

WAITING FOR MUSHARRAF'S ENLIGHTENED MODERATION

by
Pervez Hoodbhoy

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The centrepiece of Pakistan's relationship with the West since September 11, 2001, has been dubbed "enlightened moderation" by its president and philosopher-general, Pervez Musharraf. Under his rule, Musharraf claims, Pakistan has rejected the orthodox, militant, violent Islam imposed by the previous chief of army staff to seize power in Pakistan, General Zia ul-Haq (who ruled from 1977-1988), in favour of a more 'modern' and 'moderate' Islam. But Musharraf's actions, and those of his government and its allies, are often at odds with this. In fact, after almost five years of 'enlightened moderation,' it seems there is more continuity than change. And, with each passing day, it becomes harder to see how such a policy can hope to stem the tide of religious radicalism that is overwhelming Pakistani society.

No one doubts that there have been some changes for the good. There is a perceptible shift in institutional practices and inclinations. Heads of government organizations are no longer required to lead noon prayers as in the 1980's; female announcers with undraped heads freely appear on Pakistan Television; to the relief of many passengers thickly bearded stewards are disappearing from PIA flights; the first women fighter pilots have been inducted into the Pakistan Air Force. More importantly, in early July 2006, Musharraf directed the Council of Islamic Ideology to draft an amendment to the controversial Hudood Ordinance, put in place by General Zia-ul-Haq and not repealed by any of the civilian governments that ruled from 1988 to 1999. This law gives women a lower legal status and punishes the victims of rape. Repeal of these anti-women laws has been a long standing demand of Pakistani women's groups. A vastly overdue – but nevertheless welcome – action was taken by the government when it released in July hundreds of women prisoners arrested under the Hudood Ordinance, many of whom had spent years awaiting their trial.

But the force of these pluses cannot outweigh the many more weighty minuses. General Musharraf has formally banned some of many Jihadi groups that the Pakistan army has helped train and arm for over two decades, but they still operate quite freely. After the October earthquake, some of these extremist groups in Kashmir seized the opportunity of relief work to fully reestablish and expand their presence. Exploiting Musharraf's ambivalence, they openly flaunted their banners and weapons in all major towns of Azad Kashmir and fully advertised their strength. Some obtained relief materials from government stocks to pass off as their own, and used heavy vehicles that could only have been provided by the authorities. Many national and international relief organizations were left insecure by their overwhelming presence. Only recently have the jihadists moved out of full public view into more sheltered places.

Other Pakistani leaders send similar messages. Shaukat Aziz, a former Citibanker and now prime minister of Pakistan, made a call for nation-wide prayers for rain in a year of drought. This effort to improve his Islamic credentials became less laughable when, at an education conference in Islamabad, he proposed that Islamic religious education must start as soon as children enter school. This came in response to a suggestion by the moderate Islamic scholar, Javed Ghamdi, that only school children in their fifth year and above should be given formal Islamic education. Otherwise, said Ghamdi, they would stand in danger of becoming rigid and doctrinaire. The government's 2006 education policy now requires Islamic studies to begin in the third year of school, a year earlier than in the previous policy.

Other ministers are no less determined to show Islamic zeal. The federal minister for religious affairs, Ijaz ul Haq, speaking at the launch of a book authored by a leading Islamic extremist leader on "Christian Terrorism and The Muslim World," argued that anyone who did not believe in jihad was neither a Muslim nor a Pakistani. He then declared that given the situation facing Muslims today, he was prepared to be a suicide bomber.

According to a newspaper report, Pakistani health minister, Mohammad Nasir Khan, assured the upper house of parliament that the government could consider banning female nurses looking after male patients at hospitals. This move arose from a motion moved by female parliamentary members of the MMA, the Islamist party that commands majorities in the provincial assemblies of the Frontier and Baluchistan provinces and offered crucial support for Musharraf staying on as president. Women's bodies are of particular concern to these holy men: "We think that men could derive sexual pleasure from women's bodies while conducting ECG or ultrasound," proclaimed Maulana Gul Naseeb Khan, provincial secretary of the MMA. In his opinion women would be able to lure men under the pretext of these medical procedures. Therefore, he said, "to save the supreme values of Islam and the message of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), the MMA has decided to impose the ban." Destroyed or damaged billboards with women's faces can be seen in several cities of the Frontier because the MMA deems the exhibition of unveiled women as un-Islamic.

Total separation of the sexes is a central goal of the Islamists, the consequences of which have been catastrophic. For example, on April 9, 2006, 21 women and 8 children were crushed to death, and scores injured, in a stampede inside a three-storey madrassa in Karachi where a large number of women had gathered for a weekly congregation. Male rescuers, who arrived in ambulances, were prevented from moving injured women to hospitals.

One cannot dismiss this as just one incident. Soon after the October 2005 earthquake, as I walked through the destroyed city of Balakot, a student of the Frontier Medical College described to me how he and his male colleagues were stopped by religious elders from digging out injured girl students from under the rubble of their school building. The action of these elders was similar to that of Saudi Arabia's ubiquitous religious "*mutaween*" police who, in March 2002, had stopped schoolgirls from leaving a blazing building because they were not wearing their abayas. In rare criticism, Saudi newspapers had blamed the *mutaween* for letting 15 girls burn to death.

The Saudiization of a once-vibrant Pakistani culture continues at a relentless pace. The drive to segregate is now also being found among educated women. Vigorous proselytizers bringing this message, such as Mrs. Farhat Hashmi, have been catapulted to heights of fame and fortune. Their success is evident. Two decades ago the fully veiled student was a rarity on Pakistani university and college campuses. Now she outnumbers her sisters who still dare show their faces. This has had the effect of further enhancing passivity and unquestioning obedience to the teacher, and of decreasing the self-confidence of female students.

The intensification of religious feelings has had a myriad other more significant consequences. Depoliticization and destruction of all non-religious organizations has led to the absence of any noticeable public mobilization – even on specifically Muslim causes like US actions against Iraq, Palestine, or Iran. Events in these areas rarely bring more than a few dozen protesters on to the streets – if that. Nevertheless large numbers of Pakistanis are driven to fury and violence when they perceive their faith has been maligned. Mobs set on fire the Punjab Assembly, as well as shops and cars in Lahore, for an act of blasphemy committed in Denmark. Even as religious fanaticism grips the population there is a curious, almost fatalistic, disconnection with the real world which suggests that fellow Muslims don't matter any more – only the Faith does.

Religious identity has also become increasingly sectarian. A suicide bomber, as yet unidentified, killed 57 people and eliminated the entire leadership of the "Sunni Movement" when he leapt on to the stage at a religious gathering in Karachi in April, 2006. Months earlier, barely a mile down from my university, at the shrine of Bari Imam, 25 Shias were killed in similar attack. In the tribal areas, sectarian tensions have frequently exploded into open warfare: in the villages of Hangu district, Sunnis and Shias exchanged light artillery and rocket fire leaving scores dead. Earlier this year, when I traveled for lecturing in the town of Gilgit, I saw soldiers crouched in bunkers behind mounted machine guns. It looked more like a town under siege than a tourist resort.

The clearest political expression of this shift towards a more violent and intolerant religious identity is the rise of the MMA as a national force, which on key issues both supports and is supported by General Musharraf's government. A measure of its power,

and the threat it poses to society and the state, is the Pakistani Taliban movement that it has helped create, especially in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. Their success draws in large measure on the lessons they learned when working hand in the hand with the Pakistan army to create and sustain the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Unable to combat the toxic mix of religion with tribalism, the Pakistani government is rapidly losing what little authority it ever had in the tribal parts. Under US pressure, the army has been mounting military offensives against Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters who fled Afghanistan. The convenient fiction that the army is merely combating “foreign militants” from the Arab and Central Asian countries is accepted by no one. Its assaults have taken a heavy civilian toll and local resistance has grown.

The local Taliban, as well as Al-Qaida, are popular and the army is not. In the tribal areas, the local Taliban now run a parallel administration that dispenses primitive justice according to tribal and Islamic principles. A widely available Taliban-made video that I saw shows the bodies of criminals dangling from electricity poles in the town of Miranshah while thousands of appreciative spectators look on. In Wana, a regional capital, about 20 miles from the Afghan border, Taliban supporters have decreed that men are forbidden to shave. A Pathan barber, who migrated to Islamabad, told me last month that many others like him are making their way to the big cities or abandoning their traditional occupation.

The Pakistani Taliban (like their brothers in Afghanistan) see education as insidious. Pakistani newspapers frequently carry news of schools in the tribal regions being attacked destroyed by the Taliban. But rarely are these incidents followed by angry editorials or letters-to-the editor. Implicit sympathy for the Taliban remains strong among urban middle-class Pakistanis because they are perceived as standing up to the Americans, while the government has caved in. In Waziristan, one of the locales of a growing insurgency, the state has essentially capitulated and accepted Taliban rule over tribal society as long as the army is allowed to maintain a spectator presence.

Stepping back, the Islamist shift underway in Pakistan becomes yet more evident. According to the Pew Global Survey (2006), the percentage of Pakistanis who expressed confidence in Osama bin Laden as a world leader grew from 45% in 2003 to 51% in 2005. This 6 point increase must be compared against responses to an identical questionnaire in Morocco, Turkey, and Lebanon, where bin Laden’s popularity has sharply dropped by as much as 20 points.

It is worth asking what has changed Pakistan so and what makes it so different from other Muslim countries? What set one section of its people upon the other, created notions of morality centred on separating the sexes, and sapped the country’s vitality? Some well

meaning Pakistanis – particularly those who live overseas – think that it is best to avoid such difficult questions. These days they are venturing to “repackage Pakistan” for the media. They want to change negative perceptions of Pakistan in the West while, at the same time, hesitating to call for a change in the structure of the state and its outlook.

But at the heart of Pakistan’s problems lies a truth – one etched in stone – that when a state proclaims a religious identity and mission, it is bound to privilege those who organize religious life and interpret religious text. Since there are many models and interpretations within every religion, there is bound to be conflict between religious forces over whose model shall prevail. There is also the larger confrontation between religious principles and practices and what we now consider to be ‘modern’ ideas of society, which have emerged over the past several hundred years. This truth, for all its simplicity, escaped the attention of several generations of soldiers, politicians, and citizens of Pakistan. It is true that there has been some learning – Musharraf’s call for “enlightened moderation” is a tacit (and welcome) admission that a theocratic Pakistan cannot work. But his call conflicts with his other, more important, responsibility as chief of the Pakistan Army.

Pakistan is what it is because its army finds greater benefit in the status quo. Today the Pakistan Army is vast, and as an institution, has acquired enormous corporate interests that sprawl across real estate, manufacturing, and service sectors. It also receives large amounts of military aid, all of which would be threatened if it comes into direct conflict with the US. In the 1960s and 1980s, and again since 9/11, the army discovered its high rental value when serving the US. Each time the long-term costs to the society and state have been terrible.

The relationship between the army and religious radicals is today no longer as simple as in the 1980’s. To maintain a positive image in the West, the Pakistani establishment must continue to decry Islamic radicalism, and display elements of liberalism that are deeply disliked by the orthodox. But hard actions will be taken only if the Islamists threaten the army’s corporate and political interests, or if senior army commanders are targeted for assassination. The Islamists for their part hope for, and seek to incite, action by zealous officers to bring back the glory days of the military-mullah alliance led by General Zia ul Haq.

Musharraf and his corps commanders well know that they cannot afford to sleep too well. It is in the lower ranks that the Islamists are busily establishing bases. A mass of junior officers and low-ranking soldiers – whose world view is similar to that of the Taliban in most respects – feels resentful of being used as cannon fodder for fighting America’s war. It is they who die, not their senior officers. So far, army discipline has successfully squelched dissent and forced it underground. But this sleeping giant can – if and when it wakes up – tear asunder the Pakistan Army, and shake the Pakistani state from its very foundations.

*The author is a professor of physics at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad.
Comments may be directed to: pervezhoodbhoy@yahoo.com*