

Pakistan: Another wake-up call?

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"IF Pakistan is to move forward as a democratic and progressive state it is necessary to firmly check sectarian activities, otherwise Pakistan will be reduced to a retrogressive medieval state."-Punjab CID chief, 1952

ONE of the most relevant ways of looking at the Lal Masjid affair is to treat it as another wake-up call - hopefully the last one. On the one hand, this case has introduced us to a new, and perhaps the deadliest, form of religious militancy, and on the other hand, it has revealed the upgraded standing of the theocratic camp. A combination of these two will be disastrous for the polity Pakistan has so far experimented with, unless those in command have wisdom and guts to redefine the foundational assumptions of the state, and do not ignore the present warning in the manner they have done so far.

The polity adopted by Pakistan at independence was an admixture of the Viceregal system and rudimentary democracy. The founding elite saw little wrong in this model and this was one of the major reasons for its failure to frame a new constitution for the state. The contradiction between this system and the religious basis of the demand for partition was ignored by the Muslim League leadership but those attracted by theocratic ideals had reason not to follow suit. Soon after independence they served their first warning of their political ambition when a memorandum calling for Islamisation of the state was submitted on behalf of the country's ulema.

The government did not accept the ulema's demands and yet it produced the Objectives Resolution. Despite government spokesmen's rhetoric in the Constituent Assembly (statements such as 'Pakistan was not supposed to be a laboratory for Islam'), the religious lobby viewed the resolution as the foundation-stone of

a religious state (for instance, Jamat-i-Islami leader Mian Tufail Mohammad's claim that after the adoption of the Objectives Resolution, the reservation on accepting Pakistan as an Islamic State had become redundant) The religio-political lobby began challenging its rivals in power through the anti-Ahmadia agitation in Punjab. The government followed the way shown by its colonial predecessor. Two Ahrar leaders were sent to prison for making objectionable speeches in mosques. Their sentence was however remitted and the idea of prosecuting anyone for speeches in the house of God was almost totally given up. During the 1953 riots that followed, Maulana Abdul Sattar Niazi, who had been an important leader of the Punjab Muslim League, offered the first face of religious militancy and Lahore's Wazir Khan Mosque became the pole of power to challenge the state.

What happened after this government-mosque clash? The military had a dress rehearsal for martial law. Prime Minister Nazimuddin ordered Mumtaz Daultana to vacate the Punjab Chief Minister's couch and propose Firoz Khan Noon's name as his successor. Many political parties that had jumped at the opportunity for populist politics learnt the lesson they are relying upon to this day - that it is possible to distance oneself from the methods of a protest and yet benefit from its fallout. Finally, Justices Munir and Kayani wrote a report on the anti-Ahmadi riots, which bears the former's name only and which became a sort of Bible for middle class secularists, who deluded themselves with the thought that the challenge in the name of belief had been beaten off for good.

The post-1953 reality was otherwise. The 1956 constitution revealed the extent of the religious lobby's nibbling at the polity. The republic became Islamic Republic; under the directive principles of policy, the state undertook to enable the Pakistani Muslims to order their lives in accordance with the Holy Quran and Sunnah, to make the teaching of the Quran compulsory, and to secure the proper organisation of Zakat, Waqfs and mosques; an Islamic research institution was set up; a bar was created against any legislation that was repugnant to Islamic injunctions and the existing law was to be brought into conformity with such injunctions (the latter task was to be

done in the light of a commission's report). These were quite significant gains for the religio-political lobby.

The imposition of the military regime in 1958 froze the tussle between the theocrats and the liberals - both so described for want of better definitions. The struggle for democratic rights dominated the national scene. The religio-political factions joined this struggle as it offered them a means to widen their base, but since the central issues were revival of parliamentary democracy and demands for provincial rights, they could not push their call for theocracy to the top of the national agenda. In 1970, as the possibility of an end to military autocracy emerged, the liberals received another wake-up call. All religio-political groups joined the race for power. Much was made of an alleged burning of the Holy Quran and socialists were told they were going to lose their tongues. The theocrats failed because they were divided, the majority wing population did not brook any deviation from their struggle for autonomy and leadership of the state, and a majority of the West Wing people were swinging to the tune of the most effective slogan in Pakistan's democratic politics - roti, kapra aur makan. But they had reason to be optimistic.

The new branch of the political elite, that had begun by proclaiming Islam as one of the three pillars of its ideology, increased the role of belief in constitutional life. Along with reiteration of democratic and socialist ideals, Islam was made the religion of the state.

So far the state's pro-religion inclinations were not wholly because of pressure from religio-political factions. A stronger impetus was the argument developed by liberal Islamic scholars that Islam was in total accord with not only democratic governance but also with egalitarian economics. Some went on to argue that Islam envisaged a socialist order. Thus, Bhutto and Nasser (vide the constitution of the United Arab Republic) could swear by socialism while declaring Islam to be the religion of the state.

The most essential premise of this approach was the theory that determination of the political

requisites of belief and their enforcement was not the monopoly of the theocratic camp - this authority lay with the country's population and was to be exercised through its elected representatives.

The Zia years marked four substantial changes in the situation. First, the state accepted the goal of a theocracy and began working towards it. Secondly, traditionalists were enabled to consolidate their monopoly over religious discourse with the help of constitutional instruments. Thirdly, the authority to interpret Islamic injunctions and to enforce them was in effect taken away from parliament and handed over to officially recognised scholars. And, fourthly, the use of the gun to capture state power was added to the curriculum of a vastly expanded network of religious seminaries. All this led to the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the inevitable diversion of their attention to Pakistan.

Lal Masjid constitutes a relatively small item on the agenda of the new breed of religious militants; some of their bigger enterprises are in Fata and the adjoining areas (hitherto described as settled districts). The situation now is that the contenders for state power fall into three categories. The first category comprises political elements that swear by democracy and constitution, they may be called, for the sake of convenience, democrats, who can gain their goal only through political / electoral means. The second group comprises advocates of theocracy who accept elections as one of the legitimate means of securing power but are also open to other means. And the third is the army of militants who have acquired the skill to get their way by holding the state to ransom.

The present representative of militants is more dangerous than his precursors because he does not demand personal or group favours, he only demands enforcement of an Islamic order, a demand nobody can oppose. His strength also lies in the fact that his attempt to seek political ends through force cannot be seriously questioned in a country where seizure of state apparatus by force has been held legitimate more than once.

The appearance of the new militant has changed

the political equation in favour of the theocratic lobby. While the so-called democratic camp remains divided (the latest proof is the London APC), and their division will not end so long as the military has its finger in the political pie, the religio-political parties have managed to forge functional unity. They stand to benefit from the militant elements' adventures without commending their tactics, secure in the belief that public (and even government) endorsement of the militants' demand advances their own agenda.

Pakistan's real crisis is that so long as the military retains power it cannot but contribute to the growth of militancy, and even if these militants do not succeed in toppling the regime, they will have paved the way to the success of religio-political parties - the final result of the military establishment's forays into politics.

P.S.

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