

Pakistan's societal schizophrenia

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Of late, there has been too much emphasis on ethnicities, religious denominations and identity politics as a whole. Interestingly, no one seems to talk about politics from the angle of socio-economics. There is very little discussion on labour rights, land reforms or other more pressing issues. In short, there is no genuine leftist ideology in Pakistani politics today.

Since the past two months or so, I have closely following the developments that unravelled after the assassination of Salman Taseer. After reading what seems like a zillion articles, I noticed that practically everyone was regurgitating the same thing. Following the assassination, predictably enough, the Pakistan media split across the old Urdu-English line, with conservative voices dominating the former and the liberal ones the latter. However surprisingly this time, there was a substantial amount of support for the assassin amongst the general populace. This baffled many in the liberal camp that had grown used to visualizing society in a naively dichotomous framework of an old silent innocent majority versus a reactionary vocal minority. It has always been my conviction that it is foolhardy (and a bit too generalizing) to force labels such as 'moderate'/'extremist' on the general populace, which numbers more than 150 million in the case of a country as large as Pakistan. I have always imagined the common man as a bit like the crowd in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* ('Methinks there's much reason in his sayings'), fickle and susceptible to emotional vicissitudes.

While the reactions from the Urdu media regarding the whole issue were more or less anticipated, what struck me was that the liberal press in Pakistan had not been the most innovative in the way they dealt with the whole issue. The most common argument of the liberals was that this wasn't the Pakistan that Jinnah had envisaged, and how the Quaid had always championed the cause of a secular Muslim state. More or less, these arguments are correct. Jinnah did not desire a theocratic Pakistan, but he clearly articulated his position only in his speech to the constituent assembly, which was given a mere four days before independence. Had he revealed his intentions of a secular 'Pakistan' sooner, it would have been politically unfeasible to mobilize support for the whole idea in the first place.

Anyway, what Jinnah did or did not want can be argued endlessly. But my point is that, it's been sixty-four years since independence, and I think it's about time Pakistan reconceptualized itself. While it is understandable that Jinnah's position as the founder of the nation has its due weight, but at the same time these arguments have not been lapped up by anyone besides the intelligentsia as I highly doubt whether the common man can differentiate between a state for the 'interests of Muslims' and an Islamic state. However, this does not imply that secularism has no future in Pakistan, but it has to be formulated differently. For secularism to take roots in Pakistani society, the entire political discourse has to change first. Of late, there has been too much emphasis on ethnicities, religious denominations and identity politics as a whole. Interestingly, no one seems to talk about politics from the angle of socio-economics. There is very little discussion on labour rights, land reforms or other more pressing issues. In short, there is no genuine leftist ideology in Pakistani politics today. Sure enough, the right winged parties have filled this vacuum by using their own

brand of 'opium for the masses'. There gradual intrusion has only exacerbated sectarian and communal tensions, To offer a comparison, the two states in India, which have been relatively free of communal politics, are precisely those two states that have a long history of left politics, i.e. Kerala and West Bengal.

Moving on, from what I have known and read, the media in Pakistan has always highlighted the Barelvis as a relatively moderate and peaceful sect, in comparison to other sects like the Deobandis and the Ahl-e-Hadis. However what surprised many liberals was the revelation that the killer MumtazQadri was himself a Barelwi. Now fools as a group are generally secular, for they occur across all sectarian boundaries. However, my instinct is that the sensitivity of Barelwis to the issue of Namoos-e-Risalat has historical roots. The founder of the movement, Ahmed Riza himself was very particular about the high station of the Prophet, and this sensitivity might have trickled down along generations.

So where should Pakistan go from here? While I am no soothsayer, I think the only way the liberalists can realize their intentions is by working from the ground up, which is infinitely more difficult than writing fluff pieces on a blog (such as my own). Also, at least for the time being the blasphemy issue is a hot potato that no politician wants to hold. Whether desirable or not, amending the law might have serious repercussions for an already faltering state. So my advice: concentrate more on the structural changes- reform school curricula, focus on land reforms, and let democracy take roots. In short, create an atmosphere in which such topics can be discussed without the threat of bullets being lodged into your chest. In short, don't reach for the secret too soon, and don't cry for the moon.

by Amit Julka

P.S.

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