

A Secular Pakistan is Inevitable

by
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Decades from now Pakistan will cease to discriminate between citizens of different religious faiths; its public schools will not poison young minds with hatred; Pakistanis will look for human qualities rather than an individual's religious affiliation; and the life and property of all citizens will be considered equally valuable. The concept of "minorities" shall have become irrelevant.

Today these appear to be impossible dreams. Indeed, even as faith-based extremist movements disrupt society, the cry for an ever greater role for religion in public life gets louder. For example, *sharia*-seeking Taliban had blown up hundreds of girls and boys schools in 2008. Although many found this distasteful, a survey conducted at that time by World Public Opinion.org discovered that 54% of Pakistanis still wanted strict application of *sharia* while 25% wanted it in some more dilute form. Totaling 79%, this was the largest *pro-sharia* percentage in the four countries surveyed (Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia).

More recently, a nation-wide survey of 2,000 young Pakistanis between 18-27 years of age found similar data. The report says that "three-quarters of all young people identify themselves primarily as Muslims. Just 14% chose to define themselves primarily as a citizen of Pakistan." This young majority feels the nation is adrift. An overwhelming number are deeply disillusioned not just by Pakistan's present rulers, but also by what they see as major failures in governance, justice, education, and science. For these children of General Zia-ul-Haq's education revolution, religion is the only firm anchor in a sea of distress.

So where lies the hope for a new, secular Pakistan?

I firmly believe that the power of reason, and the ability of humans to learn from experience, will some day override the current enthusiasm for a religious state. History has much to say about the times when some kind of faith was allowed to run states. Look at the wars of religion in Europe, many of which were caused by arcane disputes over the "true interpretation" of the Bible. Hangings, murders, and pogroms came from disagreements over whether Christ was resurrected in spirit or form, or he came by Virgin Birth as opposed to the Immaculate Conception, as well as a myriad other point-splitting disputes.

In medieval Europe, howling mobs were easily moved into action by fiery preachers – a phenomenon that Pakistanis hearing Friday *khutbas* can easily understand. Driven by doctrinal differences, Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Baptists freely slaughtered each other for many centuries. In the 16th century, the Thirty-Year War between Catholic Germany and Lutherans (principally in France) left Europe awash in blood. The population of Germany was nearly halved in this period – and this was in times when weapons of war were relatively primitive!

The peace process began with secularism, which made its debut through the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. Without it, religious wars would have consumed European societies and states. Yet, one notes that the founders of modern secularism were religious men who did not think that secularism was a threat to religion. As George Jacob Holyoake put it in 1648, “Secularism is not an argument against Christianity, it is one independent of it. Secular knowledge is manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded in this life, which relates to the conduct of this life, conduces to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience of this life.”

Whether or not “real Islam” permits a secular state, a similar argument can certainly be made using Islamic sources and history. Progressive Muslim scholars insist that the Holy Qu’ran does not mention the state (*dawlah*) anywhere. Although the Holy Prophet (PBUH) created the Medina state, there was no written law, much less a constitution. There was no taxation system, police or army, or mechanisms for providing amenities or education. Each tribe followed its own customs and traditions. As Ibn-e-Khaldun emphasized, lacking a Qu’ranic basis for the state, Muslim rulers in later centuries would freely invent laws to suit their needs which they would claim to be immutable truths. The clergy were the hand-maidens of despots seeking legitimacy.

That Islam and secularism are compatible is furiously denied by the “Nazariya-e-Pakistan” types, who still constitute the core of Pakistan’s military and media establishment. But how long can they live in a state of absolute denial? At some point they will surely have to stop blaming Blackwater, Indians, and Jews for acts of terror, given that Muslim extremists are now openly and proudly taking responsibility. And surely, Pakistan’s television anchors, who raucously challenge the government on trivia, will have to take up the tabooed subject of religiosity gone mad. That day has not yet come, but it may be closer than we think. The credit for this will go to those drunk with religious passion.

Having targeted mosques, frenzied shrine-bombers are now concentrating on other holy Muslim sites across Pakistan. Scattered body limbs and pools of blood at Data Darbar, Abdullah Shah Ghazi, and the Pakpattan shrine are proof that too much religion causes dementia. Even men who loudly proclaim their religion – like Qazi Hussain Ahmad, Maulana Fazl-ur-Rahman, and Imran Khan – feel unsafe from extremists. Although they pretend otherwise, and in spite of having declared the Taliban to be fighters for national liberation, none of these ideologues could dare to enter Sufi Mohammed’s Swat while he was in control. In a televised interview, the Sufi had flatly declared Pakistan’s Islamic parties as non-Islamic.

Attempts to make Pakistan a *mamlakat-e-khudadad* (theocracy) have lighted uncontrollable fires of religious intolerance. Increasing sections of Pakistan’s population are alienated and resentful at being treated as second class citizens. Earlier on, Hindus, Christians, and Parsis were outcasts. Ahmadis followed in 1974. These groups withdrew from public life or migrated overseas, taking with them precious human and non-human resources. The list of undesirables has expanded further and further as religious belief became more central to the Pakistani state. Many mainstream Muslims now fear other

mainstream Muslims. Today, if you are known to be Shia or Barelvi, you could be endangered in many parts of the country. Pakistani Muslims now offer Friday prayers under the shadow of vigilant gun-wielding guards.

Pakistan's chest thumping ultra-patriots may be impervious to reason, but ordinary Pakistanis are increasingly anxious. The country has fallen far behind India and is high on the list of the world's failing states. It is futile to search for tiny bits of contrary evidence, such as the high number of mobile phone users in the country. Except for atomic bombs – which even wretched North Korea has succeeded in making – Pakistan's achievements are few. This failure owes squarely to a skewed world view and wrong attitudes towards progress, ethics, and morality. Even though the clergy are not formally in power, they are busy miseducating the Pakistani mind. The longer they remain unchallenged, the more protracted our suffering.

Shall we not learn from the past? That theocracy is a dead end? Any serious move in the direction of a *sharia* state in Pakistan could lead to civil war. This is not a temporary difficulty but a fundamental one. Since there is no Pope in Islam, there is just no way of answering which *sharia* is the right one. Hanafi, Shafii, Maaliki, Hanbali? Will all, or most, Pakistanis ever accept any *amir-ul-momineen* (leader of the pious) or a caliph? What of the Shias, who reject the very notion of a caliphate? For those who say unity is possible, here is a simple challenge: get one religious leader from each of Pakistan's Islamic sects. Let them sit around a table and see if they agree on any significant matter related to governance, taxes, penal code, banking, or economy.

Looking ahead: even devoutly religious people can accept that genuine faith flourishes when individuals are free to choose, without having religion imposed upon them by their government. Surely, the church, mosque, synagogue, and temple all inform humans in some way. But peace and progress lie in giving Reason the stewardship in matters of science, technology, economics, commerce, trade, industry, finance, public affairs, warfare, education, research, public discourse and debate, arts, and literature. Laws (personal, family, civil, corporate, criminal, international) and social ethics (including sexual ethics and morality) must be made by humans for humans. The rightful domain of religion is in personal conduct, beliefs, worship, and conscience.

While I am optimistic in the long run, the victory of secularism in Pakistan is assured only if there are enough thoughtful people who can make it happen. There is little danger of a religiously fractionated society like Pakistan becoming a hard-line theocracy. But the clergy could continue to rule in religiously delineated communities. To the extent that this happens, our people will continue to remain scientifically and culturally backward, wallow in self-pity and drown in conspiracy theories, and have only one message for the outside world: give more.

Successful states should be a model for Pakistan. But history has no example of a successful sovereign religious state, much less one in modern times. While Israel appears to be an exception – and is secretly envied by many Pakistanis – this success is likely to be temporary. Israel is deeply dependent upon the largesse of its patron, the United States.

It also has fast-breeding, ultra-conservative Sephardic Jews who yearn for a Jewish state and want to forcibly impose their antiquated laws. They could soon overtake modernized and secular Ashkenazi Jews, forcing Israel into primitivism. Surely, it would be unwise to take this racist, religious state as our ideal.

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