

# Pakistan: Difficulties in building alternative civic movements on war and war memory

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Pakistan is presently at war. There are both internal and external aspects. In fact it is more of a civil war than of a war between countries. And who pays for this “war on terror”? It is being paid profoundly and severely by Pakistan’s civil population. The drone attacks kill civilians, whose relatives are looking to retaliate. Thus Washington’s war fuels more opposition. Into this dangerous mix religious fanatics are able to recruit new adherents, who mount daily suicidal attacks. These are justified as a response to the Pakistan government’s partnership in the “war on terror.” So it is a fight between two Spanish bulls: among the contenders there is no winner and loser. The losers are the ordinary people of Pakistan.

There is no significant alternative civic movement to this war. The occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq by the American and NATO forces has complicated the whole issue and spilled over into Pakistan. Further, the rise of religious fundamentalism has divided the forces who traditionally oppose war, the Left and Progressives. Meanwhile those on the Right are calling, in an open way, for war and extreme measures in the name of Jihad. Some are even motivating youth to suicide by promising that when they offer up their lives against the enemies they will go directly to heaven. While there is no significant civil movement to stop the war, fundamentalists have unleashed a nonstop suicidal attack against war and occupation.

The daily suicidal attacks have left the whole population in leading a very fearful life. The general psyche has become of an uncertain future. Hope and optimism is the main loser in this situation.

Why is a civil antiwar movement so stunted? For this we must look to the history of the region, particularly the historical narrative that has been woven since India and Pakistan won independence and went their separate ways.

The root of this separation was over the inability of political elites of Hindu and Islamic religions to feel confident in creating one state. The historical memory on each side of the border from day one of independence begins with violence, separation and displacement. Since independence that strikingly different historical narrative has been reinforced by suspicion. This is clearly revealed in Indian and Pakistani history books and heavily impacts events today. It also is an effective state defense against the construction of a civil antiwar movement in the region.

Today the Pakistan government finds itself in a bind. It has promoted the psychology of a religious war in order to justify continual and massive defense spending. The enemy, of course, is India. In their propaganda, the Pakistani military won all three wars (1965, 1971 and 1999) against a much larger country. This was always carried out with a bow to religion: “India is a Hindu country. Muslims must continue a Jihad against them; Muslims never lose” was the theme. Jihad was central to the everyone’s memories.

Since the 1950s the Pakistani state has become increasingly under the control of the military. It has treated minority nationalities with contempt and brutality. We saw this in the way the ruling West Pakistani elite treated East Pakistan for 25 years, culminating in the army’s horrifying conduct

against Bengalis in 1971, when they raped and killed their own citizens with abandon.

The 1971 national uprising of Bengali people against the injustices, army rule and occupation was perceived by the Pakistani elite as a conspiracy to “break up” the country. At that moment only a very tiny minority of Left forces in West Pakistan sided with the Bengali people and opposed the military operation. Of course for this they were called “traitors.”

On the other side, the Indian establishment presented their military intervention into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) as aiding the Bengalis in their fight against the army operation. However their action was perceived by the Bengalis as an attempt to exert hegemony in the struggle in order to carry out their colonial intention.

Pakistan and Indian have been at odds on several occasions. Each uses the other as a political football. The Pakistani establishment has internalized the memory of 1971 and is constantly watching India. They blame the dismemberment of the Pakistani state not as a consequence of their own brutal policies but on the Indian army. The memory of dismemberment burns with the intensity of loss to an historic enemy.

For their part Indians tend not to remember 1971 as a Pakistani civil war sparked by the oppression of a national minority who fought for their liberation but rather as India’s ‘good’ war. It is remembered as India’s intervention to prevent the genocide. The fact that the Bengalis themselves were also Pakistanis has been effaced from the collective memory of Indian elites. This makes 1971 merely another Kargil, or Kashmir, Afghanistan or Mumbai—an instance of Pakistan meddling in other people’s affairs, and of the Pakistani military’s adventurism in the region. That version seems to be an accurate memory for a majority of Indian civil society. Both ruling elites consciously use memories of the war to enhance and deepen anti-India or anti-Pakistan opinion.

From the point of view of the Pakistani elite, the Jihad was promoted as a main defense mechanism. “Jihadies” became the most respected ones. Army “Jihadies” with slogans like “God is great” were the heroes. But these actors were transformed following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. State actors were replaced by non-state actors as American imperialism developed a close collaboration with the military dictator General Zia Ul Haq. The madrasas became war academies. Fundamentalist, war-driven religion took the affairs of the state along an even more brutal path.

The withdrawal of Soviets from Afghanistan after Geneva accord in 1988, gave Pakistan army another chance to spread Jihad from Kashmir to Afghanistan. Afghanistan became the target of the Jihadies trained in Madrasas inside Pakistan. So the birth of the most brutal force came into existence, the Taliban. Once in power, Taliban even said goodbye to their masters in Pakistan and became the international hub of religious fundamentalism for an Islamic world. Islam became political Islam and the world must accept by any mean the supremacy of “Islam”.

9/11 changed everything. It altered the relationship of the state and the non-state actors. It changed the meaning of war. It challenged the link the intelligence agencies had with those who were non-state actors who developed and strengthened themselves in the name of religion. For the state actors, the Jihadies became terrorists.

The confusion among the Left was at its height following 9/11. Some advocated cooperation with NATO forces against the religious fanatics and saw no need to build an alternative antiwar movement. “Religious fanatics are fascists and NATO must eliminate them” was the argument put forwards by these quarters. “NATO is doing our job. Military solution is the only alternative; we must either keep quiet or cooperate with the Americans. There is no need to build the antiwar movement involving the masses.” These were the typical lines of argumentation.

A tiny minority advocated for an antiwar movement linked internationally with the to the antiwar and anti-globalization movement. We had formed an Anti War Committee Pakistan in 1990 after the Gulf War broke out and were able to bring thousands into the roads protesting the American invasion of Iraq. But by 9/11, the antiwar activists could be counted on one's fingers. Two extreme positions emerged: one for more war in the name of Jihad and the other allying with the occupying forces.

In the build up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Anti War Committee Pakistan held antiwar rallies attracting hundreds, nowhere near to the size of demonstrations in other countries. Meanwhile the Jihadies were able to mobilize thousands. But do not be confused by their slogans! They were calling to stop the war on Iraq by calling for "death to America." That meant a "do more Jihads" strategy.

Beginning in 2002, and continuing after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, protests against the Iraq War were held in many cities worldwide, often coordinated to occur simultaneously. After the biggest series of demonstrations on 15 February 2003, New York Times writer Patrick Tyler claimed that these showed there were two super powers on the planet, the United States and worldwide public opinion.

These demonstrations were mainly organized by antiwar coalitions, In some Arab countries demonstrations were organized by the state. Europe saw the biggest mobilization of protesters, including a rally of 3 million people in Rome, which is listed in the Guinness Book of Records as the largest ever antiwar rally. According to the French academic Dominique Reynie, between January 3 and April 12, 2003, 36 million people across the globe took part in almost 3,000 protests against the Iraq war.

We were unable to match this upsurge against the war. What has been displaced in our historical narrative is an alternative to war. So the religious fanatics took the lead and transformed anti-imperialist and antiwar consciousness toward Jihad. This, of course, hijacked the politicization of the masses. It fueled the war rather than dampened it through an active antiwar mobilization.

On the other side, to reinforce the central paradigms of the dominant actors of the conflict "Us and Them," "The Battle of Good Against Evil," "Crusades against Islamic terrorism," "Civilization versus Chaos" the state, media and liberals hand in hand with some progressives were able to convince many that the road to peace lay through war.

The shining light in this dark period was the historic lawyer's movement spread over 18 months during 2007-8 against the military dictatorship of general Musharraf paving the way of another memory. This can definitely lay down the basis of a memory of success not led by religious fanatics.

The absence of a strong antiwar movement in the region has given way to the religious fanatics with an open space to exploit the feeling of "do something to stop the war." The growth of religious fundamentalism in Pakistan was not only the result of the American and Pakistani intelligence agencies, but also the complete failure of the civilian and military governments to solve any of the basic problems of the working class and its allies. Successive regimes have been unable to end the grip of feudalism, the absolute exploitive nature of Pakistani capitalists and their humiliating treatment of workers and farmers, the repression of smaller nationalities and exploitation of natural resources where they live.

The ruling class has failed even to bring about democratic norms. That is why whenever the civilian government was overthrown by a military dictatorship, the vast majority of the masses did not offer any resistance to dictatorship. To build an effective mass movement against the war, we must oppose both occupation and religious fundamentalism. One cannot support either false alternative.

The narrative of liberation is one that projects self-empowerment through building a world of health, education and work, not destruction and death.

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