

What the Muslim World Wants to Hear From Obama

Mutual Understanding

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan

WHEN President Obama addresses the Muslim world his words will be best understood by the people of Pakistan — literally, that is, because this is one of the largest English-speaking countries in the world. And today, with Pakistan being torn apart in a battle between the ideas of Western democracy and Islamic law, its people could use a few encouraging words from the American president, in the language the two nations share.

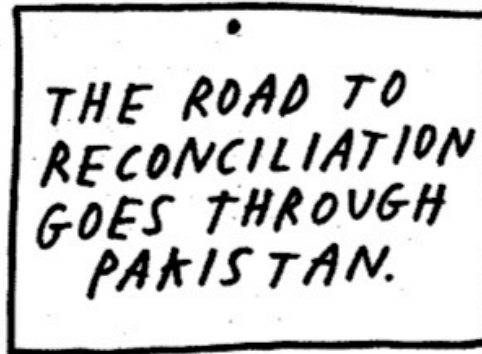
Pakistan once showed us a synthesis, not a clash, of Islamic and Western civilizations. In 1973, the country produced a constitution that fused a parliamentary system of pluralistic democracy with Islamic principles of law and governance.

But since 9/11, Pakistan's Constitution has turned on itself, with Shariah and Western law in conflict rather than cooperation. In the past few years, I have witnessed how a battle with a rag-tag militia that claims to defend Islamic law against secularism has killed thousands, forced millions of people from their homes and plunged the country into civil war.

I've also witnessed so many Pakistanis, the college students, the urban middle class and, yes, those Islamists

who carry the germs of pluralism still trying hard to make the country's constitutional idea — an Islamic democracy — work.

President Obama should speak to those Pakistanis who need so badly to hear that this constitutional experiment is worth a fresh try, even in these testing times; that the Islamic legal tradition is compatible with Western models of democracy; that Islamic and Western conceptions of justice and freedom still



might meld in the grand Pakistani experiment.

It's worth a shot. And it might be the best one we have — if for no other reason than the bond of a common language.

— SHAHAN MUFTI, a correspondent for the Web site GlobalPost