

Inevitable outcomes - In Pakistan, the state will fail to keep the religious right at bay because far too many inches have been given to it in the past

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AN enduring question in the study of Pakistani politics has been the relative lack of success of religious parties in electoral politics. Barring the extremely dubious 2002 exercise, in no election have religious parties won more than 10 per cent of the vote. They have, at best, exercised coalition potential at various points during their history. This is somewhat puzzling given that when allowed to compete, parties espousing political Islam have attained some success in other Muslim-majority countries, such as Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria.

The recent emergence of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan, and the display of Barelvi aggression in light of the Aasia Bibi acquittal, compel a review of the arguments around the future of political Islam in this country.

There are two linked trends associated with this topic. The first relates to their inability to do well in the polls: this is almost always traced back to their lack of organisational reach within the rural masses; their inability to overcome ethnic, *biradari* [1]-based, and other social cleavages that seem to have been politicised prior to the spread of political Islam in the country, and the bare minimum ability of mainstream parties to cater to the material needs of the electorate through patronage politics. This last one, in particular, is said to provide a major electoral advantage over Islamist parties. In geographical areas where the Islamists have sporadically held power — such as the JUI-F in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — they mimic the patron-client behaviour of mainstream parties to win elections.

The reason why the state will fail to keep the religious right at bay is because far too many inches have been given to it in the past.

The second trend inadvertently questions the relevance of the larger puzzle: What difference does it make whether religious parties actually win elections or not? The idea behind this is that they use street agitation to get what they want.

If the assumption is that their supporters want to attain power to shape law, policy and, ultimately, societal behaviour, they've been very successful in doing that by marching on the streets after Friday prayers, burning tyres, shutting down markets and lynching the innocent. Abetted by a compliant political and military elite, they've secured important legal victories, such as the passage of the Second Amendment, the Islamicisation of the civil and criminal legal framework and the repeated conjoining of national identity with pan-Islamic aspirations.

In the presence of these two tendencies — failure at the polls, and success on the streets — Pakistan has lumbered unevenly (but unidirectionally) towards greater space being accorded to faith in affairs of the state and society. This is an outcome that has been in the making since 1947.

If one wishes to clutch at straws, a plausible case can be made that the selective co-optation of political Islam by the ruling civilian and military elite has ensured progress that is 'uneven' rather than a full-throttled religious revolution. By paying lip-service to the ideas vocalised by ideologues from Maudoodi to Khadim Rizvi, the ruling elite has shored up its own support within the public, used it as a tool in factional conflict (such as displacing a less preferred government or fighting left-wing politics), and disarmed hard-liners from their monopoly over ideology.

But if one assumes that the larger aim is to keep the hordes at bay, this short-termism of using them strategically or giving them an inch every time has failed in the past and is guaranteed to fail in the long run. And the reasons for its failure in the future is precisely because far too many inches have been given in the past.

Imagine a tomorrow where the Pakistani ruling elite decides on a set of red lines related to unequivocal protection and promotion of minority and gender rights. This would likely require tweaking a biased legal framework, which would set off a chain reaction of protests from the religious right. Now imagine something even more implausible — the Pakistani state holds firm to the red lines it has set. We end up with a scenario where the state is propagating its own cultural/ideological vision, and one which is in opposition to that being proposed by the religious right.

What happens when the ruling elite and the religious right find themselves at odds with each other? This has only happened sporadically in our history — briefly in Ayub's period; briefly in Bhutto's period; and then again briefly under Musharraf. Each time the outcome has been a strengthening of the right, who have used their opposition to the then ruling elite to either wage violence (TTP's 'jihad' as a result of the Lal Masjid operation) or gain a bigger seat at the table (such as both during Bhutto's government and in the post-Bhutto regime).

This leaves our ruling elite with a very discomforting dilemma. Today, if they decide to take on these forces head on, they can set off a polarising reaction that will likely result in violence, and potentially strengthen the religious right's narrative and popularity as 'victims' of a secular-capitalist conspiracy down the road. It would be similar to what has happened in much of the Middle East, where state-enforced secularism has fought and often lost against religious populism.

On the other hand, if they continue with the capitulation, co-optation and incrementalism approach, the long-term aims of protecting the rights of religious minorities and women still go down the drain, but just a little more slowly.

What's worse is that the Pakistani state's expedient use of faith to combat politics it didn't like in the past — most notably left-wing and redistributive populism — means there is no other ideological force left out there that can help fight obscurantism. It increasingly looks like the country has reached a point where whatever strategy the ruling elite adopts going forward, the long-term outcome is probably going to be the same hue of regressive, violent and troubling for the most - marginalised in society.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

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