

The Saudi-isation of Pakistan

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A stern, unyielding version of Islam is replacing the kinder, gentler Islam of the Sufis in Pakistan.

The common belief in Pakistan is that Islamic radicalism is a problem only in FATA, and that madrassas are the only institutions serving as jihad factories. This is a serious misconception. Extremism is breeding at a ferocious rate in public and private schools within Pakistan's towns and cities. Left unchallenged, this education will produce a generation incapable of co-existing with anyone except strictly their own kind. The mindset it creates may eventually lead to Pakistan's demise as a nation state.

For 20 years or more, a few of us have been desperately sending out SOS messages, warning of terrible times to come. In fact, I am surprised at how rapidly these dire predictions have come true.

A full-scale war is being fought in FATA, Swat and other "wild" areas of Pakistan, resulting in thousands of deaths. It is only a matter of time before this fighting shifts to Peshawar and Islamabad (which has already been a witness to the Lal Masjid episode) and engulfs Lahore and Karachi as well. The suicide bomber and the masked abductor have crippled Pakistan's urban life and shattered its national economy.

Soldiers, policemen, factory and hospital workers, mourners at funerals and ordinary people praying in mosques have all been reduced to globs of flesh and fragments of bones. But, perhaps paradoxically, in spite of the fact that the dead bodies and shattered lives are almost all Muslim ones, few Pakistanis speak out against these atrocities. Nor do they approve of the army operation against the cruel perpetrators of these acts because they believe that they are Islamic warriors fighting for Islam and against American occupation. Political leaders like Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan have no words of solace for those who have suffered at the hands of Islamic extremists. Their tears are reserved exclusively for the victims of Predator drones, even if they are those who committed grave crimes against their own people. Terrorism, by definition, is an act only the Americans can commit.

What explains Pakistan's collective masochism? To understand this, one needs to study the drastic social and cultural transformations that have rendered this country so completely different from what it was in earlier times.

For three decades, deep tectonic forces have been silently tearing Pakistan away from the Indian subcontinent and driving it towards the Arabian peninsula. This continental drift is not physical but cultural, driven by a belief that Pakistan must exchange its South Asian identity for an Arab-Muslim one. Grain by grain, the desert sands of Saudi Arabia are replacing the rich soil that had nurtured a magnificent Muslim culture in India for a thousand years. This culture produced Mughul architecture, the Taj Mahal, the poetry of Asadullah Khan Ghalib, and much more. Now a stern, unyielding version of Islam (Wahhabism) is replacing the kinder, gentler Islam of the Sufis and saints who had walked on this land for hundreds of years.

This change is by design. Twenty-five years ago, the Pakistani state used Islam as an instrument of state policy. Prayers in government departments were deemed compulsory, floggings were carried out publicly, punishments were meted out to those who did not fast in Ramadan, selection for academic posts in universities required that the candidate demonstrate a knowledge of Islamic teachings and jihad was declared essential for every Muslim. Today, government intervention is no longer needed because of a spontaneous groundswell of Islamic zeal. The notion of an Islamic state – still in an amorphous and diffused form – is more popular now than ever before as people look desperately for miracles to rescue a failing state.

Villages have changed drastically; this transformation has been driven, in part, by Pakistani workers returning from Arab countries. Many village mosques are now giant madrassas that propagate hard-line Salafi and Deobandi beliefs through oversized loudspeakers. They are bitterly opposed to Barelvis, Shias and other sects, who they do not regard as Muslims. The Punjabis, who were far more liberal towards women than the Pukhtuns, are now beginning to take a line resembling that of the Taliban. Hanafi law has begun to prevail over tradition and civil law, as is evident from the recent decisions of the Lahore High Court.

In Pakistan's lower-middle and middle classes lurks a grim and humourless Saudi-inspired revivalist movement that frowns on any and every expression of joy and pleasure. Lacking any positive connection to culture and knowledge, it seeks to eliminate "corruption" by regulating cultural life and seizing control of the education system.

"Classical music is on its last legs in Pakistan; the sarangi and vichitraveena are completely dead," laments Mohammad Shehzad, a music aficionado. Indeed, teaching music in public universities is violently opposed by students of the Islami Jamaat-e-Talaba at Punjab University. So the university has been forced to hold its music classes elsewhere. Religious fundamentalists consider music haram or un-Islamic. Kathak dancing, once popular with the Muslim elite of India, has few teachers left. Pakistan produces no feature films of any consequence. Nevertheless, the Pakistani elite, disconnected from the rest of the population, live their lives in comfort through their vicarious proximity to the West. Alcoholism is a chronic problem of the super rich of Lahore – a curious irony for this deeply religious country.

Islamisation of the state and the polity was supposed to have been in the interest of the ruling class – a classic strategy for preserving it from the wrath of the working class. But the amazing success of the state is turning out to be its own undoing. Today, it is under attack from religious militants, and rival Islamic groups battle each other with heavy weapons. Ironically, the same army – whose men were recruited under the banner of jihad, and which saw itself as the fighting arm of Islam – today stands accused of betrayal and is almost daily targeted by Islamist suicide bombers.

Pakistan's self-inflicted suffering comes from an education system that, like Saudi Arabia's system, provides an ideological foundation for violence and future jihadists. It demands that Islam be understood as a complete code of life, and creates in the mind of a school-going child a sense of siege and embattlement by stressing that Islam is under threat everywhere.

On the previous page, the reader can view the government-approved curriculum. This is the basic road map for transmitting values and knowledge to the young. By an act of parliament passed in 1976, all government and private schools (except for O-level schools) are required to follow this curriculum. It was prepared by the curriculum wing of the federal ministry of education, government of Pakistan. It sounds like a blueprint for a religious fascist state.

Alongside are scanned pictures from an illustrated primer for the Urdu alphabet. The masthead states that it has been prepared by Iqra Publishers, Rawalpindi, along "Islamic lines." Although not

an officially approved textbook, it is being used currently by some regular schools, as well as madrassas associated with the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), an Islamic political party that had allied itself with General Musharraf. These picture scans have been taken from a child's book, hence the scribbles.

The world of the Pakistani schoolchild remained largely unchanged, even after September 11, 2001, the event that led to Pakistan's timely desertion of the Taliban and the slackening of the Kashmir jihad. Indeed, for all his hypocritical talk of "enlightened moderation," General Musharraf's educational curriculum was far from enlightening. It was a slightly toned down version of the curriculum that existed under Nawaz Sharif which, in turn, was identical to that under Benazir Bhutto who had inherited it from General Zia-ul-Haq. Fearful of taking on the powerful religious forces, every incumbent government has refused to take a position on the curriculum and thus quietly allowed young minds to be moulded by fanatics. What may happen a generation later has always been a secondary issue for a government challenged on so many fronts.

The promotion of militarism in Pakistan's so-called "secular" public schools, colleges and universities had a profound effect upon young minds. Militant jihad became part of the culture on college and university campuses. Armed groups flourished, they invited students for jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan, set up offices throughout the country, collected funds at Friday prayers and declared a war which knew no borders. Pre-9/11, my university was ablaze with posters inviting students to participate in the Kashmir jihad. Post-2001, this ceased to be done openly.

Still, the primary vehicle for Saudi-ising Pakistan's education has been the madrassa. In earlier times, these had turned out the occasional Islamic scholar, using a curriculum that essentially dates back to the 11th century, with only minor subsequent revisions. But their principal function had been to produce imams and muezzins for mosques, and those who eked out an existence as 'maulvi sahibs' teaching children to read the Quran.

The Afghan jihad changed everything. During the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, madrassas provided the US-Saudi-Pakistani alliance the cannon fodder they needed to fight a holy war. The Americans and Saudis, helped by a more-than-willing General Zia, funded new madrassas across the length and breadth of Pakistan. A detailed picture of the current situation is not available. But according to the national education census, which the ministry of education released in 2006, Punjab has 5,459 madrassas followed by the NWFP with 2,843; Sindh has 1,935; the Federally Administrated Northern Areas (FANA), 1,193; Balochistan, 769; Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), 586; the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA), 135; and the Islamabad capital territory, 77. The ministry estimates that 1.5 million students are acquiring religious education in the 13,000 madrassas.

These figures appear to be way off the mark. Commonly quoted figures range between 18,000 and 22,000 madrassas. The number of students could be correspondingly larger. The free boarding and lodging plus provision of books to the students, is a key part of their appeal. Additionally, parents across the country desire that their children be "disciplined" and given a thorough Islamic education. The madrassas serve this purpose, too, exceedingly well.

Madrassas have deeply impacted the urban environment. Until a few years ago, Islamabad was a quiet, orderly, modern city different from the rest of Pakistan. Also, it had largely been the abode of Pakistan's elite and foreign diplomats. But the rapid transformation of its demography brought with it hundreds of mosques with multi-barrelled audio-cannons mounted on minarets, as well as scores of madrassas illegally constructed in what used to be public parks and green areas. Now, tens of thousands of their students, sporting little prayer caps, dutifully chant the Quran all day. In the evenings they swarm the city, making women minus the hijab increasingly nervous.

Total segregation of the sexes is a central goal of the Islamists, the consequences of which have been catastrophic. For example, on April 9, 2006, 21 women and eight children were crushed to death and scores injured in a stampede inside a three-storey madrassa in Karachi, where a large number of women were attending a weekly congregation. Male rescuers, who arrived in ambulances, were prevented from moving the injured women to hospitals.

One cannot dismiss this incident as being just one of a kind. In fact, soon after the October 2005 earthquake, as I walked through the destroyed city of Balakot, a student of the Frontier Medical College described to me how he and his male colleagues were stopped by religious elders from digging out injured girl students from under the rubble of their school building. This action was similar to that of Saudi Arabia's ubiquitous religious 'mutaween' (police) who, in March 2002, had stopped school girls from leaving a blazing building because they were not wearing their abayas - a long robe worn in Saudi Arabia. In a rare departure from the norm, Saudi newspapers had blamed and criticised the mutaween for letting 15 girls burn to death.

The Saudi-isation of a once-vibrant Pakistani culture continues at a relentless pace. The drive to segregate is now also being found among educated women. Vigorous proselytisers carrying this message, such as Mrs Farhat Hashmi, have been catapulted to the heights of fame and fortune. Their success is evident. Two decades back, the fully veiled student was a rarity on Pakistani university and college campuses. The abaya was an unknown word in Urdu. Today, some shops across the country specialise in abayas. At colleges and universities across Pakistan, the female student is seeking the anonymity of the burqa. And in some parts of the country she seems to outnumber her sisters who still "dare" to show their faces.

I have observed the veil profoundly affect habits and attitudes. Many of my veiled female students have largely become silent note-takers, are increasingly timid and seem less inclined to ask questions or take part in discussions. They lack the confidence of a young university student.

While social conservatism does not necessarily lead to violent extremism, it does shorten the distance. The socially conservative are more easily convinced that Muslims are being demonised by the rest of the world. The real problem, they say, is the plight of the Palestinians, the decadent and discriminatory West, the Jews, the Christians, the Hindus, the Kashmir issue, the Bush doctrine - the list runs on. They vehemently deny that those committing terrorist acts are Muslims, and if presented with incontrovertible evidence, say it is a mere reaction to oppression.

The immediate future does not appear hopeful: increasing numbers of mullahs are creating cults around themselves and seizing control of the minds of worshippers. In the tribal areas, a string of new Islamist leaders have suddenly emerged: Baitullah Mehsud, Maulana Fazlullah and Mangal Bagh. Poverty, deprivation, lack of justice and extreme differences of wealth provide the perfect environment for these demagogues to recruit people to their cause. Their gruesome acts of terror are still being perceived by large numbers of Pakistanis merely as a war against imperialist America. This could not be further from the truth.

In the long term, we will have to see how the larger political battle works out between those Pakistanis who want an Islamic theocratic state and those who want a modern Islamic republic. It may yet be possible to roll back those Islamist laws and institutions that have corroded Pakistani society for over 30 years and to defeat its hate-driven holy warriors. There is no chance of instant success; perhaps things may have to get worse before they get better. But, in the long term, I am convinced that the forces of irrationality will cancel themselves out because they act at random whereas reason pulls only in one direction. History leads us to believe that reason will triumph over unreason, and the evolution of the humans into a higher and better species will continue. Using ways that we cannot currently anticipate, they will somehow overcome their primal impulses of

territoriality, tribalism, religiosity and nationalism. But, for now, this must be just a matter of faith.

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P.S.

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