
Reclaiming Pakistan's Pacifist Religious Creed

Ishtiaq Ahmad

If there is a cut-off point in the 62-year life of Pakistan, a country created in the name of Islam by secular Muslim leadership, it is 1979. For whatever traditionally pacifist sub-continental Islamic creed with a strong Persian influence that the country had retained since the partition of 1947 effectively ended that year. Since then, until the rise of al-Qa'ida/Wahhabi-inspired Taliban extremism and terrorism in recent years, Pakistan has seen the consistent erosion of the broadly inclusive religious tradition it had inherited from the pre-independence Subcontinent — a heritage, in particular, of the centuries of Muslim rule under the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire.

The two epoch-making regional developments of 1979 — the revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan — were instrumental in conservative military leader General Zia ul-Haq's efforts to consolidate political power and institutionalize religious radicalism in the country. Pakistan's association with the Afghan *Jihad* during his rule and with the Kashmir *jihad* in its aftermath strengthened radical religious tendencies in state and society. The extremist ideologies and terrorist practices of al-Qa'ida and its local affiliates, especially since the start of the Afghan war in 2001, also have reinvigorated religious radicalism in the country.

The Musharraf regime was no doubt an antidote to Zia's rule, but its inherently authoritarian nature was perhaps the main hurdle in reversing Zia's radical religious legacy. Pakistan's current civilian democratic government does not face such a limitation, and, therefore, has a unique opportunity to do what its civilian and military predecessors could not in the past couple of decades: re-institutionalize the founding ideals of the nation, which were grounded in one of the finest statements on secularism ever made. Pakistan's founding father, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, said in his August 11, 1947 presidential address before the Constituent Assembly:

You are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place or 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 ... We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State ... Now I think we should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would 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.

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Ahmad...

could be more ironic than the fact that the same Islamists who had opposed the very idea of Pakistan, including Jamaat-e Islami, have hijacked its destiny during this period, which has seen bloody Sunni-Shi'ite sectarianism starting in late 80s and culminating into Taliban-led suicide terrorism at present.

The question of *Shari'a* in Swat, Taliban sanctuaries in Waziristan, the spread of Talibanization to regions far from the country's frontier with Afghanistan, and much more: Was it for all this that Jinnah had founded a separate homeland

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for the Muslims of the Subcontinent? His idea of Pakistan was simply that of a constitutionally secular, politically progressive, and religiously tolerant nation — one that would emulate all the attributes which had helped the Delhi Sultans and Mughals establish a benevolent Muslim reign in Hindu-majority India for several centuries before the arrival of the British.

Had Jinnah not died so early, the face of Pakistan might have been different today. For like Mustafa Kemal Ataturk of Turkey and Jawaharlal Nehru in India, he would have had enough time to consolidate the basic constitution-

al and structural foundations of a secular state, thereby clearing away all of the societal confusion about the country's real national destiny. Consequently, even in the wake of the radical regional developments of 1979, the country might not have experienced the consistently regressive trend leading up to the current religiously rooted terrorist quagmire.

It is true that the national context for the sudden upsurge of religious radicalism in the 1980s was already there. Within a year of Jinnah's death, the Constituent Assembly adopted the Objectives Resolution, which stated:

Whereas sovereignty over the entire universe belongs to God Almighty alone, and the authority which He has delegated to the State of Pakistan through its people for being exercised within the limits prescribed by Him is a sacred trust ... Wherein the principles of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice, as enunciated by Islam shall be fully observed ...Wherein the Muslims shall be enabled to order their lives in the individual and collective spheres in accord with the teaching and requirements of Islam as set out in the Holy Qur'an and the Sunna.

This Resolution forms a preamble to every Constitution Pakistan has had, and is a direct rebuke to Jinnah's secular vision for the country as expressed in his historic speech before the Constituent Assembly. It empowered the Islamists, reinforcing their claim to be the custodians of Pakistan as an Islamic state, and providing a legitimate excuse for today's neo-Taliban organizations such as Tehrik-e Nifaz-e Shariat-e Muhammadi operating in Swat today to demand *Shari'a*.

Despite this, it can be safely argued that religious radicalism remained a peripheral force in the country until the end of the 1970s. Except the anti-Ahmadi riots of the 1950s, Pakistan never experienced any major instance of violence in the name of religion until the 1970s, which in itself is a popular reference point for all those who have seen exclusivist dogmatic Islam overtake the country's traditionally pacifist Islamic creed in the last 30 years. Those who have lived in

Ahmad...

the 1970s often recall the nightlife of Karachi, and liquor shops doing business in broad daylight across the country during those golden years. The era of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto is still hailed as the last of the liberal times that the people enjoyed.

However, factors such as the 1971 dismemberment of East Pakistan on the basis of ethnicity, Mr. Bhutto's weakening power base, and deterioration in US-Pakistan ties pushed the Bhutto regime to play the Islamic card to prevent ethnic disunity, appease the religious right, and bring the country closer to Saudi Arabia. All of this may have had the unintended consequence of empowering radical Islamic forces and transforming the country's traditionally pacifist religious creed with strong Persian/Subcontinental influences into a new, potentially violent, Arabist-Wahhabist Islamist culture that has gripped the entire nation since 1979.

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Reclaiming Pakistan's pacifist religious creed may take as much time, if not more, than the three decades during which it eroded. However, an essential first step in this regard may be to initiate immediately a national debate on rethinking the country's founding ideals in accordance with the secular vision of Muhammad Ali Jinnah — the need for which is all the more clear and urgent when the very Islamic basis of the state has become its principal weakness and a major source of religious extremism and terrorism.