**Pakistan: Democracy, Religion and Politics**

Pakistan is the only present country to be created in the name of Islam and hence, Islam stood as a sole pillar for the nation that was otherwise divided along ethnic, religious, provincial and cultural lines from the very beginning of its creation in 1947. In fact, being the only Muslim nation to be founded in modern times on the name of Islam, Islamic laws have been stitched evenly in the fabric of constitution of Pakistan but it was during the Afghan War in the decade of 1980 when Islam had taken a radical turn that is the opposite of what it stood for. The US involvement in the Afghan conflict, fueled by Iranian and Saudi government funding their version of Islam, led to a much deeper division of sects that prevailed in the Indian Sub-Continent.

A common dispute among the present generation is if a secular Pakistan would help conclude the endless war against the Islamic radicals. Even though Jinnah envisaged a secular, or maybe not, Pakistan which would provide equal rights to Muslims and non-Muslims, and thus he appointed a Non-Muslim Minister of Law of the newly created state of Pakistan, our new leaders have failed to prevent the ever-lasting hatred, let alone provide equal rights regardless of religion and sects. Today’s Pakistan is a major haven for terrorist, despite our mutual efforts to end the civil conflict. Religious extremism is on the rise, as our history has witnessed the assassination of governors in federal Capital, the curfew in the neighboring Rawalpindi due to Shia-Sunni tensions, the violence against Ahmadis in Lahore etc. Let us briefly discuss this and share our opinion.

**Creation of Pakistan**

After decades of conflicts between Hindus and Muslims of India during British rule, many Muslim scholars sought for a solution. All-India Muslim League called for an independent state when Hindu-Muslim tensions reached at its peak; Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the President of Muslim league, on advice of Allama Muhammad Iqbal, advocated the idea of a new state based on Islam regardless of geography. Some of the major Muslim parties rejected the idea but Jinnah who was an unbiased, liberal leader called out to all the Indian Muslims to demand an independent state. It was a movement of the elite, deeply motivated with the basis of economics, a class scared of competition with the Hindus being a majority, that stood up for a new separate nation when majority of the religious parties opposed it.

Soon after the creation of Pakistan in August of 1947, the same parties who opposed the idea of a new country, started calling for Islamization of Pakistan. This in fact resulted in delays in forming a new constitution due to many controversial issues between religious parties and the government in power.

**Towards Islamization**

To agree upon common set of ideas for formation of constitution, compromises had to be made. Objective Resolution in 1949 made it clear that we were now diverted from Muslim League’s aspirations for a secular state. Jinnah in his address to the Pakistan’s first constitutional assembly laid down his vision for a state with equal rights for all regardless of caste, creed or religion. Jinnah said,

*“…Hindus would cease to be Hindus, and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State.”*

Pakistan has throughout tried to identify itself. With a very slow journey towards Islamization till the mid-1970s, government made deeper approach towards Islamization and took numerous steps: Alcohol was banned for Muslims, Ahmadis were forbidden to call themselves Muslims etc. But that was not enough, Islam was used to topple Bhutto’s government.

The new government of Zia-ul-Haq implemented stricter version of Sunni-Islam backed by Saudi funding. The fall of liberal government of Shah of Iran, Islamic Jihad against soviets with US and Saudi support and the implementation of strict Sharia Law paved way for a conservative Pakistan.

Islam was being used in court of law; it formed the basis of civil education and military training. Religious parties began using Islam for political gains, inciting violence against opposition.

After the end of Afghan war, effective de-weaponization of Afghan and Pakistani jihadist never took place, religion was being used to influence people for political motives.

**Muslim or Non-Muslim**

During 1950s, anti-Ahmadi riots took place; this was the first sectarian violence for the new state. Ahmadis originate from India who object to finality of Prophet Muhammad, though they follow Quran and Sunnah along with the teachings of their leader Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Qadiani and call themselves Muslims, the state of Pakistan designated Ahmadis as non-Muslims by a constitutional amendment in 1974. This led to a major backlash among Ahmadis who had left their hometown, Qadian - India, for Rabwa – Pakistan, a town with Ahmadi majority on land leased from the government soon after independence. Since 1970s, many Ahmadis left other cities for Rabwa while government tried to control the growing violence against Ahmadis especially in Lahore where their businesses and properties had been targeted and occasionally set on fire.

Just like the politically violent decade of 1990, the decade following year 2000 saw the rise of terrorism in the name of Jihad against the state after the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan in 2001; similarly sectarian violence also saw significant growth. Hatred against the Taliban grew as they continued to target Shia Muslims and various sects of Sunni Muslims. This has added fuel to the fire of hatred between Shia and Sunnis, two major sects of Islam. History speaks about the blood spilled in the name of religion, for example, less than a decade ago Sunni mosque was targeted and its worshipers brutally murdered by Shia procession in 2013 during the Ashura, days of martyrdom of Imam Hussain, an important Islamic figure, and his family. It was proceeded by long curfew in Rawalpindi city as army took control of the streets.

Government itself played part in creating the sectarian divisions. During Zia regime, government supported the migration of tribal and Kashmiri people towards Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan’s only Shia majority province. This was supposed to put an end to Shia majority in the province but this had been partially successful.

**Ruling the masses**

Pakistan has also used Islamist militant groups to wage war against India in Kashmir in the name of Islamic Jihad. Since 9/11 attack, Pakistan’s alliance with the United States in the war in Afghanistan has led many of these groups to turn against the Pakistani state. However, the army continues to support pro-state militant groups as strategic assets in India and Afghanistan. Pakistan has continued to decline the accusations, yet US claims that certain groups like Haqqani Network continue to receive crucial intelligence from local agencies, IB and ISI. Pakistan had been under sanctions from US repeatedly but our military leadership considers them a vital source to maintain its Western boarders.

Religious parties of Pakistan have often attempted to shape public opinion on many issues including CIA drone attacks, Pakistan’s counterterrorism efforts, and the country’s controversial blasphemy laws. In 2011 when Punjab Governor, Salman Taseer, and Pakistan Minorities Minister, Shahbaz Bhatti, were assassinated for calling for reform of the country’s blasphemy laws, which allow offenders to be punished by death. The killer was hailed as a hero, and upon his death sentence, protest broke out and he was declared a martyr.

Throughout our history, our leading political parties fought elections using religion as a tool. PPP, a pro-American liberal party competed against IJI, a united PML and JI front presenting itself as anti-American Islamic party, in the Centre during 1990s while JI, a conservative Islamic party, competed with MQM, a liberal secular party, in Karachi during the same era. The provincial government in both ultra-conservative western provinces have usually been based on ethnicity or religion.

An attempt to amend the heavily criticized 1979 Hudood Ordinance laws, introduced by Zia regime in his attempts to implement Sharia Law, which govern the punishment for rape and adultery in Pakistan, Women Protection bill was approved in 2006. Critics of the Hudood Ordinance were of the opinion that it made it extremely difficult and dangerous to prove an allegation of rape resulting in thousands of women being imprisoned. Islamic parties took it to the streets to criticize the government. Similarly, the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act 2016 was also the target of severe criticism as it was considered ‘un-Islamic’ and ‘sinful’.

Lack of governance, poor socioeconomic conditions, and a problem-ridden state-run education system have also resulted in greater space for religious parties to sow seeds of hatred among the people. Anti-American sentiments, especially in the wake of the Afghan war has fed growing religious intolerance in Pakistani society. Ever. Since Pakistan’s cooperation with the United States in targeting terrorist sanctuaries in its tribal areas. The army’s action against groups such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates has led to a blowback within Pakistan resulting in deaths of thousands of civilians and soldiers by the local group, Pakistan Taliban abbreviated as ‘TTP’. With terrorist violence on the rise, religious parties hold the United States responsible for all the violence and suicide bombings inside Pakistan.

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**Is Secularism the answer to extremism?**

Pakistani society has drifted toward religious extremism at the time secularism is on rise. Pakistan, perhaps is itself in need secularism. Pakistan is plagued by sectarian extremism and suffers from misuse of several religious laws. Supporters of secular Pakistan argue that secularism proved to be the end of religious war in Europe during 19th and 20th century; it perhaps helped states like Turkey and Malaysia become a stable state when rest of the Muslim world suffers from similar violence like Pakistan.

Further, Pakistan’s education system which is an important factor in inciting violence, must be reformed. Better governance and enhancing economic opportunity will also make it more difficult for radical Islamists to influence the country’s increasing youth. To resolve the tensions between liberals and Islamists, and to emerge as a modern, democratic state, the army will have to give up support for militant groups and rethink its foreign policy on Afghanistan and India. Also strict implementation of secular laws is important as many secular nations lacks true implementation such as India, which has seen increasing attacks on Muslim community by the Hindu extremist groups.

Concluding it, though Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah did not live long enough to oversee the making of constitution of Pakistan but remembering Jinnah’s words,

*“You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed****—that has nothing to do with the business of the state”,***

I must say that perhaps we need to look back if we are actually living according to the principles laid by the founder of Pakistan. In his other speeches, he said the following:

*“Religion should not be allowed to come into Politics….Religion is merely a matter between man and God”. [Jinnah, Address to the Central Legislative Assembly, 7 February 1935]*

*“….in the name of Humanity, I care more for them [the Untouchables] than for Mussalmans.” [Jinnah, speaking about the Shudras or Untouchables, during his address at the All India Muslim League session at Delhi, 1934]*

*“….I am not fighting for Muslims, believe me, when I demand Pakistan.” [Jinnah, Press Conference, 14 November 1946]*

*”But make no mistake: Pakistan is NOT a theocracy or anything like it.” [Jinnah, Message to the people of Australia, 19 February 1948]*

We should question ourselves if we are living in Jinnah’s Pakistan? Do we need to draw a line between religion and politics? Share your opinions and let us know.