

Ethnicity and Regional Aspirations in Pakistan

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Ethnicity is not a new phenomenon in world politics. For a long time ethnicity was regarded as the sole domain of sociologists and anthropologists, whereas in studies on International Relations and intra-regional development it received little attention.

After the nation building efforts of Bismarck and Garibaldi succeeded in Europe during the 19th century, the European States were mainly considered mono-national states, where the influence of any sub-national ethnic groups was largely neglected. After the end of the Second World War, with numerous multinational multiethnic colonised nations becoming independent, the issue of ethnicity assumed enormous scholarly significance. Many of the post-colonial states have faced the problem of ethnicity in one form or the other ever since. In many cases, ethnic assertion has assumed violent forms. Since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the reassertion of ethnic movements, especially in violent forms, across the globe has forced many states to look at it more closely. As Horowitz says, ethnicity has fought and fled and burned its way into public and scholarly consciousness.¹

Before coming to the ethnic problems in Pakistan, it will be helpful to define ethnicity. Etymologically speaking the word 'ethnic' is derived from the Greek word 'ethnikos', which referred to: a) non-Christian 'pagans'; b) major population groups sharing common cultural and racial traits; and c) groups belonging to primitive cultures.² Ethnicity denotes the group behaviour of members seeking a common ancestry with inherent individual variations. It is also a reflection of one's own perception of oneself as the member of a particular group. According to Prof. Dawa Norbu, "an ethnic group is a discrete social organization within which mass mobilization and social communication may be effective. And ethnicity provides the potent raw material for nationalism that makes sense only to the members of that ethnic group. Its primary function is to differentiate the group members from the generalised others."³

Out of 132 countries in 1992, there were only a dozen which could be considered homogeneous; 25 had a single ethnic group accounting for 90% of the total population while another 25 countries had an ethnic majority of 75%. 31 countries had a single ethnic group accounting for 50 to 75% of the total population whereas in 39 countries no single group exceeded half of the total population. In a few European and Latin American cases, one single ethnic group would account for 75% of the total population.⁴

The Pakistani Case

The country under study here- Pakistan – comes under the third level, with one dominant ethnic group accounting for 50 to 75% of the population, as the Punjabis are around 56% of the total population. In the case of Pakistan, the regional assertion based on ethnic identities came to the fore in more pronounced ways in the 1990s. Ethnic disaffection was simmering in Baluchistan and NWFP since the 1970s. Similarly, the Mohajirs of Pakistan were emerging as an important ethnic group with the growth of MQM since the 1980s as a major force in urban centres in Sindh, especially in Karachi and the twin city of Hyderabad. The Sindhi assertion has all along been there since the 1950s. All this has to be studied against the background of the Bengali separatism within Pakistan that climaxed in the formation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Historical Background

To examine the ethnicity in Pakistan, we will have to search for its roots in the Pakistan movement. It was a movement of a special nature. Led by the Muslim League under the leadership of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the Muslims of British India were fed with the fond hope of an Islamic state as opposed to the secular, democratic ideals of State advocated by the Indian National Congress, which sought to unify diversities by recognising their separate identities. While the Congress Party organised constructive programmes like, women welfare, eradication of illiteracy, untouchability, decentralisation of power and so on, the leaders of the Pakistan movement clung to the anti-Congress agenda and their strategy of exploitation of the religious sentiments which culminated in Direct Action day in August 1946. The idea of ‘Islamic State’ overstepped all other secular concerns and after the foundation of the State of Pakistan on August 14, 1947, there was no further impetus to build a nation out of several disparate ethnic groups. The demand for an Islamic Pakistan essentially a demand for political empowerment, and was therefore not so religious in intent. As such, ‘Islam’ did not act any more as a binding force once Pakistan came into existence. It is of little surprise that the most prominent of India’s ulema and religious leaders, notably those in the Jamaat-i-Ulama-i-Hind (party of Indian ulema) did not look favourably upon Muslim Communalism and instead supported the Congress party’s notion of United India.⁵ After independence, the positive programmatic policies of the Congress Party were incorporated into the Indian constitution as the guidelines of a welfare state. In contrast, the ideological foundation of Pakistan as a unified Muslim nation has not yet taken roots in the minds of the people in Pakistan.⁶ The failure of the process of drafting of a constitution for the state of Pakistan revealed the irreconcilable differences among various groups seeking to impose their world-view on the people of Pakistan. This lack of consensus has marked the nature of the Pakistani polity ever since.

Pakistan movement was very strong in Muslim minority provinces; where Muslims feared Hindu domination most. Pakistan, however, was created in the Muslim – majority provinces of northwestern India and Bengal. Ethnic, linguistic and cultural distinctions set them apart. The socio-cultural outlook of the Muslim populations of the Muslim-minority provinces (Bihar, U.P., M.P., Hyderabad) had very little similarity with the Muslims in Sindh, Baluchistan, NWFP’ and even in Punjab. The Sindhis, Punjabis, Bengalis, Biharis or Hyderabadis followed different customs. They were different people who had more in common with their Hindu neighbours than with Muslims of other provinces.⁷ The founding fathers of Pakistan had hoped, however, that the cementing force of Islam would maintain the integrity and unity of the country despite the presence of various ethnic groups.

After the passing away of both Jinnah and Liaquat, the League virtually became leaderless. The League leadership was heavily Mohajir dominated. Just after independence, out of 27 top posts of the country including P.M., C.M., Governor, Attorney General etc., Mohajirs numbered about 18. They were very well educated in comparison to other ethnic groups. However, the oligarchic League leadership delayed the formation of the constitution, and remained over-dependent upon the old colonial set-up, which again had its ethnic bias with Mohajirs and Punjabis having an upper hand.

This Punjabi-Mohajir combine further did not like the idea of Bengali dominated Pakistan, culturally a stronger community in Pakistan and numerically preponderant. The ruling elite, mostly Urdu speaking mohajirs from north India, was completely against the Bengalis. There was a big gap between East and the West Pakistani society in terms of rituals and customs. Between 1963 and 1967 the percentage of the poor- whose income was below Rs.300 per month- had declined in both rural and urban areas, from 60.5% to 59.7% and from 54.8% to 25% respectively. The actual number of the poor in both areas had risen, from 24.46 million to 24.8 million in rural areas, and from 6.78 million to 6.82 million in urban areas.⁸ Economic growth favoured the industrial sector at the cost of the traditional economy, and it led to growth of the cities at the cost of the rural hinterland and small towns; Punjab and west Pakistan grew at the cost of East Pakistan. Authoritarianism became associated with economic disparity. Ayub Khan's (1958-1967) rule especially harboured an ethnic bias. According to Mahbubul Haq, by 1968, twenty-two families controlled two thirds of Pakistan's industrial assets: 80% of banking and 70% of insurance.⁹ Majority of them were from West Pakistan. This hatred and the sense of discrimination against the Bengalis culminated in the bifurcation of Pakistan in December 1971. It was the first direct manifestation of the anguish of major ethnic groups against the dominant ethnic groups. In post-1971 Pakistan, there were five main ethnic groups, i.e., Punjabi, Sindhi, Pathan, Mohajir and Baluchi, apart from many small groups like. Saraiki, Hindko, Zikri, Ahmadiya etc.

The rise of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the PPP to power in 1971 presented Pakistan with another opportunity to define national identity in secular socio-economic terms. But he miserably failed to embrace democratic norms, thus shaking the foundation of newly established parliamentary democracy and federalism in Pakistan. Bhutto could not tolerate his PPP's electoral debacle in 1970 elections in Baluchistan as well as NWFP and to meddled with the ethnic politics of these states.

The ruling political elites in Pakistan have always sought to use the ideology of Pakistani nation against the demands of different nationalities as well as ethnic groups for greater provincial autonomy. The elite's temptation to take any demand for autonomy as a mischievous conspiracy to divide and disintegrate Pakistan has had adverse effects and led to assertion of many regional identities.

The Case of Baluchi and Pathan Assertion

Baluchistan is the largest province of Pakistan constituting 43% of the total area but only 3% of the total population. Even if the name would suggest that the province is named after the principal ethnic community, the Baluch, in Baluchistan, the Baluch make up less than half of the population of the province. In fact, Baluchi population residing in Karachi outnumbers the Baluchi population

living in Baluchistan itself. Baluchis are divided into several tribes and clans and organized on the lines of traditional semi-feudal Sardari System. Firstly Z.A. Bhutto played the Sardars against each other for their own interest and finally in 1976 he declared the system abolished.¹⁰ Subsequently, Baluchi leader Ghaus Bakhsh Bijenjo gave the theory of four nationalities. Z.A. Bhutto motivated by desire to dominate Baluchistan and NWFP, dismissed the elected provincial governments and put the Baluch nationalist leaders on trial before the special Hyderabad tribunal.¹¹ These measures were seen in Baluchistan and NWFP as an assault on the autonomy of the provinces. The resistance in Baluchistan soon developed into a civil war. Bhutto ordered the armed forces to suppress the Baluchi dissidents. The war against the Baluchis lasted almost three years and many Baluchis were forced to flee Afghanistan. The war resulted in the killing of 5300 Baluchis and death of 3300 soldiers.¹² The Shah of Iran also came to the help of Bhutto in suppressing the Baluchi nationalities as he was afraid that the contagion might spread to Iranian Baluchis too.

Again in October 1992, ethnic tempers ran high and clashes took place between the Baluchis and second largest ethnic group, the Pathans in Baluchistan, when 12 new wards were included in the Quetta municipal corporation. Pathan dubbed the decisions as faulty because according to them it was meant to outnumber Pathan councilors against Baluch to ensure the election of a Baluch Mayor.¹³

After the Chagai nuclear tests by Pakistan in June 1998, some Baluchi students hijacked one PIA plane to register their disapproval and draw international attention to the prevailing sense of discrimination in Pakistan against Baluch people and Baluchistan. The Afghan crisis in early 1980s also triggered ethnic tension between the Pathan and the Baluchis.

The idea of an independent Pakhtunistan is very old. The origins of this idea lie in the nostalgic association of the Pathans with the empire of Ahmed Shah Durrani, a Pathan, who gained control over the entire area from Persia to Delhi during the late 18th century. This empire did not last long. But the memory of this empire lingers in popular memory and this has provided the legacy for those advocating Pakhtunistan.¹⁴ Apart from this the major ethnic group in Afghanistan, the Pathans, are willing to support any movement for autonomy for Pathans in Pakistan. Continued negligence of NWFP by the central leadership in Islamabad gives further legitimacy to the movement for ethnic assertion, which might assume disintegrative proportions. The gradual decline of Pathan representation in administration and especially in security agencies has created lot of resentment among the Pathans. In 1968 Pathans were almost 40% of the top military elite, thus getting a bigger share than the Punjabis (35-4%). Ayub Khan was himself a Pathan. For some time, the large presence of Pathans in the state apparatus made it difficult for the advocates of autonomous or independent Pakhtunistan to convince the younger educated middle classes to believe that they were being ruled by other ethnic groups.¹⁵ But later on the steps taken by the central administration contributed to their fear of gradual marginalisation in the hands of the Punjabis. The massive influx of Afghan refugees into Baluchistan and NWFP in the wake of the Afghan war revived the Pakistani fears of an eventual revival of the Baluch and Pathan separatism in the 1980s. This in fact disturbed the ethnic equation in Baluchistan leading to Baluch assertion for they were being 'minoritised' (outnumbered by Pathans). Similarly in NWFP, the huge Pathan-refugee population added to the confidence of the Pathans for renewed assertion. During this period, interestingly quite, regional parties were welcomed into alliances with mainstream national parties and such coalition succeeded in blunting the edge of ethnic assertion effectively

for some time till irreconcilable differences tore them apart leading to ethnic assertion by the regional parties again.

Thus, after the 1988 elections the Awami National Party (ANP) having considerable Pathan following, made an alliance with the PPP and in 1990 formed a coalition government with the Islamic Jumoori Ittehad (IJI), and again with PML-N in 1997. This alliance broke down when the government of Nawaz Sharif refused to rename the NWFP as Pakthunkhwa. This marked apparently the return of the strategy of ethnic mobilization by the ANP. Begum Nasim Wali (the wife of Wali Khan) declared in an interview: "I want an identity. I want the name to change so that the Pathans may be identified on the map of Pakistan." She emphasised that Pakthunkhwa was "the 3000-year-old name of this area: the name used by Ahmed Shah Abdali who said he forgot everything including the throne of Delhi but not Pakthunkhwa."¹⁶ ANP is also against the Kalabagh Dam project whose royalties the Pathans say is bound to go in Punjabi pockets.

The Mohajirs

Another serious ethnic tension, going on in Karachi, is the one between the Sindhis and the Mohajirs. The Mohajirs are the people who migrated to Pakistan mainly from the Gangetic belt of India, in 1947. The Mohajirs were not only in politics but also dominant in administration in Pakistan during the initial years. Out of 101 Muslim members of the Indian civil service, 95 opted for Pakistan, among whom only one third were Punjabis. The Mohajirs represented only 3.5% of the population, in the early years while they occupied 21% of civil services post.¹⁷ Right since the beginning, the Mohajirs shared a dominant position with the Punjabis, who because of their former status of the martial race in British India, represented 80% of the armed forces.¹⁸ The reign of Ayub Khan saw the balance tilting in favour of a Punjabi-Pathan axis. The Mohajirs were no longer in a position to exert as much influence as they did in 1947. Mohajirs raised their voice against this axis, as they did not vote for Ayub in the 1964 presidential election.

Z.A. Bhutto's PPP came to power in 1971. The Sindhi saw it as the empowerment of Sindhi nationalism. At the same time Mohajirs saw Bhutto as Anti-Mohajir. Bhutto made Sindhi compulsory in school by passing the Sindhi language bill. It forced bureaucrats to use Sindhi as an official language. Mohajirs protested against this. Bhutto introduced a quota system under which 1.4% of the posts in central administration was given to rural Sindhis (Sindhi hinterland) through the 1973 constitution. This affected the Mohajir preponderance in the civil service of the province. In 1973 Mohajirs constituted 33.5% of the posts in civil administration, when they only represented 8% of the total population. The rural Sindhis occupied 2.7% of the posts in the junior grade and 4.3% of the posts in the officer grade. In the army they represented only 2.2% and their presence has remained more or less the same since then.¹⁹ Zia, on the one hand supported Mohajirs for countering the PPP in its stronghold and on the other hand favoured Sindhi nationalism and also facilitated the Punjabi penetration in Sindh. The Karachi crisis is mainly between the Sindhis and the Mohajirs but there is strong presence of other ethnic groups too. *Table 1* shows the real situation. In April 1998, a Mohajir boy's love marriage with a Pathan girl triggered a new brand of ethnic clash resulting in many deaths.

Table – 1

Ethnic Groups in Sindh²⁰

Ethnic Groups	Total	Urban	Rural
Mohajirs	4.1	54.4	2.2
Sindhi	55.7	20.0	81.5
Punjabi	10.6	14.0	8.2
Pathans	13.6	7.9	0.5
Baluchis	16.0	3.7	7.6

Mohajir ethnic consciousness found expression first in 1986 in the form of student activism, but very soon it consolidated into a political party—the Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM). Soon after its appearance, the MQM swept into power in the urban centres of Sindh, taking over the Mayorship of Karachi and Hyderabad in 1988. This led to confrontation and the province became the battleground for violence and armed conflict.²⁰ Army launched operation clean up in 1992 to clean Sindh of dacoits and anti-social elements. During the operation, MQM activists were harassed and fake-encounters occurred. Army also engineered split within MQM and the split away group was known as MQM-Haqiqi faction, which acts as an arm of the security agencies of the Pakistani state. The main MQM party was then known as MQM-Altaf Hussain faction. The leader of MQM-A, Altaf Hussain lives in exile in London. During the last decade, encounters between the two MQM factions as well as between the MQM-A and the police and security forces took ten of thousands of lives in Karachi. The city, which generated one third of the country's GDP has been termed by the New York Times as one of the most violent cities of the world.²² It has had negative impact on the economic scenario, which is already under tremendous pressure after the Chagai explosions due to international economic sanctions. There are many other small ethnic groups in the country and many linguistic groups as well. Various smaller linguistic groups often complain that they are not receiving treatment from the centre.

Table –2

Language distribution in Pakistan²³

	Percentage	No. of Speakers
Punjabi	48.17	60.9
Poshto	13.14	16.8
Sindhi	11.17	15.0
Sirake	9.83	12.6
Urdu	7.60	9.7

Baluchi	3.02	3.8
Hindko	2.43	3.1
Brahvi	1.21	1.5
Others	2.81	3.6

Among the above-mentioned linguistic groups, Sariki-speaking people have proclaimed their independent ethnic identity within Punjab. They have demanded that Punjab should be bifurcated and Saraikistan would be constituted.

As far as the fulfillment of regional aspirations are concerned, after the secession of Bangladesh, Punjab has emerged as the focal point of the unity and integrity as well as the cause of regional assertion. Punjab became economically very strong after the successful culmination of 'green revolution' in 1970s.

Pakistan is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country. There are also so many multiethnic, linguistic and racial groups in India. But the problems of ethno-linguistic assertion have been successfully managed through the mechanisms available for resolution of such tensions within the Indian constitutional framework. Unlike India, the leaders of Pakistan could not evolve a healthy democratic culture. The party responsible for formation of Pakistan was not sufficiently democratised to lead Pakistan to a truly representative form of democracy.²⁴ The conflicting forces of unity and diversity could not be balanced due to the prevalence of acute ethnic and linguistic variation and lack of mutual interdependence of national and regional sub-systems. The frequent outbreak of federal provincial and inter-provincial crisis such as the one-unit act, the Pakthoon-Baluch struggle for maximum autonomy and the Sindh-Urdu controversy in Sindh continues to disturb the federal equilibrium. In the process the ruling elites, in a bid to keep the union intact tend to gravitate more and more towards centralisation.²⁵

When Z.A. Bhutto took over as the first elected Prime Minister of the country in 1971, there was some hope because he had made his intentions very clear on the issue of founding and strengthening a federal structure under which, regional aspirations could be effectively managed. He came out with the 1973 constitution. But within one year of passage of 1973 constitution, he himself violated the very ethos enshrined in the constitution. Zia used his full tenure (1977-1988) to destabilise the society, by pitting one against the other. He used Islam not as a cementing force to unite the whole society but to legitimise his illegitimate regime. The restoration of democracy in 1988 raised some hope in this direction. But rampant corruption, growing fundamentalism, sectarian violence, etc. dampened the prospects of good, efficient and federalised governance. Bureaucracy, which is very important in any system, saw itself as the ultimate arbiter of Pakistan's fate and soon linked itself with the army. This military-bureaucratic collaboration proved lethal to the development of other institutions. The legislative branch remained sapless; the judiciary withered and the press stultified.²⁶ Successive prime ministers depended on the support of the army to maintain public order. According to Article 6 of 1973 constitution, army rule could not be imposed, but it has been imposed successfully, first on July 1977 and recently on 12th October 1999.

The assertion of regional identities can be attributed to the shrinking resources too. Economy is in doldrums in Pakistan. Apart from gross mismanagement by the ruling elite—the

army-bureaucracy-landlord troika—the nuclear engagement with India has taken its toll. Economic growth has faltered and is now incapable of keeping pace with Pakistan’s annual population growth rate of nearly 3%. By the late 1990s, annual crop growth plummeted to about 3%, from about 6% in the 1980s.²⁷ current military budget consumes roughly 40% of the gross national product. Much of the government spending goes on interest payment. After all this, the government does not have sufficient amount to meet with people’s aspirations. The chief interest of the elite in this situation has been to maintain status quo.

All this has had its effects on the regional aspirations. The formation of political outfits like PONAM (Pakistan’s Oppressed Nations Movement), which vows to fight for the rights of the oppressed nationalities in Pakistan, shows the way non-Punjabi ethnic and national identities are trying to assert themselves in the national political scene. It is easy to brush them aside as nominal parties without having any constituency or support base. But the sense of frustration that is simmering within may very well erupt posing grave challenges to national integration in Pakistan.

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