

HIMAL COVER FEATURE

Why Pakistan is not a nation

And how it could become one

By Pervez Hoodbhoy

Pakistan has been a state since 1947, but is still not a nation. More precisely, Pakistan is the name of a land and a people inside a certain geographical boundary which is still lacking the crucial components needed for nationhood: a strong common identity, mental make-up, a shared sense of history and common goals. The failure so far to create a cohesive national entity flows from inequalities of wealth and opportunity, absence of effective democracy and a dysfunctional legal system.

While it is true that most Punjabis think of themselves as Pakistani first and Punjabi second, this is not the case with the Baloch or Sindhis. Schools in Balochistan refuse to hoist Pakistan's flag or sing its national anthem. Sindhis, meanwhile, accuse Punjabis of stealing their water, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) runs Karachi on strictly ethnic grounds, and in April the Pakhtun of NWFP successfully had the province officially renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (against the wishes of other residents). In getting a job, caste and sect matters more than ability, and ethnic student groups wage pitched battles against each other on campuses throughout the country.

The lack of nationhood can be traced to the genesis of Pakistan and the single factor that drove it – religious identity. Carved out of Hindu-majority India, Pakistan was the culmination of the competition and conflict between natives who had converted to Islam and those who had not. Converts often identified with Arab invaders of the last millennium. Shah Waliullah (1703-62), a 'purifier' of Islam on the Subcontinent who despised local traditions, famously declared 'We [Hindustanis] are an Arab people whose fathers have fallen in exile in the country of Hindustan, and Arabic genealogy and the Arabic language are our pride.'

The founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, also echoed the separateness of Muslims and Hindus, basing the struggle for Pakistan on the premise that the two peoples could never live together peacefully within one nation state. But Jinnah was unrecognisably different from Waliullah, a bearded religious scholar. An impeccably dressed Westernised man with Victorian manners, a secular outlook and an appreciation of fine foods and wines, Jinnah nevertheless eloquently articulated the fears and aspirations of an influential section of his co-religionists. Interestingly, he was opposed by a large section of the conservative *ulema*, such as Maulana Maudoodi of the Jamaat-e-Islami, who said that Islam must not be confined to national borders. But Jinnah and his Muslim League won the day by insisting that Muslims constituted a distinct nation that would be overwhelmed in post-British India by a larger and better-educated Hindu majority.

Thus Pakistan, in essence, was created as the negative of India: it was *not* India. But what was it, then, beyond being a homeland for Muslims? Decades after the horrific bloodbath of Partition, the idea of Pakistan remains hotly debated. It did not help that Jinnah died in 1948, just a year after Pakistan was born, with his plans still ambiguously stated. He authored no books and wrote no policy paper. He did make many speeches, of which several were driven by political expediency and are frankly contradictory. The speeches are freely cherry-picked

today. Some find in them a liberal and secular voice; others, an embodiment of Islamic values. The confusion is irresolvable.

After Jinnah, the Objectives Resolution of 12 March 1949 was the first major step towards the transformation of Pakistan from a Muslim state into an Islamic state. The Resolution starts with the statement that sovereignty rests with Allah. This obviously limits the legislative power of a representative assembly since the fundamentals are already defined. Another consequence was the grudging concession that ‘minorities have a right to worship and practice their religion’. This created the concept of minorities in the Pakistani polity, and hence negated the right of equality – a basic requirement of modern democracy.

The basis in religious identity soon led to painful paradoxes. An overbearing West Pakistan was to ride roughshod over East Pakistan, and become despised as an external imperial power. Jinnah’s ‘Two Nation’ theory was left in tatters after the separation of East Pakistan in 1971, and the defeat of the Pakistani military. The enthusiasm of Muslim Bengalis for Bangladesh – and their failure to ‘repent’ even decades after 1971 – was a deadly blow against the very basis of Pakistan. Nevertheless, contrary to dire predictions, the Pakistani state survived. Its powerful military easily crushed emerging separatist movements in Balochistan and Sindh.

For a while after 1971, the question of national ideology fell into limbo. Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto attempted to create a Pakistani identity around the notion of revenge for the loss of the East Wing. He promised ‘war of a thousand years’ against India, and started Pakistan’s quest for the atomic bomb in 1972. While this served temporarily as a rallying cry, the military coup of 1977 that sent him to the gallows was to revive the identity issue.

Zia’s project

Soon after he seized power, General Zia-ul-Haq announced his intention to remake Pakistan, and end the confusion of the country’s purpose and identity once and for all. In a sense, he wanted to emulate Napoleon’s achievement of creating a nation from a nation state. Eric Hobsbawm, the influential Marxist historian, persuasively argues that the state of France made the French nation, not vice-versa. Similarly, Zia sought to create a nation – albeit one based on religion rather than on secular principles – using the power of the state. The word soon went out that Pakistan was henceforth not to be described as a Muslim state. Instead, it was now an Islamic state, where Islamic law would soon reign supreme. To achieve this re-conceptualisation, Zia knew that future generations of Pakistanis would have to be purged of liberal and secular values.

Thus began a massive decade-long state-sponsored project. Democracy was demonised and declared un-Islamic, culture was purified of Hindu ‘contamination’, Urdu was cleansed of Hindi words to the extent possible, capital punishment was freely used, dress codes were introduced, university teachers had their faith examined under a microscope, and religion was introduced into every aspect of public and private life.

Education was the key weapon for Zia’s strategy. In 1981, he ordered the education authorities to rewrite the history of Pakistan. All new school textbooks would now ‘induce pride for the nation’s past, enthusiasm for the present, and unshakeable faith in the stability and longevity of Pakistan.’ Jinnah and other icons of the Pakistan Movement had to be portrayed as pious fundamentalists, whether or not they carried beards; their lifestyles had to be hidden from public view. To eliminate possible ambiguities of approach, a presidential

order was issued to the University Grants Commission that, henceforth, all Pakistan Studies textbooks must:

Demonstrate that the basis of Pakistan is not to be founded in racial, linguistic, or geographical factors, but, rather, in the shared experience of a common religion. To get students to know and appreciate the Ideology of Pakistan, and to popularise it with slogans. To guide students towards the ultimate goal of Pakistan – the creation of a completely Islamised State.

In a matter of years, Pakistani schoolchildren grew up learning a catchy but linguistically nonsensical jingle about the ‘ideology’ of Pakistan: ‘*Pakistan ka matlab kya? La illaha illala!*’ (What is the meaning of Pakistan? There is no god but Allah!) Although the purported answer has nothing to do with the question, Zia’s strategy soon began to show results.

Barely a decade was needed for Pakistan’s transformation from a moderate Muslim majority country into one where the majority of citizens wanted Islam to play a key role in politics. The effects of indoctrination are now clearly visible. Even as members of the *sharia*-seeking Taliban were busy blowing up schools in Swat and elsewhere, a survey in 2008 by the online World Public Opinion found that 54 percent of Pakistanis wanted strict application of , while 25 percent wanted it in some more dilute form. Totalling 79 percent, this was the largest percentage in the four countries surveyed – Morocco, Egypt, Indonesia and Pakistan. A more recent survey of 2000 young Pakistanis between 18 and 27 was carried out across Pakistan 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.’

Clearly, the country’s youth is deeply worried by lack of employment, economic inflation, corruption and violence. In this turbulent sea, it is not surprising that most see religion as their anchor. For some, violent change is the answer to the country’s problems. This is precisely what Zaid Hamid, one of Pakistan’s fiery new demagogues, advocates. Hamid, a self-proclaimed jihadist who claims to have fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan, builds specifically on the insecurity of the youth, and enthrals college students who pack auditoriums to listen to him. Millions more watch him on television, as he lashes out against Pakistan’s corrupt rulers and other ‘traitors’. Hamid promises that those who betrayed the nation’s honour by joining America’s ‘war on terror’ will hang from lampposts in Islamabad. In his promised Islamic utopia, speedy Taliban-style justice will replace the clumsy and corrupt courts established by the British. Just as Adolf Hitler dwelt on Germany’s ‘wounded honour’ in his famous beer-hall oratory in Munich (where he promised that Germany would conquer the world), Hamid calls for the Pakistan Army to go to war against India and liberate Kashmir, Palestine, Chechnya and Afghanistan. One day, he says, *inshallah*, Pakistan’s flag shall fly from Delhi’s Red Fort. The students applaud wildly.

Why still no Islamic state?

Notwithstanding the enormous impetus given by Zia ul-Haq, final success still eludes Pakistan’s Islamists. The explosion of religiosity did not produce a new Pakistani identity, and a *sharia* state is nowhere to be seen. Why? Ethno-nationalism is part of the answer. This natural resistance against melding into some larger entity is the reflexive response of historically constituted groups that seek to preserve their distinctiveness, expressed in terms of dress, food, folklore and shared history. Assimilation of Pakistan’s diverse peoples into a

homogenised national culture is opposed by this force that, like gravity, always acts in one direction.

Ethno-nationalism is, of course, vulnerable. It can be overcome by integrative forces, which arise from the natural advantage of being part of a larger economy with correspondingly greater opportunities. But for these forces to be effective, it is essential that the state machinery provides effective governance, demonstrates fairness and is indifferent to ethnic origins. Pakistan's ruling elite, unfortunately, is both incompetent and ethnically partisan, drawing its roots from the powerful landed and feudal class. The army leadership and the economic elite had joined forces after Partition to claim authority, but they were transparently self-serving and therefore lacked legitimacy.

Dangling the utopia of an Islamic state raised expectations but did little else. To the chagrin of the political and army establishment, it ultimately backfired and became the cause of infinite division. The post-Zia generation – which believes that every issue will be solved if the country was to go back to the fundamentals of Islam – muddles on in a state of deep confusion and deadly divisiveness. It believes that adherence to 'true Islam' will solve all problems and lead to a conflict-free society. But, in reality, the Quran and Hadith can be interpreted in multiple ways and 'Islamic fundamentals' can be defined in many different, contradictory ways. These differences fuel violent political forces, each convinced that they alone understand god's will. Murderous wars between Sunni and Shia militias started during the late 1980s. Today, even those favouring the utopian vision of an ideal Islamic state are frightened by the Pakistani Taliban, which seeks to impose its version of *sharia* through the Kalashnikov and suicide bombings.

All this was easily predictable: sectarian divides are almost as old as religion itself. Basic questions are fundamentally unanswerable: Which interpretation of Islam is the right Islam? Of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence (*Hanafi, Shafii, Maliki, Hanbali*), whose version of the *sharia* should be adopted? Will all, or most, Pakistanis accept any non-elected *amir-ul-momineen* (leader of the pious) or a caliph? And what about the Shia?

Democracy is excluded in any theocratic state, which, by definition, is a state governed according to divinely revealed principles wherein the head of state, elected or otherwise, interprets such principles and translates them into practical matters of the state. So, for example, although Abul Ala Maudoodi, in his *Islamic Law and Constitution*, states that 'Islam vests all the Muslim citizens of an Islamic state with popular vice-regency', he is quick to point out that all vice-regents need not be of equal consequence. He demands that constitution makers should:

Evolve such a system of elections as would ensure the appointment of only those who are trustworthy and pious. They should also devise effective measures to defeat the designs and machinations of those who scramble for posts of trust and are consequently hated and cursed by the people in spite of their so-called 'victories' in the elections.

In this 'state without borders' any Muslim anywhere can be a citizen. It will be the best governed not only because its leaders are pious but also because only those will vote who are pious themselves.

Religion cannot be the basis of Pakistan or move it towards integration. This can be said categorically, although religion was undoubtedly the reason for Pakistan's formation. Coming over a half-century after Partition, Musharraf's call for 'enlightened moderation' was indeed a tacit admission of this fact. He realised that a theocratic Pakistan could not work even though this conflicted with his other responsibility, that of being chief of the Pakistan Army. Since the days of Zia, the army had arrogated to itself the task of 'defending Pakistan's ideological borders' and, since the end of the 1980s, had consciously nurtured radicalism as an instrument of covert warfare in Kashmir and Afghanistan. Although Musharraf's successor, General Pervez Kayani, also seeks to distance the army from its past, it is unclear as to what extent he or other senior officers have control. The Islamists, for their part, hope for, and seek to incite, action by zealous officers to bring back the glory days of the military-mullah alliance led by General Zia ul Haq.

While it is true that religious political parties have never got any sizeable fraction of the popular vote, the secular system of power was never regarded by Pakistan's citizens as just, appropriate or authoritative. So by default Islam became accepted as the basis of Pakistan, and any suggestion to the contrary evokes a fierce public reaction. On the other hand, any serious move in the direction of making Pakistan a *sharia* state would almost certainly lead to civil war. Why so?

This is because while the *sharia* is considered a panacea for Pakistan's multiple problems of corruption, inequity and poor governance, its true nature is revealed only once there is an actual move towards its implementation. In the past, terrible and uncontrollable forces have been released against the people. As in Swat, the Pakistani Taliban's Wahabi-Deobandi-Salafi understanding of *sharia* calls for forbidding females from leaving their houses, being educated or holding jobs. Men must have beards, wear *shalwars* rather than trousers, and never miss prayers. Killing apostates, decapitations, amputation of limbs, and floggings are an essential part of their penal code. Fortunately, those who defend this notion of *sharia* constitute no more than perhaps ten percent of Pakistan's population. Of course, that still means millions.

Pakistan must remain

In common parlance, the 'state' refers to the government, and an entity in international law. Recognition by other states of the state's claim to sovereignty enables it to enter into international agreements. Moreover, it needs a government to control its internal affairs. A more standard-political-science definition of a nation state goes something like this: A state is an organised political community, occupying a territory, and possessing internal and external sovereignty, that enforces a monopoly on the use of force. Max Weber defined the state as 'a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.'

Pakistan is a nation state by the above definition and must, I feel, continue to remain one. In effect, it must be because it is! The cost of the disappearance or destruction of this nuclear-weapon state is too awful to contemplate. Pakistan can indeed become a nation. Moreover, it will almost certainly become one in time to come. Although religion will certainly remain an important part of Pakistan's social reality for the foreseeable future, it must seek new roots lying within the country's social reality rather than religion.

Look at it this way: rain inevitably grinds down stony mountains over centuries and ultimately creates fertile soil. Similarly, nations are inevitably formed when people

experience a common environment and live together for long enough. How long is long enough? In Pakistan's case the timescale could be fairly short. Its people are diverse, but almost all understand Urdu. They watch the same television programmes, hear the same radio stations, deal with the same irritating and inefficient bureaucracy, use the same badly written textbooks, buy similar products and despise the same set of rulers. Slowly but surely a composite, but genuine, Pakistani culture is emerging.

Stable nationhood is still not guaranteed. Both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia broke apart after seven decades. If Pakistan is to stay together and chart a path to viable nationhood, it must identify its most pressing problems and seek their amelioration. What might be a suitable manifesto of change?

What does Pakistan really need?

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 conflict with India has achieved nothing beyond creating a militarised Pakistani security state that uses force as its first resort even when dealing with its own people. Attempts to solve the Kashmir issue militarily have bled the country dry, leaving it completely 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. Indeed, given that the country could otherwise be rapidly overwhelmed by extremists who openly declare their disdain for democracy, the army is obligated to fight its progeny – the Taliban. We should not be under any illusion that extremism can be defeated by purely peaceful means. Indeed, the way ahead will be subtle and complicated. How can one develop the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and ameliorate the anguish of their people when the insurgents are out to stop development, bomb schools and kill doctors? In such a situation, Pakistan must say yes to negotiations, but no to surrender. I suspect that the future is going to be talk-fight-talk-fight.

Second, Pakistan needs economic justice. This is not the same as flinging coins at beggars. Rather, it requires organisational infrastructure that, at the very least, provides employment but also rewards according to ability and hard work. Incomes should be neither exorbitantly high nor miserably low. To be sure, 'high' and 'low' are not easily quantifiable, but an inner moral sense tells us that something is desperately wrong when rich Pakistanis fly off to vacation in Dubai while a mother commits suicide because she cannot feed her children.

A welfare state in Pakistan is a distant ideal. India abolished feudalism upon attaining independence. But the enormous pre-partition land holdings of Pakistan's feudal lords remained safe and sound, protected by the authority of the state. The land reforms announced by Ayub Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto were eyewash. In later years, with the consolidation of military rule in national politics, the army turned itself into a landlord and capitalist class. Military officers own assets that have no relation to national defence. This includes vast amounts of farm lands and valuable urban real estate, banking, insurance, advertising companies, cement and sugar industries, airlines and ground transportation, cornflakes and commercial bottled water. Most countries have armies but, as some have dryly remarked, 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 centralised government machine sitting in Islamabad cannot effectively manage such a

diverse country. The demand for creating more provinces should be carefully examined and not peremptorily rejected as is being done now. Having smaller administrative units does make sense, especially because of the rapidly rising population. On the other hand, to fan the flames of nationalism can hardly be a good thing.

As in India, Pakistan should be reorganised as a federation in which provinces and local governments hold the critical economic and social powers, while defence and foreign affairs are held in common by the centre. In particular, Islamabad's conflict with Balochistan urgently needs resolution, but using political sagacity rather than military force. Blaming India will not achieve anything – the Baloch are angry for good reason. At a recent lecture to senior Pakistan civil-service officers in Peshawar, I was taken aback at the intensity with which senior officers from Balochistan spoke. They said that Baloch wounds are too deep, and the time for healing and reconciliation with Pakistan had passed. A decade ago, one would only have expected this language from student radicals – now, it is the mainstream Baloch who articulate such sentiments.

Fourth, Pakistan needs a social contract and economic justice. This is a commitment that citizens will be treated fairly and equally by the state and shall, in turn, willingly fulfil basic civic responsibilities. But today, Pakistanis are denied even basic protections specified in the Constitution. The poor suffer outright denial of rights – such as personal security and access to water in cities – while the rich are compelled to buy these. Rich and poor alike therefore feel no obligation to fulfil 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. Seeing that the rulers flagrantly flout the very laws they claim to espouse, it is no surprise that the common citizen does the same.

Fifth, the country's 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, students need to be taught to be enquiring, open-minded, creative, logical, socially responsible, and to appreciate diversity. Pakistan paid a very heavy price because its leaders could not understand that a heterogeneous population can live together only if differences are respected. The imposition of Urdu upon Bengal in 1948 was a tragic mistake, and the first of a sequence of missteps that led up to the awful slaughter of Bengalis by the West Pakistani army in 1971. A myopic education system is squarely responsible for the fact that ethnic and religious minorities are viewed with suspicion and disdain by the majority. This must change.

In the end, for Pakistan to succeed, it must want to become a nation held together by mutual interests rather than by some abstract Islamic ideology. This is the only way to deal with the multiple civil wars that have started in the country.

The path to creating a Pakistani nation is doubtless difficult. As the population explodes, oceans of poverty and misery deepen, limbless beggars in the streets multiply, water and clean air become scarce, education is stalemated, true democracy remains elusive, and the distance from a rapidly developing world increases. One is strongly tempted to step aside, give up, and admit helplessness.

But no, surely that is wrong, for what we fear will then actually come to pass. Antonio Gramsci spoke of ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’. Indeed, with the pessimism of the intellect we must calmly contemplate the yawning abyss up ahead. But then, after a period of reflection, one should move to prevent falling into it.

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SUGGESTED PULL QUOTES

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2. Soon after he seized power, General Zia ul-Haq announced his intention to remake Pakistan, and end the confusion of the country’s purpose and identity once and for all. In a sense, he wanted to emulate Napoleon’s achievement of creating a nation from a nation state.
3. Although religion will certainly remain an important part of [Pakistan’s] social reality for the foreseeable future, the country must seek new roots lying within its social reality rather than religion.