

Pakistan: What to do about religious fundamentalism?

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"Let's deal with the ISI and the Pakistan military and let's go recruit these mujahideen. Here is a very strong argument which is... it wasn't a bad investment to end the Soviet Union but let's be careful with what we sow... because we will harvest." – US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, April 23, 2009.

October 28, 2009 — Once again Pakistan has become the focus of world attention. Every day there is news of the latest suicide attack or military operation, with killings, injuries and the displacing of communities. Recently schools were ordered closed for more than a week. Even children talk about death and suicide attacks.

With more than 125 police checkpoints in Islamabad, it has become a fortress city. Lahore and other large cities are suffering the same fate: there are police road blockades everywhere. After each terrorist attack authorities issue another security high alert and set up additional barriers. How ironic that, until recently, officials and the media described these "terrorists" as Mujahideen fighting for an Islamic world.

Under immense pressure by the US administration of President Barack Obama, the Pakistan government has launched a series of military operations in various parts of the country. This has led to an unprecedented wave of killings, with hundreds of thousands more being forced to leave their homes for temporary shelter.

Pushed out of Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks in the US, religious fanatics from different countries have found refuge in Pakistan. They have two aims: to make Pakistan more Islamic and to teach the government a lesson for its close relationship with US imperialism. However the price is being paid by ordinary people.

Religious fanatics are the new fascists. They believe in the physical elimination of their political opponents. Although they may appear to be anti-imperialist, they are not a progressive force. Instead they are an extreme right-wing force that wants to turn back the clock of history.

The religion of the state

Pakistan is also known as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Religion is part and parcel of the state. The constitutions and the judiciary are all beleaguered with Islamic demagoguery. Most of the education syllabus is also coloured with Islamic ideology; even scientific explanations somehow manage to drag in religion. Religion has become a way of life. Every donation to charity ends up in the coffers of the religious institutions.

Although the rationale for the Pakistan state was to be a place for Muslims, it was to be a secular Muslim state. When the state was formed in 1947 the population was not fundamentalist. But as time went on Pakistan adopted an Islamic ideology that today gives these fanatics a more favourable ground for the promotion of their dream of an Islamic country.

At the end of the 1970s, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Washington decided it needed to develop an indigenous counterforce. In order to fight "communism" in Afghanistan, Washington worked closely with Pakistan's military dictator, General Zia ul Haq, and the Pakistani intelligence service, the Inter-Services intelligence (ISI).

There are dozens of books explaining the rise of Taliban and Mujahideen under the direct guidance of the US, but the ISI had no reason to cut off funding after the Soviet retreat in 1987. If the Americans were no longer interested in these guerillas, the ISI found these jihadis useful in its conflict with India over Kashmir.

Also, there are many religious political parties in Pakistan. Jamaati islami and Jamiat Ulmai Islam, along with other Sunni and Wahabi political parties, are all for an Islamic revolution. They also give political support to the religious fanatics of the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

Hillary Clinton admits US role

Even Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, acknowledged Washington's responsibility in promoting the religious fanatics. She admitted to a US Congressional sub-committee on April 23, 2009, that the US had effectively created the current disastrous situation in Afghanistan:

"It was President Reagan in partnership with Congress led by Democrats who said, you know what, it sounds like a pretty good idea... let's deal with the ISI [Pakistani intelligence agency] and the Pakistan military and let's go recruit these mujahideen. Here is a very strong argument which is ... it wasn't a bad investment to end the Soviet Union but let's be careful with what we sow... because we will harvest."

However, it is not only the US that are harvesting what they have sown. Numerous Pakistan governments were ready to do whatever Washington wanted them to do out of sheer financial greed. Since 1978 different governments have all been a close US allies. This includes 20 years of military dictatorship under Zia (1977-1988) and General Musharaf (1999-2008). These various governments enabled religious fanatics to establish religious educational institutions that have changed the country's religious culture.

The Madrassas' tactics

One of the main strategies used by the fanatics to bring jihad to the youth of Pakistan was through

opening religious schools (*madrassas*). They mushroomed under the Zia ul Haque dictatorship. At present, there are religious schools throughout Pakistan. Of the more than 15,000 registered *madrassas*, about half are in the Punjab. Experts estimate the numbers are higher: when the state tried to count them in 2005, a fifth of the province refused to register.

The *madrassas* found a place among the working people as they were marketed as offering a free education with religious teachings. In fact, the failure of the government to provide adequate resources for free public education paved the way for the progress of the *madrassas*. Pakistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world. The government spends less than 3 per cent of GDP on education. Only about half of Pakistanis can read and write, far below the proportion in countries with a similar per-capita income, such as Vietnam. According to UNESCO, one out of three school-age Pakistani children does not attend school; of those who do attend, a third drop out by fifth grade. The enrollment of girls is among the lowest in the world, lagging behind Ethiopia and Yemen.

Though *madrassas* make up only about 7 per cent of primary schools in Pakistan, their influence is amplified by the inadequacy of public education and the innate religiosity of the countryside, where two-thirds of the population live. The *madrassas* are the real breeding grounds for religious fundamentalism.

More than 15,000 registered religious seminaries in the country cater to more than 1.5 million students and more than 55,000 teachers. Before 2002, according to the Religious Affairs Ministry, the number of registered *madrassas* in Pakistan were not more than 6000. After 9/11, the religious fanatics who left Afghanistan came to Pakistan, and with the help of the two provincial governments run by the religious alliance MMA — North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan — they were able to quickly establish more *madrassas*. By 2007 there were around 13,000 registered seminaries across the country. At this time General Musharaf was a partner in the so-called US-led “alliance against terrorism”. He was manipulating both the fanatics and the imperialists.

By March 2009, the number of registered *madrassas* in Pakistan reached 15,725.

The growth of religious fanatics

The partnership of religious fanatics with US and the Pakistan intelligence agencies went unchecked until the 9/11 attacks. Then the whole scenario shifted. The Mujahideen was labelled terrorist and Washington wanted a military solution to the growth of religious fundamentalism.

The growth of religious fundamentalism was not only the result of the US and Pakistani intelligence agencies but also the complete failure of civilian and military governments to solve any of the basic problems of the working class and its allies. Successive regimes have been unable to end the grip of feudalism, the absolute exploitive nature of Pakistani capitalists and their humiliating treatment of workers and farmers, the repression of smaller nationalities, and the exploitation of natural resources they possessed.

Pakistan’s ruling class has failed miserably to bring about democratic norms. That is why whenever the civilian government has been overthrown by a military dictatorship, the vast majority of the masses have not offered any resistance to dictatorship.

Establishing Islamic courts

The present civilian government of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) has been contradictory in

dealing with religious fanatics. In the Swat area, following peace talks, the government has entered into agreements with the fanatics to establish Islamic courts. The religious forces were decisively defeated in the general election of 2008. Where in the 2002 general election the fanatics' parties received 15 per cent of the vote, in 2008 they got less than 3 per cent.

Just after the 2008 general election, when the masses had rejected the religious forces, instead of a mass mobilisation to end religious fundamentalism, the PPP regime opted for negotiations. This gave the fanatics an incentive to go further: they demanded sharia laws in the Malakand division. This was accepted and an agreement was signed. It was a real boost for the religious fundamentalists who then went further in their attempt to control more areas, therefore giving an impression that they were not far from Islamabad.

In a panic, the regime, with full support of the US, went for a full military operation in the Malakand division in June 2009. The result was more than 3.5 million internally displaced people and more than 5000 killings. The present government boasted a military victory over the fundamentalists and then asked people to go back home. But this was not the army's military victory but a temporary retreat of the fanatics. Able to save their infrastructure, the fanatics did what Afghan Taliban did during the October 2001 military attack. That too was a military retreat, with the Taliban to re-emerge later.

The celebration of a military victory over the religious fanatics had not lasted even one month before the fanatics were able to attack the military's general headquarters, the famous GHQ, along with several police training centres in different parts of the country during October 2009. This month has been the bloodiest, with killings on both sides.

Saying there was no other option, many liberals in Pakistan have supported the military actions against the fanatics. But no military solution can eliminate the religious fundamentalists. It has been the case in Afghanistan and so too will it be the case in Pakistan. It can only push them to other areas. The religious fundamentalists are using the tactics of urban terrorism. Urban terrorism cannot be eliminated by invading areas considered to be under fundamentalists' control. Military actions in Malakand division and now in Waziristan have pushed the fanatics to other parts of Pakistan.

The fallacy of short-term and long-term strategies

The military solution has been presented as an immediate step to the ultimate solution to fundamentalism. It is like the old Stalinist theory of minimum and maximum goals. "Demand minimum to get the maximum" was the philosophy. It was known as the minimum and maximum stage of revolution. But there was no measures in between the short-term and long-term strategies.

Similarly with the fight against the religious fanatics, this is being presented short-term and long-term strategies. The military solution is a short-term strategy while the long-term strategy requires reforms and more development. The long-term strategy never arrives. This is just an excuse to please US imperialism.

If the fight against religious fanatics is to go forward, it must begin with a revolutionary program. It has to start with the political will to separate religion from the state. It has to deal with the question of the nature of Pakistani state. Religion cannot become the basis of a nation. Pakistan was torn apart by the events of the 1960s and 1970s when Bangladesh came into existence. Now a more severe crisis is erupting in Baluchistan along similar lines. There is strong movement developing that calls for the independence of Baluchistan.

There has to be a concrete program to fight religious fundamentalism. It has to combine immediately dealing with suicide attacks and curbing the activities of the fascist forces from their strongholds, along with an overall plan of action in economic, political and social development. This should include the nationalisation of religious madrassas and the retraining of teachers. It should include an immediate increase in workers' wages in both the private and public sector to at least 12,000 rupees a month.

All discriminatory laws must go and all citizens of Pakistan should enjoy equal constitutional status. At present there are several laws that make religious minorities second-rate citizens. The government should be committed to fully back local resistance to the religious fanatics. Civil society organisations in the strongholds of the religious fundamentalists should be given full backing by the state so that they can function. The state must help to strengthen and sustain the local defence committees to fight the religious fanatics.

All trade union rights must be restored in the public and private sectors, with full freedom of speech and assembly. Most of the discriminatory laws are still intact, including blasphemy laws. The government has no plan to do away with these laws promulgated under military dictatorships, so the organisations of civil society must demand government action to restore civil rights.

– 'War on terror' fuels fundamentalism

The forces of religious fundamentalism organise on an international basis. A fight against them has to be organised at that same level. The US "war on terror" is fueling religious fundamentalism. It is seen as a war on Muslims. The occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan by the imperialist forces is providing the religious fanatics a political justification for their terrorist activities.

The campaigns to end the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and no support to the fanatics can be the basis for a united front of progressive forces internationally. The campaign against religious fundamentalism must be part and parcel of an anti-globalisation campaign by all progressive forces.

We must oppose the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and religious fundamentalism. No support to one against the other. The fight between religious fundamentalism and the imperialists is a fight between bulls. There is not much to be gained by siding with one against the other. The goal must be to end the fight altogether and open the space to create an alternative way of living.

P.S.

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