

A tale of two countries - Civilian institutions and the military

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Carved out of the same political fabric in 1947, India and Pakistan were expected to be identical twins. It quickly became clear that their future trend lines would be vastly different. Soon after Pakistan's creation, power gravitated to the office of the Governor-General or President outside the control of Parliament. This trajectory reached its zenith with the assumption of power in 1958 by Army Chief Ayub Khan. Since then, the military has called the shots in Pakistani politics.

India launched itself on a very different route. The Constitution was framed in record time, powers of the different arms of government were clearly demarcated, and above all the armed forces were made subject to civilian authority. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru made it very clear in the context of the Menon-Thimayya differences in 1959 that, regardless of the merit of the case, "civil authority is and must remain supreme". This doctrine of civilian supremacy is one of Nehru's greatest gifts to the nation.

The underlying reason for the supremacy of civilian institutions in India and their decimation in Pakistan was the difference in the nature of the Congress and the Muslim League. The Congress had a countrywide organisational structure and a leadership whose legitimacy was uncontested. In contrast, the Muslim League hardly had any roots in Pakistan because its base lay in the Muslim minority provinces that remained in India. It was easy for the army-bureaucracy nexus to arrogate all power to itself in the absence of a political balancer. The second major reason lay in their radically different ideological underpinnings. Pakistan was created on the basis of an exclusivist ideology that increasingly disqualified more and more segments of the population from access to power. This was a recipe for mayhem that has turned Pakistan into a failing state. India chose to adopt secularism as its guiding philosophy. In the first four decades of its existence, India tried to approximate this ideal even if it did not achieve it all the time. The story of the last 25 years, beginning with the demolition of the Babri Masjid followed by the Gujarat pogrom, has been very different, foreshadowing trends clearly visible today.

What is disturbing is how much India has begun to emulate Pakistan. As the Indian army has become increasingly engaged in domestic order maintenance, its footprint in domestic politics has amplified. Serving generals have taken to making statements that border on the political. Retired officers have entered the political arena in droves. All this is bound to whet the officer corps' political appetite. The Indian state's commitment to the secular ideal has eroded as the ruling party has pursued majoritarian policies and legitimised rhetoric bordering on hate speech. The vision of a "Hindu rashtra" is gaining increasing acceptability. Unless this exclusivist trend is reversed, India may descend down the same road that Pakistan has done, to its great detriment.

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