

Is 911 why Pakistan went under?

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A whopping 92% of Pakistanis feel their country is headed the wrong way, 85% think economic conditions are worsening, and just 14% have confidence in the government. Although 63% disapprove of the killing of Osama bin Laden, 88% consider terrorism “a very big problem”. These Pew poll results merely confirm that Pakistan is a deeply unhappy and confused country. Its streets, markets, mosques, churches, and shrines are soaked in the blood of religious minorities, religious scholars, religious militants, religious thugs, ordinary people, policemen, soldiers, and nationalist separatists. Anyone can be killed, for any reason.

The army and government say that 911 is the culprit. Its aftermath, they claim, created the terrorism that has consumed 36,000 lives so far and cost the economy \$38 billion (the amount varies from speaker to speaker and time of day). They call these losses “sacrifices” – the price Pakistan allegedly paid for partnering with America in the “war against terror”.

But a self-inflicted wound is no sacrifice towards anything else. Pakistan’s war with the world, and itself, predates 911. Since the 1980’s, thousands have been killed in ethnic and gang warfare in overpopulated Karachi. Last month, police say 315 people were killed; corpses stuffed inside gunny bags appeared across the city. Equally unconnected with 911 is the sickening abduct-torture-kill-dump routine of the Frontier Corps as it crushes Baluch nationalists alienated by Punjabi domination.

But, could Pakistan’s religious militancy be explained by its post-911 embrace of America, and the subsequent ditching of its Taliban progeny under American pressure? Is America, the devil, responsible?

Imran Khan, politician and cricket hero, now said to be the most popular politician in Pakistan, said so during a televised debate some time ago. But what, I asked, of the Taliban who blow up girls schools and video shops, kill doctors and health workers, refuse to allow women to vote, threaten barbers and tailors with death, and destroy music and culture? Khan dismissed these as inconsequential.

America’s negative role in Pakistan, post-1979, is undeniable. Its unconscionable invasion of Iraq reinvigorated Al-Qaida, bringing its deadly tactics to Pakistan. The U.S. is also guilty of having waged illegal wars for decades and, in pursuit of its self-interest and wealth, bribed, bullied and overthrown governments, supported tyrants, and undermined movements for progressive change.

But the poison of religious militancy had been injected into Pakistan’s bloodstream a quarter century ago. Violent jihadist groups, such as the Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, were busy with bloody sectarian cleansing. Their goal was to remake Pakistani society. Uninterested in the redistribution of wealth or social justice, such jihadists are most provoked by a woman’s bare face or someone from the wrong sect or religion.

Subsequently, Shias, Christians, and Hindus were attacked. Many fled the country. Female education spiraled downward. To date, about 1400 schools have been blown up and reduced to rubble in the tribal areas. In Pakistan's cities, coeducational schools have largely converted to girls-only or boys-only schools. Many elite private schools have banned mixed plays and games.

The religious militants originally had the full backing of Pakistan's state – until it too was targeted. Euphoric after the successful US-backed jihad in Afghanistan, the military had imagined similar victory elsewhere. “Bleeding India with a thousand cuts”, and gaining strategic depth in Afghanistan, was the army's new goal. A plethora of hard-line jihadist groups such as the LeT, Jaish-e-Muhammad, and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen received backing from secret agencies. These groups spawned others, some allied with Al-Qaida and drawing upon Arab, Uzbek and Chechen fighters.

State sponsorship of jihad did not disappear with 911; it merely slipped underground. Throughout the 1990's, my university in Islamabad had been decorated by posters and banners urging students to join the jihad in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Although these disappeared after 911, the change was cosmetic. For those who ran Pakistan, religious militants were too great a strategic asset to surrender.

Still, it is wrong to blame the military alone for the cancerous growth of jihadism. In Pakistan, Islam has always been a refuge of troubled and weak political leaders. When challenged by mullahs, their instinctive response has been to seek appeasement.

The secular Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in declaring the Ahmadis as non-Muslim, had suddenly turned Islamic in his last-ditch attempt to save his government and life. A fearful Benazir Bhutto made no attempt to challenge the anti-woman Hudood laws or anti-minority blasphemy laws during her two premierships. And Nawaz Sharif went a step further by attempting to bring shari'a to Pakistan.

Fast forward to 2007. Runaway religious radicalism now made its debut in the heart of the nation's capital. Stick-wielding burqa-clad students of Jamia Hafsa, located next to Islamabad's Red Mosque, had forcibly occupied a government building. Seizing alleged prostitutes, they declared that Islamabad would henceforth be governed by *sharia*. Their male counterparts moved around the city with automatic weapons, making bonfires of video cassettes and CDs. Operating as a parallel government, the Red Mosque custodians received the Saudi Arabian ambassador on the mosque premises and negotiated with the Chinese ambassador for the release of his country's nationals, kidnapped from an alleged brothel.

Though seriously challenged, General Musharraf's government dithered. It chose not to shut down the mosque's illegal FM radio station, or cut off electricity and water supplies. Not wishing to alienate allies useful in Kashmir and Afghanistan, Musharraf sent in militant-friendly negotiators. This merely increased the mullahs' intransigency. But in July 2007, the Red Mosque was stormed. By this time, under the nose of intelligence

agencies, the militants had accumulated large stocks of weapons and fuel. Ferocious battles spread over days killed around 150 defenders and two dozen attacking commandos. Enraged mullahs ordered scores of suicide bombings across Pakistan.

What prevents Pakistan from becoming a normal country, separating mullah and state? Answer: etched in stone lies a fundamental principle – when a state proclaims a religious identity and mission, it is difficult to challenge those who organize religious life and interpret religious text.

Built on the Two-Nation theory and Islam, Pakistan cannot declare itself secular. But, since there are many models and interpretations within Islam, there is irresolvable conflict over which version should prevail. This gaping philosophical and ideological void leaves the door open to demagogues who exploit resource scarcity and bad governance. They use every failing of the state to create an insurrectionary mood, driving it towards ungovernability. Years into the future, Pakistan may or may not survive. But if it miraculously does, then it shall surely be as a secular state and not an Islamic one.

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