

Q 1. Pakistan stands at point in time where tomorrow history may claim that this was the time when everything changed. With the forthcoming elections, do you feel that change is imminent? If yes, what realistic change should we expect, if any at all? From your standpoint do you feel that the voice of reason stands a chance or do we need to expect change through conservative eyes only?

The short answer is: these elections will not be a game changer. In the initial period we are likely to see a somewhat more efficient and less corrupt government. This will come as a relief after five years of serious mis-governance and ubiquitous corruption. But after that it will be business as usual.

The basic fact is that a country's politics reflects the underlying distribution of economic power and social relations. But nothing indicates that these fundamentals are about to change. Or, for that matter, that there is an effort to create a more open and tolerant society. We're going to see yet another round of musical chairs as various players jockey for power. Unlike the time of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto – who made grand promises for reform that he never intended to fulfill – this time around change is not even on the agenda. I suspect that the PPP will be seriously weakened because of its past performance but will cling on to at least a third or half of its present seats in the assembly. While the PMLN is likely to win nationally, it will be challenged strongly by PTI, the new insurgent. Of course both PMLN and PTI have been spared the dreadful attacks made on the ANP, MQM, and PPP because they have refused to condemn the Taliban. Because these two can hold public rallies, it gives them a huge advantage. But all said and done, no party will have a clear majority. So we shall see a coalition government which will have all the weaknesses that such arrangements bring with them. Moreover this elected government will be competing for power against the military, judicial, and religious establishments.

As for social attitudes: I see that we will continue to regress in the short term. The mullah and the media hold our society hostage, leaving little space for reason. Look at the lack of outrage from mullah and media when polio workers are murdered, little girls going to school are shot, schools are blown up every other day by anti-education religious fascists, and politicians are assassinated unless they belong to Taliban-friendly parties. Will the targeting of Shias, Hindus, and Ahmadis stop after the elections? Or the daily abduction, torture, and killing of Baluch nationalists cease? If the answer is yes, then surely we've gained something. Let's see.

Q 2. Relatively speaking what is the biggest deception that we live under as a nation, as a people, as a society, and what is that one thing we can practically change with personal introspection to evolve as a whole?

We deceive ourselves that Pakistan can thrive as a religious state. This has been laid to rest over the last several years. At best it can survive, and that too for only a little bit longer. When the state stands as a silent spectator to the daily murder of its citizens just because their particular variant of Islam is not that of the majority, then it's the beginning of doom. You see the military calmly watching as Shia neighborhoods are devastated by suicide attacks, and when men identified by Shia names like Abbas and Jafri are dragged out from buses and executed Gestapo style. The police are unconcerned when Ahmadis are murdered, or have their graveyards dug up and desecrated openly by the local powers-that-be. Although Sind was traditionally much more tolerant than Punjab, Hindus have fled Sind en masse. We're seeing religious fascism, plain and simple.

So what's the solution? Well, we need to redefine Pakistan! Indeed, the Two-Nation Theory brought the country into existence. But it can't hold the country together any more on the basis. What we need now is a constitution that gives exactly the same rights and opportunities to all of its citizens independent of their ethnicity or religious affiliation, and a machinery that can enforce the law in matters of personal security of citizens.

This equality of rights and opportunities is so attractive that, although most are strongly against secularism, almost every Pakistani wants a visa or green card to go to the United States. Remember the late Qazi Husain Ahmad, the amir of the Jamaat-e-Islami? He would fulminate against America, calling it the den of all evil. But his family is settled in the US, and during a visit to the Brookings Institution in DC in 2000 he declared that "I feel that I've come to my own country". Go search for this on Youtube if you like. Why did he say it? Because although he opposes giving Pakistani non-Muslims the same rights that Muslims possess, he too was treated as a human by the Americans. The fact is that equal treatment appeals to everyone's sense of natural justice. This is why we must have equality for all in Pakistan.

Q3. You are a man of science. The fundamentals of religion and science address two entirely different principles. What role can secularism play in aiding to heal a religiously extremist society into progressing without creating conflict while also integrating science and belief into answering the questions of the universe. As individuals is it possible for us to carry both burdens without a personal struggle?

If you regard religion and science as belonging to separate domains, then they can be pursued separately without creating a conflict. Scientists may hold any faith – or no faith – and yet the work of a scientist in Japan or India is judged exactly on the same criteria as for scientists in America or France. Unfortunately no Pakistani leader has publicly called for separating science from religion. Instead, the government has supported scientific nonsense like the "water car" – a fraud that occasioned three cabinet meetings last year! If you look at the solutions offered in religious TV programs in matters related to personal health, you'd wonder if we are living in the 15th century or the 21st century.

Fortunately, all Muslim countries are not so backward. Iran is certainly a lot better and has an educational system that actually works. Pakistan has seen numerous absurd attempts to marry science with Islam, but Ayatollah Khomeini was quite content with keeping the two separate. He once remarked that there is no such thing as Islamic mathematics. Nor did he take a position against Darwinism, as we have in Pakistan. In fact Iran is one of the rare Muslim countries where the theory of evolution is taught. Moreover, it is a front-runner in stem-cell research – something which George W. Bush and his neo-conservative administration had sought to ban from the United States.

Q.4. As an intellectual observer and commentator you hold a vision for a 21st century Pakistan. What responsibility does our generation have towards the Pakistan Youth, and what is that one thing that the Pakistani diaspora can collaborate to do with the local Pakistanis that may benefit in aiding evolve the thought process of the youth resulting in a progressive Pakistan?

The Pakistani diaspora has been content with doing charity work such as financing schools and hospitals, sending relief materials to disaster hit areas, and so forth. That's good, but not good enough. It does not address Pakistan's need to cure itself of a xenophobic, conspiracy

driven mindset. Our countrymen are persuaded that somehow the Western world is dead set against Islam and Muslims, and that every problem in Pakistan can be traced back to some devilish Western conspiracy. We are so paranoid that one of our top scientists, Dr. Atta-ur-Rahman, claimed that the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan and the 2010 floods were caused by America through its scientific facility called HAARP! A huge number of Pakistanis think that Muslims in the West are the most miserable of people who are fiercely discriminated against in everything. This absolute nonsense must be openly challenged and rejected by those Pakistanis who live in the West and benefit from it in countless ways.

Of course nothing is perfect. So, for example, the bombing of the Boston marathon race last week had some American Muslims concerned that they might be needlessly investigated. These are legitimate fears and hint at discrimination that must be challenged. But can you imagine what they would have done to Hindus or Christians if something similar had happened in Pakistan? After 9/11, I'm told that Americans went to various mosques to assure Muslims that they had nothing to fear. So even though that mad religious zealot – President George W. Bush – was preparing for the invasion and destruction of Iraq, ordinary Americans were perfectly decent.

Compare this with what happened a couple of months ago where a mob of 2000 Muslims went on a rampage against Christians in Lahore after one young Christian man had been arrested after he had a fight with his Muslim friend and had allegedly said something blasphemous. They burned down a hundred or more houses. They had been put into a state of madness by mullahs in madrassas and mosques. Sometime earlier, the same thing had happened in the town of Gojra. The mob destroyed 50 houses and burnt 7 Christians to death, including women and children. Of course, there is long history of attacks against minorities in Pakistan and this was just one of very many. The entire village of Shantinagar had been destroyed by another Muslim crowd in 1997...and recently a Christian man had been beaten to death in Gujranwala for eating at a restaurant in spite of a prominent notice "No Christians Allowed" that had been put outside. Perhaps he thought that he could sneak in unnoticed. What is especially sad is that in a protest demonstration by Christians against the recent massacre I am told that there were no Muslims.

It is also deeply troubling that the Pakistani diaspora remains silent as we burn churches and blow up mandirs in Pakistan. Every American Muslim can see that mosques are flourishing here in America and that their numbers have dramatically increased. Do we ever reflect on how differently we behave? Ever speak on it?

Q5. For democracy to flourish all citizens must vote. One's ideological and political views may be entirely in conflict, or somewhat different with the manifesto of parties presented, but if you had to pick a side who would you support in the upcoming Pakistani elections, and why?

It's a very hard question because none of the parties running in this election seek to build a Pakistan that treats all its citizens in exactly the same way. Some parties emphasize their version of religion, others are built around ethnic origins. So in voting next month, I shall see which local candidate is relatively the least corrupt and dishonest, and then make the least bad choice. But I will not vote for any pro-Taliban party candidate belonging to Imran Khan's PTI, Jamaat-e-Islami, Nawaz Muslim League, etc.