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View from Pakistan

‘Religious’ politics and the democratic political process

By Beena Sarwar

The political rise and election of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister of India aroused anxiety in India as well as in Pakistan. Many Indians feared an onslaught on the secular values enshrined in India’s constitution. Pakistanis were wary, given Modi’s anti-Pakistan, anti-Muslim history.

But while Modi may symbolise divisive forces in India, as Prime Minister now, he must deliver on the development agenda for which he was elected, and distance himself from the ‘saffron brigade’. In the long run, the deep-rooted democracy in India, for all its aberrations and weaknesses, is likely to eventually neutralise sectarian elements and prevent them from imposing their agenda.

Communal forces in both India and Pakistan broadly mirror each other. Extremists on both sides equate religion with patriotism and are quick to accuse others of being traitors or anti-religion. As much as there are lessons for Pakistan in India’s democratic political process (barring Indira Gandhi’s Emergency Rule, 1975-1977), India can also learn from Pakistan’s experience, where injecting religion into politics has led to disastrous consequences.

Some Indians object to any comparison with Pakistan, arguing that India is in a different

league, an economic power to reckon with, while Pakistan remains mired in the past, racked by violence stemming from its own policies. This is an oversimplification of a complex situation.

For one thing, although Pakistan has never elected extremist or communal parties to power, these elements have gained ground over the years due to various factors, including Pakistan's geo-politically strategic location. This has led to Pakistan becoming a proxy battleground for international players like America, Saudi Arabia, Iran and more lately China. Since the Afghan war in the 1980s, extremists in Pakistan operating in the name of religion have been immeasurably strengthened. These retrogressive forces reject democracy. They don't represent the people but due to bully tactics and street power, they unduly influence politics. The emergence of a democratic polity in Pakistan now threatens their power.

The continuation of a democratic political process in the long term neutralises communalism and militancy. Today, the world faces violent extremism in various forms along with economic and social inequalities and unequal political power structures. Problems persist even in advanced countries – for example, racially motivated murders and school shootings in the United States, Nazi revivalists and white supremacists in Europe and England. Leaving aside the correlation between inequalities and militancy, criminal-minded hardliners operating in the name of religion clearly pose stronger challenges in less-developed countries mired in tradition like India and Pakistan that already face tensions due to rampant disparities and unplanned urbanisation.

The words of Pakistan's founding father Mohammad Ali Jinnah in his first address as President of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on August 11, 1947 should have set the tone for the new country. Jinnah asserted that after the "unavoidable" partition of India, each citizen, from any community, colour, caste or creed, "is first, second and last a citizen of this State with equal rights, privileges and obligations."

Working in that spirit, he said, would eventually erase all divisions between not only Hindus and Muslims but also within communities "because even as regards the Muslims,

you have Pathans, Punjabis, Shias, Sunnis and so on. Among the Hindus you have Brahmans, Vashnavites, Khatries, also Bengalis, Madrasis." These divisions had been "the biggest hindrance in the way of India to attain its freedom and independence".

All citizens of Pakistan were free, proclaimed Jinnah: "You are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed. That has nothing to do with the business of the state..."

"I think you should keep that in front of us as our ideal, and you will find that in the course of time Hindus will cease to be Hindus and Muslims will cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense, as citizens of the State."

This was an assertion of pluralism in the new country. It was also a vague manifesto, perhaps deliberately so according to Jinnah's biographer Hector Bolitho, given the difficulties of developing a secular system in a country founded in the name of religion. Jinnah enunciated his conviction on several occasions that Pakistan would not be a theocracy. But bringing religion into politics has its own dynamics.

Eerie Parallels

Extremists in India and Pakistan are essentially two sides of the same coin. They feed on each other with their anti-Pakistan and anti-India rhetoric respectively. Communal forces in India glorify the murderer of Mahatma Gandhi as a hero. Their counterparts in Pakistan glorify Mumtaz Qadri who assassinated the Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer. Caste-based violence is all too common in India, just as it is in Pakistan – where it is often disguised as 'religious' violence as in the case of Aasia Bibi, the Christian woman convicted and sentenced to death after being charged with 'blasphemy'.

India and Pakistan also have in common contradictions arising from the pace of social change juxtaposed with traditional, conservative values particularly with regard to caste and gender. The 'India shining' slogan notwithstanding, the fault-lines there bear an eerie

resemblance to the situation in Pakistan. Mutual problems include economic inequality, gender violence, ‘honour’ killings, widespread illiteracy and child labour, and unplanned urbanisation. Additionally there is often impunity for those with connections in the circles of power. This gives an opening for criminals to operate and for communal forces to polarise society. In India, extremists are pushing an agenda of Hindu supremacy with attempts like the "ghar waapsi" (return home) drive to “re-convert” Muslims and Christians, rewriting textbooks, imposing Hindu nationalism, and attacking Indians who celebrate non-Indian festivals like Valentine’s Day.

In Pakistan, extremists kidnap Hindu girls and get them married to Muslims as part of a deliberate strategy to make inroads into Sindh, the province with the largest Hindu population in Pakistan. The situation is exacerbated by the influx of money, religious seminaries, and radical preachers from the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia. In this situation, Pakistanis like advocates Asma Jahangir, Amarnath Motumal and their colleagues at the non-government Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) are like a David pitted against a Goliath. David may well win in the end in Pakistan. But it will take time. In the meantime, innocent Pakistanis will continue to pay a huge price.

The common problems India and Pakistan face include gender violence, and hundreds of women killed every year on the pretext of ‘honour’. Traditionally ‘honour’ based violence is contained within a family or community, with the perpetrators punishing their ‘own’ women for alleged transgressions. However, in Pakistan ‘Islamic’ militants like the Taliban and their affiliated groups have crossed these barriers, and freely threaten and attack women of other communities.

Recognising the commonalities, ordinary people, artists, writers, activists and intellectuals in Pakistan have long stressed the need to build bridges with India. Key stakeholders, from major political parties to the business community, now also support the political consensus for peace with India that has developed in Pakistan over recent years.

However, a fringe element still clings to the out-dated pro-'jihad', anti-India narrative perpetuated by sections of the security establishment and the 'religious' groups the army once nurtured in order to gain 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan; and an upper hand over India particularly in the disputed territory of Kashmir. I use the word 'religious' in quotes when referring to the politics of the 'religious parties' in India and Pakistan, because religion is the pretext these parties use to gain power. This lobby equates being a patriotic Pakistani with being Muslim and anti-India (although India's Muslim population exceeds Pakistan's total population).

One of the spokespersons of this anti-India lobby is Hafiz Saeed who heads the banned 'religious' charity Jama'at-ud-Dawa (JUD), another incarnation of the infamous Laskhar-e-Tayyaba (LeT) that is involved with militancy in the Indian-administered side of Kashmir. Washington has head money on Saeed for his links to the Mumbai attacks of November 2008, but the JUD openly holds rallies in major cities and keeps the anti-India narrative alive in Pakistan.

Groups like JUD / LeT in Pakistan have gained ground due to policies formulated not by elected governments but by the security establishment. The political vacuum created by military rule and the injection of religion into politics has strengthened militancy in Pakistan. There is genuine apprehension about the rise of extremism in India where the 2002 pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat took place under Modi's watch as chief minister. More than a decade later, he owes his election as Prime Minister to his development, rather than communal, agenda.

Gujarat and Mumbai

Modi has never been convicted of crimes against humanity of which he is accused. Neither has Hafiz Saeed. One was allegedly involved in a pogrom against a religious minority community in the state he headed as a political representative. The other, who has never been elected, is allegedly behind the massacres of members of a religious community (Shia Muslims) in Pakistan, and attacks on Indian soil. In both cases, courts have so far acquitted them for lack of evidence.

Indians who ask why the Pakistan courts acquit people like Hafiz Saeed forget that our court systems are basically the same. Both countries inherited the same set of British era colonial laws in 1947. But while India under Jawaharlal Nehru got to work on a Constitution and land reforms, Pakistan retained its Provisional (Interim) Constitution, adapted from the Government of India Act of 1935, with various amendments and alterations for almost a decade after Independence.

Obtaining convictions is not easy. Pakistan has no witness protection programme. This, coupled with poor forensics and prosecution techniques, and controversial laws imposed by a military dictator in the name of religion, has created a culture of impunity and allows criminals to literally get away with murder. Any litigation involves a long and cumbersome process with several levels of appeal. When a district court in Pakistan on December 26, 2014 announced that it was granting bail to Zaki ur Rehman Lakhvi, accused of the November 2008 Mumbai attacks, the Pakistan government contested the court order (at the time of writing in February 2015, Lakhvi was still in prison; he obtained bail in April). There was a furious reaction in India where there seemed to be an expectation that Pakistan would bypass due process when it came to militants.

For decades Pakistan has seen the military guard not just the country's physical frontiers but also take upon itself the task of guarding its ideological frontiers, projected as being synonymous with Islam. This has much to do with the political vacuum caused by the subversion of the democratic political process.

Some Pakistanis express nostalgia for the days of military rule when law and order and the economy were under control. Some Indians also look nostalgically at General Pervez Musharraf's stint in power as a kind of golden era between Pakistan and India. Yet as Pakistan's army chief, Musharraf was the architect of the 1999 Kargil war that brought the two nations to the brink of a nuclear war. He is on record saying that he is "proud" of the Kargil operation that he masterminded "in revenge" against India's role in the division of Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh in 1971. A few months after the Kargil war, Musharraf usurped power in a military coup, and headed an illegitimate regime for nearly a decade.

Musharraf also played a duplicitous game post 9/11 as he ran with the hares and hunted with the hounds. Under Musharraf, Pakistan was the last government to cut off diplomatic ties with the ‘bad Taliban’ in Afghanistan, and that too when pushed by Washington. But Musharraf allowed Pakistan’s home grown militants to function, like the 'good Taliban' and their affiliates -- those who supposedly further Pakistan’s foreign policy objectives of bleeding India and ‘strategic depth’ in Afghanistan.

India and Pakistan did come close to a rapprochement under Musharraf. But a one-man band doesn’t need political consensus to take decisions. His ‘boys’ unquestioningly obeyed his orders because that’s what soldiers do. Not so the ‘bloody civilians’. Democracy is a messy business. Elected representatives have to answer to a constituency – and in Pakistan, also to the security establishment. An elected head of government must obtain parliamentary consent for policy decisions.

Military rule, on the other hand, keeps things under control artificially, including prices. It’s like a pressure cooker from which the steam isn’t allowed to escape. When the lid is lifted, whatever is stewing in the pot erupts.

In India, the existence of a democratic political process enables a continuous letting off of the steam, preventing its contents from erupting. This eventually neutralises the potential dangers when communally minded politicians are elected into power. With the eyes of the world and the Indian electorate upon him, Modi has to distance himself from RSS extremists causing havoc in the name of religion. He may not condemn them or take strong action but he cannot afford to let them run totally amok.

In Pakistan, on the other hand, extremist forces have been immensely strengthened by religion-based politics perpetuated by Zia ul Haq during his decade-long (1978-1988) military regime. The so–called Islamic laws imposed during that time, coupled with the indoctrination, training and arms provided to the ‘mujahideen’ (holy warriors) during the Afghan war contributed to a veritable army of indoctrinated militants who now want to occupy power and impose their version of Islam on the entire state. Since the Afghan war the extremists have mutated into multiple splinter groups who, despite their differences,

are ideologically aligned against democracy, democratic values, human rights, women's rights and cultural freedoms.

If this has echoes of India's saffron-brigade, that's because they are - as mentioned earlier - mirror images of each other. The difference is that in Pakistan, extremists are trying to impose their agenda through armed militancy while in India, 'religious' extremists are trying to do this through the political system. As mentioned above, this system, if allowed to function, has its own dynamics in terms of curbing extremism. There is a glimmer of hope in Pakistan having taken the first steps on the path to a democratic, political process, with an elected government having completing its tenure and handed over power to the next elected government for the first time, although this happened as late as 2013.

Only when the democratic political process is allowed to continue do citizens have a platform to voice their views. After the horrific attacks on Mumbai in November 2008, attempts by Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to communalise the issue with anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim sentiments did not yield them victory in the state elections held shortly afterwards. When the Modi government failed to deliver on its development agenda, the electorate rejected the BJP in the Delhi state elections in 2015. Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Admi Party (AAP) swept the polls --a reminder, if one is needed, of the power of the electorate.

Communal politics

India's voter turnout in the 2014 general elections was nearly 67 per cent, out of which Modi's BJP polled 31 per cent -- that is, barely 21 per cent, less than a quarter of the total eligible voters, or about a fifth of the total electorate. The remaining four-fifths did not vote for Modi/BJP, and a large part of the fifth that did was the negative vote against the incumbents rather than a positive vote for Modi/BJP. But even narrow margins win seats in a parliamentary democracy. At a glance, it may look like a 'saffron wave', but the electorate has made clear their distaste for communal politics.

In Pakistan too, the electorate has consistently voted for parties that are not communal. There was massive bloodshed in the run- up to the May 2013 elections and fears of

violence on polling day itself. The Taliban had denounced the process as ‘un-Islamic’ and attacked electoral candidates and rallies, killing over a 100 people in the prior month. Yet Pakistan saw its highest ever voter turnout, 55 per cent. People came out in unprecedentedly large numbers to vote, as much for political parties as against the Taliban. There had been opinion polls about Pakistanis’ growing sympathies for ‘religious’ parties. However, when it came to the real and the biggest opinion poll, the general elections, in another poignant gesture, the people of Pakistan made their views clear: they gave a resounding 'no' to Talibanisation.

Extremists operating in the name of religion in Pakistan have gained strength as a result of policies not democratically formulated but imposed by the security establishment. Post 9/11, after Pakistan began changing that policy, the extremists turned their guns on state symbols like police academies, intelligence offices and military bases. Attacks such as on the Peshawar Army Public School massacre on December 16, 2014 show the increasing desperation of the militants at losing the war.

Until then, Pakistan marked December 16 every year as a ‘black day’ to mark the surrender of the Pakistan army to India in Dhaka in 1971. In 2014, the significance of this day was overshadowed by the massacre in Peshawar that drew an unprecedented response from around the world, especially India. The hashtag #IndiaWithPakistan spontaneously began trending on the social media within hours of the attack, with over 63,000 tweets on Tuesday, the day of the tragedy. By Friday, the number of tweets tagged #IndiaWithPakistan had crossed the one million mark. In another poignant gesture, Modi appealed for a two-minute silence at schools across India.

India-Pakistan relations

Despite Modi’s heartwarming gesture and despite the goodwill that clearly exists between the people of both countries, India-Pakistan relations have worsened under Modi. An increasingly restrictive visa policy makes it difficult even for members of divided families to meet. India’s intransigence on this front seems to have increased since the Modi government was elected. India denied visas to 24 prominent Pakistanis invited

to a seminar in Delhi on "Understanding Pakistan", organised by the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD) on December 19-21, 2014 (the visas were granted later, delaying the seminar till March, 2015). Formed in 1994, PIPFPD is the oldest and largest people-to-people group between India and Pakistan. Both governments have in the past granted visas for PIPFPD conventions to citizens of the other country, leaving a door open even during hostilities.

The growth of the internet and the social media have allowed Indians and Pakistanis to surmount the visa difficulties and connect through platforms like Aman ki Asha (a platform for peace jointly launched by Pakistan's Jang group of newspapers and The Times of India), the peace video selfies ('velfies') of the 'Dear Neigbour Movement', the Indo-Pak Peace Calendar launched by the cross-border youth organisation Aaghaz-e-Dosti and countless other such initiatives.

However, both sides continue to violate the 2003 ceasefire along the disputed border that divides Kashmir. Each blames the other for 'unprovoked' firing that kills civilians and soldiers on both sides. Security establishments on either side provide whatever little information appears in the public domain about what is happening at the border. Very few journalists question the official narratives or have the access to produce more in-depth, nuanced reports. Both sides typically report only their own casualties. This provides a greater space to war-mongering extremists, hawks and fanatics. Political leaders fall into sabre-rattling rhetoric with sound bites like 'munh-tor jawab' (jaw-breaking responses) and 'boli nahin goli' (bullets not talks).

The overwhelming and genuine response in India to the Peshawar school massacre was a strong counter to the anti-India narrative peddled by Pakistan's security establishment that has been making major policy decisions for too long. Given the power of this security establishment, it is understandable for Indians to ask why they should bother talking to an elected government in Pakistan at all. But, in the long run, only an elected government can legitimately make policy changes. There are no short cuts. The Taliban and their affiliated groups have made great inroads in Pakistan, enabled by the 'good Taliban, bad Taliban' policy. A mess that has taken over 60 years to make cannot be

fixed overnight. In the long run, the biggest blow to the extremist militants would be for democracy in Pakistan to take root and continue, and for India and Pakistan to unite against them.

Pakistan's political timeline (see Appendix) shows how democracy has been subverted and prevented from taking root in the country. In contrast, India's continuing democratic political process demonstrates how it is able to check extremist forces from gaining the upper hand. As India faces the rise of Hindutva forces, it must learn from the Pakistani experience the danger of inserting religion into politics, particularly when religion is conflated with national identity.

In India, extremists in the name of Hinduism are trying to push the narrative that to be a true Indian you also have to be a Hindu. They label as traitors those who resist this concept. Similarly, in Pakistan, hyper-nationalists term as 'traitors' and 'infidels' those who question or oppose the 'two- nation theory'.

There are greater dangers associated with such demonisation in Pakistan than in India. Armed, trained men indoctrinated with Takfiri ideology (Muslims declaring other Muslims to be 'kafir' or non-believer) target Shia and Ahmadi communities in Pakistan. They also carry out attacks inspired—even trained-- by Takfiri militants like Daish, Al Qaeda or Taliban. As Hillary Clinton famously said, "You can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbours. Eventually those snakes are going to turn on whoever has them in the backyard."

The bottom line is that criminal acts must be dealt with as such. The rule of law must be applied and due process followed, regardless of the perpetrator's religion or motivation, whether it is religion, nationalism or honour.

We are starting to see evidence of this in India where at least some perpetrators of the 2002 carnage in Gujarat have been convicted and sentenced --belatedly and insufficiently perhaps, but it is a start. The painful process continues. Few perpetrators of earlier mass crimes like the 1984 massacre of Sikhs following Indira Gandhi's assassination have been brought to book. But going forward, given increased awareness, tools and platforms

that enhance the voice of the people, it will be increasingly difficult for such pogroms to take place in the further with impunity.

In the coming years, India must decide in which direction it wants to go. Indians who criticise the shrill nationalism-religious narrative in Pakistan must look inward and contemplate the damage that voice within their own country is causing. This is something Prime Minister Modi and others will have to consider in the long term if they want to achieve electoral success in India.

Appendix

Pakistan and the democratic political process: A political timeline

1947-58: The first war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir - 1948. Pakistan's founding father Muhammed Ali Jinnah dies - September 1948. Jinnah's successor Liaquat Ali Khan is assassinated - 1951. Pakistan's first Constitution, adopted in 1956 proclaims Pakistan to be an Islamic republic. In 1958, President Iskander Mirza declares the country's first martial law. Two weeks later, Field Marshal Ayub Khan deposes him and takes over.

1958-1971: Ayub Khan proclaims himself as President in 1960. In 1965 Pakistan fights its second war with India over Kashmir. Gen. Yahya Khan takes over in 1969 after Ayub Khan resigns. Pakistan holds elections in 1970. The Awami League wins, but isn't allowed to take over power.

1971-1977: Pakistan breaks up in 1971 following the West Pakistan establishment's refusal to allow the winning Awami League of then East Pakistan to form government. The subsequent military onslaught on East Pakistan and the ensuing civil war ends with Pakistan's humiliating surrender to India on Dec 16, 1971 and the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation. Instead of putting paid to the 'two nation theory' according to which Hindus and Muslims form two separate

nations, the self-proclaimed keepers of the 'ideology of Pakistan' continue to propagate it.

The country's first elected prime minister, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto comes to power on the back of the army, with then Army chief Gen. Yahya Khan resigning and handing over the government to him after secession of Bangladesh. (In the years since, despite many setbacks and problems, Bangladesh has made great strides in areas like education and the separation of state from religion. Meanwhile, Pakistan continues to reel under a situation that has spiralled almost out of control, fuelled by a 'Takfiri' ideology. Takfir means to divide; Takfiris are Muslims who claim the right to declare others as non-Muslim or deserving of death for having offended Islam.)

April 10, 1973 - Pakistan's parliament under Bhutto finally passes a Constitution. September 7, 1974: The Assembly passes the Second Constitutional Amendment, declaring Ahmadis as a non-Muslim minority. Appeasing the 'religious' right will not save Bhutto.

1977-1988: In July 1977, then army chief Gen. Ziaul Haq overthrows the PPP government, and gets Bhutto hanged in 1979 on trumped up murder charges.

The Zia regime makes various changes to the Constitution in the name of Islam, immeasurably strengthening the 'religious' right. These measures have furthered a narrative that supports 'religious' militancy. Militant groups have claimed over 50,000 civilian and over 10,000 armed forces personnel lives over the last decade.

1988-1999: Zia is killed in a mid-air explosion in August 1988. Pakistan undergoes a period of what I term "democracy musical chairs". General elections held in November 1988 bring Benazir Bhutto to power, but the military establishment, used to making policy decisions by now, prevents her from taking oath as prime minister until she agrees to allow them control of three key policy areas – defence, economy and foreign affairs.

But even the crippled government is not allowed to complete its tenure and is dissolved less than two years later under Article 58-2 (b) -- a Ziaist constitutional amendment imposed in 1985 that allows the President to dismiss an elected government. Article 58-2 (b) is used to dismiss the next two elected governments before completion of their terms - Nawaz Sharif's, and then again Benazir Bhutto's. Benazir Bhutto's (After the 2008 elections and restoration of the democratic process, the Pakistan Assembly finally did away with Article 58-2-b, in April 2010).

Re-elected in 1996, Nawaz Sharif is again overthrown, this time by his army chief Gen. Pervez Musharraf in what journalists like to call a 'bloodless' military coup (all coups in Pakistan have been bloodless) in October 1999.

1999-2008: Musharraf, the last military dictator to rule Pakistan, holds controlled elections in 2002. In the political vacuum created by the exile of leaders like Sharif and Bhutto, the 'religious' parties are able for the first time to form government in one province of Pakistan (North West Frontier Province, later re-named Khyber Pakhtunkhwa).

Growing political pressure forces Musharraf to allow Bhutto and Sharif to return to Pakistan and participate in the elections of 2008. After Bhutto is assassinated during an election campaign in December 2007, the People's Party is elected to power. Musharraf serves out his term as President until August 2008.

During his regime, Musharraf tries to mend fences with India and even comes close to resolving the Kashmir dispute. The matter ends when his presidential term ends and he is forced to let the elected government appoint the country's next President – a historical transfer of power in Pakistan. But the military establishment continues to call the shots in Pakistan – which may change over time if the democratic political process continues. The process began with the 2008 elections and the peaceful transfer of power following the 2013 elections.

2008-present: 2013 marks the first time in Pakistan that an elected government on completion of its tenure handed over power to the next elected government. The democratic political process in this country has barely begun.

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