

Drifting towards fascism - The rise of “Ziaism” in Pakistan

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Retreat of socialism, particularly in former Soviet Union, and rise of “Ziaism” in Pakistan depressed the progressive (Leftist) and secular forces in the country which resulted in fading of “battle of ideas” in media and educational institutions. The consequences are the general intellectual bankruptcy and emergence of media-obsessed intelligentsia and the result is the “Ziaized” elitist intellectuals are on the center-stage.

S. Akbar Zaidi, a well-known political and social scientist, in his recently published book “Military, Civil Society and Democratization in Pakistan”, while exploring the Pakistani society has pointed out that the social and structural transitions in economy and society has resulted in emergence of new socio-economic groups and classes which have come up against older and more established structures and institutions, resulting in conflict, contradiction and compromise.

Pakistani society has gone through cataclysmic political, social and economic changes for the past four decades. The transformation occurred largely because of four or five main factors; emergence of people’s power and drastic socio-economic changes during Zulfikar ali Bhutto’s rule, Islamization by General Zia-ul-Haq and resultant birth of a “Ziaized” segment of society, “Saudization” to contain the influence of Iranian revolution, emergence of nouveau-riche and affluent middle class after 1980s, withering of the culture of argumentation, and hence the disappearance of ‘battle of ideas’.

The process of Islamization deeply involved a large section of society particularly emerging economic and social classes which supported Zia and his political Islam and benefited from his dictatorship. General Zia attracted the people who migrated from India and were settled in big urban centers, particularly of Punjab and Sindh provinces, and who later became a powerful constituency of Zia-ul-Haq. Shias in Pakistan were very much inspired by the Iranian cleric revolution and even threatened Zia’s rule by occupying Islamabad’s road. To contain Iranian influence, and to support jihad in Afghanistan, the Saudis came into action and with the help of petro-dollars promoted sectarianism, particularly wahabism, anti-Shia militancy and proliferation of sectarian madrassas, and this gave birth to religious fanaticism, communal intolerance and jihadi culture.

One can refer to “Ziaization”, initiated and promoted by General Zia’s dictatorship, as a culture of hypocrisy, patronage, mediocrity, obscurantism and cruelty. Ziaization and Saudization proved more catastrophic for the Pakistani society than Islamization. Today, the product of “Ziaization” is mergence of hypocrite, obscurantist educated middle class, which showers flower petals on killers and has been nurturing fascist tendencies which we see in affluent cities and regions of the country.

Economic boom in certain areas, particularly central Punjab and central NWFP, during 1980s and 1990s, expansion of financial institutions and increasing hold of corporate sector, surge of shopping

malls, food chains and food outlets in every nook and corner of big cities, high-rise glass towers and almost 20 to 30 percent annual increase in vehicles, and subsequently rapid growth of well-to-do, largely religious, professional class, have also affected the social fabric and environmental atmosphere.

It is half truth that poverty is the reason that youth joins jehadi organizations. Intriguingly, these are relatively rich areas which provide financial resources or provide fodder to militant organizations i.e. central Punjab, a part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Karachi.

Retreat of socialism, particularly in former Soviet Union, and rise of “Ziaism” in Pakistan depressed the progressive (Leftist) and secular forces in the country which resulted in fading of “battle of ideas” in media and educational institutions. The consequences are the general intellectual bankruptcy and emergence of media-obsessed intelligentsia and the result is the “Ziaized” elitist intellectuals are on the center-stage. Besides, the national political and social discourse is dominated by the urban mediocre middle class. Majority of progressive/Leftist intellectuals (including myself if I am an intellectual) have been consumed by national and international NGOs and they are running after the donor-driven projects and for meeting deadlines. Now, there is abundance of so-called “educated” political analysts to discuss individuals and events, and dearth of grass-roots intellectuals and social scientists to discuss ideas and societal changes.

Iftikhar H. Malik in a work on “State and Civil Society in Pakistan” observes, “The imperatives for establishment of a civil society in Pakistan have been side lined...Totalitarianism, elitist monopolization, majoritarian coercion and ethnic fascism which normally stand rejected by a ‘civil society’ are all pervasive and predominant in Pakistan.”

Other socio-cultural and environmental changes include rapid migration from rural to urban centers and swelling of cities, and despite migration, widening rural-urban divide in the country. There are under-current feelings of natives vs mohajirs—Sindhis, Seraikis, Balochs, Pukhtuns have different point of views vis-à-vis army, relationship with neighbouring countries, nuclear weapons etc. Big cities in Sindh and Punjab largely represent the political, cultural, and religious aspirations of the people migrated from India. Afghan mohajirs are also influencing Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan politically, economically and socially.

Pakistani society is a rapidly growing consumer society, and hence rapid deterioration of land and water resources causing more and more migration to cities resulting in sprawling slums. The degradation of natural resources has been resulting in shrinking livelihood opportunities both in rural and urban areas and subsequently increasingly tense and violent population and rise of crimes.

Pakistani society is gradually drifting towards fascism. James D. Forman, in his book “FASCISM: The Meaning and Experience of Reactionary Revolution” (1976), describe the fascism as following (imagine Pakistani state and society in the light of the definition):

“Towards a comprehensive definition of traditional fascism then, it might be described as the seizure and control of economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of a state by a small group of activists, backed by a large segment of the conservative middle and upper classes fearful of the Left, to the end that the state becomes intensely nationalistic, militaristic and finally imperialistic.”

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