



Religious Forces in Pakistan: A Future Alternative Political Option?

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Abstract: Pakistan created in 1947 as the first self-professed Muslim state laid its natural tie with Islam contrastingly went forward to embrace a secular outlook, faced with crisis of diverse regional and linguistic demands pandered to the ideals of Islam to knit the distinct threads together. Lost in the rotation of civilian and military governments, Pakistan clung to the only common thread of religion to give semblance to a nation and its national identity. However, religious forces have never succeeded in capturing political power and remained mainly as an aligning force. Do they have a chance to emerge as a future credible political power?

Keywords: Pakistan, religious forces, power, Islamic revival, militant Islam.

INTRODUCTION

Even after seven decades of its inception Pakistan remains trapped in a quagmire. Political instability, economic viability, deteriorating security conditions and the ever-looming shadow of terrorism has invited grave terms as a failed state and a divided society. It has shown enough resilience to deal with diverse crisis and defy 'doomsday prognosis'(Lodhi,2011:2) to usher in the hope that "This is a state that is not likely to disappear soon" (Cohen,2004:267).

Religion had remained central to the creation of state institutions, political culture, identity and foreign policy of Pakistan but as an independent force singularly religion has not been able to bring about substantive effective drifts and changes in the political course of Pakistan. Throughout Pakistan's history no religious leader had been able to translate the possibility of a mass based Islamic revolutionary movement into reality (Owen,2002:5), they have failed to impose an Islamic code of life throughout the Pakistani society and electorally the religious parties remained at the lower margins. However religious forces retained their prominence by aligning with either the civilian or military forces accordingly, cashing on their weaknesses like lack of legitimacy, inability to deal with ethnic divergences and internal rivalry. In spite of its opportunistic rise and increase in prominence with time it failed to mold these gains to emerge as an alternative challenge to the civilian parties or the army neither it could turn the weaknesses of these forces into its strength to drive the country towards positive outcomes.

The surge of Islamic revivalism at the societal level coupled with the enhanced influence of the militants endorsing conservative religious parties has led to the promotion of exclusionary political discourses that seek to establish the pre-eminence of a particular type of sectarian Islam as emblematic of Pakistan. Given such an equation can the religious forces emerge as definite force to sweep Pakistan's political landscape.

ISLAM AT INCEPTION

Pakistan's birth was to create and sustain a homeland for the Muslims inhabiting the subcontinent to provide a better life in terms of opportunity, enhanced rights and prosperity in opposition to the dominance of Hindu majority of India.

The Muslim League's claim of a 'two-nation theory' had some inherent short comings since it was conceived. There was a clear absence of unanimity in Muslim politics in India despite a common religious identity, politics was more often defined by class, regional, ideological affiliations (Jalal,2011:2).

Ayesha Jalal has put forward, "Jinnah's resort to religion was not an ideology to which he was ever committed or even a device to use against a rival community it was simply a way of giving a semblance of unity and solidarity to his divided Muslim constituents. Jinnah needed a demand that was specifically ambiguous imprecise to command general support, something specifically Muslim though unspecific in every other respect" (Jalal,1990:16) Thereby the contradiction between bringing religion to evoke Muslim nationalism and the achievement of the territorial state remained unresolved and left Pakistan to struggle behind a definition of an identity that is both Islamic and national (Haider,2011:11).

With its very inception came the question of was Pakistan an Islamic state or merely a state in which Islam could be practiced without the fear of discrimination? Jinnah never envisaged the creation of a state in which Islam would provide the framework for all political activity. (Owen,2002:11-120). With his death these arguments became more intense, as the politicians debated the content of the Pakistani constitution, the Islamic parties pressed for a document that would establish Pakistan as an ideological state committed to Islam. The adoption of the Objective's resolution brought Islam to the core of Pakistan though the 1956 constitution retained much of the modernist view. The religious stakeholders were unified only in broad generalities but never on wholesome idea of an Islamic constitution so clearly brought out in the Munir Inquiry Report on the anti-Ahmadia disturbances in Punjab (1953) which concludes in dismay that the leading Ulemas who appeared before the court of inquiry, could not agree on the criteria of defining a Muslim. The report observed "if considerable confusion exists in the minds of Ulemas on such a simple matter, one can imagine what the differences on more complicated matters will be" (Qadeer,2006:157). These contradictions underlie the ideological logjam that has plagued Pakistan since its birth.

Apart from the ideological logjam, appeal to Islam during inception blinded them to the rich diversity of Pakistan's regional cultures hence failing to form a cohesive society and giving rise to bitter sectarian crisis which plagued the polity ever since. "Using the Islamic bond to justify the suppressing of the distinctive linguistic and cultural mores of Pakistan's regional people... had politically divisive effects" (Jalal,2011:11).

Once utilized it became extremely difficult to subside, it paved the way to further complications which troubled the new nation as well as remained with the country then onwards.

Firstly, the tug of war between the modernist who believed that time honoured tenets of Islam sit easily with a progressive political outlook and the Islamists who believed that Pakistan should be an Islamic state based on sharia never got settled, devoiding the nation of a uniform vision of the type of polity it is to be (Sheikh,2009:15-20). Secondly, the religious forces were and still remains divergent in their views about an Islamic state or Islamic constitution or the very role of Islam. Thirdly, with Islam needing no more protection in a Muslim majority homeland the Muslim League faced deeper crisis of ethnic differences, sub nationalism that threatened the unity of Pakistan but rather than finding solutions to the dissents they saw them as threat and emboldened the Islamic shield resulting in disenchantment and dismembered of large sections of population from the government. "Thus,

for political and ideological reasons, Pakistan has found it difficult to project a national identity that can strike a sympathetic chord with its heterogeneous people” (Jalal,2011:5).

POLICY OF ‘TURN COATS’: THE CYCLIC POLITICS AND ROLE OF RELIGION.

Such uncertainty over national identity had has profound and far reaching consequences, apart from denying a pluralist culture to emerge it had tempted political elites and military elites to find an easy answer in Islam as a substitute for democratic legitimacy.

Thus, the ambiguity about the role of Islam in Pakistani governance got solved in a way that Islam got shaped, twisted, coloured and tailor made to fit the successive bouts of civil and military administrations, although each pursued a distinct agenda, each did so by struggling to articulate a monopoly on the expression of Islam (Sheikh,2009:5). Pakistan’s politics has been shaped by the dynamics of civil military relations and religion’s relation to state. This has created an ongoing negotiation for power in which the military, civilian politicians and the religious forces have individually and in alliance with one another vied for control of Pakistan’s politics (Nasr,2004:1). Interestingly while the three forces have participated in the political arena and religion has played an important role yet religious political parties could never come close to winning power in Pakistan. Electoral fate has always faulted with them and they have remained as an aligning force either to the ruling or the opposition forces and by doing so they have supported contradictory claims, shaped their ideas to suit the situation further reiterating the lack of consensus over the meaning of Islam and its role.

Ashotosh Misra argues that the religious forces possess’ ideological legitimacy but are devoid of power and authority due to a weak political base and lack of control over state institutions and government machinery. This makes them dependent on the military or democratic forces to implement their agenda and they are tolerated to a limited extent (Misra,2012:11). Then how has Islamic religious forces sustained in the political realm? Why even the other forces have looked for alignment with them given these weaknesses?

Ayub Khan elaborating in his autobiography on people’s need for an ideology, he stated, ‘they will have tremendous power of cohesion and resistance. Such an ideology with us is obviously Islam’ (Khan,1967). Thus, whenever fractures and fissures appeared on the Pakistani body politic Islam was the only uniting force, they could think of effectively lending them ‘a patina of legitimacy’(Khan,1967:196-197). Misra (2012) is of the view that military, democratic forces suffer from weaknesses which they try to overcome by co-opting with religious forces and vice a vi. The military possesses power and authority but lacks legitimacy specifically popular legitimacy which predisposes them to co-opt the Islamists to benefit from their ideological legitimacy, on the other hand the democratic forces enjoy popular legitimacy but lacks power, authority and ideological legitimacy, as a result they seek to appease the Islamists by enshrining Islamist provisions in the constitution and seeking from them appropriate Islamic terminology and its ideological metaphors for policy-making purposes (Misra,2012:12-17).

In the political scenario of Pakistan religion seems to be the weakest force but neither insignificant nor avoidable. They have had significant influence on the socio-political, religious and sectarian milieu of Pakistan. Despite of poor electoral performance, weak political base, lack of consensus among the Islamists, they have had remained an integral part of the political structure because of some inherent strengths and qualities in them and some inherent weaknesses in the other forces. Strengths definitely include, them being a seamless, flexible aligning force, with their deep contradiction with the Principles of Liberal democracy they have found it easier to co-opt with military forces yet with much ease swung into the arms of civilian parties with little hint of fulfilling their agendas. Secondly, the age-old weaknesses of the state institutions to find a definite national identity to unite the heterogeneous population and to henceforth to swear by Islam whose interpretation though ambiguous remains

vested in the Islamic forces, utilizing them as a leverage for attaining strategic national interest goals, earning legitimacy through their support and for all these the ruling elites have accepted most critical demands as declaring the Ahmediyas as non-Muslims in 1974. Thirdly, the inexorable rivalry between the military and democracy has also benefitted them. The best example would perhaps be 2002 elections where taking advantage of the strife between military and populist parties the religious parties with the backing of military rose to win seats in two constituencies and also in federal government for the first time. Fourthly, the religious parties and the Ulema developed close links with ISI during Afghan Jihad in 1980's which proved to be instrumental in creating Jihadi apparatus in Pakistan to further foreign policy objectives in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Thus, the rise of the religious political Islamic Parties or the threat that Pakistan can one day succumb to a hardline Islamic revolution stems less from the strength of the Islamists than from the weakness of their opponents (Lieven,2002:108).

THE REVIVED ALTERNATIVE: DRIFTS, CHANGES AND OUTCOMES.

As the Pakistani state has undergone almost a metamorphosis so did its society, economy, customs and religion. As perceived in the political arena that summation of the weaknesses of other forces and certain strengths of religious forces opened up avenues for them to come to prominence. Similarly, the policies and the attitude adopted by the successive governments to appease and further use religion as leveraging power to attain national interest goals have emboldened their positions even in the socio-economic sectors and smoothed their paths to affect and bring changes accordingly. Specifically the flow of money and arms since 1980's and their strong links with the military and ISI enabled them to adopt stances that is inflicting the society with divisive and detrimental effects such as sectarian crisis, violence and terrorism, spread of radical Islamic ideas.

The Islamization process of 1980's had wrought deep changes in the orientation of the country's religious establishment what unfolded may be termed as 'Islamic revivalism' or 'lure of shariatization' (Qadeer,2006:51-60). Shariatization is quite distinct from Islamization which is often blurred by the common perception that both share an uncompromising emphasis on the enforcement of Islamic law but the social and political forces behind each of these processes were recognizably different. Islamization may be termed as a state driven process relying on a statist interpretation of Islam, Shariatization being a recent phenomenon corresponds more closely to what some scholars have described as the indigenization of the post-colonial state in Pakistan and the steady nativization of its society. The Sharia based Islam recently seen to be emerging in Pakistan was rooted in the Deobandi school founded near Delhi in 1867 (Metcalf,1982:1-10). It is less concerned with the creation of an Islamic state but sees the state as the best instrument to transform society along Islamist lines which they perceive to have a universal appeal transcending territorial boundaries of a single state. This strengthened at a time when manipulation of extra-territorial Islamic networks and a strategy of political violence are increasingly available to ascendant political forces.

The revivalist project in Pakistan promotes religious observances and pieties into everyday life, social conservatism in the form of women's segregation; rigid dress code gets finely weaved into acceptance of modern technology, economic entrepreneurship. One of the greatest malice of such spread of conservative Islamic practices is rise in sectarian violence. Initially sectarian violence was mainly a seldom localized event often driven by clash of economic or political interests but by 1990's there was full turn of events. Sectarianism came to be equaled with marginalizing or seeking to exclude Muslim minority sects like Ahmediyas and the Shias and to secure constitutional recognition for Pakistan as a (majority) Sunni state (Abbas,2005:148).

The Islamic influence infiltrated in social service organizations, colleges/universities, labour unions to almost form a distinct sector within civil society. State patronage along with the transnational funds helped the Ulemas to structure the young minds in the madrassahs along radical lines falling easily to the militant groups. By 1990's

militant Islamists, Jihadis introduced a violent streak, reinforcing orthodoxy, projecting themselves as fighters for Islam and were not reluctant to use violence for suppressing so called un-Islamic activities. They operate individually of the Islamic parties (buttressed by their control over arms, manpower) but shows their sympathies and support. Apart from drugs and weapon smuggling, Taliban militants easily generates resources by enforced taxes, ransom from kidnapping and control over natural resources in certain areas of FATA and NWFP (Kepel,2002:104). Inability of the government to provide welfare and security services to the public supplied them the opportunities to embolden their public image by establishing subsidiary public welfare wings, charity organizations, disaster management programs. Lack of political integration of the tribal areas with the rest of the country, failure to provide basic services as security and welfare to the public by the successive governments, the parties failed to reflect public interest, alternative visions, ideological commitment, together they created a vacuum soon filled by radical Islamic ideas. Public disenchantment and dismemberment provided the opportunity for Islamists to integrate into the society but they remained disillusioned by electoral success thus a shift from political Islam to militant Islam can be observed.

CONCLUSION

The process of promoting Islamic ideology has split into two tracks, mainly the electoral/legislative tracks followed opportunistically by religious political parties and the agitational or jihadist track pursued by militant organizations (Qadeer,2006:175). The rise of these militant organizations has justified the use of violence as a means to protect and preserve Islamic ideals resulting in large scale acts of terrorism both at home and abroad. Islamic organizations work like estates within the state. The rising influence of the ulemas to the extent of issuing fatwas on major national and domestic polices to implement their personal views superseding the government decisions and ideas invites no reaction from the state and are simply ignored. This trend gained momentum with the rise of jihadist forces. What seems concerning is that they have established almost a parallel force with control over manpower, arms and financial resources. They have indigenous resource generation and recruitment bases to act independently and have even enmeshed into the society through charitable and welfare services to the public where the state has failed to do so. Given such increased influence of Islamism in society and the militant Islamists can it be said the future provides a definite opportunity for the religious forces to rise as a concrete political alternative? The past records and the current developments make such a definite rise unlikely.

Firstly, the idea of Islam as the main source of social cohesion and uniting force has always been plagued with short sightedness. The state by promoting unitary and centrist policies utilizing Islam has inherently stood in the way of developing a pluralistic society resulting in alienation and dismemberment of public. Even the Islamists failed to grasp the plurality and the recent spread of Islamism mainly advocates Sunni majoritarianism and seeks to marginalize other minority sects resulting in wide spread sectarian violence and further 'Islamic revivalism' has been mainly an urban phenomenon detached from large rural population. Thus, they do not enjoy support from all regions, sects, classes of the Pakistani society, thwarting its prospects of providing a stable political regime. Secondly, electorally the religious parties don't seem to possess the abilities to turn the tables anytime soon. Deep sectarian and ideological differences among the religious parties rule out any long term political understanding. Further their link and support to the militant organizations responsible for current security crisis and extreme violence across the country have eroded public support. Thirdly, they have failed to address any of the pressing problems of the masses to provide a viable and responsible alternative. Even the spread of Islamism within the society is more concerned with enforcing prayers rather than enforcing social justice goals like establishing a minimum wage, policies to reduce disparities. Thereafter people have a tendency to vote for parties like PPP or PML in national or local elections even if they have supported Islamic parties in their college or University elections (Wilder,1999:170).

Symbiotic relation with either the military (mainly) or civilian forces will help the Islamists to sustain in political sphere. The weaknesses of the two other forces runs too deep to be addressed and resolved immediately, thus, Islam though with differences and divisions still remains the only cohesive force that has a spiritual and emotional underpinning to serve as a legitimizing tool. But given the force and vigour of militant Islamists and their sympathies for the religious political parties radical outcomes can be predicted, as the probability of a hardline religious party coming to power with the backing of Islamic militant forces. Lamently, the religious forces as the civilian and military forces lack in their approach to current problems of the state and looks for easy cherry-picked solutions rather than concrete enduring policies or reforms continuing the legacy of personalized and clienteles' nature of politics majorly concerned with enforcing norms and virtues of Islamic mode of life over perils of the society like social inequality, rising unemployment, public welfare and others. The weaknesses of the other forces because of which the religion had have gained prominence did nothing unique to overcome those weaknesses and forge a strong enduring state society relation and have further induced it with orthodoxy and violence depriving the people to vouch on it as a credible alternative.

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