

## Towards Theocratic Fiefdoms?

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FOR 20 years or more, a few social activists including this writer in Pakistan have been desperately sending out SOS messages, warning of terrible times to come. Nevertheless, none anticipated how quickly and accurately dire predictions would come true. It is a small matter that the flames of terrorism set Mumbai on fire and, more recently, destroyed Pakistan's cricketing future. A much more important and brutal fight lies ahead as Pakistan, a nation of 175 million, struggles for its very survival. The implications for the future of South Asia are enormous.

Today a full-scale war is being fought in FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas), Swat and other "wild" areas of Pakistan, with thousands dying and hundreds of thousands of IDPs (internally displaced people) streaming into cities and towns. In February 2009, with the writ of the Pakistani state in tatters, the government gave in to the demand of the TTP (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, the Pakistani Taliban Movement) to implement the Islamic Sharia in Malakand, a region of FATA. It also announced the suspension of a military offensive in Swat, which has been almost totally taken over by the TTP. But the respite that it brought was short-lived and started breaking down only hours later.

The fighting is now inexorably migrating towards Peshawar where, fearing the Taliban, video shop owners have shut shop, banners have been placed in bazaars declaring them closed for women, musicians are out of business, and kidnapping for ransom is the best business in town. Islamabad has already seen Lal Masjid and the Marriot bombing, and has had its police personnel repeatedly blown up by suicide bombers. Today, its barricaded streets give a picture of a city under siege. In Karachi, the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), an ethnic but secular party well known for strong-arm tactics, has issued a call for arms to prevent the Taliban from making further inroads into the city. Lahore once appeared relatively safe and different but, after the attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team, has rejoined Pakistan.

The suicide bomber and the masked abductor have crippled Pakistan's urban life and shattered its national economy. Soldiers, policemen, factory and hospital workers, mourners at funerals, and ordinary people praying in mosques have been reduced to hideous masses of flesh and fragments of bones. The bearded ones, many operating out of madrassas, are hitting targets across the country. Although a substantial part of the Pakistani public insists upon lionising them as "standing up to the Americans", they are neither seeking to evict a foreign occupier nor fighting for a homeland. They want nothing less than to seize power and to turn Pakistan into their version of the ideal Islamic state. In their incoherent, ill-formed vision, this would include restoring the *caliphate* as well as doing away with all forms of western influence and elements of modernity. The AK-47 and the Internet, of course, would stay.

But, perhaps paradoxically, in spite of the fact that the dead bodies and shattered lives are almost all Muslim ones, few Pakistanis speak out against these atrocities. Nor do they approve of military action against the cruel perpetrators, choosing to believe that they are fighting for Islam and against an

imagined American occupation. Political leaders like Qazi Husain Ahmed and Imran Khan have no words of kindness for those who have suffered from Islamic extremists. Their tears are reserved for the victims of predator drones, whether innocent or otherwise. By definition, for them terrorism is an act that only Americans can commit.

### **Why the Denial?**

To understand Pakistan's collective masochism, one needs to study the drastic social and cultural transformations that have made this country so utterly different from what it was in earlier times. For three decades, deep tectonic forces have been silently tearing Pakistan away from the Indian subcontinent and driving it towards the Arabian peninsula.

This continental drift is not physical but cultural, driven by a belief that Pakistan must exchange its South Asian identity for an Arab-Muslim one. Grain by grain, the desert sands of Saudi Arabia are replacing the rich soil that had nurtured a rich Muslim culture in India for a thousand years. This culture produced Mughal architecture, the Taj Mahal, the poetry of Asadullah Ghalib, and much more. Now a stern, unyielding version of Islam—*Wahabism*—is replacing the kinder, gentler Islam of the sufis and saints who had walked on this land for hundreds of years.

This change is by design. Twenty-five years ago, under the approving gaze of Ronald Reagan's America, the Pakistani state pushed Islam on to its people. Prayers in government departments were deemed compulsory, floggings were carried out publicly, punishments were meted out to those who did not fast in Ramadan, selection for university academic posts required that the candidate demonstrate knowledge of Islamic teachings, and jihad was declared essential for every Muslim.

Villages have changed drastically, driven in part by Pakistani workers returning from Arab countries. Many village mosques are now giant madrassas that propagate hard-line *Salafi* and *Deobandi beliefs* through oversized loudspeakers. They are bitterly opposed to Barelvis, Shias and other Muslims, who they do not consider to be proper Muslims. Punjabis, who were far more liberal towards women than Pashtuns, are now also beginning to take a line resembling the Taliban. Hanafi law has begun to prevail over tradition and civil law, as is evident from recent decisions in the Lahore High Court.

Pakistan's Ministry of Education estimates that 1.5 million students are getting religious education in 13,000 madrassas. These figures could be quite off the mark. Commonly quoted figures range between 18,000 and 22,000 such schools.

In the Pakistani lower-middle and middle-middle classes lurks a grim and humourless Saudi-inspired revivalist movement which frowns on every expression of joy and pleasurable pastime. Lacking any positive connection to history, culture and knowledge, it seeks to eliminate "corruption" by regulating cultural life and seizing control of the education system.

"Classical music is on its last legs in Pakistan; the sarangi and vichitarveena are completely dead," laments Mohammad Shehzad, a music aficionado. Indeed, teaching music in public universities is violently opposed by students of the Islami Jamaat-e-Talaba at Punjab University. Religious fundamentalists consider music haram. Kathak dancing, once popular with the Muslim elite of India, has no teachers left. Pakistan produces no feature films of any consequence.

As a part of General Zia-ul-Haq's cultural offensive, Hindi words were expunged from daily use and replaced with heavy-sounding Arabic ones. Persian, the language of Mughal India, had once been taught as a second or third language in many Pakistani schools. But, because of its association with Shiite Iran, it too was dropped and replaced with Arabic. The morphing of the traditional "khuda hafiz" (Persian for "God be with you") into "allah hafiz" (Arabic for "God be with you") took two decades to complete. The Arab import sounded odd and contrived, but ultimately the Arabic God won and the Persian God lost.

### **Genesis of Jihad**

One can squarely place the genesis of religious militancy in Pakistan to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent efforts of the US-Pakistan-Saudi grand alliance to create and support the Great Global Jihad of the 20th century. A toxic mix of imperial might, religious fundamentalism, and local interests ultimately defeated the Soviets. But the network of Islamic militant organisations did not disappear after it achieved success. By now the Pakistani Army establishment had realised the power of jihad as an instrument of foreign policy, and so the network grew from strength to strength.

The amazing success of the state is now turning out to be its own undoing. Today the Pakistan Army and establishment are under attack from religious militants, and rival Islamic groups battle each other with heavy weapons. Ironically, the same Army – whose men were recruited under the banner of jihad, and which saw itself as the fighting arm of Islam – today stands accused of betrayal and is almost daily targeted by Islamist suicide bombers. Over 1,800 soldiers have died as of February 2009 in encounters with religious militants, and many have been tortured before decapitation. Nevertheless, the Army is still ambivalent in its relationship with the jihadists and largely focuses upon India.

### **Indoctrination?**

Similar sentiments exist in a large part of the Pakistani public media. The commonly expressed view is that Islamic radicalism is a problem only in FATA and that madrassas are the only jihad factories around. This could not be more wrong. Extremism is breeding at a ferocious rate in public and private schools within Pakistan's towns and cities. Left unchallenged, this kind of education will produce a generation incapable of living together with any except strictly their own kind. Pakistan's education system demands that Islam be understood as a complete code of life, and creates in the mind of the schoolchild a sense of siege and constant embattlement by stressing that Islam is under threat everywhere.

The government-approved curriculum, prepared by the Curriculum Wing of the Federal Ministry of Education, is the basic road map for transmitting values and knowledge to the young. By an Act of Parliament, passed in 1976, all government and private schools (except for O-level schools) are required to follow this curriculum. It is a blueprint for a religious fascist state.

The masthead of an illustrated primer for the Urdu alphabet states that it has been prepared by Iqra Publishers, Rawalpindi, along "Islamic lines". Although not an officially approved textbook, it has been used for many years by some regular schools, as well as madrassas, associated with the Jamiat-ul-

Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), an Islamic political party that had allied itself with General Pervez Musharraf.

The world of the Pakistani schoolchild was largely unchanged even after September 11, 2001, which led to Pakistan's timely desertion of the Taliban and the slackening of the Kashmir jihad. Indeed, for all his hypocritical talk of "enlightened moderation", Musharraf's educational curriculum was far from enlightening. It was a slightly toned-down copy of that under Nawaz Sharif which, in turn, was identical to that under Benazir Bhutto, who inherited it from Zia-ul-Haq.

Fearful of taking on powerful religious forces, every incumbent government refused to take a position on the curriculum and thus quietly allowed young minds to be moulded by fanatics. What might happen a generation later has always been a secondary matter for a government challenged on so many sides.

The promotion of militarism in Pakistan's so-called "secular" public schools, colleges and universities had a profound effect upon young minds. Militant jihad became part of the culture on college and university campuses. Armed groups flourished, invited students for jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan, set up offices throughout the country, collected funds at Friday prayers, and declared a war without borders. *Pre-9/11, Quaid-e-Azam University* in Islamabad was ablaze with posters inviting students to participate in the Kashmir jihad. After 2001, this slipped below the surface.

### **The Madrassas**

The primary vehicle for Saudi-ising Pakistan's education has been the madrassa. In earlier times, these had turned out the occasional Islamic scholar, using a curriculum that essentially dates from the 11th century with only minor subsequent revisions. But their principal function had been to produce imams and muezzins for mosques, and those who eked out an existence as "moulvi sahibs" teaching children to read the Quran.

The Afghan jihad changed everything. During the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, madrassas provided the US-Saudi-Pakistani alliance the cannon fodder needed for fighting a holy war. The Americans and the Saudis, helped by a more-than-willing General Zia, funded new madrassas across the length and breadth of Pakistan.

A detailed picture of the current situation is not available. But, according to the national education census, which the Ministry of Education released in 2006, Punjab has 5,459 madrassas followed by the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) with 2,843; Sindh 1,935; Federally Administrated Northern Areas (FANA) 1,193; Balochistan 769; Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) 586; FATA 135; and Islamabad capital territory 77.

Madrassas have deeply impacted upon the urban environment. For example, until a few years ago, Islamabad was a quiet, orderly, modern city different from all others in Pakistan. Still earlier, it had been largely the abode of Pakistan's hyper-elite and foreign diplomats. But the rapid transformation of its demography brought with it hundreds of mosques with multi-barrelled audio-cannons mounted on minarets, as well as scores of madrassas illegally constructed in what used to be public parks and green areas. Now, tens of thousands of their students with little prayer caps dutifully chant the Quran all day. In the evenings they swarm around the city, making bare-faced women increasingly nervous.

### **The Lesser Species**

Total separation of the sexes is a central goal of the Islamists. Two decades ago the fully veiled student was a rarity on Pakistani university and college campuses. The *abaya* was an unknown word in Urdu; it is a foreign import. But today, some shops in Islamabad specialise in *abaya*. At colleges and universities across Pakistan, female students are seeking the anonymity of the burqa. Such students outnumber their sisters who still dare show their faces.

While social conservatism does not necessarily lead to violent extremism, it does shorten the path. Those with beards and burqas are more easily convinced that Muslims are being demonised by the rest of the world. The real problem, they say, is the plight of the Palestinians, the decadent and discriminatory West, the Jews, the Christians, the Hindus, the Kashmir issue, the Bush doctrine, and so on. They vehemently deny that those committing terrorist acts are Muslims or, if faced by incontrovertible evidence, say it is a mere reaction to oppression. Faced with the embarrassment that 200 schools for girls were blown up in Swat by Fazlullah's militants, they wriggle out by saying that some schools were housing the Pakistan Army, who should be targeted anyway.

The high school at Qambar in the Swat valley was among the 200 schools for girls destroyed by the Swat Taliban led by Mullah Fazlullah.

### **The Prognosis**

The immediate future is not hopeful: increasing numbers of mullahs are creating cults around themselves and seizing control over the minds of worshippers. In the tribal areas, a string of new Islamist leaders have suddenly emerged : Sufi Mohammad, Baitullah Mehsud, Fazlullah, Mangal Bagh.... The enabling environment of poverty, deprivation, lack of justice, and extreme differences of wealth is perfect for these demagogues. Their gruesome acts of terror and public beheadings are still being perceived by large numbers of Pakistanis as part of the fight against imperialist America and, sometimes, India as well. This could not be more wrong.

The jihadists have longer-range goals. A couple of years ago, a Karachi-based monthly magazine ran a cover story on the terrorism in Kashmir. One fighter was asked what he would do if a political resolution were found for the disputed valley. Revealingly, he replied that he would not lay down his gun but turn it on the Pakistani leadership, with the aim of installing an Islamic government there.

Over the next year or two, Pakistanis are likely to see more short-lived "peace accords", as in Malakand, Swat and, earlier on, in Shakai. These are exercises in futility. Until the Pakistan Army finally realises that Mr Frankenstein needs to be eliminated rather than be engaged in negotiations, it will continue to soft-pedal on counter-insurgency. It will also continue to develop and demand from the US high-tech weapons that are not useful against insurgents. There are some indications that some realisation of the internal threat is dawning, but the speed is as yet glacial.

Even if Mumbai-II occurs, India's options in dealing with nuclear Pakistan are severely limited. Cross-border strikes should be dismissed from the realm of possibilities. They could lead to escalations that neither government would have control over. India's prosperity—and perhaps its physical survival—demands that Pakistan stays together. Pakistan could disintegrate into a hell, where different parts are run by different warlords. Paradoxically perhaps, India's most effective defence could be the Pakistan Army, torn and fractured

though it may be. To convert a former enemy army into a possible ally will require that India change track.

To create a future working alliance with the struggling Pakistani state, and in deference to basic democratic principles, India must be seen as genuinely working towards some kind of resolution of the Kashmir issue. It must not deny that the majority of Kashmiri Muslims are deeply alienated from the Indian state and that they desperately seek balm for their wounds. Else the forces of cross-border jihad, and its hate-filled holy warriors, will continue to receive unnecessary succour.

In the end : the forces of irrationality will surely cancel themselves out because they act in random directions, whereas reason pulls in only one. Reason will surely triumph over unreason, and humans will continue their evolution towards a higher and better species. □□□

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