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RELIGIOUS POLITICAL PARTIES IN PAKISTAN

Muqarrab Akbar

The role of religion in international politics gained much attention due to the impact of beliefs and/or of theology, the link to particular cultures, and the origin of related customs. A country which has both religious beliefs and a specific hierarchy in relation to religion might be expected to have a role for religion in its foreign policy, for example, in relation to how to create favourable interactions with allies and enemies in the political domain and/or to play a pivotal role vis-à-vis existing political systems and specific groups in the wider political structure.

In Pakistan, religion has a key role in politics, probably the dominant influence in the political and religious history of the country. It began from the ideology of a separate homeland for India’s Muslims and in the foundation of Pakistan’s ‘Objective Resolution’ and related constitutional innovations to practical infrastructure. Over time, religion has remained the main pillar of governance in Pakistan. Religious attachments and attainments were intended to have both an acceptable and positive impact on political culture, with Islam serving as a mechanism uniting society. Political parties and other relevant actors use religion in their political prisms and manifestoes which relate it to policy-making processes to help coordinate interactions between political leaderships and grassroots party members and supporters. These are all elements of how religion affects politics in relation to political parties and help us to understand its role in Pakistan’s domestic and international politics.

Initially, the slogan of ‘Islam in Danger’ united India’s Muslims under the platform of the Muslim League which resulted in the creation of Pakistan. Islam was cited as the binding force to hold the Muslims together. Soon after the creation of Pakistan, the religious groups which had initially opposed the partition of the Indian subcontinent started calling for the country’s Islamisation and adoption of Islamic laws into the future constitution. These religious groups used Islam as a political means to achieve their goal: implementing ‘hardcore’ Islamic values and principles, including Sharia law in the newly independent state of Pakistan. General Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan’s president from 1978 to 1988, once claimed that ‘Pakistan is like Israel, an ideological state. Take out Judaism from Israel and it will collapse like a house of cards. Take Islam out of Pakistan and make it a secular state; it would collapse’ (quoted in Akhtar, 2018: 94) Almost two decades later a similar statement was given by the then Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani, ‘Pakistan was created in the name of Islam and Islam can never be taken out of Pakistan. However, Islam should always remain a unifying force’ (quoted in Paul, 2014: 127).
Islam, Pakistan’s raison d’être, is highlighted by the authorities, whether civilian or military, to encourage people to realise that Islam is the driving force by which they could diminish or do away with any regional or sectarian differences. The unity of the people of Pakistan could be realised by appealing to the denomination of an Islamic republic or Islamic state, whether by comprehending its theoretical underpinnings or its practical layout. Because it was used as a rallying cry to mobilise the masses for the creation of Pakistan, early leaders of Pakistan tried to follow the principles of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan and revered in the country, as Quaid-e-Azam. Jinnah clearly opposed the idea of a theocratic state and invited Pakistanis to support the project of building a modern, that is, secular nation state. Ziring contends that Jinnah as the leader of the nation aspired to build the state on modern democratic ideals with liberal principles. He stated that ‘Islam was cast as a moderating element, reinforcing secular guarantees of fundamental liberties’ (Ziring, 1984: 934). Ziring argues that after Jinnah, the leadership of Pakistan was not able enough to transform the idealistic goal of the Muslim League into a practical programme due to both internal rifts within the party and to personal desires to give benefits to family, friends and supporters. ‘As a consequence, the politicians could bicker and intrigue, but they could not manage policy’ (Ziring, 1984: 934). Ziring also states that the early leadership of Pakistan compromised the institutional norms and laid the foundation of opportunistic politics. Finally, Pakistan’s early political leadership even failed to project the symbolic image of the state as a republic – whereby every citizen was to be envisioned as equal without any discrimination on the basis of race and sect.

Ziring’s critical view is that the state and society of Pakistan passed through a tumultuous period, a shift from so-called democracy to autocracy or dictatorship. Personnel at the helm of affairs tried to use Islam to get legitimacy for their role and sought to project an image to the public that they were seeking to make the society more egalitarian via their policies and programmes. Yet they were not able to ‘normalise’ the role of religion in politics mainly because they were unable to formulate a successful strategy to achieve unity among the different cultural groups of Pakistan. The result was that Pakistan’s journey from Islamic republic to Islamic state was problematic and not achieved. Ziring opines that,

in the view of the nation’s principal architect, they required tutors and guides, not political leaders who exploited their historic fears and suspicions. By the same token, references to Islam were deemed counterproductive, and appeared more to divide than unite the nation in common endeavour.

(Ziring, 1984: 935)

Later, during the rule of Zia-ul-Haq, political use of Islam increased, not least by Zia himself who was religiously motivated, to try to build the state upon the moral philosophy of Islam. In the same vein, Haqqani opined that ‘Zia-Ul-Haq is often identified as the person most responsible for turning Pakistan into a global center for political Islam. Undoubtedly, Zia went farthest in defining Pakistan as an Islamic state’ (Haqqani, 2005: 131).

In the context of Pakistan’s polity, the legacy of the past is still functional to try to operationalise the system of governance whereby people are encouraged to be satisfied by the working of what is claimed to be a moral social order and a patronage mode of deliverance of political goods, including welfare. This kind of thinking was imbued with the idea of a ‘people’s democracy’ which sought the effective support of the community by relying upon the force of Islam to encourage political mobility and to act as a key justification to support state-building efforts. Against this backdrop, politicians of Pakistan sought to serve the people by increasing religious symbolism, using various cultural idioms to trumpet their democratic ideals. In his
Vying for Allah’s Vote, Haroon K. Ullah (2014: 17) observes that ‘Pakistan was not established as a true democratic republic. Its system of government was cobbled together from a host of competing traditions, including feudalism, Islamism, tribalism and Western-style representational government’.

Pakistan is a country which drew upon the faith of Islam to justify its existence, employing it as a signifier of cultural difference in the context of the Indian subcontinent and later as political ideology following independence in 1947. However, the country moved cautiously, seeking to develop a sense of common purpose in between a religiously informed national identity and liberal democratic ideals. This discourse achieved primacy while forming the structure of government, envisioned in the process of constitution making. Different interests and ideals of democracy were to be reconciled by giving vent to the principles of Islam in its doctrinal form. In short, leaders of Pakistan sought to use Islam to provide an ‘outlet for expressing their religious concern in the political arena’ (Gilmartin, 1979: 498).

Different authorities of Pakistan used Islam as the sole cause and purpose of the existence of the state and nation, strongly informing their commitment to upholding Islam as the supreme law of the land as the foremost duty of the true believer. Yet, this approach caused much harm to the image of Pakistan as a progressive state which was still malignly affected by serious cultural, ethnic and sectarian differences.

The approach of Zia to run the country during his time as president was dictated by right-wing forces which were visible through strong encouragement to implement Sharia law in a doctrinal way. Zia enforced Sharia law through newly introduced related institutions which sought to make the people submissive to a single authority – rather than trying to change their behaviour to observe the code of social justice. In her book, The Making Sense of Pakistan, Farzana Shaikh explains this posture of Zia’s government as a ‘co-option of religious parties which pressed for an ever more rigid understanding of Islam as a set of regulative, punitive and extractive commands’. She has a view that his way of thinking was quite different from the founder of Pakistan, Jinnah. She states that ‘Zia’s vision of Pakistan [was] as an ideological state based on Islam [different] from Jinnah’s more liberal understanding of a Muslim State diffusely informed by Islam’ (Shaikh, 2009: 102). Zia issued and implemented the Hudood Ordinances in 1979; established a Federal Shariat Court in 1980; issued the Zakat Ordinance (1981) and the Qunoon-i-Shahdat Order (1984), which decree that a woman’s testimony is only half as important as a man’s; and created the Nizat-e-Salat committees which decreed that religious sects would pray at the same times of the day. Collectively, these developments reflected the view that an Islamic state of Pakistan would act as a divine instrument with unquestioned sovereignty. This shift in the regime’s policy and attitude was highly appealing to many religious elements. Mumtaz Ahmad (1996: 375) notes that

Zia-ul-Haq’s announcement of these Islamic reforms was hailed by the Islamic revivalists and conservatives; they saw the invocation of Islam by the military regime not only as a genuine revival of Islamic shari’a (Islamic Law), but also as a recognition of their special sphere of influence in matters of public policy.

Islamists – that is proponents of a ‘political Islam’ – demanded an Islamic movement in the newly established state of Pakistan which was highly critical of colonialism and colonial powers. All religious groups in the country believed that Western ideas and institutions had spoiled Islamic societies leading to an alienation of Muslims from their Islamic values. When they learned ‘modernity’ and ‘progress’ from the West they wanted to incorporate these modern experiences into Islam. Even today many accept the Western idea of liberal democracy, while
questioning the sovereignty of parliament and wishing to see it working under the supremacy of Islamic law (Rais, 2017: 211).

Following the independence of Pakistan, liberals/modernists and Islamists were engaged in a struggle for supremacy, particularly in terms of the role of religion in the state. Religious political parties initially opposed the idea of creation of an independent state but after the creation of Pakistan, religious groups, particularly Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and its founder Maulana Mawdudi, proposed that Islam should have the most important role as the main pillar in the constitution of Pakistan. However, it is interesting to note that successive civilian governments and military dictators repeatedly manipulated Islam as a tool to prolong their reign or to legitimise their rule. As a result, both religion and religious parties have posed problems in both the society and politics of Pakistan.

Inclusion of Objective Resolution (1949)

It can be said that the first compromise between the secularists and religious groups came with the inclusion of the Objective Resolution in 1949, a set of guiding principles that was to form the country’s future constitution. The Objective Resolution is widely considered to be a set back to the vision of Muhammad Ali Jinnah in which he aspired for a state in which non-Muslims can live according to their will and can practice their religion with full freedom. This marks the first phase of political Islam in Pakistan and the influence of Islam in future constitutions.

The secular elite thought that minor concessions like including the Objective Resolution of 1949 would quieten the religious groups. Hindu minority members of the Constituent Assembly quoted Jinnah on creating a state where all religious minorities would be provided with equal fundamental rights, and questioned the passage of the Objective Resolution. The response was that the Objective Resolution was ‘just’ included in the preamble, that is, the ‘non-operative’ part of the constitution that would not have any impact on the parliamentary-democratic character of the constitution (Rais, 2017: 211). According to Maulana Maududi (head of JI at that time), the Muslim majority had the right to shape the laws and the constitution in their Islamic state. This conventional thinking was also reflected in the 1956 constitution, when the country was named the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. As a result, only a Muslim can become president and no law that is contrary to the Islamic teachings can be promulgated (Mahmud-un-Nasir, 1980: 51–56).

An Islamic state or a state for Muslims? Prominent religious parties in Pakistan

According to the religious parties there is a difference between a Muslim state and an Islamic state:

A Muslim State is any state which is inhabited and ruled by Muslims. An Islamic state, on the other hand, is one which opts to conduct its affairs in accordance with the revealed guidance of Islam and accepts the sovereignty of Allah and the supremacy of His law, and which devotes its resources to achieve this end.

(Ahmad, 1994)

There was a continuous divide between the secular elite and the Ulema (religious scholars), religious groups and religious parties on how Islam should be included in the laws and constitution of Pakistan. To stay relevant, the Ulema’s strategy was two-fold. First, all religious groups provided consensus in the form of the Ulema Committee Report that was given to the Basic Principles Committee which recommended that an Islamic character should be given to the constitution of
the newly established state (Rais, 2017). Second, the Ulema used mosques to deliver sermons and threats of agitation if their concerns were not accommodated.

The interpretation of the Constitutional Assembly on the Objective Resolution was opposite to that of the Ulema. The Ulema considered it a huge success of political Islam, and started demanding the enforcement of Islamic laws based on the Objective Resolution. However, the ruling party thought that it had settled the issue of the idea of Pakistan as an Islamic state.

At this time, the 1950s, Jamat-i-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) were the most prominent religious political parties. JI was the most organised among the religious political parties that produced an impressive literature, including both magazines and journals, targeting the middle class. The focus of JI was to build a political constituency to support demands for an Islamic state. JUI’s focus was towards establishing madrassas – that is, religious schools – across Pakistan so that the party could increase its support from among the large numbers of people who send their children to madrassas for educational purposes.

Interestingly, while other religious groups in the 1950s were engaged only in ‘low politics’ and appeared to be competing with each other rather than working together, only Jamat-i-Islami tried to rise above the sectarian divide and present Islam as an ideology of national relevance. JI accepted the validity of the ‘Western’ form of democracy and used politics as a tool to achieve the goal of making Pakistan an Islamic state. However, ‘the religious political parties of Pakistan can be termed as intuitionalists and not revolutionary in their struggle for the supremacy of Islam and its central place in the affairs of the state’ (Rais, 2017: 190).

**Movement against Ahmadiyya community**

Pakistan inherited the religious controversy regarding Ahmadis which emerged in the early twentieth century, but the demand to declare Ahmadis non-Muslims in Pakistan was formulated in Karachi by the Ulema in June 1952 (Government of Punjab, 1954: 125). Jamaat-e-Islami and Majlis-e-Ahrar led the movement to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslims and sought to dismiss them from significant government, bureaucratic and military positions (Rais, 2017: 190). Protests followed which caused bloody riots in different parts of the country, especially in Lahore. This ended with the imposition of Pakistan’s first Martial Law by General Ayub Khan in 1953, mainly for suppressing these riots and to maintain law and order in the country. All the leaders of the anti-Ahmadiyya movement were put on trial; some were given the death sentence, including Mualana Maududi. Although it was changed to a life sentence in prison, this development marked the first major confrontation between the state and religious groups, and the state did not surrender to the demands of the religious parties.

**The Justice Munir Report**

The government appointed Justice Munir to head a special court of inquiry to identify causes of the anti-Ahmadi riots of 1954. The Justice Munir Report placed the onus of responsibility for the bloody riots on the then prime minister, Khawja Nizamuddin, accused of not taking a timely decision to reject the religious political parties’ demands. It accused religious parties of attacking the Ahmadi community. This report countered the claims of the religious groups by concluding that the religious groups have no role in the constitution making process, so they should stay out of it. On the other hand, the report also sought to prevent the government from defining who was a Muslim and to enforce Islam as a state religion. The report also recommended re-orientation of Islam as a modern world idea and to develop Pakistan’s Muslims into citizens of the modern world (Justice Munir Report, 1954).
The Munir Report is widely considered to be the last significant effort to eliminate Islam from Pakistan’s political life. The reason behind this was that Islam was the only major tool used by successive governments to try to build national cohesion (Nasr, 1994). Yet, the demands of the religious groups conflicted with the principles of both law and the constitution. Unsurprisingly, Jamat-i-Islami and other religious parties strongly criticized the Munir Report.

**Ayub Khan’s vision of Pakistan (1958–1969)**

During the period of Ayub Khan’s rule (1958–1969), the mainstream political parties faced many strictures but the religious political parties remained relatively free. The religious political parties continued working towards building an Islamic state with both Islamic law and constitution. Yet, Ayub’s vision for the state of Pakistan was entirely different from that of the *Ulema* and religious political parties. Ayub Khan was a modernist-reformist who wanted a modern, development-oriented Pakistan and believed that religious politics was outdated and that the *Ulema* should not be allowed to hold the state hostage (Rais, 2017: 191–196), like they did during the anti-Ahmadi riots.

Ayub viewed Islam as a positive force that would transform Pakistani society only if it was freed from the grip of religious orthodoxy. For him, Islam should be interpreted for modern times. As a result, Ayub created new institutions, such as the Advisory Council of Islamic Ideology and the Islamic Research Institute. Dr Fazlur Rahman was appointed in 1962 to head the latter (Qasmi, 2010). *Ulema* and religious political parties criticised their modern ideas about Islam and labelled Rahman as *Munkir-i-Quran* and Parvez as *Munkir-i-Sunnat* (Qasmi, 2010), that is, a person against religion.

**Role of JI during the Ayub regime**

The Jamat-i-Islami was a source of irritation for Ayub Khan as its views were entirely different from his, and the JI engaged in the politics of agitation. JI was banned in 1964 due to an article written about the oppression of Islamists by the Iranian government that seriously damaged relations between Pakistan and Iran (Qasmi, 2010: 1244).

The influence of the *Ulema* can also be seen during Ayub’s regime when certain reforms were introduced including the building of economic, social and political institutions informed by the teaching and principles of the Qur’an. Ayub was convinced that the *Ulema* were not interested in making Pakistan an ideal Islamic state rather they were more interested in strengthening their own position in society (Qasmi, 2010: 1227).

The promulgation of Family Laws in 1961 is the best example of the divergent views of Ayub and the *Ulema*, which was marked as the time when the state bypassed the authority of the *Ulema* and gave the right to legislate in matters of private law. The laws passed and amended during Ayub’s rule included the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act 1939 and the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929. The *Ulema* were not happy with these amendments so they demanded changes (Qasmi, 2010: 1232). The religious parties opposed Ayub’s reforms regarding women’s rights and family planning, claiming they were ‘against the spirit of Islam’ (Hussain, 2018). However, the Family Laws were implemented by the state, so religious parties shifted their focus against family planning (Hakim, 2001: 555). JI advocated that more children would increase the Muslim population in the world, and they turned their sermons, speeches and print media against Ayub Khan. The *Ulema* and religious parties were of the opinion that Ayub Khan was promoting secularisation in the disguise of social reform and modernisation. All religious parties rejected Ayub’s choice of scholars and intellectuals headed the Islamic Advisory Council and the Islamic Research Institute.
General Ayub wanted to drop the prefix ‘Islamic’ from the Republic of Pakistan in the Constitution of 1962, but he was strongly condemned by the religious parties and, as a result, he changed his position. This in a way recognised and acknowledged the influence of religious parties in Pakistan’s domestic politics. All this led to anti-Ayub agitation around 1966–1967 in which the religious parties although with limited support presented a united front and brought many ordinary people onto the streets. However, the influence and popularity of religious parties was tested for the first time in the 1970 general elections. Up to five parties competed independently but lost in both East and West Pakistan. JI was able to win only four seats in the National Assembly whereas JUI secured seven seats and became part of the collation government in North West Frontier Province (NWFP) (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)), whereas Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan secured seven seats out of 300 seats at national level. The situation at the provincial level was similar: Jamaat-e-Islami could only secure one seat in East Pakistan, one each in Punjab, Sindh and NWFP (Rais, 2017: 196). This showed that ‘political Islam’ didn’t have much electoral support; and over the years, its popularity decreased further. In the 1977 election, the situation of the Islamic political parties was similar. Pakistan National Alliance, a right-wing political alliance consisting of both religious and non-religious political parties, secured only 36 seats out of 206 with almost 35 percent of the votes, whereas the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), a left-wing party, secured 155 seats and received almost 60 percent of the votes. As a result of these elections, PPP’s Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto became prime minister. It is interesting to note that the PPP is considered as the secular party but many of its leaders are from families of hereditary saints and gets their political power from a religious perspective, including former prime minister Ayed Yousaf Raza Gillani, former foreign minister, Makhdoom Shah Mehmood Qureshi, former minister, Makhdoom Amin Faheem, and others (Lieven, 2012: 125). Bhutto was not interested in implementing Sharia law but due to popular interest in Islam and to achieve his political objectives, he proposed to seek ‘Muhammad’s egalitarianism’ and ‘Quranic Social justice’ (Paul, 2014: 137).

The demand to declare Ahmadis non-Muslim was still being advanced by the religious political parties and the pressure on the government was increasing. Religio-political forces were demanding a ban on nightclubs and alcohol and sought to get the government to declare Friday as the weekly holiday. As a result, on 21 September 1974, in order to please the religious political parties and to help prolong his rule, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto declared the Ahmadiyya community as non-Muslim. This proved to be counter-productive for the future politics of Pakistan, and raised many questions over the fundamental rights of religious minorities.

The nuclear programme of Pakistan was another contentious issue. According to Bhutto, it was justified for a leading Muslim state to have ‘the bomb’. Later on, in his political testament written shortly before his death, Bhutto outlined his comprehensive view of Islamic ideology and its principles. He claimed that Pakistan was near to acquire the nuclear weapon capability when he was thrown out of government. He also claimed that Islamic civilisation was without a nuclear weapon capability whereas Hindu, Jewish and Christian civilisations had developed such a capability and parity demanded that Pakistan should have the same capability (Bhutto, 1979: 137–138).

Pakistan’s nuclear programme can be seen from the perspective of Islam and pan-Islamism. The leaders of religious political parties particularly Jamaat-i-Islami argued that Pakistan’s nuclear weapons in the hands of an Islamic state would be a guarantee of world peace. The United States and many Western states were against the Pakistan’s nuclear programme. However, the JI played a crucial role in defending Pakistan’s stance of developing nuclear weapons. Many ‘ordinary’ people welcomed Pakistan’s development of nuclear weapons to the extent that any person speaking in favour of closing the nuclear programme of Pakistan was branded a traitor and their patriotism questioned (Delvoie, 1996).
Another effort at Islamisation in Pakistan was launched by the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA). The PNA demanded the implementation of Nizam-i-Mustafa in 1977 that led to a conflict between PPP and PNA. Riots followed and Zia took the opportunity to impose martial law. By the time of General Zia-ul-Haq’s period in power (1977–1988), the basic principles of Islam and linked political institutions were well integrated in the state of Pakistan. Zia tried to suppress the left-wing secular political parties and movements, including the previously dominant PPP. Zia took strong measures to implement Islamic law and successfully promote the associated religious ideology. After seizing political power and establishing a military government under his control and seeking the support of right-wing religious groups and parties, he took many additional measures. The Islamic Ideology Committee was reorganised as an advisory body to the president, with responsibility to advise him on issues of Islam, politics and society. Despite this, after Zia, four general elections in Pakistan led to the same results: religious political parties were unable to secure a significant number of seats whether at provincial or national level.

Islamisation of Pakistan

The Objective Resolution of 1949 can be considered as a first compromise among the competing forces who wanted to see Pakistan as either a secular or Islamic state. This resolution provided the guiding principles for the formation of the future constitution of Pakistan. The 1956 constitution also reflected its Islamic nature by including various conditions, such as the national president must be a Muslim, the name of the country would be the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and no law could be made that was repugnant to the teachings of Islam, the Qur’an and the Sunnah. To secure implementation of the teachings of Islam in the constitution, President Ayub Khan created an Advisory Council of Islamic Ideology in 1962.

The military rule of Zia ul-Haq strengthened the role of Islam in the state and the state provided full support for Islamisation. For this purpose, Zia sought partnerships with religious political parties, particularly JI. He introduced Islamic reforms such as announcing compulsory Islamic education in schools, established the Federal Sharia Court, and promoted establishment of madrasas. He also introduced Islamic teachings into military training. The position of females was undermined during Zia’s rule due to various laws, including reducing the significance of a woman’s testimony to half that of a man in certain trials. Overall, the state was turned into an arena of sectarian and gender confrontation due to Zia’s policies.

Zia’s successors did little to change his policies. In the 1988 elections, the main contest was between Islami Jamhori Ittihat (IJI) and the PPP. IJI was an alliance of nine political parties, including major Islamic political parties such as Jammat-i-Islami, Jamiat-i-Ahli Hadith and Jamiat-Ul-Ulema-i-Pakistan (JUP) (Dastori Group) and JUP (Noorani). Interestingly, the rule of Qur’an and Sunnah and upholding the ideals of Islam were aspects of the manifestoes of both major contestants. The PPP won the election by getting 92 seats whereas IJI secured only 44 seats. However, IJI was successful in forming the government in Punjab, gaining a majority of seats. The IJI also won the 1990 election in the Punjab, securing 105 seats and getting 37.27 percent of the vote. The PPP supported the People’s Democratic Alliance (PDA) but could get only 45 seats, although securing 36.65 percent of the votes (Mahmood, 2002: 168–171). In the subsequent elections of 1993 and 1997, the religious political parties won few seats. Later, in 1998, Nawaz Sharif tried to promulgate Sharia law as the supreme law of Pakistan but failed to do so and a military coup ousted him the following year (Paul, 2014: 142).

Overall, it was not only military dictators who used Islam for personal motives but also civilian governments. According to Cohen (2004), both major civilian political parties, PML
(N) and PPP, used Islam to seek short term political benefits. In addition, Haqqani (2005: 8) states that the alliance between the military and the mullahs gave rise to both armed and unarmed religious group and they were more powerful during military rule.

**Dominance of religious parties in politics**

Today, Pakistan is still on its way to becoming an Islamic state. Yet, the Western-educated elite is still in leading positions in the state, controlling relevant institutions. Such policy makers are not in favour of implementing Islamic laws because of their modern and liberal way of thinking (Delvoie, 1996).

Over the last 30 years, Pakistan has seen eight different general elections and the religious parties were unable to get mass political support at national level. None of these religious parties secured a majority in any of the provinces except once in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the 2003 elections. While they could often arrange a large number of protests within a short span of time, religious political parties were unable to convince most voters to vote for them. Interestingly the JI, often considered the most organised and well-structured political party, is unable to perform significantly in elections. The case of Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam, the second largest religious political party, is also not different from that of JI. They were also unable to perform well in elections.

**Shaping domestic policy**

Although the religious political parties were unable to perform well in general elections, they are able to help mould public opinion on many vital national and international issues, including: the law of blasphemy, the Iraq war, the War on Terror, drone attacks, the Afia Siddique issue and the release of Raymond Davis. It was the fear of religious political parties that meant that many people were afraid of condemning the killer of Salman Taseer, governor of Pakistan’s largest province, Punjab. The killer of Salman Taseer was called a hero by a large number of people. Shahbaz Bhatti, the minorities’ minister, was assassinated for calling for reforms in the country’s blasphemy laws. Shereen Rehman, a Pakistani politician and former diplomat, member of the Senate of Pakistan since 2015, was threatened on the same issue. These events show that religious political parties have mass support at least for important national and international issues but not much electoral support.

The 2002 election witnessed the success of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), the six-party Islamic coalition in Balochistan and Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). MMA also won 59 seats out of 272 in National Assembly (Afzal, 2018: 125). This was the only election that showed that if Islamic political parties act as a united bloc they might make a difference by getting popular support – even in elections. However, it was alleged that the military regime of General Pervez Musharraf manoeuvred this because he wanted to marginalise the main opposition political parties, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the PPP.

Another important factor in this result was the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan. The US invasion of Afghanistan not only removed the Talban from power but also caused the deaths of a large number of civilians in Pakistan. As a result, there was an anti-US wave across Pakistan in general and across NWFP (now KP) in particular and MMA benefited electorally. Overall, the MMA’s election campaigns were a strong appeal against US intervention in Pakistan’s concerns, while seeking to strengthen the country’s global interests. In addition, the Federation of Trade Unions succeeded in achieving its objectives in relation to popular rejection of America and its policies. On the War on Terror (WOT), the MMA and the United States had different views. Maulana Nurani the president of MMA rejected what he saw as America’s ‘inhuman massacre’ of
Iraqi Muslims. Moreover, because of political pressure from MMA members, Pakistan changed its policy to send military personnel to Iraq. Many Pakistanis believed that the Wana operation in South Waziristan was a Zionist conspiracy against Islam (Pirzada, 2008). This proposition was also supported through a survey conducted by the author in which a simple majority of 54 percent of respondents believed that WOT was war against Islam whereas 36.2 percent did not (Akbar, 2014: 347). The MMA controlled Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) – the erstwhile NWFP province – and was a coalition partner of PML-Q at the centre. All parties, whether in government or in opposition, could not openly support the United States and the WOT. Pakistan’s establishment and politicians were reluctant to express views in favour of the United States, which prevented the country from supporting the United States in its WOT, refusing to send troops to fight with the United States. Nevertheless, in 2001 a referendum was arranged which expressed the opposition of people against terrorism and they intended to stop the terrorist activities as well. A survey conducted by the author also supports this fear as 59 percent respondents declared the American decision to wage the war against terrorism was unjustified whereas only 28.3 percent considered it justified (Akbar, 2014: 262). Later, the alliance broke up due to internal differences between the parties and in particular between the orthodox JUI and the revivalist JI. The MMA could not take part in the subsequent election, in 2008, due to an absence of military support and in the wake of a revival of other political parties such as the Awami National Party (ANP), Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML (N)), and the PPP.

**Shaping Pakistan’s foreign policy**

Pakistan’s foreign policy is the result of an interplay of its cultural heritage, its geo-political situation, the organisational structure of the state and of various interest groups. Pakistan’s government and its people have tried to maintain a neutral attitude while carving out relations with the non-Muslim world, although the country draws on its Islamic character when engaging with the Muslim world. So, Islam has had an influence on Pakistan’s foreign policy and this issue is consistently a major plank of the religious political parties when compared to non-religious parties. Their claim is that all Pakistan’s affairs – both external and internal – should be according to Islamic principles.

Bhutto included Islamic elements in his foreign policy due to an instrumental response to some specific opportunities. Zia’s Islamisation on the other hand was on the basis of both strategic calculation and personal conviction. To try to legitimise his regime, Zia opted to shape Pakistan’s foreign and domestic policy in favour of supporting the Afghan jihad in the name of fighting Soviet infidels and to gain the support of the Muslim world by portraying Pakistan as the sole leader to defend Islam by waging jihad against ‘Godless communism’. Most religious political parties and several orthodox Islamic leaders collaborated with Zia during the Afghan jihad because of their opposition to the democratisation process (Misra, 2003: 186–215).

Foreign policy during the Nawaz Sharif government (1990–1993) sought to become ‘more Islamic’ mainly due to the inclusion of Jamaat-i-Islami as a coalition partner in the government. This can be observed by Pakistan’s policies in relation to Kashmir, Bosnia and Somalia. The following government, that of Benazir Bhutto, continued the same policy, mainly due to strong Islamic sentiments held by many Pakistanis. In particular, both Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto showed great interest in the issue of Indian-held Kashmir as a key foreign policy priority.

**Conclusion**

Following the independence of Pakistan, religious leaders felt themselves isolated and tried to establish their leadership on the basis of religion, sectarianism, extremism and violence. With the
passage of time, orthodox ideology was strengthening rather than the Quaid’s concepts of pluralism and enlightenment. Over time, the unresolved role of Islam in Pakistan’s politics and political development created an identity crisis in the country. Recent years saw increases in numbers of religious political parties; and there are now many, including: Tehreek Labaik Pakistan, Pakistan Awami Tehreek, Sunni Tehreek, Sunni Ittehad Council, and Sipah-e-Muhammad. However, while these religious political parties have so far been unable to secure a significant number of seats in elections, they do achieve a sizeable number of votes that draws on support from other parties and thus favours some candidates for office over others.

We have seen that religious political parties were not in favour of the creation of an independent state due to the concept of Muslim Ummah, which is anti-nationalist. Later on, after the creation of Pakistan, the religious political parties, notably JI, wanted to implement Islamic Sharia law. Overall, Islam has been used by successive democratic governments and dictatorial regimes in pursuit of their own personal vested interests.

Finally, popular street support for religious political parties shows that many people in Pakistan trust them appropriately to address religious issues. However, many seem unconvinced that the religious political parties can improve the state’s political performance or development outcomes. To acquire political support consistently, Pakistan’s religious political parties should restructure their outlook to improve voters’ perceptions of them and thus encourage citizens to support them at the ballot box.

Notes

1 The Constituent Assembly of Pakistan passed the Objectives Resolution in 1949. This Resolution was designed, in part, to serve as a framework for the drafting of Pakistan’s first constitution.
3 Afia Siddique is a Pakistani neuroscientist who was convicted by a New York court of trying to kill American military officers. Raymond Allen Davis is a former United States Army soldier, private security firm employee, and contractor with the Central Intelligence Agency. On 27 January 2011, Davis reportedly killed two armed men in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

References


