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Pakistan's Identity Crises

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Ever since its inception in 1947 Pakistan has been termed in different ways by different scholars. It has been described as an ideological state, an Islamic state, a garrison state² or even as an illiberal democracy³ which is doomed to fail. Some critics have even called Pakistan a failed state which has had 40 years of military rule out of 65 years since independence⁴. Most of the answers of different questions regarding Pakistan lie in its very origin. Pakistan has been looking for a viable explanation of its creation and passing through a severe identity crisis that looms large over its democratic future.

Many of the new states of Asia and Africa, as Rupert Emerson has pointed out, 'are not yet nations in being but only nations in hope'⁵. Nationalism in these countries came out as a negative phenomenon. It was a movement more against western colonialism than for a positive coherent national identity⁶. Pakistan is one of them. Pakistan was the climax of the politics of separatism, which had its genesis in the events which followed the first Arab invasion. The new state had to invent a grandiose

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2 A term used by Ishtiaq Ahmed to describe the nature of Pakistani state in his book, "Pakistan: The Garrison State- Origins, Evolution, Consequences (1947-2011)" published by Oxford University Press, USA.

3 The term used by Fareed Zakaria in his article, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy" published in Foreign Affairs, November/December 1997. It has been used for those democratically elected regimes, often ones that have been re-elected or reaffirmed through referenda, are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms. Pakistan is one of such states.

4 Gustav Ranis, "Is Pakistan a Failing State?" Yale Global, April 25, 2013. Can be found: <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/pakistan-failing-state>

5 Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation* (Cambridge: Mass Harvard University Press, 1960) p. 94.

6 Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p. 1.

explanation for its creation. Pakistan was the result of 'reflexive nationalism' and reflexive otherness. The two-nation theory gave the country a nationalist ideology – it has been even described as an 'ideological state'¹ – which has been formulative against India, the 'other nation'. Indeed, much of the uncertainty over Pakistan's identity stems from the pestering question of whether its identity is fundamentally dependent on India and what its construction might entail outside of opposition to the latter. This has prompted the proposition that Pakistan is a state burdened with a negative identity shaped by the circumstances of Partition.

Pakistan as a state emerged on the fulcrum of the two Nations theory. The underlying assumption of the theory was that a community can be homogenous on the basis of religion alone. But, the theory was unique in its character from several ways. For example, it had no precedent in history or justification in the annals of political theory. Contrary to Islamic ideology which believes in '*Ummah*'² it includes only the Muslims of Indian subcontinent in the proposed Pakistani state. The theory also failed to take into account those Muslims of India who refused to be mobilized on the demand for a separate homeland. Further, apart from Muslims in areas later constituting independent India some ethno- nationalist groups of Muslim majority regions (mainly the Pashtuns of NWFP and the Baluchis of Baluchistan) also opposed the idea of Pakistan. Besides this, the claim that all Muslims of India constitute a nation and they should have a separate homeland was a denial of other factors such as language, culture, history etc. that plays an important role in a country's unity and integrity.

The Pakistan movement was infect, not a movement of 'Islam' but of political sovereignty of select Indian Muslims. It was not a mass movement seeking a divinely ordained political and social system. Rather it was a movement in which diverse Muslim ethnic groups from different regions of India, representing different social strata and interest, at the centre of

1 A. Hussain, "Ethnicity, National Identity and Praetorianism: The Case of Pakistan" Asian Survey, Vol. 16, No. 10, October 1976 p. 919.

2 *Ummah* is an Arabic word meaning nation or community. In the Quran the '*umma*' typically refers to a single group that shares common religious beliefs, irrespective of their territorial space and united for the objects of a divine plan of salvation. It believes in universal Islamic brotherhood.

which were the emerging Muslim *Salariat*¹ were allied in pursuit of quite material objectives. The alliance such as this did not include all the Muslims of India all the time.

Since its creation in 1947, Pakistan faced a serious crisis of national identity. Mohammad Ali Jinnah (the architect of Pakistan) gave the country a national ideology (the ideology of Islam) but he missed the social and geographical base since the communities were neither ethnically or culturally homogenous nor they were geographically united. In order to control the fundamentalist forces of Pakistan, he declared that Pakistan would be a 'secular state'².

But after his death in 1948 the political leadership of Pakistan looked towards Islam for the justification of its very existence. Unfortunately, there was no leader in Pakistan who enjoyed his kind of vision, power, popular support and authority. As a result fundamentalist forces and clergy were given importance in political and administrative matters and with it Pakistan's Islamic journey started which is continuing even now. Pakistan, like India, is also a multicultural and multi-ethnic state. There are different groups of people belonging to different ethnicity and they have their loyalty towards their people, their region rather than the nation. Therefore, very soon after the birth of Pakistan their Islamic identity dissolved and a struggle for more power and more representation started among different ethno-nationalist groups of Pakistan especially between the Punjabi-Muhajir community of West Pakistan and the Bengalis of East-Pakistan. Later, this power struggle was joined by other ethnic groups.

The civilian leadership of Pakistan due to their inability to govern and lack of popular support failed to handle politicised ethnicity. As a result, in 1958, first military rule came in Pakistan under General Ayub Khan. After this, military intervention in civilian rule became a usual thing and four army generals ruled

1 The term originates from the early 20th century French word *salaire*, literally means 'salary'.

2 In his inaugural address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on September 11, 1947 Mohammad Ali Jinnah declared that, "Now I think we should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find 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 the individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state."

Pakistan for more than half the years after its creation. Due to the changing structure of military elites and recruitment pattern power came in the hands of lower class people with deep religious sentiments, who joined armed forces just as a profession. They were quite materialistic in their orientation and always have a lust for political power. It paves the way for long military rule and Islamization of Pakistani society.

Pakistani army regards its dominance of politics not only as a right but as a duty based on the need to safeguard the territorial integrity of the country in face of the lingering ethnic, religious and linguistic fissures. In this context a political observer aptly remarked, "In contemporary world, state possesses an armed force to carry out some of its functions. In Pakistan, it is the other way round, the armed forces possesses a state called Pakistan. They can get away with anything; they can suspend, abrogate or alter the constitution, which the people have given themselves, to govern with impunity. They set their own agenda, and elected the government of the people, can supplement it but cannot change it".¹

In 1971, ethnic, cultural and linguistic homogeneity of Bengalis overtook their Islamic unity and brotherhood with Muslim of East and West Pakistan disintegrated along ethnic lines. With the emergence of Bangladesh it becomes apparent that the Bengali identity was dearer to those who lived in East Pakistan than their Muslim Pakistani identity. The disintegration of Pakistan proved the fallacy of the two nation theory as the only integrating factor to constitute a separate state based on Islamic ideology. In this context, Asghar Ali Engineer aptly remarks that 'religion at best is one important factor for unity but not the only factor. The Pakistanis are discovering this today, the Bengalis discovered it yesterday'.² It proved a milestone as it reinforced the aspirations of other ethnic movements in West Pakistan. It was later followed by the Pakhtun and Baluchi nationalistic assertion in 1970s, Sindhi nationalism in 1980s and Muhajir movement in 1990s.

¹ Sreedhar and Nilesh Bhagat (eds.), *Pakistan: A Withering State* (Delhi: Wardsmiths, 1999), P.64.

² Asghar Ali Engineer, "Pakistan's polity and its viability", *The Hindu*, Delhi, 14 October 2000, p.10.

Pakistani state and society saw a great change under General Zia-ul- Haq's policies of extensive Islamization, which were adopted during his regime. The military which was considered modern and westernized in their orientation also used Islam as a political survival tactic. General Zia's Islamization initiative claimed to manifest a universal Islamic vision, but in reality, was based on narrow Sunni interpretations of Islamic theology and law, and was therefore unaccepted to Shias who buoyed with pride from Iranian revolution, asserted the validity of their own religious interpretations. As a result, a serious violent confrontation started between these two major sects of Islam in Pakistan. Their conflict poses an obvious threat to the nation building process. It puts the very notion of Pakistan into question since it demonstrates that Islam cannot be the only cementing ideological force behind the nation.

After Zia's death in 1988, restoration of democracy in Pakistan took place. It was optimistically assumed that restoration of democracy might be able to achieve a long overdue political consensus in which supremacy of political institutions over the bureaucratic- military oligarchy would produce a workable synthesis between the contrasting forces of reformism and ethnic pluralism. However, the 11 year long democratic rule (1988- 1999) ended without leaving any landmark in Pakistan's political history and the ethnic and sectarian violence further increased during this period.

During the third and fourth military regimes of Pakistan, fundamentalist and terrorist organization got full expression due to government's indirect; but constant support. They have developed relations with pan-Islamic terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda during this period and received massive and support from outside Pakistan. Now they had an international terrorist network and carried on their Islamic mission not only in South and central Asia, but in other parts of the world also. After the happenings of September 11, 2001, the whole scenario was changed. It changed the future prospects of Pakistan's polity, economy, security, and provided a landmark in Pakistan's political history. Emerging worldwide public opinion against terrorism further complicated the problem for Pakistan.

In fact, Pakistan's support to fundamentalism has deep negative impact on Pakistan's polity, economy and society. Madrassas, which were later turned into schools of hate; to wage

war in Afghanistan and later in Kashmir, have no doubt served Pakistan's short term interests. But in the long run they have created a strong fundamentalist culture that is ultimately likely to wreck and ruin Pakistan. The further increase in violent sectarian clashes between Shia and Sunni also exemplifies this point.

Right from its inception Pakistan's civilian and military leadership used Islam as a political survival tactic. In fact, in Pakistan Islam has been used negatively rather than positively in the national building process. Whenever there comes any demand for fairer representation or devolution of power, Pakistan's political leadership raised the slogan of Islamic solidarity and brotherhood. Thus, they manipulated the religious sentiments of people in order to pursue their own selfish interests. They ignored the heterogeneous nature of Pakistani society and avoided political and administrative reforms. They opted for exclusive policies in a heterogeneous society that give birth to constant tension, frustration and movement that converted Pakistan into a weak and unstable country. Democratic norms such as political consensus, timely election, power sharing, equality, civil liberty have no place in such a system.

In fact, a country ethnically so diverse and uneven in terms of economic development and political power desperately needed a political order that could sculpture a nation based on common aspirations, equality of opportunity, rule of law and economic justice for all.

Now Pakistan needs to access better options. For the time being and in the distant future they will find the secular nation state and political organisation of choice as a viable alternative not only in the world at large, but within the Muslim world itself. Pakistan's will have to confront this reality, and in so determines where it its Islamic heritage guides it in constructing a viable home for a portion of South Asia's Muslim population. Once again Pakistanis have voiced their desire for genuine democratic experience, for economic growth and social justice by electing a civilian government and giving Nawaz Sharif a second chance to fill the ideological void and nurture a society on democratic ethos. Religion alone failed to construct and achieve the grand nation building project there. As of now weak and unpopular civilian leaders remained indifferent towards the heterogeneous nature of Pakistani society and sought refuge in adhoc measures that gave birth to unending ethnic and sectarian conflict. The long cycles of

military rules further added to the decline of Pakistani state and society. Consequently there is a critical need in Pakistan for developing a broader consensus on fundamental issues of political power and distribution of resources, which have significant implications for economy, polity, healthcare and ultimately the physical and material well being and security of all Pakistani's regardless of their religion, ethnicity, class or gender. In an age of fragmenting societies and deadly civil wars, Pakistan might be better served by opting some form of civic nationalism that is built on shared values and ideas rather than on the pursuit of narrowly defined exclusive identities.