

Future course for Pakistan

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(This article address the situation developed in the aftermath of the assassination of Salman Taseer, ex-Governor Punjab.)

Assassination of Salman Taseer has once again brought to light one of the fault lines dividing Pakistani society: for one person the question is to what extent religious radicalisation of the society is acceptable; for the other the question is to what degree liberalism may be tolerable in the society.

The fault line is not new but has been there since the inception of Pakistan. The founding father Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah identified that and in February 1948 he said, “In any case, Pakistan is not going to be a theocratic state to be ruled by priests with a divine mission. We have many non-Muslims – Hindus, Christians and Parsis – but they are all Pakistanis. They will enjoy the same rights and privileges as any other citizens and will play their rightful part in the affairs of Pakistan.”

Before formation of Pakistan, religious parties were not in politics but used to play roles in movements that mostly turned violent later on and ended in loss of human lives and property. In the post-independence period, availability of the space for political manoeuvring through religio-political means opened a new vista for religious parties. Several religious leaders sprang up to proclaim what extent of Islam was required, besides what kind of Islam was required in the new state inhabited by the Muslims.

The space once occupied never left vacant. Entered the army in the political sphere under the guise of martial laws, the religious parties reinforced and confirmed their lasting roles. To find their share in the political market of Pakistan, the religious parties sided with the army to stay relevant. Sectarianism also sprouted from the same sort of struggle to stay in the political arena. Consequently, politics gave religion a permanent role to play in Pakistan. The latest national elections, when held in a transparent fashion, tried to side line the religious parties.

Retrospectively, in March 1949, Objectives Resolution was passed not to make the country a theocratic state but to lay the foundation of a Muslim state which would be a federation (recognizing ethno-linguistic identities) and taking care of the minorities. Later on, incorporation of Islamic provisions in 1973 Constitution swelled the religious aspect of the Constitution and outsized the democratic, federal and pluralistic aspects. The 18th Amendment has now balanced the tilt with its 102 amendments but there is still a need to do more in this regard.

It is not just the role of religion in politics but also allowing religious sentiments taking precedence over nationalism. Pakistan of today is enmeshed in the discussion whether religion should be first and country later or vice versa? The pan-Islamist movements spring from the theory of religious sentiments first and all else later. Nevertheless, assassination of Salman Taseer has also opened another dimension of the conflict: should a Pakistani keep his religious sentiments before his official duty or vice versa? In the history of Pakistan, first time religious sentiments have taken priority to one's official duty. How long this trend set by Mumtaz Qadri, a police constable, will sustain its presence is yet to be seen?

The Taseer-Qadri difference was not just a conflict between two Pakistanis 'Who is a righteous Muslim?' but how to safeguard lives of minorities in Pakistan from being trampled on by the majority who are the Muslims? That is, no innocent Pakistani (of whatever religious hue) should be sentenced. In that way, in the Taseer-Qadri conflict, state and religion were on a head-on collision course with each other. Hence, the dimension of the conflict is broader than the apparent state of affairs. So are its repercussions.

What is the brink Pakistan has reached is whether the name of Islam can be exploited to gain political leverage on the opponents or not? Rana Sana Ullah, an MPA from Punjab, was also instrumental in highlighting activities of Salman Taseer and depicting those as un-Islamic – as a retaliatory measure to the political manoeuvre of Salman Taseer as a Governor to embarrass the Government of Punjab on one issue or another. The character assassination of Salman Taseer had already been started at the political level; consequently, the social field got fertile to sow the seed of physical assassination by any religious zealot – under any pretext.

In a way, the Taseer-Qadri conflict was also a type of class conflict between a class which is considered a friend of the west and a class which is denied even visas to visit the west. The point is did the religious elements found Pakistan without the help of the liberal and educated sections of the society? The answer is in a give negative. The religious elements were followers and supporters of those who were foreign qualified and used to wear western dresses, speak English language and dine in western manners. Without their leading from the front, the followers could not do anything.

As a solution, two strategies are possible: either to exclude religious elements from the political system to discourage them or to include them to the political system to transform

them into moderate beings. Generally speaking, it is now getting obvious that Pakistan is gone beyond the stage where religious parties can be banned from taking part in politics. In other words, now religion cannot be separated from politics in Pakistan. The voters have been trying to separate both and that can happen only if the elections are not rigged to have any combination like the MMA. After passing Objectives Resolution and subsequent Islamisation of 1973 Constitution (through Islamic provisions), the role of religion in social, political, economic and moral affairs of the country is confirmed. Can staving off martial laws keep the religious parties in check is the next best question?

Then the point is not only of religious radicalisation but of religious sentimentalism making a religious fanatic decide on his own and act. Education is meant to modulate that sentimentalism but if education as an intervention factor is missing what is a substitute?

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