

DIALOGUE WITH THE DEAF

It was a contest of David and Goliath. Ahmadienjad, a true underdog, was no match to what he faced in the land of the free. It was a nice welcome they had organised for him. Columbia boss, Lee C Bollinger, who had acted as if he had to go through fire and had put his entire career on the line for inviting Ahmadinejad to speak at the university, was very thoughtful in his welcome speech.

He said "Mr President, you exhibit all the signs of a petty and cruel dictator. You are either brazenly provocative or astonishingly uneducated."

Ahmadienjad, seated 10 feet away from him on the stage, continued to smile. The anti-Ahmadienjad portion of the audience, about 70 percent of it, jeered and booed.

Bollinger praised himself and Columbia to glory for the magnanimity of inviting the Iranian president.

He said it was "well documented" that Iran was a state sponsor of terrorism, accused Iran of fighting a proxy war against the United States in Iraq and questioned why Iran has refused "to adhere to the international standards" of disclosure for its nuclear programme.

"I doubt," Bollinger concluded, "that you will have the intellectual courage to answer these questions." So much for the fabled traditions of tolerance of Columbia and America. If this in the face of liberal and tolerant America, one wonders how they would treat a Middle Eastern or Muslim leader in the US South, the heartland of middle America!

Is this how the Land of the Free treats its guests? Is this how to deal with the elected leader of a country with 3,000 years of history? Ahmadinejad was not there only as the president of Iran but as a representative of the Muslim world. This is perhaps why they rolled out the red carpet for him.

First, Columbia president took almost half an hour of the time for the guest to attack him, reading from a script that would have been the envy of the 'fair and balanced' Fox News or Dick Cheney's office in the White House.

It was like Spanish Inquisition and Ahmediensjad was tied there at stake to be burnt down as a heretic. But no, the Church did not read you the charges before they set you on fire.

It was more like a kangaroo court they show in Hollywood westerns dispensing summary justice without fussing too much about the innocence of the accused or fair play. And the leader of an immensely proud and cultured country was put on trial as if he was a petty thug captured from America's badlands.

This was the same when Ahmadi-nejad was interviewed by the CBS in Iran a day before his departure for the US. So much so the humiliating grilling by Scot Pelley forced the cool as cucumber Ahmadinejad to complain: "You are like a CIA investigator. This is not Guantanamo Bay. This is not a Baghdad prison! This is not Abu Ghraib! This is Iran. I'm the President of this country!"

To all the humiliation he was subjected to, Ahmadinejad came up with a response that would have made Gandhi proud: "In Iran, we treat our guests with more respect! The text read by the dear gentleman here, more than addressing me, was an insult to the knowledge and intelligence of the audience

here. In a university environment, we must allow people to speak their mind, to allow everyone to talk so that the truth is eventually revealed."

This harassment was not limited to Columbia. Outside the university, Zionist groups and other rednecks picketed comparing the guest to Hitler. And big names of the US political and media establishment vied with each other to condemn Iran leader as Satan himself. On the day of Ahmadinejad's arrival, the New York Daily News screamed: THE EVIL HAS LANDED!

On the other hand, presidential pretenders—from Hillary Clinton to Barak Obama and Rudy Giuliani to Mitt Romney—joined hands to take on the man from Iran condemning him as the evil incarnate himself. This is a telling comment on the extent of the Zionist lobby's influence on the US establishment.

Given the overwhelming nature of this witch-hunt, it's a miracle that Ahmadinejad kept his cool throughout the visit. He refused to be cowed down and bullied by the welcome his hosts had so graciously arranged for him.

He not only managed to say his piece at Columbia without moving an inch from his convictions, he took his battle to the United Nations.

The Iran leader responded to all the accusations hurled at him with utmost dignity. In fact, he put his hosts on the defensive once again by exposing the continuing dual standards on issues like Palestine, Iraq and nuclear proliferation.

It was a performance at once both defiant and conciliatory. He insisted: "If you have created the fifth generation of atomic bombs and are testing them already, who are you to question other people who just want nuclear power." On the other hand, he said he wanted to visit Ground Zero to show his respect for 9/11 victims.

Ahadinejad's passage to America only goes to show the impossible gulf that exists between the Muslim world and the West, especially United States. The Iran leader has managed to present the Muslim viewpoint where it matters the most. He left his hosts squirming in their seats by asking: "Even if the Holocaust happened, why should the Palestinians pay the price for the sins committed by Europe?" □□□ *[contributed]*