

Pakistan's Cultural Revolution – Causes and Consequences

by
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It is the purpose of this essay to establish markers along Pakistan's journey into religious radicalism, to identify the key drivers, and to speculate on what actions might possibly lead to positive change.

General Zia-ul-Haq, after he took power in 1977, launched an intensive multi-pronged effort, backed by physical force, to redefine Pakistan as an Islamic – rather than a Muslim – state. Many Pakistanis had hoped that his sudden death in 1988 would bring relief. But Zia's plans had far too many enthusiastic guardians. Hence, upon assuming power, every subsequent national leader – Benazir Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif, Pervez Musharraf, and Asif Ali Zardari – was wary of touching, much less undoing, Zia's steps. Even if their personal inclination and sense of justice caused them occasional discomfort, they calculated that the cost of tampering with any law that appealed to Islam would be too high.

Their fear was not unfounded in a country that had been brought into existence by the Islam-is-in danger cry. Many have fallen afoul of religious extremism. Punjab governor Salman Taseer, who expressed his opinion on the country's blasphemy law, paid the ultimate price in January 2011 when one of his bodyguards pumped 22 bullets into him as the others watched. The assassin, Mumtaz Qadri, instantly became a national hero of sorts. Black-coated lawyers, famed for their role in protesting against dictatorship, showered rose-petals on Qadri and swore to defend him for free as the police led him away. The judge who later sentenced him to death had to flee, together with his family, into indefinite exile.

Future political leaders are likely to be still more cautious. A current aspirant to political office, Imran Khan, draws resonance with parts of the Pakistani public with his fiery denunciation of corruption. But his anti-Americanism and Islamic rhetoric draw even more approbation. After spinning his wheels fruitlessly for many years, Khan has honed his oratorical skills towards breaking away from the West and attacking domestic opponents of the Taliban, who he calls "liberal fascists". In November 2011, his mammoth rally in Lahore at the Minar-e-Pakistan established him as a serious force in Pakistani politics.

The message from the mosque is even more strident; the reader is invited to sample typical *khutbas* recently recorded in villages and towns across Punjab¹. A little before Friday prayers is when the mullah makes his call to arms – sometimes literally. Islam, he says, is a complete code of life. It therefore has to be everywhere and not confined to the mosque. Even if they frequently and ferociously differ among themselves, the *ulema* are unified in demanding that the Quran and Hadith must determine economics, politics, and family laws as well as govern lifestyle issues such as dress, food, personal hygiene, marriage, family relations, and even daily routine. Inspired by the philosophy of Abul Ala Maudoodi and Syed Qutb, They warn that Islam – whose expression is the *sharia* – must be thought of as a complete code of life and not just another theology like Christianity,

Judaism, or Hinduism. The faithful must die and, if necessary, kill, to establish this truth.

Pakistan's religious, political parties, the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) are mosque-based and think similarly in spite of political differences. So far they have had little electoral success – except when the post-9/11 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan temporarily boosted their fortunes after which they joined up into the alliance of religious parties called the MMA, *Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal*. But their general lack of success in electoral politics owes to internal conflicts and, as yet, lack of sufficiently charismatic leadership. While political commentators frequently downplay their importance, the fact is that they have sufficient street power to paralyze all attempts at social reforms by any government. Their influence on Pakistan's cultural, social, and political life is enormous and disproportionate to the small number of votes they receive.

Influenced by such radical voices, millenarian movements have sprung up in the tribal areas as well as settled areas like Swat. They demand the imposition of *sharia* and a fulfillment of the slogan taught in schools – *Pakistan ka matlab kya? La illahha illallah!* (What is the meaning of Pakistan? Allah is supreme!). But middle-class urban populations also welcome the *sharia*. The Islamabad Red Mosque episode of 2007 vividly demonstrated this.

Correspondingly, the liberal citizen of Pakistan has been progressively marginalized and confined in expression to the small English-reading part of the public. Since there is only a small window open to outsiders, many have taken dissenting voices to be proof of cultural and political vibrancy. But this is a mistake. Urdu TV channels, watched by the masses, have steadily moved rightwards, dropping token dissenters. Liberals are terrified that they may be accused of speaking against Islam – a crime for which death is legally the minimum penalty. All but a few have shied away from challenging laws that have now been in place for over a quarter century. Forlorn and sporadic protests by women's groups have occasionally reminded the world of the existence of such laws.

Today's Pakistan is very different from what it had been during its first three decades. A cultural revolution is transforming the country. What happened and why?

Frustrated Post-Zia Reforms

The deference of Pakistani leaders to mullah power is not new. Their instinctive response has always been to seek appeasement. Although a whisky-drinking, mercurial Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had challenged them successfully in his rise to power in the early 1970's, he too suddenly turned Islamic in his final days as he made a desperate, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to save his government and life. A fearful Benazir Bhutto did not challenge Pakistan's *Hudood* and blasphemy laws during her two premierships. Her western education and personal lifestyle notwithstanding, she made no attempt to undo the inferiority of Pakistani women that remains written into the law. Nawaz Sharif, her successor, went a step further by attempting to bring the *sharia* to Pakistan.

Post-Zia, of all leaders who followed, Pervez Musharraf was the only one bold enough to publicly espouse a more “modern” and “moderate” Islam. Although his personal

ambitions and limited vision brought his downfall, the immediate relief he brought in his initial years was felt by many. Heads of government organizations were no longer required to lead noon prayers as in the 1980's; female announcers with undraped heads freely appeared on Pakistan Television; thickly bearded stewards were replaced by female flight attendants on PIA flights; the first women fighter pilots were inducted into the Pakistan Air Force; encouragement towards overt religious symbols among military officers was no longer encouraged; and hundreds of women prisoners arrested on charges of fornication under the Hudood Ordinance were released. Many of these women had spent years awaiting their trial.

Although Musharraf actions were frequently inconsistent with his stated beliefs, his personal instincts were undeniably liberal. Well before 11th September 2001 – on 21st April 2000 to be specific – he announced a new administrative procedure for registration of cases under the Blasphemy Law 295-C. This law, under which the minimum penalty is death, had often been used to harass religious minorities as well as personal opponents. To reduce such occurrences, his modified procedure would have required authorization from the local district magistrate for registration of a blasphemy case. A modest improvement at best, it could have ameliorated some of the worst excesses.

But Musharraf's commitment was less than firm. Twenty five days later – under the watchful glare of the mullahs, Musharraf hastily climbed down saying: *“As it was the unanimous demand of the ulema, mashaikh and the people, therefore, I have decided to do away with the procedural change in the registration of FIR under the Blasphemy Law”*.

This was the beginning of his other climb downs. In October 2004, as a new system for issuing machine readable passports was being installed, the government declared that henceforth it would not be necessary for passport holders to specify their religion. The Islamic parties swiftly reacted, denouncing it as a grand conspiracy aimed at secularizing Pakistan and destroying its Islamic character. But even before the mullahs actually took to the streets, the government lost nerve and the volte-face was announced. On 24 March, 2005, the minister of information, Sheikh Rashid, said the decision to revive the religion column was a good one else, *“Qadianis and other apostates would be able to pose as Muslims and perform pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia”*.

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 in 1980. This was not repealed by any of the civilian governments that ruled from 1988 to 1999. Under the Hudood Ordinance, Pakistani law prescribes death by stoning for married Muslims who are found guilty of extra-marital sex (for unmarried couples or non-Muslims, the penalty is 100 lashes). The law is exact in stating how the death penalty is to be administered:

“Such of the witnesses who deposed against the convict as may be available shall start stoning him and, while stoning is being carried on, he may be shot dead, whereupon stoning and shooting shall be stopped.”

Musharraf proposed amending the Hudood Ordinance and opened it for parliamentary discussion in early September, 2006. Some suspected that a part of the gain would be political: he might be seeking to split the parliamentary opposition to government policies in Balochistan, where the insurgency has pitted that province against the Punjab. On the other hand, he expected outrage from some of his allies, fundamentalists of the MMA, the main Islamic parliamentary group that commanded majorities in the provincial assemblies of the Frontier and Baluchistan. Indeed, their reaction to the initiative was precisely as anticipated. MMA members tore up copies of the proposed amendments on the floor of the National Assembly and threatened to resign en masse. But long before any threats by the Islamic opposition were actually carried out, Musharraf's government scuttled its own initiative. This retreat doomed the bill to obscurity.

Other Pakistani leaders in the Musharraf government were also anxious to establish their religious credentials. Shaukat Aziz, a former Citibanker who was chosen to be prime minister, made a call for nation-wide prayers for rain in a year of drought. At an education conference in Islamabad, he rejected the suggestion of a moderate Islamic scholar, Javed Ghamdi, that only school children in their fifth year and above should be given formal Islamic education. Instead, Aziz proposed that Islamic religious education must start as soon as children enter school. The government's education policy now requires Islamic studies to begin in the third year of school, a year earlier than in the previous policy.

Government ministers allied to Musharraf competed to show their Islamic zeal. The federal minister for religious affairs, Ijaz ul Haq (Zia-ul-Haq's son), 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 could not be either a Muslim or a Pakistani. He then declared that given the situation facing Muslims today, he was prepared to be a suicide bomber. The 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. Maulana Gul Naseeb Khan, provincial secretary of the MMA, was among those holy men to whom women's bodies are of particular concern. He said, "*We think that men could derive sexual pleasure from women's bodies while conducting ECG or ultrasound*". 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 could be seen in several cities of the NWFP (now renamed as KPK) province because the MMA deemed the exhibition of unveiled women as un-Islamic.

As it finally turned out, Musharraf's "enlightened moderation" turned out to be largely cosmetic and left no permanent mark. Many felt that his decisions were more for American consumption – he got a standing ovation from the Council for Foreign Relations in 2006 – than out of real worry for the growing forces of religious extremism. Duplicity was enshrined as the military's de-facto foreign policy: even as it formally

withdrew its support for the Taliban, it continued to actively support and train anti-India extremist groups on Pakistani soil. The membership of these jihadist groups largely subscribed to the Deobandi/Salafi/Wahabi schools. Most were bitterly anti-Shia while some considered worship at shrines, practiced by Barelvi Muslims and others, as heretical. This soon had practical consequences: shrines were to become their targets, preferred by their proximity over distant and dangerous India.

Defeating the Shrine

Sufi Islam, representing the softer side of Islam, has been on the defensive in Pakistan for many years. Major shrines of Pakistan, such as that of Data Darbar in Lahore or of Abdullah Shah Ghazi in Karachi, are experiencing a precipitous decline in the number of devotees. Fear is certainly part of the reason. All major shrines, and scores of minor ones, have attacked by suicide bombers who have left carnage behind.



Data Darbar Shrine in Lahore blown up by Pakistani Taliban, June 2010.

But fear is not the only reason. Growing literacy enables more individuals to read the abundant religious literature, and to absorb more readily the dominant back-to-the-Qur'an line. This is leading towards a reassessment of the *piri-mureedi* system in which Sufi *pirs* hand out amulets, prescriptions, and blessings – all for a hefty price – to their credulous followers. Considered to be spiritual guardians and guides of the faith, they supposedly have magical healing powers. For example, Benazir Bhutto was a *mureed* of the prescient Pir Pinjar, a man who claimed to cure terminally ill patients by spraying water on them with a garden hose. Her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, has a black goat sacrificed daily at his residence on the advice of his *pir*. But educated Muslims incline increasingly towards associating Sufism with ignorance and blind belief.

The conflict between the hard and soft Islam is not recent. *Wahabism*, which originated in the 18th century, started as a reaction to Shia'ism and Sufism. In its early years, it succeeded in destroying all shrines, together with historical monuments and relics from the early days of Islam. Muslims of the *Deobandi-Salafi-Wahabi* persuasion fiercely decry the syncretism of popular Islam, claiming that it arises from ignorance of Qura'nic teachings.

Historically, Sufis were responsible for much of Islam's rapid spread after its initial military conquests in the 7th and 8th centuries. Conversion of lower Hindu castes into Islam was an attractive option for some on the Indian subcontinent. The Kurds of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey also converted while maintaining parts of their pre-Islamic culture. For Sufis, the Qur'an has to be interpreted allegorically. Harsh Qu'ranic instructions for punishment were smoothed away by charismatic Sufi masters like Mansur al-Hallaj and Jalaludin Rumi. They invested in the concept of subjugating the self (*jihad bi nafsihi*) to the service of the Creator and His creation. Allah, they argued, must be worshiped not out of duty or fear but because he loved his creation and was loveable. Many dedicated their lives to the service of the weak and needy. In searching for that divine love, Sufi Muslims pray at shrines, venerate local saints, sing, and dance themselves into ecstatic oblivion. In India, Sufi saints continue to be revered by Muslims and Hindus alike.

Today's Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, and an increasing number of mainstream worshippers, share the Wahabist hatred for shrine worshippers. They are sometimes equated with idolaters and Hindus for this reason. The tomb of Rahman Baba, a Pakhtoon Sufi poet of the 19th century who played the rubab and loved to sing and dance, was the particular object of an attack in Swat in 2009. A Pakistani journalist sardonically observed that "Islamist warriors won a great victory in the ongoing global jihad against the satanic western powers, especially the United States, when they successfully bombed and damaged the mausoleum of Rahman Baba."

Sufism is losing out on the Indian subcontinent for other reasons too: its followers tend to be concerned primarily with saving their own souls rather than those of others through aggressive proselytizing. The Sufi shrine of Bari Imam, barely a mile down the road from my university, is a colorful example. The site of a festive annual pilgrimage, at its peak it brought nearly a half million devotees. Arriving barefooted from far-away places in the Punjab, pilgrims twirl to rapidly beating drums. Some carry miniature golden mausoleums garlanded with yellow and green streamers while triangular flags bearing Qur'anic verses flutter everywhere. They seek blessings, spiritual enlightenment, miracle cures, and relief from life's other stresses. A carnival atmosphere prevails. Until they were banned some 30 years ago, there were gatherings called *mujras* where spectators showered money upon dancing girls. The present generation of students finds it hard to believe that it could ever have been like that. This shrine was targeted a few years ago by a suicide bomber who killed over 20 devotees; this may be one reason why times have become leaner and meaner for Sufi shrines.

Finances may be a still more important reason. Shrines rely upon relatively small local donations, but petrodollar funding for madrassas and mosques has steadily worked in favor of the hardliners. Across the world, as well as in the West, hard-line Islamist clerics have their salaries paid for by donations from oil-rich countries. The *Tablighi Jamaat* religious movement, headquartered in Raiwind near Lahore is also well-funded. It has annual congregations that rank in size second only to that of the Haj pilgrimage. With an estimated following of 70-80 million people of *Deobandi* persuasion, it is spread across Southwest Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. In France it has

about 100,000 followers and by 2007, Tabligh members were situated at 600 of Britain's 1350 mosques. *Tablighis* despise mystical Islam, which they equate with idolatry and ancestor worship.

The TJ represents only the tip of the religious iceberg. Attendance at mosques has skyrocketed, as has adherence to prayers, fasting, and other rituals. In Pakistan, an observer who grew up in a military family notes that “until the late 70s, the mosques located at the armed forces bases (military, air force and navy), were 90% *Ahle Sunnat Wal Jama't* (Sufi), 8% *Deobandi*, and 0% *Salafi*. Currently 85% of the mosques are *Deobandi* or *Salafi*, and less than 10% are *Ahle Sunnat Wal Jama't*.²” This is an enormous transition, and has strong implications for what Pakistan’s military will become in the future. Steadily, the culture of the mosque is defeating the culture of the shrine.

Death to Culture!

The physicist Murray Gell-Mann coined the term “cultural DNA” for that which is continuously being encoded, strand by strand, for passage on to future generations. Indeed, culture will have a bigger role than politics in determining how Pakistanis will live, the quality of their lives, the kinds of employment available, and the shape of its economy. All else can be considered as dependent variables: politics, economics, and education.

What is our culture and where do we really belong to, ask young Pakistanis. Are we South Asian or Arab? The tension between religious, national, and ethno-linguistic identities can be quite wrenching. Perhaps more than other Muslims, immigrants from Pakistan to the West feel at sea when their children ask them where they belong to. Only a few respond by identifying themselves through their ethnic origins. Most simply say: we are Muslims.

This reflects attitudes in the home country as well: a survey of 2000 young Pakistanis between 18 and 27 was carried out across Pakistan regions by the British Council in 2009. It found that “three-quarters of all young people identify themselves primarily as Muslims. Just 14% chose to define themselves primarily as a citizen of Pakistan.” Only where ethnic and linguistic nationalism is very strong, as in Bangladesh or Turkey, do populations have a significant primary identification with the nation-state.

This phenomenon had also been investigated earlier in 2005 by the Pew Global Survey which reported that “Large majorities in Pakistan (79%), Morocco (70%) and Jordan (63%) say they self-identify first as Muslims, rather than as Pakistanis, Moroccans or Jordanians. Even in Turkey, with its more secular traditions, a 43% plurality among Muslims identify primarily with their religion rather than their nationality. Indonesians are closely split with 39% self-identifying as Muslims first, 35% as Indonesians and 26% saying both equally.”

Religion is your friend and culture is your enemy, says Pakistan’s Saudi-inspired revivalist movement. Grim and humorless, it frowns upon every expression of spontaneity and pleasurable pastime, decrying it variously as *biddat* (unacceptable

innovation) or *haram* (forbidden). The orthodox say that corruption of the youth must be eliminated by regulating cultural life. Weddings, once colorful events of joy marked by singing and dancing, have moved towards specious consumption of food, decorative lights, and false glitter.

Charles Ferndale, a freelancer who occasionally writes on Pakistan, reflects sadly upon the destruction of the country's literary and artistic heritage. "Archaeologists date the arrival of *homo sapiens* in the world by the traces of art they left behind. Art was then a celebration of life, an act of worshipping a beautiful world, which is now being destroyed by "progress". These ancient remnants of art show the earliest expression among people of their sense of what is sacred. We need art because when we lose that sense of the sacred, we destroy the world to which we truly belong, and replace it with savage doctrines and wastelands.³"

Ferndale says nothing new but still moves me because of the truth of his observations: students in my university have forgotten to dance traditional dances or any other, cannot act or mimic, cannot recite classical poetry, and read almost nothing beyond their textbooks. Most students secretly watch Indian or western films on their computers or VCRs in the privacy of their rooms. But an attempt in 2007 by my university's physics department to screen "A Beautiful Mind", the story of John Nash the famous Princeton mathematician, was disrupted by bearded students who decried it as immoral and an imposition of Western culture. A viewing of the film *Bol* was also disrupted in 2011.

Perhaps the biggest cultural casualty has been music. So many of our students sang beautifully in past decades but only a few do so now. Playing a musical instrument of any kind is becoming rarer. Much has been lost.



Hair cutting is forbidden – a scrawled Taliban edict in Kohat leaves a barber unemployed

The expulsion and murder of Pashtun traditional musicians by the Taliban has sometimes been written about. Many think that this is just a problem of the wild tribal areas of Pakistan. But the problem is still deeper, and the rejection of music is a favorite issue of the orthodoxy. The *Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba* (IJT), the fascistic student wing of the

Jamaat-e-Islami, forced the music department at Punjab University to relocate off-campus. Peshawar University was shut for nearly a month in 2010 after IJT members bludgeoned to death a student who insisted on hearing music in his hostel room. The music department at Bahauddin Zakaria University in Multan was closed down for good in 2009 because the university claimed there was a lack of interest in music.

More generally, music has always been a disputed matter in Islam, with arguments only about the degree to which it has been forbidden in the Qur'an, i.e. whether it is partial or total.

Mustafa Sabri, a leading 20th century conservative Ottoman scholar and a *Shaikh-ul-Islam*, writes about music's pernicious effects: "*Music has a tremendous effect in agitating the feelings of romance and love. That is why a banquet with music is usually accompanied with pretty women and alcoholic beverages. Therefore, the most intimate secrets of love are exposed first by poems, then, under the disguise of music, in a similar manner to some women making themselves more attractive under the disguise of the hijab.*"

A somewhat softer approach is taken by the Al-Mawrid Institute of Islamic Sciences (of Shia persuasion): "If the content of the poems and all literature is endorsed by the *Shari'ah* and does not offend man's moral values, then music can be used in poetry, prose, oratory, writings and recitals." While this concession puts him in the category of Muslim "liberals", it still does not allow for the rich tradition of Urdu, Persian, and Arabic love-and-romance music. Even more, his exceptions do not cover today's pop-music, vulgar but attractive, broadcast on growing numbers of FM stations in Muslim countries. So how do today's young Muslims deal with it? They love the beat but feel uncomfortable at some deep level, often internalizing a guilt that comes out as repentance at a later stage in life.

It is therefore unsurprising that there is no substantive movie industry of any consequence in any Muslim country, although many are secret consumers of Bollywood. Iranian documentary movies may be the exception because of their rich aestheticism, but their makers are in constant battle against state censorship. Bangladesh, with its rich secular culture of music and poetry, may be next in the firing line. One fervently hopes that Bengalis will look to their mother country and decide that that is not where they should go.

Where are the Women?

A casual visitor to India, Bangladesh, or Nepal will see women riding bicycles and scooters, seated in buses next to men, working in shops and offices, or selling items on the pavements. Not so in Pakistan, except in the posh areas of a city. Millions are under the spell of Al-Huda Islamic centers whose message is: "cover up", "stay at home", and "obey your man"⁴. Across the border the mainstream Deoband madrasa in India issued a fatwa on 4th April 2010 stating that: "*It is unlawful for Muslim women to do job in government or private institutions where men and women work together and women have to talk with men frankly and without veil.*"⁵ Presumably this means that women may

work only in a man-free environment, else “frank” conversations may follow. Moreover, as the Deoband spokesman said, to work in a bank that operates on interest is *haram* (forbidden) for man and woman.

The veil transcends particularities of geography. At any international airport Muslim women are identifiable through their *hijabs* and *burqas*. Reasons vary: a defensive assertion of cultural identity in a foreign land, specific instructions from relatives, fear of social disgrace, peer pressure, physical threat, or a belief that this fulfils a divine instruction.

What does the “real Islam” say? How much a Muslim woman should cover up is a hotly disputed matter. For some the simple Malaysian headscarf and Iranian-style *hijab*, which leave the face uncovered, will do. Liberal Muslims go further and contend that almost any (modest) clothing is sufficiently Islamic, and the Qur’an merely enjoins men and women to avoid gazing at each other lustfully. But the revitalized orthodoxy finds the headscarf and *hijab* excessively promiscuous. The Saudi *burqa*, with even the eyes covered, is finding increasing favor in much of the Sunni world.

For Taliban vigilantes in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the *muslimahs* of *Al-Huda* are saying the right thing but with insufficient force. For them, few sins are greater than for women to walk around bare faced. Instructed by a wisdom that transcends the country’s law, they have shot and killed women for not wearing the *burqa*, and have set off powerful bombs killing dozens in markets frequented by unveiled women. Throwing acid, or threatening to do so, has been spectacularly successful in making women embrace modesty. Maulana Abdul Aziz, a head of Islamabad’s Red Mosque and a graduate of Quaid-e-Azam University, broadcast the following threat to QAU’s girl students from the mosque’s FM station:

“The government should abolish co-education. Quaid-i-Azam University has become a brothel. Its female professors and students roam in objectionable dresses. . . . Sportswomen are spreading nudity. I warn the sportswomen of Islamabad to stop participating in sports. . . . Our female students have not issued the threat of throwing acid on the uncovered faces of women. However, such a threat could be used for creating the fear of Islam among sinful women. There is no harm in it. There are far more horrible punishments in the hereafter for such women.”⁶



Jamia Hafsa, Islamabad, 2007. The madrassa's leaders had threatened to teach women students at QAU a lesson unless they too covered up.

Such threats from the clergy have not been condemned by the public, nor even by the students of my university who were directly threatened (Musharraf was the university's chancellor at the time; he made no response). Today there is scarcely a female face visible anywhere in Pakistan's Pakhtunkhwa province or any of Afghanistan's cities. Working peasant women cannot function while wearing the tent-like *burqa*, but the pressure on urban women grows by the day. Both *burqa* and the Saudi *abaya* (a shapeless gown) were unknown 15-20 years ago on campuses. Now, while the undraped head is still occasionally visible, delivering my physics lectures to rows of *burqa*'ed women feels somewhat like giving sermons in a graveyard.

The taboo of the female body often overpowers all else. 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. Male rescuers, who arrived in ambulances, were prevented from moving injured women to hospitals. After the October 2005 earthquake in 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 Impact on Culture and Progress

Culture is a strong influence upon the acquisition of wealth and resources. In his magnum opus, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber argues that capitalism and the rational pursuit of economic gain were aided by the inherent logic of certain religious ideas which encouraged planning and self-denial. This gain could, of course, happen at the expense of other groups or nations, or perhaps of the natural environment.

Increased emphasis on ritual is directly impacting productivity in factories, offices, businesses, and universities in Pakistan. Which is more important, this world or the world of the hereafter? The answer to this question determines how much time a society gives to religious rituals. Ultimately this is a question of core values.

Islam is more demanding of a worshipper's time and energy than other religions. Unless corners are cut, these include participation in five daily congregational prayers (additional prayers called *nufils* are encouraged). In the holy month of Ramadan when fasting is mandatory, the body is so taxed that institutions and industries generally close well before normal hours. Apart from praying and fasting, daily recitation from the Qur'an is recommended. The pilgrimages of *Haj* and *Umra* are strongly encouraged as well. Inevitably compromises with religious demands are sought in industry, government, and academia. Else they would become quite dysfunctional

Some Muslims, including those who perform rituals, are worried by a work ethic that often renders institutions in Muslim countries inefficient and ineffective. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian cleric who frequents Al-Jazeera, is reported to have delivered a fatwa intended to address Egypt's productivity problem – pray less, work more, and limit prayers to ten minutes at a time. The article reporting this news goes on to say that “According to an official study, Egypt's six million government employees are estimated to spend an average of only 27 minutes per day⁷ actually working, reflecting a real problem with productivity.” Since there is no footnote of an actual survey, I think this is an excessive exaggeration. He goes on to say that “To save some time, they can also just put some water over their socks, instead of taking (socks) off to wash the feet”. Misusing prayer time is common. Workers of all levels in many Muslim countries massively misuse prayer time to cover up for laziness. Ramadan is a month when every non-religious activity barely crawls along. Who, living in a newly energized Muslim society, can deny this?

There is increasing incompatibility between Pakistani work ethics and the demands of modernization and science in a fiercely competitive world. This bodes ill for the future.

The Larger Dimensions

How does one understand Pakistan's lead role in extremism? Does it come from the personalities of its leaders? The ideological forces that led to its birth? American connivance with Pakistan in creating the post-1979 jihad? Its manipulation of Pakistani politics over the decades and support for military dictators? Answers have been sought in all of these. But many other developing societies also have incendiary material and not exploded. Perhaps one should one try to understand the phenomenon in Marxian terms.

A prescient essay “Terrorism: Theirs and Ours”^{8,9} by Eqbal Ahmed, a Pakistani scholar of exceptional insight who died in 1999, is well worth consideration. Well before 911, Ahmed foretold that a historic confrontation between Muslims and the West was just beyond the horizon. He made the case that even as communications shrink distances between cultures, strong material forces were acting in the opposite direction. A mass of newly landless peasantry, displaced by shrinking farms and mechanized agriculture, was

drifting towards shanty towns surrounding the urban centers. Looking anxiously for wage work, peasants were forming a new proletariat that would shake the foundations of developing states.

“A transformation so systemic was bound to threaten old ways of life. It destroyed the autonomy of rural life lived for millennia, shrank the distances that had separated communities from each other, forced diverse peoples and individuals to live in urban proximity and compete with each other, undermined the structures and values of patriarchy as it had prevailed for centuries, and threw millions of people into the uncertain world of transition between tradition and modernity. In brief, the phenomenon put into question, and increasingly rendered dysfunctional, traditional values and ways of life. Yet, cultures tend to change more slowly than economic and political realities. All societies caught in this process undergo a period of painful passage.”

Ahmed argued that the extent to which a society makes this transition peacefully and democratically depends on its historical circumstances, the engagement of its intelligentsia, the outlook of its leaders and governments, and the ideological choices they make.

The chances of peaceful transition have been denied by millenarian movements which have seized upon the dislocation and discontent caused by modernization. This has sharply changed the texture of cultural life from what it was during Pakistan’s first three decades. Taking advantage of the state’s weakness, they offer critical assistance in aiding victims of natural disasters. But their welfare system is contingent upon mosque attendance. Steadily, their power increases.

Perhaps things would have been different if the US not cultivated Islamists as allies against communism during the Cold War. But things came to a head with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The American strategy for defeating the ‘Evil Empire’ required marshalling the forces of Islam from every part of the world. With General Zia ul-Haq as America’s foremost ally, and Saudi Arabia as the principal source of funds, the CIA openly recruited Islamic holy warriors from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Algeria. Radical Islam went into overdrive as its superpower ally and mentor funnelled support to the mujahideen. It worked. In 1988, Soviet troops withdrew unconditionally, and the US-Pakistan-Saudi-Egypt alliance emerged victorious. A chapter of history seemed complete, and hubris defined US policy for another two decades. But the true costs of this victory did not take long to become known. Even in the mid 1990s – long before the 9/11 attack on the US – it was clear that the victorious alliance had unwittingly created a genie suddenly beyond its control.

All this is history – and unchangeable. Today, relations between Islam and the West, particularly as represented by the US, are deteriorating even if Huntington’s epic civilizational clash may not be here yet. Stung by the attacks of 11 September 2001, the United States had lashed out against Muslims globally. Plans for attacking Iraq were put

in place just weeks after 911 and the Bush administration zeroed in on Saddam Hussain as a villain who had to be eliminated. Evidence was suitably fabricated, and reactions of the Muslim world to the forthcoming invasion were brushed aside. America's neoconservatives thought that cracking the whip would surely bring the world to order. Instead, the opposite happened. Islamists won massively in Iraq after a war waged on fraudulent grounds by a superpower filled with hubris, arrogance and ignorance. "Shock and Awe" eventually turned into cut and run. Left behind was a snake pit, from which battle-hardened terrorists stealthily made their way to countries around the world. Muslims saw reinforcement of their belief of an oil-greedy America, in collusion with Israel, as a crusader force occupying a historic centre of Islamic civilisation.

Reversing the Slide – How?

Mustapha Kemal Ataturk's was the first revolutionary response in the Muslim world. He abolished the Caliphate, established an uncompromisingly secular Turkish republic, suppressed many religious institutions, proscribed the veil, prohibited polygamy, and enacted secular laws regulating property rights and women's rights on the basis of equality. He broke away from tradition and the association of Islam with state power. But this was a one-off; it is hard to conceive that well-prepared Islamists would permit such direct frontal assault in the 21st century. Moreover, a century later, Turkey is experiencing the resurgence of Islamism.

An Ataturk-style frontal assault is unimaginable in Pakistan's situation. So, could the answer be science and education? One might have hoped that science would prove to be a Trojan Horse. Reminder: a few thousand years ago, after a fruitless 10-year siege of Troy, the Greeks had built a huge wooden horse. Hidden inside were crack Greek warriors. The Greek army pretended to sail away, and the Trojans pulled the Horse into their city as a victory trophy. At night, the Greek warriors crept out of the Horse and opened the gates for the rest of the Greek army, which had sailed back. The city was destroyed and the Greeks won the war. Cassandra, the soothsayer of Troy, had insisted that the horse would be the downfall of the city and its royal family but she was ignored. Doom and loss followed.

In a sense, modern science too is a Trojan Horse. In the centuries-long war between science and religion, it has made itself welcome – and even indispensable – by offering everything big and small that the modern world now relies upon: antibiotics and aspirin, computers and cars, gasoline and gelatins. Although they smash television sets and blow up internet cafes, even the rigidly orthodox and primitive Taliban pay tribute to science by using rocket propelled grenades and driving around in Toyota pickups instead of using swords and riding on horses or camels. Thus science clearly has the power to penetrate everywhere.

The hope for those believing in science as a panacea goes something like this: if a society is convinced that it must develop science then teaching science obviously becomes necessary. Since science teaching requires developing critical inquiry as a basic tool, it can silently subvert mindless superstitions, irrational beliefs in witches, spirits, and other

constructions handed down from tradition. Briefly stated, the hopeful ones think: science in, non-science out.

Unfortunately the world doesn't really work this way. Troy made a fatal mistake by ignoring sound advice, but today's Cassandras are being listened to very attentively because they can point to real evidence that science has weakened the hold of religion, and even removed it from the realm of ordinary life. They sense that this great horse also hides within it certain germs, the pathogenic substances that soundlessly attack and weaken cherished beliefs from within. Indeed, the Cassandras of orthodoxy in all religions have come to recognize science as an invasive foreign body. A range of distinct immune responses is before us. One can ignore science but welcome technology. In this way of looking at things, science is just the window dressing. You don't have to know how a cell phone works in order to use it. So just don't bother about asking questions about why things work. In earlier times, Muslim orthodoxy had resisted new inventions such as the printing press, loudspeaker, and penicillin, but today such rejection has all but vanished.

So then could changing popular culture through music and movies be the answer? Open up more avenues for public entertainment such as sports, festivals, etc? Surely these are good softeners and make it relatively harder for extremism to penetrate the mind. Khaled Ahmed, an astute observer of the Pakistani cultural scene has a pithy definition: "The handiest meaning of culture – in the absence of a permanent and consensual definition – is the ability of a people to have fun."¹⁰ Indeed, every opportunity that provides the public with alternatives to joyless, hard-line, one-track thinking must surely be seized upon.

In an environment that chokes on religiosity and hypocrisy, it is a relief to see that satire has managed to survive – at least to an extent. A band called the *Beyghairat Brigade* (the Dishonour Brigade) had recently caused waves among the young with its *Aloo-Andey* (Potatoes & Eggs) on You-Tube. The title targets the peddlers of *qaumi ghairat* (national honour) who peddle xenophobic patriotism.

Cultural critic and columnist Nadeem F. Paracha describes the effort¹¹:

In a clean, unadulterated sweep that lasts not more than ten seconds, BB wonders about a country where killers like Mumtaz Qadri (who assassinated former Punjab governor Salman Taseer after accusing him of committing blasphemy) are treated as royals; and where Ajmal Kasab (the Pakistani terrorist who took part in the attack in Mumbai) is a hero; and where mullahs escape wearing a woman's burqa (like the head cleric of the Lal Masjid); and how no-one ever mentions men like the Nobel-Prize winning Pakistani scientist Abdul Salam (just because he belonged to the outlawed Ahmadi sect).... Then halfway through the video, as if preempting what a majority of the 'ghiarat brigade' would be decrying about this video, one of the band members is seen holding up a placard with the words, 'This video is sponsored by Zionists.'

But such sniping, for all its brilliance, has its limits. Hardliners will violently attack what they see goes against their version of Islam. Culture cannot replace the power of reason.

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. Saving Pakistan from intensified internal conflict will require that it seek a more inclusive identity and extend equal rights and opportunities to all its citizens.

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