

Muslim, Islamic, Indian, or all of the above

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At the base of all of Pakistan's current problems, both domestic and foreign, lies its inability to define its identity. The issue whether it is a Muslim state, an Islamic state, or merely a Muslim offshoot of India remains unresolved to this day.

A tension

As Princeton scholar Muhammad Qasim Zaman's recently published book *Islam in Pakistan: A History* clearly demonstrates, the tension between the modernist concept of a Muslim state and the traditionalist and Islamist concepts of an Islamic state continues to hound Pakistan. As far as the leading lights of the Muslim League, above all Muhammad Ali Jinnah (picture), were concerned, Islam was strictly of instrumental value to them. It was used to mobilise Muslim opinion in British India to serve the political goals of the League leadership, first parity with the Congress, and when that failed, partition of the country. After the creation of a Muslim majority state, Islam became useful to them as a unifying myth that could hold the country together and act as the principal antidote to ethnic nationalism, especially in East Bengal and the North-West Frontier Province. The leading traditional ulama, especially those associated with the Deoband seminary with its strong Indian nationalist tradition, had opposed Partition. However, a breakaway faction led by Maulana Shabbir Ahmed Usmani had from the mid-1940s supported the League's demand for Partition. The creation of Pakistan provided the traditionalist ulama led by Usmani with the opportunity to demand that the state should be turned into an Islamic one. In such a state, the ulama, although not necessarily in direct control of day-to-day affairs of governance, would have a supervisory role in order to ensure that its laws conformed to the Sharia as interpreted by leading jurists of the Hanafi school predominant among Muslims of the Indian subcontinent.

The lay Islamists, exemplified by Maulana Maududi and his Jamaat-i-Islami, were cut from a very different cloth. They were not religious scholars trained in Islamic

jurisprudence — Maududi, despite the honorific title of Maulana, began his career as a journalist — and held the ulama in disdain as fossilised relics of a bygone age. They were both a product of modernism and a powerful reaction to it. Maududi had opposed Partition for two reasons. One, he believed that nationalism was the very antithesis of Islam which enjoined a universal community of all true believers. Two, he intensely distrusted the modernist leaders of the Pakistan movement, who he compared to Ataturk, as the harbingers of a secular, not Islamic, state.

However, after Pakistan came into existence, Maududi moved to the new country and changed his tune. He began agitating for a purely Islamic state that combined the most intrusive aspects of the modern Westphalian state in terms of social control with a government run by a vanguard Leninist party like the Jamaat-i-Islami committed to the implementation of Islamic law. In his conception of the ideal Islamic state, the legislature's power would be circumscribed by the dictates of the Sharia, but the executive under persons of exceptional probity and commitment to Islam would possess near-dictatorial powers.

Although the traditionalist ulama and the Islamists were often at daggers drawn with one another, they combined forces against the modernists to introduce "Islamic" provisions in Pakistan's first and subsequent Constitutions. Under their joint pressure, the modernists have been steadily losing ground, especially since the 1980s when the fallout of the Afghan "jihad" began to radicalise the Pakistani polity.

However, the modernists, represented by mainstream Pakistani parties, even if weakened, have retained enough residual authority, often with the military's support, to remain in control of most of the levers of state. This situation has had two consequences. One, the religious parties and the Islamists feeling they have been politically marginalised have often taken recourse to extra-constitutional means, such as mammoth demonstrations, to assert their clout. Two, it has led to an emergence of extremist and terrorist manifestations of political Islam, several of them Frankenstein's monsters created by the Pakistani military over whom it now has little control.

Indian past

The continued tussle between the three trends of modernist Islam, traditional Islam, and Islamism has contributed to the perennial instability in the country that threatens to turn it into a failed state. But, this is not the end of the story. A major factor adversely affecting Pakistan's search for a national identity is its love-hate

relationship with its Indian past. The close affinity in terms of language, cuisine, music and other attributes that are subsumed under the term “culture” make it impossible for Pakistan to break away from its Indian roots. Although Pakistan was created in the name of Islam, it is a progeny of Indian Islam and not of Islam in an abstract sense. In fact all the major strands of Pakistani Islam — Deobandi, Barelvi and Ahle-Hadees — have their roots in Indian Islam and mirror the divisions witnessed among Muslims in India, both before and after Partition.

Furthermore, Pakistan’s boundaries conform to the boundaries of British Indian provinces and its territorial identity is defined by the geographic contours of the subcontinent. In sum, Pakistan’s inability to shed its Indian geopolitical, cultural and Islamic identity has forced it to adopt anti-Indian postures in order to differentiate itself from the mother country. It is its inability to define itself without reference to India that lies at the base of Pakistan’s hostility toward India.

Pakistan is, therefore, caught in a double bind. On the one hand, it is unable to resolve the contradictions among the three forms of political Islam battling to impose their own definition of Islam on the country. On the other, its inability to define its identity in non-Indian terms has forced it into an anti-Indian mould that is almost impossible to break. Both these factors contribute hugely to Pakistan’s current predicament. For, failure to successfully define a country’s national identity is a sure recipe for domestic instability as well as unpredictable, even aggressive, behaviour abroad.

Courtesy: daily The Hindu, January 17, 2019.