**My fear is that Pakistan will move towards becoming another Somalia**

— Pervez Hoodbhoy

Physicist and academic

In this month’s interactive Q&A interview, Newsline readers on Facebook and Twitter put nuclear physicist-cum-social analyst Pervez Hoodbhoy in the hot seat. Pervez Hoodbhoy is known for his outspoken and often controversial views on issues such as nuclear proliferation and the secularisation of society. He was recently denied the renewal of his tenure as a physics professor at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), possibly due to ideological differences between him and the university faculty. Hoodbhoy is an accomplished scientist, and has written several research papers in the field of physics. He also writes regularly on a wide range of social, cultural and environmental issues. In this interview, Hoodbhoy answers readers’ questions regarding the current state of science education in the country, his political leanings and his views on the rising extremism in Pakistan.

**Moeed Tirmizi:** Did you have a contract with LUMS? If so, why was it terminated/not renewed?

LUMS has consistently refused to explain why they did not renew my contract. It has not responded to my letter, written after this was made known to me. Over a period of several months, the vice-chancellor and dean gave me various explanations at various times for the non-renewal. A new excuse would be invented just as an old one was shown to be false. For example, I was first told that no one over 60 could be hired as a visiting professor. But it was only too easy to point out over fifteen 60-plus people on the LUMS faculty whose contracts had been routinely renewed. Thereafter they changed the story and said I was not teaching enough credit hours. That was a bit silly because their official record showed that I had taught more courses and credit hours than anyone else in the physics department. And so it went on. Clearly they had made their decision on something that went beyond academics.

Moeed Tirmizi: Why were private e-mails made public, and who made them public?

I suppose you are referring to the email that I sent to the LUMS vice chancellor and six others in the administration. It laid out a record of the various statements LUMS made to me. In that email I said that if the record contained any incorrect statement, they should correct it. After 10 days, when none of those addressed responded, I allowed interested individuals to see the email. That was because, after a certain point, I did not consider their decision to remove me from LUMS to be a purely private matter. Such documentation belongs to the public domain.

Mobin Khan: Sir, how do you manage to live in the increasingly suffocating atmosphere of Pakistan? Have you ever considered moving out?

I am not moving out. This is my country, and I will do what I can to turn it around. I agree that the atmosphere has become suffocating, and that Pakistan is now particularly cruel to its religious minorities. However, we are not the only country in the world that has passed through bad times. Things can improve only when people stand up and fight for what is right.

Farhad Rasool: Why did you walk away from a debate on the topic of culture and religion with a Britisher? You must mean Hamza Tzortzis, the young Greek-British chap who suddenly discovered Islam and now is a globe-trotting preacher. When some LUMS students asked me to debate him, I agreed. It turned out that Tzortzis was a globetrotter and used a lot of big words – Einstein’s general relativity, M-theory, Stephen Hawking and black holes, etc. He used them to make sweeping statements about Islam, science and philosophy. So I asked him to explain the concept of general relativity and M-theory. But, being a psychology major, he had no clue of what he was talking about. Being thoroughly exposed before the audience, he lost his temper and accused me of being anti-Islam and anti-Muslim. I could not take such nonsense, and decided there was no point in debating a dangerous charlatan.

Muhammad Usman Ghanai: Why are you always at the centre of controversy? Do you court controversy?

Well, if someone asks me whether Agha Waqar’s water car can work, then a controversy begins just there. I have no choice, whether on the screen or off it, except to say that the laws of physics do not permit cars to run on water as fuel. That’s just one example, but there are scores of others where if you say the right thing then others jump on you. When Imran Khan declared on Hamid Mir’s TV show that schools in Swat were being blown up because the Americans had occupied Afghanistan, I had to tell him then and there that his statement was nonsensical. This made him so angry that he tried to attack me physically. It’s people like Agha Waqar and Imran Khan who should be considered controversial, not me.

Sarah Kamal: You take very radical positions on issues. Are you ever fearful of the consequences?

I am fearful and not a risk-taker by nature. In fact, I take positions that would be considered conservative, not radical, almost anywhere else. It simply has to be done, even if it’s risky. You cannot always wait for others to take the lead. We live in a society which has become dangerous for practically everyone, including those who do not take strong positions. Behaving like ostriches does not really help. Just think of the 40,000 people killed in the last decade. An overwhelming number were plain bystanders, women shopping in markets, Shias in Imamargahs, Ahmdeis in their prayer houses, etc. Unless we stop the perpetrators of terror, no one will be safe. We have to speak up or be collectively destroyed.

All Haider: Will Pakistan dismember or exist as a banana republic?

My fear is that the authority of the Pakistani state will continue to diminish, and we shall move towards becoming another Somalia. So, even as the state furiously makes more nuclear weapons and fancy long-range missiles, it is surrendering to armed groups that run life in densely populated parts of cities or in the tribal areas. These groups determine the distribution of scarce resources like electricity and water, and they collect their own taxes. Kidnapping is a flourishing industry. Even in the most “civilised” parts of Pakistan, you see the law being openly flouted – the way people drive on the wrong side of the road and freely violate red lights is just one indication.

Mifrah Yusuf: Can we turn the tide of obscurantism and extremism? How?

With three steps: concentrate entirely upon domestic issues and forget about using armed groups to liberate Kashmir and Afghanistan; enforce the rule of law and punish terrorists as well as those who use the mosque and television to stir up religious hatred; and change the school curriculum to reflect civilised values.

Iqbal Razzak: Was there any contradiction between the Quaid’s vision of a secular Pakistan and the premise on which Pakistan was founded?

Mr. Jinnah did not have a clear plan for Pakistan; his Two-Nation Theory was an argument for why Hindus and Muslims could not live together in peace. He made different statements at different times about the character of the new state of Pakistan. Some were pro-secular and others were exactly the opposite. It is often said that had he lived longer, Mr. Jinnah would have given us a plan for Pakistan. But, in fact, he had quite a lot of time in which to define the contours of the country-to-be. Like Nehru, he could have said that the future state would emphasise education, science, modernisation, etc. But he did not do so. In fact, Jinnah wrote no books, programme, or manifesto for Pakistan. And so, when he died, Pakistan was still wondering what it was all about.

Samia Sarwar: Do you subscribe to
Religion and science can get along fine only if religion stays away from scientific and worldly matters, and stays within the realm of morals and values. Marrying them together leads to all kinds of confusion and contradiction because science and religion are fundamentally different. Science is built upon skepticism and the incessant urge to question everything. Religion, on the other hand, is concerned with the hereafter and stands entirely upon faith and obedience to authority.”

Dr. Khurram Yousufzai: Have you ever considered joining politics? Which party is close to your heart?
If there was a party with a clear agenda for socialism and secularism, I would join it. I feel closest to the left parties that have recently joined hands in a coalition, although I don’t agree with all they say and don’t know if the alliance will last.

Fozia Siddiqui: Do you ever see Pakistan’s poor getting their basic rights such as education, a roof above their head and medical facilities?
Not if the population explosion continues. Even an extremely well-meaning and competent government cannot cope with this horrific situation. Population control should be the very first priority of our society. We are breeding like fleas.

Professor Nasir Hassan Baloch: What is the future of education and religion in this country? In 10 years, a lot of education will rely on notebook computers and the technical level will improve almost everywhere. So students in middle-class schools and above will be able to read and write better, and will be better at math. But I doubt that they will be more open-minded because it will also be so much easier to inject poison into young minds. As for religion, all minorities in Pakistan will be driven out. Sectarian fires will become common and even fiercer than now. But eventually Pakistan will become secular, because that is the only way for a society to stay at peace and allow people to be able to practice the religion of their choice.

Mubarak Zeb: What is the state of science and technology in Pakistan?
We are much smarter than the Arabs and, unlike them, actually have a respectable amount of industry, mostly textile. But we can’t compare with the Indians who have become major producers of computer software, pharmaceuticals, heavy machinery, etc. The universities and research organisations produce next to nothing in terms of new knowledge, processes, or products.

Hira Tariq: How geared are our institutions towards imparting the education of science as a subject?
The situation is pretty dreadful. I see this at various schools, colleges and universities where I am invited to speak. The younger generation is totally turned off science and religion because science and religion are fundamentally different. Science is built upon skepticism and the incessant urge to question everything. It constructs the framework by which to understand the material world, and then to change it as needed. Religion, on the other hand, is concerned with the hereafter and stands entirely upon faith and obedience to authority.

Farhan Saeed: How do you view institutions like the Atomic Energy Commission and the KRL Laboratories? Have they made any significant contribution to the development of science in Pakistan?
I think they have done remarkably well in the area of reverse engineering, which means that systems existing elsewhere in the world have been successfully replicated by these two organisations. This is not a small thing and requires intelligence and planning, along with resources. But there does not seem to be a single example of original work where a major invention, innovation, or scientific work has been produced by KRL or PARC. I could be wrong, but I have not heard of anything along these lines. Perhaps some reader could correct me on this.

Shahid Ronaldo: Who, in your view, is the greatest scientist? The choice would be between Newton and Einstein.

Dr. Eqbal Ahmed: Are you clear about nuclearisation views specific to Pakistan or would you suggest the same for India? Have nuclear weapons served as a deterrent to war?
I think it’s hard to do a simple ranking because there are so many specialisations within even a single field. A comparison across different fields is impossible, and I am deeply suspicious of the accuracy of various university international rankings such as made by QS World University Rankings or Times Higher Education (THE). The subjectivity is no less than in a beauty contest. Therefore I cannot answer your question.

Hasan Shaqfi: Is there a meeting point between science and religion? Given the intolerant society we live in, can they co-exist peacefully?
Religion and science can get along fine only if religion stays away from scientific and worldly matters, and stays within the realm of morals and values. Marrying them together leads to all kinds of confusion and contradiction because science and religion are fundamentally different. Science is built upon skepticism and the incessant urge to question everything. It constructs the framework by which to understand the material world, and then to change it as needed. Religion, on the other hand, is concerned with the hereafter and stands entirely upon faith and obedience to authority.

Zehra Mubeen: Do you see another Abdullah Salam ever emerging from Pakistan?
Persons with highly exceptional qualities are born randomly in any human population and so chances certainly exist of another Salam-like genius. But will he or she manage to rise to the top in a world that is now so intensely competitive? One important factor favoring this is the internet; the quickness with which information now travels means that some very bright person, even if isolated from all else, will self-educate and become a shining star. However, it would be much easier to nurture talent if it could be recognised in school. Unfortunately, the poor quality of traditional schooling in Pakistan means that the brightest ones are often suppressed rather than encouraged.