

Reinventing Pakistan

by

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It's March 23, Pakistan Day, and time for the usual flag-waving celebrations. But let's face it – things have not gone well for Pakistan. It has been a state since 1947 but is still not a nation. Missing is a strong common identity, mental makeup, shared sense of history, and common goals. The failure to effectively integrate flows from inequalities of wealth and opportunity, absence of effective democracy, and a dysfunctional legal system.

Notwithstanding the recent outburst of Punjab's chief minister, most Punjabis think of themselves as Pakistani first and Punjabi second. But not the Baluch or Sindis! Schools in Baluchistan refuse to hoist Pakistan's flag or sing its national anthem, Sindis accuse Punjabis of stealing their water, the MQM runs Karachi on strictly ethnic grounds, Pakhtoons adamantly want the NWFP renamed Pakhtoonkhwa against the wishes of other residents, caste and sect matter more than competence in getting a job, and ethnic student groups wage pitched battles against each other on campuses.

Pakistan's genesis explains the disunity. Created as the Boolean negative of India – NOT India – there was little thought to how the new country might accommodate diversity. It did not help that its founder died just a year later. Mr. Jinnah's plans were ambiguously stated and he left behind no substantive writings. His speeches, often driven by the exigencies of the moment, are freely cherry-picked today. Some find there a liberal and secular voice, others an articulation of Islamic values. The confusion is irresolvable.

The determination to emphasize a singular Muslim national identity, and maintain a centralized state structure run by the colonial-era ruling elite, became the basis for governance. It proved to be Pakistan's greatest burden. This became evident as the Baloch, Pashtuns, Sindhis, and most dramatically the Bengalis in East Pakistan, launched struggles to be respected and pursue their own dreams. The independence of East Pakistan thirty years ago should have ended the illusion that religion and force can hold people together in the face of injustice and a lack of democracy.

Yet, religion still remains the strongest bonding factor. A recent survey of 2000 young Pakistanis in the 18-27 age group found that three-quarters identify themselves first as Muslims and only secondly as Pakistanis. Just 14% defined themselves as citizens of Pakistan first. Dejected and adrift, most see religion as their anchor. The common refrain of the post-Zia generation is that "every issue will be solved if we go back to the fundamentals of Islam."

But these "fundamentals" have multiple interpretations that fuel divisive and violent political forces, each convinced that they alone understand God's will. Murderous wars between Sunni and Shia militias started in the late 1980's. Today, even those favoring the utopian vision of an ideal Islamic state are frightened by the Pakistani Taliban who seek to impose their version of *sharia* through the Kalashnikov and suicide bombings.

This is not a temporary difficulty. Shall it be for Sunnis to decide Pakistan's laws? Whose *sharia* is the right one: Hanafi, Shafii, Maaliki, Hanbali? Will the *amir-ul-momineen* or caliph be elected and by who? More troubling questions: can Hindus, Christians, Parsis, Ahmadis, be equal Pakistanis? Or is Pakistan only for Muslims?

For all these vexing matters, Pakistan can become a nation one day. Just as rain grinds down stony mountains and ultimately creates fertile soil, nations are created when people live together long enough. How long is long? In Pakistan's case this does not have to be centuries. Its people are diverse but almost all understand Urdu. They watch the same television programs, read the same newspapers, deal with the same irritating and inept bureaucracy, use the same badly written textbooks, buy similar products, and despise the same set of rulers. Slowly but surely, a Pakistani culture is emerging.

But nationhood is still not guaranteed. Both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia broke apart after seventy years. If Pakistan is to chart a path to viable nationhood, there must be a national dialogue on its most pressing problems. What might be a suitable manifesto of change?

First, Pakistan needs peace. This means that it must turn inwards and devote its fullest attention to ending its raging internal wars. The sixty year long conflict with India has achieved nothing beyond creating a militarized Pakistani security state which uses force as its first resort even when dealing its own people. Attempts to solve Kashmir militarily have bled the country dry and left it totally dependent on foreign aid. The army's role must be limited to defending the people of Pakistan, and to ensuring that their constitutional and civil rights are protected.

Second, Pakistan needs economic justice. This demands a social infrastructure providing decent employment, minimum incomes, and rewards according to ability and hard work. In rural areas, where old structures of land ownership remain intact, sweeping land reforms are urgent. India abolished feudalism upon attaining independence but the enormous pre-partition land holdings of Pakistan's feudal lords were protected by the authority of the state; the land reforms announced by Ayub Khan and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto were hardly serious. But even in the urban areas there is gross inequality; mothers commit suicide in the shadow of 5-star hotels because they cannot feed their children. The military is a landlord and capitalist class that owns vast assets having no relation to national defense. Most countries have armies but, as many have dryly noted, only in Pakistan does an army have a country.

Third, Pakistan must shed its colonial structure of governance. Different historically constituted peoples must want to live together voluntarily, and see the benefits of doing so. A giant centralized government machine sitting in Islamabad cannot effectively manage such a diverse country. As in India, Pakistan has to be reorganized as a federation where provinces and local governments hold the critical economic and social powers, with defense and foreign affairs held in common. In particular, Islamabad's conflict with Baluchistan urgently needs resolution using political sagacity rather than

military force. Blaming India will not achieve anything – the Baluch are angry for good reasons.

Fourth, Pakistan needs a social contract. This is a commitment that citizens shall be treated fairly and equally by the state and, in turn, shall willingly fulfill basic civic responsibilities. But today Pakistanis are denied even the most fundamental protections specified in the Constitution. The poor suffer outright denial of their rights while the rich are compelled to buy them. Rich and poor alike feel no obligation to fulfill their civic duties. Most do not pay their fair share of income tax, leading to one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios in the world.

Fifth, our education needs drastic revision in the means of delivery and content. Money goes some way towards the first – better school infrastructure, books, teacher salaries, etc. But this is not enough. Schools teach children to mindlessly obey authority, to look to the past for solutions to today’s problems, and to be intolerant of the religion, culture and language of others. Instead, we need to teach them to be enquiring, open-minded, creative, logical, socially responsible and appreciative of diversity.

For Pakistan to succeed, it must want to become a normal nation held together by mutual interests rather than some abstract ideology. This is the only way to deal with the multiple civil wars that have started around us.

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