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**Impressum**

Ashutosh Vardhana: Mission impossible: President Bush hijacks an iftar (compact version)

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e: ashutosh.vardhana@rochdalewriters.org.uk

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There is a long and a short version of this article:  
This is the short version.

**EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION**

Iftar is the name for the modest meal which Muslim families take when breaking their dawn-to-dusk fast during the holy month of Ramadan. Only a Muslim, who has fasted, can do iftar and invite close friends for the occasion. President Bush, in ignorance of this fact, 'put on' an iftar dinner at the White House and invited 53 Muslim ambassadors (who could not decline and, being guests, had to listen politely). He abused the occasion by bragging about America's generosity to Afghanistan, disregarding not only Muslim custom but also the Biblical injunction that charity and prayer are meritorious only if done in private and not for show.

**Ashutosh Vardhana:**

**Mission impossible:  
President Bush hijacks an iftar  
(compact version)**

On 20 November, the BBC News announced: 'US President George W Bush has given a traditional Ramadan dinner - an iftar - at the White House for ambassadors from more than 50 Muslim countries.' That event took place on Monday, 19 November.



My family at iftar

During Ramadan, I, though not a Muslim, visit my Muslim friends on most evenings. Over the years, I have become 'family'. They have fasted from dawn to dusk. Exactly at the time of sunset, they formally break their fast by eating a date, after having said namas, the prayers of the hour. Then they sit down together, often in silence, and eat the precious food, simple but good, that they have prepared. This is a special occasion, holy because it was preceded by the fast, holy because it is part of the holy

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month of Ramadan, and holy because the food is blessed by Allah and because of the harmony of eating together in the family and in remembrance of Allah. So this is a quiet, sacred and relaxed family occasion, whose sacredness comes from the Muslim hosts and their religious practice, and which cannot be just 'put on' or 'hosted' by anyone. I as a non-Muslim could be invited (or go uninvited being so close). I was honoured by the love and affection which made this possible but I could not 'arrange' it myself and invite my Muslim friends. If I did it, especially not even having fasted myself, it would not be an iftar, a breaking of the fast.

Therefore President Bush, undertaking, as he is prone to, the impossible (like eradicating evil and the like), has an uphill struggle, steep as the hills of Afghanistan, when he 'hosts' an iftar, and a 'traditional' one at that.

We must give him credit though, he is well on his way to becoming a Muslim, for at least he is going through the motions.

Since he does not understand iftar and since he only 'respects' Islam and is still far from loving it, he is not invited and cannot go uninvited as I did (except into Afghanistan). So he has to put on his own show, 'host an iftar dinner' at the White House. He invites the ambassadors of all Islamic countries, who because of diplomatic courtesy cannot say No, to provide the necessary window dressing. Prayers are duly said. The table is laid as if it were an American Thanksgiving dinner. Rich food is provided, halal of course. Only three countries, Iran, Iraq and Libya, decline the invitation.

At my family iftar no speeches were made since everybody knows the significance of the occasion. All except me had fasted, and I, because of our close ties, was allowed to participate in their family occasion.

President Bush, however, does not host this dinner because he has fasted from dawn to dusk and now wants to share this holy and enjoyable occasion with his family, neighbours or close friends. It is not his habit to fast and break his fast with an iftar. He does not invite his Muslim friends into his own culture (which would be a proper thing to do). He rather tries to tell them what to do with theirs.

This is as if Ayatollah Khomeini had put on a Christmas dinner for President Reagan, even though the Ayatollah does not normally celebrate Christmas, and Christmas dinners are not something that he would have held on his own. This would have been a mere show to impress the guests. Ridiculous and unthinkable.

Bush's iftar dinner is a charade. Bush has hijacked a religious occasion from another culture in order to broadcast to the world a sentiment ('I am a friend of Islam') which is not his.

If he had done it without making speeches, left people to infer his sentiments (or invited the Ambassadors to Christmas dinner), he might still just about have got away with it. If he had been invited to a poor Muslim family and had sat down with them on the floor to eat, he might even just about have been believed.

But being desperate to ensure that his efforts should not be in vain, that his (that is America's) kindness and good intentions should not be overlooked, he and his helpers had to drive home the message with a sledgehammer (all his missiles being elsewhere deployed). This made the message ridiculous and unbelievable.

I quote from the BBC news about the President's event:

Mr Bush emphasised US humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan. Bombing in Afghanistan will continue; Bush said: 'The terrorists have no home in any faith. Evil has no holy days.'

BBC: 'By hosting the iftar, Mr Bush hopes to strengthen the support of Islamic countries for the coalition against global terrorism.'

Bush: "As this feast breaks the Ramadan fast, America is also sharing our table with the people of Afghanistan. ... We are proud to play a leading role in humanitarian efforts with air drops and truck convoys of food and medicine. America's children are donating their dollars to the Afghan children."

BBC: 'Earlier on Monday, piles of flour, wheat, cornmeal, blankets and coats of the kind the US is sending to Afghanistan were displayed on the lawn of the White House.'

His henchman Ari Fleischer (butcher) said: 'The White House is setting a table, not only for ourselves domestically, but for other nations, for the people of Afghanistan.'



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**Monday, 19 November 2001:**  
The President has fifty Ambassadors eating out of his hand.  
As on all official occasions, one seat has been left empty -  
for Osama Bin Laden in case he decides to pay a flying visit.

These are political messages. They have nothing to do with Ramadan, nothing with iftar, and it is an abuse of the concept of iftar to use it for such a purpose. Muslims have no reason to be upset with Bush. His farce cannot harm Islamic customs and piety.

It harms the President and it harms America if the President appears to be a naïve, clumsy manipulator, which, as we all know, he isn't.

This is charity for public consumption. Instead of trying to ape Muslim customs, which they do not understand, Mr Bush's advisers would do well to take a leaf out of their own Holy Book and consider what Jesus said before he proceeded to teach us The Lord's Prayer:

'And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.' (Matthew 6:5-6)



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Yasser Arafat, still a happy man - breaking the fast with Palestinian refugees

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Ashutosh Vardhana is a Hindu. He grew up in Europe and lives in Yorkshire, England. He studied at London University. He is a keen student of comparative religion and now writes fiction, poetry and essays. He has produced many academic publications. His 'creative' work has been published in Dipika (London), Writers' Forum (Bournemouth, UK), Scavenger (Osage City, Kansas, USA), The World of English (Peking), Asian Image (Blackburn, UK), Gujarat-Samachar (London) and Pphoo Magazine (Calcutta).