

Pakistan's transition to substantive democracy



WHEN Pakistan holds elections on May 11, 2013 it will be the first time in Pakistan's history that an elected government hands over power to another elected government.

Though this is a positive development, most Pakistani and international observers are not optimistic that the elections form part of a broader transition from procedural to substantive democracy a system of government where civil and political liberties

are protected.

There are many reasons for this lack of optimism. Ongoing attacks on the minority Shia population have significantly increased, with hundreds killed already this year. Political leaders and candidates are routinely targeted, and there have been regular attacks on development workers seen to be promoting 'liberal values'. These political and social fault lines have been exacerbated by the worsening economic crisis. Economic growth has averaged just under 3 per cent over the last three years a

level that is insufficient to either substantially improve the population's living standards or absorb the growing workforce. Prices are rising at around 11 per cent per year, and the price increases on fuel, together with severe electricity shortages, have prompted a growing number of mass protests across the country.

Politically, socially and economically, Pakistanis face deep insecurity.

There is evidence for the argument that substantive democratic systems emerge only in the presence of certain conditions. First, there must be mass support for civil and political liberties and individual choice and autonomy, and second, these values tend to occur on a mass scale only once a society has reached and sustained a certain level of economic development and political stability.

As the people's economic security increases, and their confidence that these gains will not be lost grows, democratic values that is, respect for freedom of choice and individual autonomy increase. Widespread demands for civil and political liberties and responsive government tend to occur (with a time lag) once these values are held broadly throughout a society. The data also demonstrate that a loss of public confidence in economic security leads to a reversal of these values, and a preference for, or at least acceptance of, strong authoritarian government.

In a recent Pew Research Center poll, over 40 per cent of Pakistanis stated a pref-

erence for democratic government. But this finding cannot be viewed in isolation. Further democratisation depends on an engaged population, but 22 per cent of Pakistani respondents reported that 'for someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have'. This is particularly stark when measured against the views of other Muslim-majority populations in the broader region: only 13 per cent of Egyptians, 11 per cent of Jordanians and Tunisians, 9 per cent of Lebanese, and 5 per cent of Turks feel this way.

Another factor that complicates analysis of the data is that the term 'democracy' has come to be almost universally held as positive and associated with prosperity and stability. Over 90 per cent of World Values Survey respondents globally now state a preference for democracy, even when those same respondents also profess support for severe restrictions on individual choice and freedom of expression, and an acceptance of, or preference for, authoritarian regimes. So, measuring attitudes toward democracy's components is often more useful than measuring attitudes toward democracy itself.

This incongruence between rhetoric and actual belief is clear in Pakistan: most Pakistanis believe a strong authoritarian leader will be better able to address the country's problems than a democratic form of government. The level of support for authoritarian government is much higher in Pakistan than in any of its Muslim-majority

neighbours which is not surprising given Pakistan's ongoing political instability, economic decline and low level of development in most areas (disappointingly the comparable data is not available for India or Bangladesh).

The degree to which freedom of expression is prioritised is also a useful indicator. Only 58 per cent of Pakistanis believe the media should be able to 'report the news without (state/government) censorship', whereas 83 per cent of Jordanians, 86 per cent of Turks and 91 per cent of Lebanese believe a free media is important.

The Election Commission of Pakistan and the National Database and Registration Authority have established systems to address some of the major procedural obstacles to voting, and as a result of these initiatives millions of voters including a significant number of women and those in rural areas were registered last year. But even if the growing violence doesn't prevent a high voter turnout on election day, the attitudes of most Pakistanis toward their preferred form of leadership and the low value placed on freedom of expression indicate that substantive democracy and a responsive and accountable government are still some way off.

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Maulanas to monks: Why is our clergy angry and violent?

IT is also imperative to analyse why the Mullahs and Monks in our part of the world, though preach non-violence and advocate peace, spearhead some of the worst violent campaigns.

At the outset, for the purpose of this commentary, a distinction should be made in terms of the communal violence led by societal groups and political organisations, and those campaigns in which a section of clergy is involved.

Perhaps, some of us, especially the critics of religion and atheists would even argue that there is enough evidence in history to prove, that the religion has been a source of violent conflicts between people, nations and even civilizations. While the much critiqued Clash of Civilizations authored by Samuel Huntington would argue in a contemporary sense, the Crusades along with the wars and clashes during the era of Renaissance and Reformation would highlight, how we as civilizations have brutally fought amongst each other in the name of religion.

So an argument could be made, if we as a people have been fighting amongst each other in the name of religion, it is only logical to expect that the institutions of religion also get influenced and in turn influence the environment. The clergy, as an institution, irrespective of which religion they belong to, it could be argued in this case, are the product of a prevailing environment.

However, a deeper analysis of the history from the Crusades to Reformation era will also reveal that more than the clergies leading violence, it was the secular that exploited the clergy and other institutions of religion to be subservient to their political goals. The empires and kingdoms of medieval Europe exploited religion for political purposes, and in our own region jihad was used by raiders such as the Mohammads of Ghor and Ghazni for their political exploits.

However, the objective of this commentary is not to look into the role of religion and its abuse by the political authorities; rather, it is an attempt to find reasons behind why one of the institutions of religion the clergy today has taken the lead in violent political assertion of a particular community. This is in sharp contrast to the earlier attempts by the political leadership to use and abuse the institutions of religion for secular reasons.

An analysis of contemporary history of those regions where the clergy is leading a violent assault against the other communities Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar would reveal something in common. In all these societies, there is a serious crisis in secular leadership at the political level, compounded by bad governance. Worse, in some places, there is a complete absence of governance with no institutions that would address basic concerns and

remedy grievances. From health institutions to legal mechanisms, even if they exist, they are corrupt and beyond the reach of poor.

Clearly, in our part of the world, especially where there is an absence and failure of secular and political leadership, the clergy being approachable by the common man is also burdened with a responsibility to provide an answer for his secular problems primarily the absence of governance. The growth of Taliban in Afghanistan can be analysed in this paradigm; though the critics of Pakistan would argue that the Taliban was a creation of Islamabad to achieve its strategic interests in Kabul, undoubtedly, Mullah Omar would not have become the Commander of Faithful, had there not been support for what he stood for within Afghanistan. Mullah Omar and his fellow Mullahs would not have got the wholehearted support of the Pashtuns in



the 1990s, had there been an alternative political leadership.

What Afghanistan offered during that time was the brutal leadership under the Mujahideens, who were more of drug barons and war lords. With institutions and delivery mechanisms from schools to courts in shambles, the Mullahs became the alternative leadership. Similar trend could be observed in parts of Pakistan today; the absence of credible political leadership in Myanmar could be projected as a reason for the Monks to assume the local leadership role. While there may be a military dictator or an autocratic President with a powerful security institution, at the local level in villages, the clergy becomes important. Perhaps, this could be a reason for most of the violent reprisals led by the clergy have remained more rural than urban.

Granted, absence of credible political leadership and bad governance by default provide a role for the clergy in an under developed region, but what makes them violent? Two explanations could be provided as reasons the quality of clergy, and

the socio-economic background they come from. Of course, these two explanations need a larger empirical research; unfortunately, they are based on preliminary interviews and common sense research.

There was a time, our clergy was well educated with a good exposure. From the Buddhist Councils before the Mauryan until the destruction of the Nalanda University in 12th century, the clergy once upon a time was well travelled, well exposed and better trained in theological discourses.

There was also a healthy interaction between the secular and religious; for example, the Milinda Panha would reveal the conversation between the secular and the religious, between King Menander and the Sage Nagasena. In the post Westphalian state, the divorce of the secular and the religious in the affairs of the State has ruptured the dialogue between the two institutions that demand political and religious allegiance from its people.

Alas! today, with the erection of political boundaries, today our clergy no more travels, as he used to. Nor does he engage in a healthy interaction with the State.

Another question, internal though, that needs to be analysed also is how orderly are the religious orders today? Is the right education being imparted to the new and young ones who aspire to become a clergy? This is not to make a judgment against every religious Order and School, but only to find an explanation to what has made a section of our clergy violent.

Finally, does the social-economic background from which they come to the multiple Seminaries play a role in influencing their behaviour, as they grow? Instead of influencing the society with their vision of peace and non-violence, do they become influenced by what is happening in their environment? A larger study is required to find out whether the social and economic background from which these clergies come from play a role in making them violent. True, this section may be small, but still large enough to make a substantial destruction.

It is also true that this commentary raises more questions than providing any answers. Perhaps, there is a need to engage in a larger debate to find out why our apostles of peace have become angels of destruction. None of us may want to see our men in robes to be influenced by hate and venom; primarily for a simple reason, that when our hearts get filled with hate, venom, sorrow and darkness, we turn towards them for our future. Instead, if they have to influence us with hatred and venom, there is no future for any of us. Is there?

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Living through terror, in Rawalpindi and Boston

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I was in the middle of having Chinese food with my wife and friends yesterday afternoon when we heard the dull and deathly reverber. The water in our plastic cups rippled. We looked at one another, and someone made a joke about that famous scene in "Jurassic Park." We tried to drown the moment in humor. But then a rush of humanity descended upon us in the Prudential Center on Boylston Street, right across from where the second bomb blast had just occurred, near the marathon's finish line.

People gushed across the hallway like fish in white water rapids. It was a blur of bright clothes and shiny sneakers, everyone dressed up for Patriot's Day weekend on what was moments ago a beautiful spring day. Instantly, images of the shootings in Aurora, Colo., Newtown, Conn., and Tucson came to mind. I felt my thoughts reduced to singular flashes. My life, all of it, was the first. My wife, sitting across me, was the second. I yelled out to her to run, and we did, not knowing what had happened, only that it had to be something terrible.

We ran out of the food court and onto the terrace overlooking Boylston Street. We could see people fleeing from the finish line even as, in the distance, other weary marathoners kept running unknowingly toward the devastation. What was left of the food court was a land frozen in an innocent time, forks still stuck in half-eaten pieces of steak, belongings littered unattended. I felt fear beyond words.

This was not my first experience with terror, having grown up in Pakistan. But for some reason, I didn't think back to those experiences. Looking onto the smoked, chaotic Boylston Street, I forgot about cowering in my childhood bedroom as bombs and gunfire rained over the army headquarters in Rawalpindi, close to our house. My mind did not go back to when I stood on the roof of my dormitory in Karachi as the streets were overrun with burning buses and angry protesters after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. None of the unfortunate experiences of growing up in the midst of thousands of victims of terror, personally knowing some of them, helped me in that moment. Nothing made it any easier.



Perhaps, if I had been thinking more clearly and hadn't had my wife with me, I might have gone down to try to help the wounded. But at that moment all I could think about was getting us out of there. We lost our friends, then found them again.

Our cell phones weren't working. And then, as we worked our way through the dazed throngs in Back Bay, I realized that not only was I a victim of terror, but I was also a potential suspect.

As a 20-something Pakistani male with dark stubble (an ode more to my hectic schedule as a resident in the intensive-care unit than to any aesthetic or ideology), would I not fit the bill? I know I look like Hollywood's favorite post-cold-war movie villain. I've had plenty of experience getting intimately frisked at airports. Was it advisable to go back to pick up my friend's camera that he had forgotten in his child's stroller in the mall? I remember feeling grateful that I wasn't wearing a backpack, which I imagined might look suspicious. My mind wandered to when I would be working in the intensive care unit the next day, possibly taking care of victims of the blast. What would I tell them when they asked where I was from (a question I am often posed)? Wouldn't it be easier to just tell people I was from India or Bangladesh?

As I walked down Commonwealth Avenue, I started receiving calls from family back home. They informed me about what was unfolding on television screens across the world. I was acutely conscious of what I spoke over the phone, feeling that someone was breathing over my shoulder, listening to every word I said. Careful to avoid Urdu, speaking exclusively in English, I relayed that I was safe, and all that I had seen. I continued to naively cling to the hope that it was a gas explosion, a subway accident, anything other than what it increasingly seemed to be: an act of brutality targeted at the highest density of both people and cameras.

The next step was to hope that the perpetrator was not a lunatic who would become the new face of a billion people. Not a murderer who would further fan the flames of Islamophobia. Not an animal who would obstruct the ability of thousands of students to complete their educations in the United States. Not an extremist who would maim and hurt the very people who were still recovering from the pain of Sept. 11. President Obama and Gov. Deval L. Patrick have shown great restraint in their words and have been careful not to accuse an entire people for what one madman may have done. But others might not be so kind.

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