
Moving beyond “Islamic”

Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

Throughout the Cold War period, and even more so after it, American scholars have attempted to understand Muslim societies. Every decade has brought with it new paradigms, although the broad tendency has been towards a limiting, and thus problematic, cultural essentialism. Since the beginning of the “War on Terror,” this tendency unfortunately has been reinforced, thanks in large part to the Bush Administration’s words and actions; the atrocious term “Islamofascism” comes to mind.



Yet, the need for Americans (and others for that matter) to become more knowledgeable about Muslim societies remains acute. Ethnocentric premises need to be discarded and more meaningful categories of analysis unearthed. The challenge lies, in the first instance, in recognizing that societies in which the majority of people are Muslim might not share as much with one another as is typically assumed. While Islam is undoubtedly a major factor in shaping the politics and culture of Muslim societies, it is essential to dedicate time and effort to understanding the other fault lines that pervade these societies.

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Unlike any other Muslim country, the modern state of Pakistan always has sought to overwrite other fault lines under the guise that Pakistanis (or at the very least the vast majority of them) all share the same religious identity. In contrast, Iranians do not shun their pre-Islamic past, and Arabs too recognize that they were Arabs before they were Muslims. The same can be said for Turks and Malays. But Pakistan is defined as the state for the Subcontinent’s Muslims, and thus Pakistanis do not know of any identity that supersedes their religious one — at least that is what the official discourse of the state always has posited.

In fact, Pakistan is fractured significantly along many lines that reflect pre-Pakistani identifications. Arguably the most obvious distinction in Pakistan is ethno-linguistic. The Pakistani state’s relationship with Pashtuns, Baluchs, Sindhis, and Bengalis has been strained since the very inception of the state. Most notably, Bengalis — or then, East Pakistanis — seceded in 1971 after relations deteriorated to the point of no return.

During Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s tenure, all sorts of symbolic attempts were made to rescue the ideology of Pakistan, or in other words, the notion that all those who reside within Pakistan are Muslims and not anything else. Given that over half of Pakistan’s population had given up on this notion and seceded, it might be argued that Bhutto’s attempts

were doomed from the beginning. As it turned out, General Zia ul-Haq overthrew Bhutto in a coup in 1977 on the back of a political movement calling for “Islamization” and proceeded to consolidate the ethnic imbalance in the state.

Zia ul-Haq of course employed the idiom of “*jihad*” to achieve strategic foreign policy objectives and to neuter domestic opposition. However, this epic attempt to use Islam to forge unity did not work. More than 30 years later, the trend towards fragmentation has intensified. Severe disaffection grips Baluchistan and the Pashtun-majority Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). Indeed, it is in the latter that the much-touted policy of patronizing *jihad* has backfired spectacularly. Has this “blowback” represented the final nail in the coffin for Pakistan’s state ideology?

Pakistan’s constitution-writing process in the late 1940s and early 1950s was painfully slow because of the machinations of the civil bureaucracy and military and also because of the lack of consensus over the role that Islam should play in the polity. Ultimately, the so-called “Objectives Resolution” was written into the preamble of the Constitution, clearly stating that Islam would underwrite the law of the land. This was nothing less than a mandate — albeit a vaguely understood one — for the state to instrumentalize Islam.

The 1973 constitution confirmed this: Article 227 reiterated that all legislation would conform to Islamic injunctions. Zia ul-Haq ruled by invoking this mandate repeatedly; indeed, he made “Islamisation” the *raison d’être* of his regime. No government that has followed the Zia regime (or preceded it for that matter) has dared to reopen the question of Islam’s role in the polity.

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The Taliban’s project for a creation of a *Shari’a* state in the NWFP is not, therefore, a simple matter of the state’s writ being challenged by insurgents. There is much more at stake here. This is why the state appeared to “surrender” to the insurgents when it came to the question of instituting “Islamic” law in the Malakand division of the NWFP. In fact, the state was not surrendering at all — it was simply acceding to the demand of the “people” to make good on the commitment made in the Constitution to make Islam the basis of all law.

Munawar Hasan, the head of the Jamaat-e Islami, the most prominent religious party in Pakistan, clearly noted that his organization and the insurgents share the same aspiration and differ only in terms of their methods. In the aftermath of the failed agreement between the insurgents and the government in Malakand, state functionaries have been insistent that they made all possible attempts to implement the agreement but that ultimately it was the insurgents who were not “sincere” in making *Shari’a* the law of the land.

This is, needless to say, a tenuous claim. Pakistan was one of three states (the others being Saudi Arabia and UAE) to recognize the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which came to power in the name of implementing *Shari'a* through the use of force. The state is using force against the Taliban insurgents very reluctantly. The latter have long been considered “strategic assets” and also represent the logical culmination of the state ideology.

The state remains committed to an obsolete official nationalism in the face of enormous contradictions, even while the pull of dissident nationalisms based primarily on ethno-linguistic identity becomes more pronounced. The overwhelming majority of Pakistanis might be Muslim, but this Muslim identity is not necessarily the primary operative identity in the political realm. The state may have tried to downplay ethnic and other identities, but has not succeeded in putting together a viable nation-building project. Understanding Pakistan and its society requires deeper interrogation of the multiple identities of ordinary people and the contradictions of official nationalism.