RELIGION, ETHNICITY, AND VIOLENCE IN PAKISTAN

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Islamists politics: desire for purity

Islamists have been demanding the fulfillment of the original purpose of the country’s genesis – to be a model Islamic state. Even while their demands have been met, they have pressed for further changes. The country is also experiencing violence at the hands of militant Islamists, some of whom justify their action with the raison d’être of the state.

Broadly stated, Muslim leaders on the road towards Pakistan’s creation were divided into two groups. The traditional clergy, disagreeing with confining Islam to any particular territory, espoused nationalism in purely territorial terms, which also included non-Muslims. These clerics and the parties they founded allied with the Indian National Congress in its struggle against the British.

On the other side were the modernists, educated mostly in the western school of thought, who brought in the western concept of nationalism and applied it to the Indian subcontinent, where they defined Muslim political identity as separate to that of the Hindus. Foreseeing the impact of democratization, these leaders argued that the survival of the Muslims depended on their separate political identity, which itself evolved over time: in 1906, the All-India Muslim League (AIML) advocated for a separate electorate; by 1946, the party was championing for a separate state.

Once the new state was created, the differences in what was perceived to be the role of Islam in politics continued, and does so up to the present day. Generally, political Islamic forces, in particular Jamaat-e-Islami and other right-wing nationalist forces, offer a religious justification for the country’s foundation, a rationale contested by the country’s more liberal parties and its minority groups.

First, Islamist forces argue that Islamic symbolism has been used extensively in the political discourse of the All-India Muslim League. For instance, the party attracted votes in the name of Islam in the 1946 elections, the outcome of which decided the separation of Muslim and Hindu communities. In those elections, the All-India Muslim League decisively won the minority seats in Muslim-minority areas. Likewise, while dismissing the instances of the founders’ lifestyle that the Islamists find un-Islamic, Islamists quote from the speeches of the founders that demarcate Muslims from Hindus.
The country’s modernist forces argue that the All-India Muslim League mostly talked in legalistic terms, as opposed to invoking religious-cultural terminology. The country’s founders like Jinnah were themselves lawyers who called for an increased representation of Muslims in the assemblies. More so, their discourse was shaped around minorities in general.

Islamists counter-argue that, at the end of the day, the founders had stressed the prominence of Muslims as opposed to any minorities. After all, the League was not representative of minorities in particular, but of Muslims in general, clearly evident from its name and from the symbolism noted above. The Islamists go as far as to say that even if the struggle was legal, Pakistan’s rationale as a home for the subcontinent’s Muslims was no different than Israel’s for the Jews. The reality, of course, is that Pakistan could not absorb all of the Indian Muslims.

Yet, to some Islamists in modern-day South Asia, sticking to their original preposition, the 1947 partition had in fact trifurcated the Muslims of the subcontinent in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (seceded from Pakistan in 1971). Had Pakistan not been created, Muslims in India would today have been on par with the Hindus, the major religious group.

The dismemberment of Pakistan, resulting in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, should have set aside the notion that religion alone could glue the citizens (Haqqani, 2005). Instead, as Islamist-inclined writers argued, the fact that the new Muslim-majority state of Bangladesh didn’t merge with India strengthened the original proposition of a Hindu–Muslim divide.Had not a Muslim-majority state similar to Bangladesh been proposed under the original pamphlet laying out Pakistan’s case in 1931 (Ali, 1933)?

All in all, while admitting that the Islamists opposed the creation of Pakistan, once the state was created in the name of Islam, they argue, it was incumbent upon those who knew about Islam to guide the state towards being an Islamic one. In 1986, when Pakistan’s military ruler, General Zia, was told by the son of Pakistan’s ideologue-poet, Muhammad Iqbal, that Iqbal would never have endorsed punishments enlisted in the Islamized codes the regime had introduced, the general responded, “If that is the case, then we have to set Allama Iqbal aside” (Ahmed, 2015). That much seems settled, at least for the Islamists.

As Pakistan’s subsequent history would show, the problem didn’t end with Islamists alone. A bigger issue was that the state too gravitated towards them. Civil and military rulers alike co-opted the Islamists, often to deflect their street pressure – such as the anti-government agitations – or seek legitimacy to their rules. On a broader level, the state invoked Islamic symbolism in an attempt to galvanize support against the perceived division from the country’s diverse ethnic groups, amid the perceived threat from India, from which Pakistan had separated in the first place. Religion was invoked to justify the distinction of Pakistan from archrival India, a Hindu majority state.

However, if Pakistan is about Islam, what entails its enforcement, and how? Given that Pakistan is a multi-sectarian society, which sect of Islam should be followed in personal lives? To what degree? Who will speak for Islam: Zia or Iqbal? Above all, are these questions even important?

More than that, as Pakistan’s own embracing of Islam has shown, the issue with Islamized laws was not about what the mover of the Islamic code might have thought about them, but how it got applied or was perceived on the ground, especially by non-Muslims and minority Muslim sects.

The legacy of the “Objectives Resolution,” adopted by the constituent assembly in 1949, best illustrates this disconnect. The Objectives Resolution, laying the foundations of the state of Pakistan, called for envisioning the state along Islamic lines. Today, this resolution is pitched as a deviation from the ideals of the founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who, in his address to the constituent assembly, had assured that “religion or caste or creed . . . has nothing to do with the
business of the State” (Jinnah, 1947). Because the founder had died by the time the resolution was tabled, the Islamists in that constituent assembly had been prevailed upon. Clearly, the non-Islamist members too voted in its favor. A more critical review of the debates would show that the members had different approaches towards the purpose of the resolution, which continues even today: whereas Islamists consider the resolution as a call for laying down the country’s constitution along an Islamic pathway, as they deem fit, several modernists point to it as maintaining a delicate balance between Islam and modernity.

One person who voted in favor of the resolution was the then foreign minister, Zafarullah Khan, whose own sect was declared non-Muslim three decades later (Ahmad, 2015). Khan, a believer in reconciling Islam with modernity, dispelled the fears of Hindu colleagues by narrating how Islamic injunctions ask for upholding the sanctity of non-Muslims in a Muslim society. That the resolution was vehemently opposed by Hindu legislators, essentially reverted to the original question – in whose spirit was the law to be implemented. Islamist intellectuals dismiss such questions, terming them hypothetical at best, and pointing towards sectarian commonalities. Any religion has jurisprudence, and jurisprudence is about legal niceties, which can be negotiated.

Hence, from early on, Islamist parties have been demanding the Islamization of the country, advocating for laws regulating lives according to what they deem to be the Islamic code.

Many times, Islamists, including militant groups, political parties or movements, have protested publicly, demanding the enforcement of “Islam” in Pakistan. As early as 1954, riots broke out in Lahore, Punjab’s capital, when some Islamist groups demanded that the Ahmedis, a minority sect, be declared non-Muslims. In 1974, a similar demand was raised by parties like Jamiat-e-Ulema Pakistan and Jamaat-e-Islami, which led to the tabling of the second amendment that inserted the definition of a Muslim in the constitution of Pakistan. In 1977, the opposition alliance, using an Islamic slogan, Nizam-e-Mustafa (System of the Prophet), called for the government to lay down the Prophetic model of governance. In response, the government declared Friday as a state holiday, besides taking other measures. In the early 1990s and 2000s, some Islamist militants in the country’s western areas started armed agitations against the state unless it enforced “Islam.” In 2009, for instance, the founder of Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat Mohammadi, who had grown disillusioned with the gradualism of the electoral system he once participated in as a member of a political Islamist party, termed the country’s democratic structure as “un-Islamic” (Aaj News, 2009).

Even when the Islamists were not able to attract enough numbers in the polls, they still shaped the working of the government by electoral alliances and political agitation. In 1977, Prime Minister Bhutto introduced several “moral” laws, such as declaring Friday a weekly holiday, to appease the opposition demanding his removal. Some Islamist parties opted for pre-electoral or post-electoral alliances with mainstream parties, a quid pro quo process. In 2002, Azam Tariq, head of the Sunni extremist outfit Sipah-e-Sahaba, banned a year earlier year, was released from the jail to cast the decisive vote in the election of the leader of the house, also the prime minister (Ali, 2015).

Jamiat-ul-Islam (JUI) is one Islamist party that seemingly tries to exercise its influence amid its limited parliamentary performance. Certainly, the JUI, like other Islamists, wish to Islamize the entire country along the lines of their schools of thought. However, they are unable to do so, because of their inability to win enough seats in order to claim majority. Yet, even with their limited performance, the party has balked at attempts from de-Islamizing the existing codes. The party’s chief, Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman, responding to a comment that Islamists couldn’t form a government, warned that once “we resolve to topple a government even its voters won’t be able to save it.”
A clear example of this has been the inability of the mainstream parties to amend the country’s controversial blasphemy code. The code became controversial in the mid-1980s when the legislators under a military regime made way for inserting vague clauses in it. Even though the code’s passage under the military rule is a point of contestation in the first place, mainstream parties balked at such attempts, given the resistance of religious parties like Jamiat-e-Ulema Pakistan, which has negligible presence in the parliament.

Over the years, even if incrementally, successive governments have accepted some of these demands. The demand for ostracizing Ahmedis was finally met in 1974, when, as noted above, the Constitution when a definition of Muslim was inserted, leaving Ahmedis out. But the story didn’t end there. Islamists kept on changing their goalposts, with new ones raising their voice. The amendments in the blasphemy code, introduced in the mid-1980s, for instance, further excluded Ahmedis (Lahore University, 2015). Moreover, since the 1980s, extreme Sunni Islamists, like Azam Tariq of Sipah-e-Sahaba, have been trying to gain entry in the parliament, this time to revise the definition of Muslim to the exclusion of the Shias. While SSP is banned for its militant activity, its members operate in the political arena using different name like Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ) (Crisis Group Asia, 2014). In 2013, a new political alliance, Muttahida Deeni Mahaz, which included the ASWJ, vowed in its manifesto to make Pakistan a Sunni state once it came into power. While the alliance didn’t make any electoral impact, the fact that such a party didn’t exist, along with its loyal vote bank, points toward the ever-narrowing definition of Muslim (Nangiana, 2013). Such parties often present this loyal vote to the winning parties as a return for constricting the legal identity of Muslims: in 2013, a senior member of the National Party, a Baluchistan-based nationalist party, revealed that a member of a banned outfit had approached him, promising his party support throughout the province in return for passing one bill: declaring one sect (the Shias) as infidels.

Over time, the country’s statutes have retained several Islamized laws, such as the Hudood (Limitation) laws, which, among other things, equaled the testimony of two women to one man, and which required the testimony of four “pious” witnesses to prove rape, failing which a woman was charged with adultery, a punishable offence (Crisis Group Asia, 2008); and amendments in the blasphemy law, which defines blasphemy in abstract terms by including vague terms like “imputation, innuendo, or insinuation” (Crisis Group Asia, 2008). Many members of the minority sects have been accused of blasphemy, charges which they deny. Even the Constitution, passed in 1973, was amended. Article 62 and Article 63, for instance, sets criteria for becoming a parliamentarian along a loosely-defined parameter of morality: a member of parliament should be “sagacious, righteous and non-profligate, honest and amen,” among other things (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). The wordings of these clauses are highly subjective in nature. As a result, they are either completely violated or invoked for political ends against rivals accused of dishonesty.

To be sure, some Islamists, while agreeing to gaps in the outcome of these laws, point to their procedural aspect. For instance, the chairman of the Pakistan Ulema Council, Tahir Ashrafi, argues that those “misusing the law by levelling false accusations should be handed down death penalty as is prescribed for the violators of the law” (Dawn News, 2014). What is ignored, however, is the substantive part of the law, as discussed above, which puts a highly subjective definition of what entails purity. Yet, these Islamists, by pointing towards the weakness of their implementation, call for fresh laws, and hence this is a never-ending quest.

The impact has been felt in other spheres of life too, education being one of them. In the 1980s, the subjects of Islamiyat and Pakistan Studies were deemed compulsory at all levels of schooling, including students of the applied sciences. Moreover, the curriculum was revised to favor a particular version of Islamist history. That interpretation constructs Pakistani exceptionalism,
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offering Islamic interpretations to the country’s past and present. The curriculum, for instance, parroted the state’s strategic goals in India and Afghanistan, using an Islamic discourse. A leading social scientist argued that, “the purpose of Pakistan’s education system is not pedagogy but indoctrination” (International Crisis Group, 2004).

The most profound involvement of religion in the state’s affairs was invoking Islam in managing its foreign affairs. Ever since its birth, Pakistan has fought at least three wars with its arch-rival India. At the same time, Pakistan grew concerned with Afghanistan’s reluctance to admit Pakistan into the United Nations. Strikingly, the ruling groups of these two countries enjoyed good relations with popular political representatives of Pakistan, especially smaller ethnicities. Fearing that India might undo Pakistan, the state gravitated towards Islamist discourse to justify its existence and to exclude the ethnic parties. Throughout the Cold War, Pakistan was anxious of the alliance between Afghanistan and India in undoing Pakistan—a fear that didn’t much materialize. It was to justify its internal defense against India that Pakistani officialdom came up with a narrative calling for a distinction from India on religious lines. That explains how the Islamist narrative, as discussed above, gained prominence in state affairs. Even officials would often invoke religious doctrines like jihad, and its discourse, to justify the fight against “Hindu” India and, later, by even interfering in Afghanistan.

An outcome of this policy has been the exclusion of non-Muslims in nation-building. Christians and Hindus in Pakistan point out that while they are indigenous to the area, they are associated with western countries or with India. At times of tense political events, these minorities bear the direct brunt. In 1992, when Hindu fanatics tried to raze the Babri mosque in India, some Islamic fanatics in Pakistan started demolishing temples.

One of the security instruments of the country’s foreign policy has been reliance on Islamist proxies, in both Afghanistan and India, mostly after the 1980s. These include, for instance, Afghan Taliban, who were openly supported by Pakistan from 1996 until they were ousted in 2001, when they were taken out by the United States, which launched its war in Afghanistan. Ever since the US launched the war in Afghanistan, many former proxies, or their offshoots, have started attacking inside Pakistan, questioning the rationale of not attacking Pakistan, an American ally. In 2007, for instance, anti-Pakistan militants coalesced in the tribal areas, forming a new group Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, which has hitherto been transformed into the state’s top militant entity. As the nomenclature of the group suggests, it sought direct inspiration from the Afghan Taliban. By 2016, the TTP has killed hundreds of Pakistanis from all walks of lives, including prominent politicians, lawyers, doctors, and minority members. Apparently, the policy of the state has been to condone the Islamist proxies unless they turn their guns inside Pakistan.

To what extent was the state’s reliance on Islamist proxies for strategic purposes as opposed to religious motivation, remains a debatable point.

First, clearly, the military or state’s support of such groups is not out of love for Islamists but for strategic goals. Islamization or the exclusion of Muslims is seen as a fallout of the policy, rather than intentional. According to this reasoning, the military has no love lost for the Islamists per se. After all, in 2014, Jamaat-e-Islami, which had supported the military against Bengalis in 1970, was condemned publicly by the military for not condemning the deaths of fallen soldiers in the war against domestic Islamist militants.

But, on the other hand, there are reasons to believe that many within the military ranks, especially mid-level officers, might have fallen prey to their own propaganda. After all, since the 1980s, under General Zia, the military donned ideological attire too, taking upon itself the task of defending the “ideological frontiers” of the country (Fair, 2014).

Clearly, much of the Islamic code was invoked in the 1980s under General Zia. It was under his watch that the curriculum was Islamized, the Hudood code introduced, the blasphemy law
amended, and articles 62 and 63 introduced. Apparently, therefore, the state’s search for religiosity is the handiwork of a few individuals, rather than society or the polity as a whole. Some attribute the rise of modern-day Islamism to the rule of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–88), who had come to power in a coup. It was during his time that a madrasah degree was accepted as equal to any professional one. It was during his time that paying zakat to the state was mandated. And it was under his watch that a whole set of codes, some noted above, were introduced.

General Zia-ul-Haq was a known sympathizer of Jamaat-e-Islami, and therefore tilted towards Islamizing the state mechanism, a policy no different than what JI wants to achieve. But others find the roots of Zia’s Islamization in his attempts to legitimize his own rule by luring the opposition against “socialist” Bhutto, whom he (Zia) had ousted. While Bhutto had invoked religion too, he and his party as a whole were seen as relatively distant from religion.

Under Zia, Pakistan started to look like a Sunni state. General Zia-ul-Haq’s “Islamization” campaign was overtly shaped on Sunni lines to the disadvantage of the Shias. In 1979, the Shias protested in the capital, Islamabad, against the Zia-introduced zakat ordinance (Islamic charity); Zia’s code had called for people to provide the charity to the state, a practice contested by the Shias. In response to the protest of around 50,000 people, Zia rescinded the “reform’ (Rajani, 2015).

One of the virulent groups to rise under the Zia regime was Sipha-e-Sahaba Pakistan. Deeply anti-Shia, the outfit and its offshoot, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, have targeted Shias across Pakistan.

The opposition by Shias to General Zia shed light on another aspect of the politics of religion in Pakistan: that the intolerance or problem has more to do with a majoritarian agenda. Given the sizeable presence of Shias in Pakistan, it is unlikely they can be ostracized too easily. They are represented in the country’s bureaucracy, including the military, as well as in parliament.

The influence of a sizeable minority was earlier felt from the Hindus too, who had a significant present in the eastern wing. That population kept checks, to some extent, on the country becoming Islamized too easily. To recall, when the 1949 Objectives Resolution was passed, Hindu legislators, mostly from the eastern wing, opposed it, fearing discrimination. The secession of the country’s eastern wing in 1971 also meant the separation of a sizeable Hindu population. Arguably, whatever little influence the minorities might have had on the polity, waned further.

Most importantly, the debates over Islamization in Pakistan are also a continuum of the debates raging in the Muslim world, ever since it went into decline in the nineteenth century. The imposition of majoritarian Islam is felt in countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran too, where non-majority sects feel excluded. By that token, Pakistan was just another Muslim country, which saw an Islamic awakening in the twentieth century. The military was in fact representative of society. While it is true that General Zia Islamized Pakistan, he wasn’t responsible for what happened in Iran or Saudi Arabia. He was, in simple terms, a product of his time. So were others, including his predecessors.

Ethnic politics: search for autonomy

To various non-Islamist forces, such as the liberal intelligentsia, ethnic parties, and modernist Islamists, the country’s foundational struggle was about empowering a minority community: to honor the founders, respect the minorities in the new state, whether ethnic or religious.

Today, ethnic parties and liberal mainstream politicians in Pakistan argue that the demand was for a minority in the larger Indian state. In the case of British-administered India, the minority was Muslim. Scholars like Ayesha Jalal have hinted that the idea of the separate Muslim state of Pakistan was used by the All-India Muslim League as a “bargaining chip” to extract
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concessions from the Indian National Congress, which considered itself as the sole party of all Indians, Muslims included (Jalal, 1985).

Thus, once the British had left, the Muslim leadership outside the Congress wanted Muslims to be represented in India’s legislative bodies. Perhaps that is why the demand for Pakistan was popular in the Indian subcontinent’s Muslim-minority areas, which after partition remained with India. As in the Muslim-majority areas, the demand seemed to focus on autonomy. The 1940 resolution, which became the basis of the creation of Pakistan, talked about plural “states” against one state. Islamist parties like Jamaat-e-Islami, which in essence lays down the road map of an Islamic state, never supported the idea of Pakistan.

After Independence, Pakistan, like India, was left with the paraphernalia of the British Raj. The Indian Act of 1935 laid the foundation of the two countries. But while India went ahead with drafting its constitution in the next two years, Pakistan’s progress on that front lapsed for a long period of time. Different committees were constituted in the constituent assemblies, but nothing definitive was decided, because of different reasons including the precise numerical relation between different administrative units.

In its early years, Pakistan comprised two exclaves, separated in-between by India: the western part, or today’s Pakistan, was inhabited by Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, and the Baloch, among others; and the eastern part, or modern-day Bangladesh, was predominantly Bengali. While the western part of Pakistan as a whole was larger in size than the eastern part, Bengalis formed the single largest ethnic group.

One of the reasons why the country couldn’t shape a new constitution, let alone hold nationwide elections, in the early years of foundation, was that the civil-political elite that came to rule the country didn’t enjoy widespread popular support across the country. Democracy or elections would have unseated them. To recall, the idea of Pakistan was popular in the Muslim-minority areas of British India. These areas didn’t come to Pakistan. Their people, however, migrated to the new state. The political elite within had their constituencies back in those areas. The popular political forces in the western part, on the other hand, included regional parties, some of which were rivals of the Muslim League during the struggle for independence.

From the onset, representatives from different provinces disagreed over power-sharing among the different socio-political groups, reflected in the committees tasked to hammer out a consensus. In 1955, the government amalgamated the four provinces of the western exclave, along with several princely states, into West Pakistan, and renamed the eastern part as East Pakistan. Known as the “One Unit” formula, it imposed parity on the two blocs, forcing population of the two blocs at 50:50.

This largely facilitated in finally delivering the constitution. Where it took nine years to come up with a consensus document, after the introduction of the “One Unit” formula in 1955, the constitution was passed in just one year, in 1956. However, some policy-makers attribute the delay in constitution-making to other issues such as the role of Islam.

Bengalis felt discriminated. With little representation in the civil and military bureaucracy, they already had little role in the broader contours of national policies. In the 1960s, when American aid came to Pakistan, the majority of that was invested in West Pakistan, which saw a “Green Revolution” even though East Pakistan too had an agrarian economy. The Bengalis also thought themselves left out of the security configuration of the country. A common phrase at that time was “the security of East lies in the West.”

The politics of the Bengalis started revolving around their rights, clearly echoed in their demand to declare Bengali the country’s official language. Bengalis, after all, were the majority. On 21 February 1952, police resorted to a crackdown of the protestors in the provincial capital.
Dhaka, resulting in the death of several students. So important is this day, that the 21st February is commemorated as a national holiday in Bangladesh.

The state of Bangladesh itself was created in 1971 from the eastern wing of Pakistan, in a turn of events, following the then government’s refusal to hand over power to the winning party in the general elections held a year earlier. The winning party, the Awami League, fought on the plank of Bengali nationalism, promising provincial autonomy should it win elections.

With the exit of the country’s eastern part, the issue of provincial autonomy didn’t subside. Instead, smaller provinces in the remaining country, what is today’s Pakistan, have raised more or less the same demands: autonomy from the central government.

These provinces, namely Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, and Sindh, accuse the largest province, Punjab, and the central government of denying them their due share of the economy and polity. Punjab is what defines Pakistan, they conclude: the country’s various policies are by and large reflective of the interests and fears of the province of Punjab.

For its part, Punjab argues that it has the most populous province, and therefore should be the recipient of greater governmental attention. Punjab, after all, holds overwhelming seats in the parliament, and therefore, anyone desiring to rule Pakistan has to come through Punjab. Moreover, it is Punjab that has the greatest representation in key civilian and military institutions.

But smaller provinces disagree that population alone should determine the direction, reminding the state not to be neglectful of these areas. Interestingly enough, before the separation of East Pakistan, the aid distribution formula was based on size rather than population. Post-1971, the formula was changed, as if to facilitate Punjab. If the pre-1971 formula is to be re-applied, the province to receive more attention will be Baluchistan, the largest province, and one of the neglected areas.

Pointedly, the Baloch population in the country is around 5 percent, far less than other ethnicities. The small size of its population is often counted as a factor as to why the latest spell of Baloch insurgency, which started in 2005, will never succeed (contrast this with the more than 50 percent Bengalis). The province also witnessed three insurgencies earlier, in the 1950s, in the 1960s, and in the early 1970s.

Strikingly enough, Baloch leaders don’t disagree with the importance of the population figure. That the demographics of the province have been changing to their disadvantage is their fear. Many Baloch parties, irrespective of their stance on the on-going secessionist insurgency, fear that without their involvement in decision-making on national projects, they will be reduced to a minority in their own province. Even those who subscribe to the state of Pakistan argue that because they are such a small number, it doesn’t make any sense to take up arms, which will further eliminate them.

Pakistani officials have tended to dismiss the movement as attempts by some stray tribes or individuals. To the state, Baloch insurgency has been a tribal affair, propped up by a few sardars (lords), even though many have allied with the government, and that current insurgency has spread to the non-sardari southern areas of the province. Lately, there have been migrations from rural to urban areas, from one province to another, as people escape conflict and search for better opportunities.

One such city that has embraced people from all over the country is Karachi, a microcosm of the country, and roughly 10 percent of its population. The city is inhabited by Urdu-speakers, migrants from India after 1947. Because of being at the forefront of the Pakistan movement, the early Urdu-speakers have, arguably, a greater role in the nation-building of Pakistan, the declaration of Urdu being one of them.

Yet, with time, things have not remained the same for the Urdu-speakers either. The Urdu-speakers were never in a majority. Today, apparently, popular Urdu has been attempting to include Punjabi vocabulary in a process of evolution, partly reflected in popular media shows.
From a direct role in nation-building of the country, representatives of the Urdu-speaking Muttahida Qaumi Movement today see its future in an autonomous Karachi. The mayor of Karachi, in which the key to Pakistan’s economy lies, would be no small authority: a port city, Karachi provides 65 percent revenue to the government and overwhelming access to international trade. Once the country’s capital, Karachi is now often in the news for political clashes among the city’s varied political and sectarian groups.

The Urdu-speakers were not even a majority in Sindh, the province where most of them migrated. Thus, after Pakistan held its first elections in 1970s, Sindh saw its language riots. In fact, Sindh was the first province to have declared the Sindhi language the official language of the province. Some Sindhi nationalists now pride themselves in speaking either English or Sindhi. Additionally, a permanent feature of today’s Sindh is the urban–rural divide, with urban referring to the Urdu-speaking areas and rural representing the Sindhi-speaking areas. This divide is reflected in official directives, with the two areas getting a different share of representation in public sector jobs.

Like other smaller provinces, Sindh too complain of being an outlier. But the province’s nationalist movements couldn’t much rise electorally amid a stronger Pakistan People’s Party, a mainstream party which has relayed some of Sindh’s grievances to the center. Yet, Sindhi nationalists recall with nostalgia how after partition the demographics of Karachi, a city of Sindh, have changed to their disadvantage. Once in a majority, Sindhis were pushed to second place and later, since the 1980s, to fourth place, as Punjabi and Pashtuns took over (Gayer, 2014).

Beyond Karachi, Pashtuns inhabit three administrative units, geographically contiguous but kept separate: Khyber Pakthunkhwa (KP), a province in the north-west named after them; Baluchistan’s northern part, which is insurgency-free; and the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), adistinctively-administrative unit which was infested by Taliban militants. Arguably, in these areas, Pashtuns have varied interests and fears, resulting in the rise of different Pashtun parties. To some extent, the Pashtuns of KP have also integrated better than others in the state of Pakistan. Together with the Punjabis, the Pashtuns are represented in key decision-making bodies, not least the military and civil bureaucracy. But like other smaller group they have their grievances too.

For one, the Pashtun tribal areas are still run by a colonial-era code that denies residents their basic rights. Currently, there is debate over how to “mainstream” the FATA. One school of thought argues that the FATA should be given the separate status of a province, because over the years it has evolved distinctively from other provinces and because its development indicators are different from others (amalgamation with an existing province would result in development priorities at the cost of FATA’s own development). Another school of thought want the FATA to be amalgamated into adjacent Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Both, the FATA and KP are populated by Pashtun, and there is no reason why people sharing ethnicity as well as geography should live together – other provinces are also named essentially after the majority ethnic group living there.

There are voices calling for new provinces, to break the administrative monopoly of Punjab, but apparently, Pakistan’s policy status quo, including Punjab, favors the status quo. Baluchistan-based Pashtun parties refer to the northern Pashtun as southern Pakhtunkhwa, FATA as central Pakhtunkwa, and KP as northern Pakhtunwa. Such a distinction has strategic implications: it will end up providing Pashtuns with a majority in the upper house.

Lately, the government of Pakistan has taken some steps to allay the concerns of ethnic groups. In 2010, Pakistan passed the eighteenth constitutional amendment, which delegated powers to the provinces, empowering them to decide on their own.

Such a move should have theoretically allayed concerns of the Baloch secessionists and nationalists. Instead, the grievances continue. Their demands are more about de-militarizing
the province, leading to speculation that the issue is more about civil versus military relations than Punjab versus the rest. The same can also be said about the secessionism of the eastern wing. Their grievances would have been addressed had the military not applied strong-arm tactics in 1970–71.

When in power, the military has tried to do away with popular parties which enjoyed support in their respective provinces. The military rulers, bypassing provinces, established local governments, producing lower-tier leadership. This mechanism cut the authority of provincial leaders, who were seen as promoting parochial agendas, and to make the local administrators directly dependent on the military regime at the top.

The eighteenth amendment does offer some hope to the ethnic parties. Undoing the amendment risks a strong backlash from smaller provinces. Pro-federalist legislators even go as far as maintaining that the amendment has shut the door on any military venture that tries to impose a unitary setup.

Yet, military regimes have had their own political goals. The much-discredited One Unit, which consolidated the western part into one unit and the east part into another, was scrapped by none other than General Yahya Khan, as if taking a hit against his immediate predecessor, General Ayub. Similarly, General Zia, after taking over in 1977, let free several high-profile nationalist politicians arrested under Bhutto's regime. In fact, some argue that Sindhi and Urdu nationalists were given space during the regime of Zia in order to cut the influence of the Pakistan People's Party in Sindh.

Also, during Musharraf's time, a high-level committee was constituted to talk with the disgruntled leader Bugti. Most importantly, though, the committee's recommendation that Bugti's demands should be listened to were ignored. Hence, the cycle continues.

The interplay of religion and ethnicity

In the context of Pakistan, ethnic nationalism has often viewed as the antithesis of Islamism, most glaringly with Islamist proxies taming ethnic movements. From early on, Pakistan policymakers saw in the country's divergent political groups contributing to an insecure environment, given that the country had fought war with India, which, according to Pakistani security planners, wanted to undo Pakistan. At a more personal level, the ruling class, many migrants from India, risked losing power with electoral exercise.

Instead of forging a national identity inclusive of all identities, the state stressed upon a singular identity, revolving around Islam and Urdu. Both were considered as ready-made glues in the face of ethnic diversity, whose political representatives were seen as colluding with archrival India.

As to why Urdu was given national status in comparison to the others, different explanations exist, one of them being that Urdu was associated with Muslims living in Muslim-minority areas, and hence a distinct language for the new state created for Muslims. Of course, Urdu had two sides: not only was it associated with Muslims inside India, after partition the language was the mother tongue of a people in a country where the majority spoke other languages. Being well-versed in the official language also meant better opportunities. The language of the powerless was soon the language of the powerful.

The absence of a nationwide party, or the presence of popular ethnic politics, is also attributed to the military's interventionist policies in Pakistan in the early years. So decisive were those years that, according to Agil Shah, a scholar on civil–military relations, the perceived threat from India, coupled with internal division, ultimately paved the way for the military (Shah, 2015). The subsequent story suggests that the military, an integral part of the state, was.
at the forefront of nation-building, flagging up religious justifications for Pakistan’s existence. As discussed earlier, Pakistan went to war with India immediately after partition; there was no party enjoying widespread support; instead, popular parties drew support in different geographical areas; those parties were in turn perceived as close to India, hence dooming the prospects of transferring power to the elected representatives.

With time, any objection to this scheme of things was dismissed either as antithetical to Islam or even to the security of the state. Bengali language, due to its resemblance to the Hindi script, and culture were dismissed as too close to that of the Hindus and therefore not deemed to be Pakistani enough. Similarly, because the Pashtun nationalist movement had allied with India’s founding party before partition, and boycotted the referendum deciding the fate of a Pashtun province with Pakistan, the Pashtun leadership was suspected as being under the influence of India, the nation’s perennial rival.

In hindsight, it can be argued that as ethnic-nationalist polity was ignored, part of that spilled into outright secessionism, further strengthening the policy-makers’ fears concerning the nationalist polity. In 1970, for instance, Pakistani officials seemed hesitant to transfer power to the Awami League, a Bengali nationalist party, after it won a majority in the polls held in the country’s first adult-franchise elections. Instead, a military crackdown was launched, resulting in the dismemberment of the eastern wing into Bangladesh.

This is not to say that India wasn’t involved in supporting the Bengali guerrillas. But the support was after Bengalis trickled into India’s eastern provinces to escape military action. The turn of events look like this: instead of accepting the results of 1970 elections, the military regime ordered a crackdown, culminating ultimately in the strengthening of the guerrilla movement, the involvement of India, and the dismemberment of the eastern wing, which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh.

This experience should have taught Pakistani officialdom a lesson of not condemning a popular movement as traitorous. Instead, to many wary of democratic choices, the final outcome – of secessionism – strengthened doubts about transferring power to ethnic parties. Indeed, Pakistan’s assumption concerning India’s foul play was strengthened recently when Indian Minister Narendra Modi told a Bangladeshi audience how his country had helped them in their war of independence.

Ironically, in the entire history of the country, political representatives of all sub-nationalities of Pakistan, that is the Pashtuns, Baloch, Sindhis, and even Urdu-speakers, who were at the forefront of the creation of Pakistan, have been at one point or another accused of being funded from India. The sole exception has been Punjab. Being the most populous province, Punjab enjoys the highest number of seats in the national legislature as well as highest representation in the state machinery, especially the powerful military. The state discourse, around Urdu and Islam, is closely resonated in Punjab, whose elite came to exercise the power.

Islamists came in handy in supporting the state, such as during the military crackdown on ethnic secessionists. In 1971, the military regime supported Jamaat-e-Islami-affiliated Al-Badar and Al-Shams militias in East Pakistan, who were fighting Bengali nationalists and secessionists. Some thirty years later, Bangladesh started hanging members of the party, drawing condemnation from a select group in Pakistan, including its interior minister. Twenty years later, Baloch nationalists accused the state of supporting Islamist-minded militias against Baloch secessionists. Even a ruling nationalist leader termed such militias as the greatest threat to the security of Baluchistan (the military denies any wrongdoing).

To Pakistani security officials, the secessionist threat is more serious than the Islamists one. Theoretically, one reason why the state would think this is to ward off any threat to its survival. The primary goal of any state, according to the realist school of thought in international
relations, is survival, and secessionism threatens that survival, at least in the minds of the military trained in traditional warfare. A similar example was observed in 2015 with Turkey, which, despite international calls, viewed the threat from Kurdish separatists at par with those of Islamic State.

In a policy whose legacy continues even today, Pakistan started supporting Islamist proxies since the 1970s, against the perceived threat from the Afghanistan government’s pan-Pashtun nationalist policy. With time, many of those whom Pakistan supported were of Pashtun ethnicities; the Afghan Taliban were one such group. Yet, ironically, one of the public planks of Pakistan’s policy towards post-Taliban Afghanistan has been empowering the Pashtuns, as Pakistan fears that non-Pashtuns are too much under the influence of India. Reality of course is that Pakistan’s own Pashtun leadership, such as the Awami National Party, has never readily endorsed Pakistan’s Afghanistan policy. Even the state’s attitude has been dismissive towards them, which is why the state started supporting proxies in the first place.

Simultaneously, after the Afghan war, the existing stock of trained fighters was sent to Kashmir, which coincided with India’s own wrong dealing in 1987. Many of those groups had their origin in Punjab and borrowed heavily from the discourse of its right-wing – how India, for example, had been stealing the country’s water.

In the post-2000 era, several of those proxies, Afghan- and India-centric, started to attack inside Pakistan, targeting high-profile individuals, minorities, military personnel, among others. Even though militancy in Pakistan is an extension of the fallout of policy in Afghanistan, it is important to note that the notorious extremist groups in Pakistan, like the SSP, were formed, or condoned, not along the Afghan border, but inside the heartland of Pakistan – in Punjab. Even the Pakistani Taliban, based in the tribal areas and considered the top anti-Pakistan group, had its ideological foundations in Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, SSP’s offshoot.

At times, part of the trends of conflict erringly resembles the contours interplaying ethnic politics and Islamist groups. The 2013 elections were marred by violence, targeting workers of ethnic parties such as the ANP, MQM, and the liberal PPP, resulting in a paralysis of their electoral campaigning. Coincidentally, Pakistan’s outlier areas, which are the least developed, have come under the regular grip of conflict and Islamist militants have been active in Baluchistan, KP, FATA, and Sindh’s Karachi. However, militants have taken on other parties, including Islamists, and in the Punjab too.

Above all, the Islamization policy has its costs in inter-ethnic relations, with Pashtuns at the center. The support for militant Islamists, against the perceived fear of Pashtun secessionism, seems to have come full circle, as not only are next-generation Islamists taking on the state, but the influx of Pashtuns and Afghans has the potential of disturbing ethnic balances in much of the country.

In Karachi, the influx of Afghans and Pakistani Pashtuns since the 1980s has increased their number in the city. In the post-9/11 period, Taliban fighters, both Afghan and Pakistani, were sighted in the city. The subsequent rise of the Pashtun party in Karachi, by now the largest city of Pashtun in the world, has upset the leading Urdu-speaking party, the MQM, which warned against Talibanization as if it intended to target two birds with one stone.

Similarly, in Baluchistan, nationalists complain that Pakistan’s interventionist policy in Afghanistan has resulted in an influx of Afghans into the northern Pashtun-belt of Baluchistan, and who over the years have been absorbed into Pakistan by taking Pakistani identity cards. This influx too will tip the balance against Baloch, adding to the fear of the Baloch’s survival, as discussed in the previous section. Even the capital, Islamabad, saw the arrival of Pashtun migrants escaping conflicts back home trickling in to the city’s outskirts.
Conclusion

In the last ten years, Pakistan has come under attack from a diverse group of actors with diverse agendas, which can broadly be categorized as militant Islamists and Baloch secessionists. For sure, the two have operated on different scales. These two, however, are the militant manifestation of two broad movements, of ethnic politics and Islamist politics, running parallel to each other.

As this chapter shows, while the Islamists want the country to become more Islamized, the ethnic parties yearn for political autonomy. The two forces portray the genesis of the state in two different terms: while the Islamists emphasize the Islamic aspect of the struggle, the ethnic ones call for upholding minority rights, albeit ethnic ones.

But where religion and ethnicity really interplay in Pakistan’s history is the somewhat similar trajectory of leaders and groups from being perceived as mainstream to becoming exclusive in agenda. The hero of contemporary Baloch nationalism, Nawab Akbar Bugti, whose death anniversary is celebrated regularly by Baloch nationalists, had once served as Pakistan’s interior minister, a position responsible for the internal security of the entire country. This trajectory should help explain why Jinnah, Pakistan’s founder, was once a member of the Indian National Congress; in his later life, he shunned the INC and stood against it, reflecting his political evolution. The trajectory of the Bengali political class is similar: once vociferous supporters of the Pakistan movement, within three decades they went for outright secession; even Pakistan’s former Prime Minister Husain Suhrwardy is now hailed as a hero in Bangladesh’s history.

These similar evolutions neatly explain how the history of Pakistan is more often a history of the relations between the majority and minority, whether on the religious or the ethnic spectrum.

Bibliography


