

Pakistan: 'Foreign conspiracies' and other distractions

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The fear of foreign actors undermining Pakistan's potential progress has had a palpable presence in public discourse since the announcement of CPEC in 2015. From political outfits in Karachi to ethno-nationalists at the peripheries to even Islamist forces, all seemed to be part of a foreign-funded conspiracy to de-track the country from the glory that awaits. The ambit of such 'treacherous elements' slowly expanded to include a number of trade unionists and peasant leaders across the country, whose demands were dismissed as a ruse for hostile agencies attempting to disrupt the imminent developmental miracle in Pakistan.

This battle against perceived foreign agents reached a crescendo last month, when a number of bloggers went missing, presumably to ascertain if behind their social media content lay a larger international conspiracy to undermine the country's ideological and geographical boundaries. Their disappearances were followed by a government crackdown on 'foreign-funded NGOs', for allegedly indulging in "anti-state activities".

The recovery of most of the disappeared bloggers and a court verdict halting the government belligerence towards NGOs seem to indicate that better sense has prevailed over the matter - at least for now. However, the second most pertinent question to ask (since asking for accountability for the perpetrators would be dangerously naive) is what the government's perception of a state of siege reveals about the contemporary situation, as well as the future of citizenship and dissent in the country.

Let us take a detour to another moment in history, when the state launched, in what is today known as Pakistan, perhaps the first and most comprehensive operation against foreign conspiracies in the region. It was in the 1920s, soon after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar in which the British authorities gunned down dozens of its subjects celebrating the festival of Baisakhi, that the state began its quest for unearthing foreign conspiracies on Indian soil. The wrath of the colonial state was particularly directed at two entities: the Ghaddar Party, a transnational group of disaffected Punjabis headquartered in California and allegedly supported by Germany, and the Communist Party of India, a group of diasporic Indians primarily based in Tashkent with the backing of the Soviet Union.

The government elevated the risk from such 'foreign agents' to the number one priority of the intelligence community; it also gave special powers to law-enforcement officials to prosecute any suspects. The 1920s witnessed a number of high-profile 'conspiracy cases', including the Peshawar, Lahore and Meerut conspiracy cases, which attempted to identify and punish those involved in anti-state activities in cahoots with foreign powers. More spectacularly, the colonial state launched one of the greatest global espionage projects of the time, engaging the intelligence communities of disparate countries, from Hong Kong to the US, in an attempt to frustrate potential anti-British plans by diasporic Indians. In the words of David Petrie, the British official heading these covert

operations, the colonial state would eradicate seditious elements like the “wiping out of a plague”.

Such hyper-vigilance, however, proved to be short-lived and embarrassing. First, there was the obvious absurdity of a colonial state differentiating between ‘authentic Indians’ and ‘foreign agents’. Indeed, it became a herculean task for British officials in India to demonstrate that they were the custodians of Indian sovereignty, while young Indian men in anti-colonial organisations were ‘seditious elements’, an irony widely mocked in the nationalist press at the time. Second, intelligence reports from the 1940s showed that the threat from these two groups had been widely exaggerated in the previous two decades, with each of them having a negligible base of just a few dozen men within India who received little material support from either Germany or the Soviet Union.

Most importantly, however, the massive amount of time and resources used in an ultimately futile global manhunt distracted the colonial state from attending to more pressing and obvious crises at home. The end of the First World War had led to a demobilisation of the British Indian military, rendering many servicemen unemployed. When coupled with the agrarian crisis in Punjab, and an overall recession in the Indian economy, the result was widespread discontent that manifested itself in the non-cooperation/Khilafat Movement, which some observers considered the greatest challenge to colonial rule since 1857. The tragedy of the situation was that there was hardly anything ‘secretive’ or ‘inexplicable’ about the unrest in India, with all its symptoms, such as increasing indebtedness, unemployment, poverty as well as growing demands for political representation, manifesting themselves in the public domain.

Instead of focusing on ameliorating the conditions of the broad mass of the Indian population, the state remained fixated on following the trails of a handful of cosmopolitan Indians in the diaspora. While the needless intelligence operation expanded to include surveilling Indian exiles even in the remote corners of Mexico and Honduras in Latin America, nationalist leaders such as Gandhi, Jinnah and Nehru were able to mobilise the mass anger at home against colonial apathy into a popular anti-colonial movement that would eventually force the British Empire to relinquish its control over the Subcontinent.

What is remarkable about the intelligence archives from the colonial era is what they reveal about vulnerable and paranoid states, which continue to search for a deeper ‘truth’ hidden from reality when all necessary facts are staring them in the face. Is that not the predicament of the contemporary Pakistani state, which is increasingly obsessing over ‘uncovering’ foreign involvement behind dissenting opinions? It takes a lot of audacity for the officials of a state, whose infrastructure cannot function without foreign funding and which currently owes over \$70 billion in external debt, to accuse dissenting voices in the civil society of being remote-controlled by foreign donors.

More importantly, however, what this search to find ‘the smoking gun’ by experts, media anchors and state officials misses is that we do not really need a James Bond figure to reveal to us the secret of our nation’s distress. Instead, the facts are out there in the public domain, evident in the declining standards of public education and public health services, the slow but painful disappearance of clean drinking water and breathable air, poor health and safety standards for working people, and the most monstrous inequalities in urban and rural land distribution. Add to that our declining exports, burgeoning public debt and looming environmental catastrophe, and one would imagine that the government should be way too occupied to fixate on social media.

Yet, in a striking similarity to the colonial era, the Pakistani state’s fantasies of exposing a hidden abode of global conspiracies exacerbates the crisis and prevents the state from gazing inward and recognising how its own neglect has eroded its credibility in the eyes of the public. Of course, no two historical analogies can ever be neatly equated with each other, and in this case, there remains an obvious difference. While the colonial state considered Indians to be its subjects, the Pakistani state

(legally) recognises Pakistanis to be its citizens, which means it accepts their right to dissent as part of the contract between the state and the general population.

Yet the concept of citizenship is under attack through the all-pervasive suspicion of foreign agents spreading across society. Labelling those who hold dissenting opinions as anti-state – and part of a foreign conspiracy – removes them from the ambit of a legally sanctioned political community, making them vulnerable to both state and non-state violence. The triumph of suspicion over public debate has enacted a perverse reversal of the social contract; rather than the state presenting itself for accountability in front of the public, members of the public are summoned to prove themselves innocent of hatching conspiracies, especially if they happen to disagree with government policies.

While facing grave challenges and undergoing a crisis of legitimacy, monitoring the social media trails of critics and hurling baseless accusations against civil society organisations is a childish obsession on the part of the state. As the British found out in late colonial India (and Americans have recently learned in Afghanistan and Iraq), even the greatest techniques of surveillance cannot guarantee stability if people lose trust in the political system.

Thus, our government officials must stop distracting themselves and the public through futile attempts to find conspiracies behind contemporary problems, as their failings, and the consequent public discontent, is out in the open for the world to see. Instead, they ought to busy themselves in devising a more inclusive and sustainable approach to meet challenges in the domains of national security, economic development and social cohesion. If such issues are truly addressed, perhaps then the state won't have any reason to fear that 180 million people can be easily swayed by some secret, foreign propaganda.

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P.S.

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