him and was perhaps unhappy at his choice as organizer of the Colloquium. But Asad, with his profound knowledge of Islam, his complete command of the Arabic language and his

acquaintance with many of the personalities who were to participate in the Conference, was the logical choice for organizing it.

Gradually, the differences between Asad and the Vice-Chancellor became more intense. Although Asad was supposed to have a free hand in the choice of scholars to be invited to the Colloquium, Afzal Husain kept interfering and questioning the right of this or that person to be invited, and suggesting some definitely inappropriate ones. It had been decided upon the outset that there would have to be more or less 'official' delegations from all the Muslim countries, which was a somewhat delicate issue because of the obtrusive presence of Jamal Abdul Nasir in and outside Egypt, but Asad believed that it would be possible to accommodate both pro-Nasir and anti-Nasir elements, since this was presumably to be a scholarly conference. Another conflicting issue of translating the presentations from English to Arabic and vice versa worsened the situation. Finally, Asad decided to hand over the work to the Vice-Chancellor himself and to step aside. From the beginning, his wife, Pola, was assisting him as his private secretary without having any 'position' or salary, so in the first week of December 1957, about three weeks before the inauguration of the Colloquium, she personally met the Vice-Chancellor and gave him all the typed English and Arabic letters and other relevant documents. At that time, everything had already been accomplished and even the air tickets had been issued, and it did not much matter to Asad that he would not even be a participant in the Colloquium. After two years (1960), when its proceedings came out, one could not even find his name there. What revenge a Vice-Chancellor had taken on a scholar like Asad who had a high standing both in Pakistan and in the entire Muslim world!

Full of disgust, Asad returned to Europe via Karachi where his old friend Mumtaz Masan, Finance Secretary, came up with a proposal which would perhaps change his mind. Asad was offered the co-directorship of a soon-to-be established Institute of Islamic Research. But it was too late, and in any case he had rightly tried resigning from— or being pushed out of Government posts— and he realized all too well that a co-directorship could never work, even with the best of will on both sides.

Again, during his stay in Switzerland, Asad received a letter from the President of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan, who was a great admirer of his book named *The Principles of State and Government in Islam* (1961). In a subsequent exchange of letters, he proposed to Asad to come to Pakistan

and have the membership of a seven-man group of Muslim scholars— who both supposedly knew the world and were experts on Islam— to advise him with regard to everyday matters as well as the drawing up of a new Islamic constitution for the country. At that time, Asad was immersed in his cherished work on the Qur'an, and so he regretfully declined.

After many years, Asad was again invited by another President of Pakistan, General Zia ul-Haq, in 1983 and that was his last visit to this country. When he arrived at Islamabad, which he had not yet seen, he was received at the plane with great honour and escorted to the Presidency. During his sojourn in Islamabad, there was a series of meetings with members of the Ansari Commission in order to prepare a kind of programme for the President for the future. Asad agreed with some, and as usual disagreed with others, which he found retrograde. On one point he was firm and insistent that Muslim women should have exactly the same rights in the political sphere as had men, to the extent of becoming Prime Minister.

Asad also spared some time to meet with his surviving friends in Lahore and Islamabad and at the request of the President made several radio and television appearances, as always spontaneous. On his return to Portugal, he was besieged by letters from literally hundreds of admirers in Pakistan, offering him land, a house, everything but he refused politely, as his concept of Pakistan was beyond all these worldly trivialities.

Asad loved Pakistan, his conception of Pakistan, even when it turned its back on him, and he never felt resentment at the treatment he had received from it. He remained a citizen— the first citizen of Pakistan— until the end, although he had been strongly tempted to accept the generous, spontaneous gestures of many heads of Islamic States to have their citizenship and passport, which would have made his life so much easier.

Asad contributed so much to Pakistan's early political and cultural life but was unfortunately shunted from the corridors of power. He served this country as the head of the Directorate of Islamic Reconstruction, Joint Secretary of the Middle East Division in Foreign Office, Minister Plenipotentiary to the United Nations and organizer of the International Islamic Colloquium. If we delve into the archival material of these government departments, the role played by Asad for his beloved Pakistan

can be dealt with in detail. But here an important question arises: where are the relevant official documents housed? Nobody knows.

In his youth Asad heard a voice of an old man in Kurdistan: “If water stands motionless in pools, it becomes stale, muddy and foul; only when it moves and flows does it remain clear.” Absolutely true. Physically, Asad is no more, but he is and will always be a part of our memory. According to a mystical dictum, “he who lives in your memory never dies.”