

“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 peo-

ple 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 glib talker 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 content 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 Ghani: 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

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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 Imambargahs, Ahmedis 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.

Ali 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 people for ransom 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

the view that the West is behind the extremism and violence in the country, or is it a home-grown phenomenon?

Religious extremism and violence, as we know them today, became dominant nationally after Pakistan willingly joined up with the United States and Saudi Arabia to battle the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Both countries lie to our west, and both are responsible for nurturing religious extremism since the early 1980s. Of course, they have been bitten by those very extremists that

es by challenging the political and religious establishments with his appeal to socialism. He was a political genius, as well as an incorrigible narcissist. He could have done much good for Pakistan. Unfortunately, he did the opposite by restoring the army to its position of brutal dominance, crushed with force the Baloch uprising of 1973, declared the Ahmadis non-Muslim, and then appointed as COAS the man who ultimately hanged him and changed the culture of Pakistan.

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they had nurtured, especially the US which suffered the World Trade Center destruction. Saudi Arabia has also taken some hits, but it remains committed to exporting its ideology. I don't think we should be searching for external causes all the time. The responsibility for today's terrible state of affairs rests squarely on the Pakistani state and the military which has used jihad as an instrument of state policy, first in Afghanistan, and then in Kashmir. Now the jihadists have gotten out of control.

Sajjad Haider: Did you, at any point in Pakistan's history, feel that there was one person who could turn the country around? If so, who would that be?

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was that person. He roused a demoralised country from the ashes of defeat and disintegration in 1971, and captured the imagination of the mass-

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 flies.

Professor Nasir Hassan Baloch: What is the future of education and re-

ligion 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 with itself and for 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. Our 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 because they see it as something dull and uninteresting. While some of our better students will be reasonably successful in science-related professions such as engineering, medicine and information technology, their poor science backgrounds will leave them ill-equipped for pushing the frontiers of these rapidly evolving fields. Contrast this with India. Surveys show that school students see science as the most prestigious and glamorous career to pursue. For them Einstein, Stephen Hawking, black holes, genes, etc. is the way to go. Although most eventually opt for more “normal” professions, sufficient numbers persist, and some eventually even rank among the world's better scientists.

Shehla Zafar: You have studied and taught at world-class institutions. Which ones would you rate as being among the best?

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 Shafiq: 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.

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 the country?

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 PAEC. 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.

@CaramelizeOnion: Are your de-nuclearisation views specific to Pakistan or would you suggest the same for India? Have nuclear weapons served as a deterrent to war?

India is responsible for starting the nuclear race in South Asia and must carry the blame for that. Even if it had China in mind



rather than Pakistan, it was wrong for India to have made nuclear weapons. But my contention is that Pakistan did not improve its security by following India down the nuclear road. Today Pakistan is in a much more precarious security situation than it was in 1974. The threat from within – religious terrorism, regionalism, breakdown of law and governance and growing anarchy – is much greater than any hypothetical attack from across the border. On the other hand, as the Kargil episode demonstrated, Pakistani nuclear weapons have been used to protect and shield militant groups based upon Pakistani soil which carry out attacks across our borders.

Seema Badar: Who do you consider the heroes of Pakistan?

There are so many, particularly those who are unsung. I would not have heard of Malala Yousufzai except for that attempted murder on her life. Those I know of: Abdus Salam, Abdus Sattar Edhi, Akhtar Hameed Khan, Eqbal Ahmed, Ardeshir Cowasjee, Shahbaz Bhatti, Salman Taseer, Saleem Shahzad, Asma Jehangir, Hassan Nasir, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Habib Jalib, Josh Maliahabadi, Saadat Hasan Manto, Safwat Ghayur, and

many others. The list is long.

Kamila Hayat: Whatever happened to your mentor Dr. Eqbal Ahmed's dream of a liberal arts university. Should one assume that it died with him?

Sadly, there seems to be no chance of that happening now. This is tragic because Eqbal was a visionary and capable of enthusing people of different sorts. Khaldunia University would have been the first liberal

arts university in Pakistan and a model for scholarly inquiry. Faced with government stone-walling, Eqbal had pretty much given up hope for Khaldunia in the year before he died. Promises made by Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto had come to naught, and the University Grants Commission refused to grant Khaldunia a charter.

Zehra Mubeen: Do you see another Abdus 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 bright ones are often suppressed rather than encouraged. ■