

OPINION

Our Doomed Democracy

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Pakistan follows the rest of the Muslim world in thinking about the state. There was a time when it was normal for a Pakistani to say that he was a Pakistani first; now he says he is a Muslim first, little realising that he was negating the modern state. Most of the states in the Muslim world began as modern states but are now on the brink of choosing a pre-modern order that is stranger to democracy. Egypt that leads the Muslims of the world intellectually now manifests the following symptoms:

Democracy as 'tyranny of the majority'

1. On the role of religion in government, 61 percent of Egyptians chose Saudi Arabia as the preferred model.

2) Asked whether Egypt's laws

should strictly adhere to the Quran, 60 percent said yes while 32 percent said it should follow the values and principles of Islam and only six percent said laws should not be influenced by the teachings of the Quran.

3) The survey found that 61 percent of Egyptians want to diplomatically de-recognise Israel, while only 32 percent think it should be recognised. The feeling against Israel has surged among the youth.

Another poll found that 52 percent of Pakistanis too wanted sharia and desired an increased role of religion in their lives. Pakistan's wealth is in the hands of a conservative elite which controls the media. Once upon a time the state TV was extreme in its Islamic tilt; now PTV is moderate compared to the 'free' TV channels numbering nearly 80. A new book

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Radicalisation in Pakistan by Muhammad Amir Rana & Safdar Sial (Narratives 2012) tells us on the basis of polls that 87 percent of the journalists think that radical elements 'have an effect' on the media. You don't have to read John Stuart Mill to conclude that Muslims demand democracy to impose 'the tyranny of the majority' on their societies.

Urdu and conservatism

Conservatism in traditionally tolerant Muslim societies has morphed into fundamentalism threatening enough to cause three categories of Muslims to shut up: secularists, liberals and the moderate. The nation in Pakistan is weaning itself from the bilingual ambience of the past despite an increasing trend in the private sector to employ persons proficient in the use of English language.

Urdu is the vehicle of Islamist view. Pakistan is moving towards the status of a single-language country because of the ouster of English-language TV channels. Most graduates from universities are less able to use English and tend to be conservative if not Islamist in their aggressive rejection of secularists and moderates. This trend is shockingly clear in the social media. Some analysts are frank enough to say that

the youth that dominates the social media - facebook, youtube, twitter, etc - will threaten the modern state in the Muslim world.

Radical assault on social media

The West was deceived by the Arab Spring. Western commentators trusted that the social-media savvy youth of Egypt wanted democracy as an adjunct of the modern state. Many social scientists also equated Muslim middle class aspirations with a desire for democracy in the modern sense: a pluralist society with equal rights for the minorities and women. What has emerged through polls is that the Muslim middle class is deeply conservative and wants the state to revert to its pre-modern traits.

In Pakistan the assault on the modern state is led by youths using the social media. Moderates, secularists and liberals, still airing their views in the English-language print media are attacked there. It is not a two-way debate on the internet; the non-extremist citizen simply does not participate in it, except for those who plead that they have been wrongly accused, fearing that they could be killed by jihadi elements working in tandem with the terrorists belonging to the non state actors nurtured by the Pakistani state in the

past.

Moderates as 'American agents'

Pakistani politicians, after assessing that the aggressive and activist sections of society have turned against America - with much help from the media - have moulded themselves to the new environment of fear. A moderate raising his voice against extremism is dubbed an American agent and condemned as a traitor. The Army has intensified its traditional but somewhat muffled negative interpretation of the 'American connection' and has joined the chorus of extremism through its retired officers. The criterion for this judgement is India - and America's betrayal over the decades by favouring India at crucial moments of Indo-Pak conflict.

Terrorism, clothed in the vocabulary of Islam, presides over this essentially anti-democratic scenario. After radical support for Blasphemy Law, the minorities and the squeezed liberal lobbies are targeted. Advocacy NGOs, funded from outside Pakistan, are abominated on the media and accused of 'working for the Americans'. Women in Pakistan are under rising pressure from an aggressive change in male

behaviour. In a research project by Mashal, an NGO based in Lahore, 80 percent of the sermons given in the mosques of Punjab condemn women who 'go out shopping without veil showing off their presence'. (Laki Marwat in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa has actually banned single women from shopping in Ramadan.)

A conservative Supreme Court

A factor in the increase of conservative influence is the Supreme Court of Pakistan. It is supported on the Pakistani street by an aggressive lawyers' community, lending muscle to the activism of the judiciary, but intensifying further the innate conservatism of judges serving under an ideological constitution. The 'basic structure' argument has once again revived the Objectives Resolution of 1949 declaring Pakistan an Islamic state. Some liberal lawyers have opined - in English - that if called upon to adjudicate on the constitutional provision of pardon and presidential immunity, the Court might declare it against the 'spirit of the constitution' which, in the eyes of most conservative commentators, is more correctly reflected in Article 63 of the Constitution, laying down conditions of Islamic ritual adherence for public representatives.

An ideological state finds it hard to be democratic. It lays down the point of view of the state and punishes the 'variant point of view' under law. Ideological democracy loses its credentials by suppressing freedom of expression. It institutionalises intellectual anxiety by constantly positing an unfulfilled ideological agenda - an agenda that remains utopian and therefore impossible of fulfilment. The Muslim League under Jinnah was never clear about the nature of the state Pakistan was going to be. It was unhappy with the 'philosophically untenable' thesis of Jinnah to duplicate the secular Indian state after separating from it.

An ideology of isolationism

The Muslim League thought that the people would not accept liberal democracy unless it was couched in the vocabulary of an Islamic worldview. After Jinnah's death, it

adopted the Objectives Resolution and parted ways with India's secularism by declaring the Quran and Sunnah as its 'ground norm'. Pakistan's gradual alienation from democracy and its irreducible secular conditionality is owed to the growth of the idea of Islamic governance, today showcased by the Taliban.

Today's Pakistan is indoctrinated with an anti-West and anti-Hindu interpretation of world and Indian history. Overlaid with notions of international Islam, it is today poised to confront the entire world, making economic recovery virtually impossible. Most citizens, when asked for a solution to the national crisis, helplessly recommend extreme isolationism as the only cure. Persistent economic decline undermines democracy just as economic prosperity increases popular tolerance of dictatorship. It simply proves that economic security is finally more important than the security of the state. Alas, the Army, which still rules Pakistan, will not hear of it



**[Courtesy: Weekly *The Friday Times*,
July 27-August 02, 2012.]**