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Pakistan: Implications of Sectarian Violence

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Once again Pakistan is ravaged by sectarian violence. Persistent stories of savagery in the name of religion is causing worry not only to Pakistanis but to her South Asian neighbors and to the international community.

Sectarian or inter and intra-religious violence should have reduced with the passage of time and the advancement of society into post-modern state where people try to think beyond the confines of the past and interrogate beliefs and concepts held sacred and inviolable.

Sectarian violence also arrests human progress founded on challenging exclusivity, intellectual and moral rigor, orthodoxy and religious tradition.

Yet in the post-secular world religion that had been confined to religious institutions and mullahs and priests were thought to have been relegated to tending their flocks has staged a comeback, sometimes in violent forms, resulting in destabilization of a yet fragile global structure trying to find its moorings in the post-Cold War slippery slope. Perhaps the creeping advance of religion in a secular world has been given a push, if any one incident can be cited credibly, by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 that for decades has divided the world into camps not so much defined by levels of economic development but by the religion the people profess. Though controversial yet oft quoted is the controversial thesis of Samuel Huntington titled Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order where he writes "The West is and will remain for years to come the most powerful civilization. Yet its power relative to that of other civilization is declining.

As the West attempts to assert its values and to protect its interests, non-Western societies confront a choice. Some attempt to emulate the West and to join or to "band-wagon" with the West. Other Confucian and Islamic societies attempt to expand their own economic and military

power to resist and to “balance” against the West. A central axis of the post-Cold War world politics is thus the interaction of Western power and culture of non-Western civilization” .Influence Samuel Huntington and others who thought alike had on Western perception resulted in consequent actions by Western political to the detriment of the Muslims.

The aberrant behavior by a section of the Muslims towards fellow Muslims is giving credence to people who propagate millennial rivalry between Islam and Christianity. Such behavior is palpably evident in Pakistan, Syria, Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and some other countries where sectarian conflicts and deaths of the innocent do not even raise eyebrows of fellow citizens because they have got used to such tragic and senseless killings.

Sectarian conflict in Islam can be traced to the difference the two sects have on the politico-theological questions. Professor N. D. Danjibo (Islamic fundamentalism and Sectarian Violence in Northern Nigeria) writes “The earliest known sects in Islam are perhaps the Sunni and the Shi’a (Shiites).Whereas the Sunni believe in integrating religion and society by adopting religion to state structures, the Shiites believe in religious Puritanism such that Islam must be practiced in its pure form and must be guarded from being adulterated by the society.

Secondly, there is also a controversy over the origin of their caliphs(representatives of the Prophet of Islam). Whereas the Sunni have designated family roots that would always produce the caliphs or imams, the Shi’a believe that the position of imam can even be earned by commoners who have excelled in religious teachings and traditions. Since the Sunni adopted religion to social structures, they also have accepted and respected political authority. In fact, Sunni leaders can function both as religious and political leaders.

The Emirate systems of administration actually derive from the Sunni tradition. On the other hand: “Shi’a sources always depict their Imams as ‘the wretched’, ‘the tortured’, ‘the humble poor’, ‘and the worshippers of God ’and ‘the followers of his religion’. By contrast, the imam’s enemies are depicted as ‘the usurpers of power’, ‘the religiously corrupt’, ‘money mongrels’, and ‘the worshippers of gold’”. It is generally understood that).Shia theology discounts the legitimacy of the first three caliphs and believe that Hazrat Ali is the second-most divinely inspired man (after Prophet Muhammed (SM) and that he and his descendants by the Prophet’s s daughter Bibi Fatimah, daughter of the Prophet’s wife Bibi Khadijah, the Imams, are the sole legitimate Islamic leaders. The Imams encompass far more of a prophetic function than the Caliphate of the Sunnis.

Sectarian violence has taken turn for the worse in recent time in Pakistan. Only a few days back Lashkar-e-Jangvi, a Sunni militant group, has claimed responsibility for bombings that killed around one hundred Shiites. Globally Sunni population accounts for about 90% among the Muslims the rest being Shiites. The emergence of combative theocracy in Iran and the replacement of Sunni domination in Iraq by the Shiites have placed the Sunni rulers and people of these countries in the Arab world in a difficult position.

French intellectual who specializes in Islamic affairs Oliver Roy sees the "Shia awakening and its instrumentalisation by Iran" as leading to a "very violent Sunni reaction", starting first in Pakistan before spreading to "the rest of the Muslim world, without necessarily being as violent."

Roy adds "two events created a sea change in the balance of power between Shia and Sunnis: the Islamic revolution in Iran and the American military intervention in Iraq....."

Today, Azerbaijan is probably the only country where there are still mixed mosques and Shia and Sunnis pray together.

"More than the Arabs Pakistan has more to lose from sectarian violence. As it is Pakistan is assailed by terrorism saddled with a government whose relations with the US is hugely unpopular and Pakistan's repeated protests to the US and request to stop the drone attacks that reportedly kill women and children as collateral damage have fallen on deaf ears of the Americans. Pakistani argument that drone attacks infringe on territorial integrity and sovereignty has lost ground to the US perception of security threat from the al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Besides former Chairman of Joint Chief's parting remarks on the unreliability of Pakistan as a partner on the US' war against Islamic extremists reminds one of the assessment of Leon Haader of the Cato institute who had Bush Junior's administration to view Pakistan, with its dictatorship, failed economy, and insecure nuclear arsenal "as a reluctant supporter of US goals at best and as a potential long term problem at worst". He did not see then President Musharraf's decision to join the US on its war on terror as reflecting a structural transformation in Pakistan's policy but a tactical move to cut losses resulting from the demolition of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

This weakness of Pakistan to have total solidarity with the US is dictated by domestic compulsions. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan is a formidable terrorist organization. So are Lashkar-e-Jangvi and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan. Shia-Sunni strife in Pakistan is strongly intertwined with that in Afghanistan. Though now deposed, the anti-Shia Afghan Taliban regime helped anti-Shia Pakistani groups and vice versa. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, sent thousands of volunteers to fight with the Taliban regime and "in return the Taliban gave sanctuary to their leaders in the Afghan capital of Kabul." It is estimated that over 80,000 Pakistani Islamic militants trained and fought with Taliban since 1994. They form a hardcore of Islamic activists ever ready to carry out a similar Taliban-style Islamic revolution in Pakistan.

It is possible that though President Asif Zardari is a Shia as was the butcher of Bengalis General Yahya Khan among others, the majority of Pakistanis being Sunni and some of their leaders in the wake of the Qadianis being declared non-Muslims had demanded that Shias as well should be declared non-Muslims, that Pakistani leaders may find it to their advantage in not containing anti-Shia rampage. General Zia-ul-Huq's Islamization of the Pakistani society was effectively "Sharatization" in which the Shias became victims due to convergence of the state rule with the sentiment of the majority and the mullahs. Zia-ul-Huq, it is reported, had hanged Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto on the questionable charge of Islamic fundamentalism when the General himself proved to be a fundamentalist himself.

A Pakistani analyst has commented on the changing nature of sectarian violence from "a reactive response to objectionable utterances or actions of rival sect to a proactive and premeditated activity, incorporating shades of battles for turf. Earlier weapons were sticks, glass bottles and knives; now the unrestricted use of grenades and bombs" (The Frontier Post-Nov 27 2012). Politicization also sustained sectarian intolerance. Sectarian parties have entered the arena of politics; clerics contest elections on sectarian rather than Islamic basis. Sectarian intolerance is now the springboard for political dividend. Even mainstream political parties like to have electoral adjustment with

sectarian clerics-turned politicians. The conflict between sectarian groups is not merely ideological; often it is impelled by the desire to obtain political power”.

Can continuing incidents of sectarian violence contribute to the centrifugal forces threatening the unity of Pakistan as a state? Bruce Riedel, a South Asian expert and ex-chair of President Obama’s AfPak study group, describes Pakistan as “a complex and combustible society undergoing a severe crisis. America helped create that crisis over a long period of time. If we don’t help Pakistan now, we may have to deal with a jihadist Pakistan later.”

As mentioned earlier TTP has become a potent force of destabilization. The death of Baitullah Meshud by US drone attack from across the border and the taking over the leadership by Hakimullah Meshud had demonstrated the consolidation of TTP fighting force that was thought to be in disarray after the onslaught by the Pakistan army in Swat and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Though the selection of Hakimullah Meshud momentarily stopped the tide of factionalism in TTP the very fact that his rival was been made the Taliban chief in South Waziristan displayed factionalism in the movement because South Waziristan is reportedly the center of TTP’s strength……. “This does not mean that the jihadists no longer constitute a threat. They are and will remain a significant threat in the foreseeable future” (Kamran Bokhari & Fred Burton-The counterinsurgency in Pakistan-August 2009-Stratfor Global Intelligence).

In June (2009) Selig Harrison of Center for International Policy raised the question: WILL PAKISTAN BREAK UP? In answering this question Harrison quoted an Indian official who had worked with Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, that as early as March 1945 Winston Churchill and British General Staff were promised by Mohammed Ali Jinnah military facilities that was refused by Pandit Nehru. As a reward they deliberately set out to create Pakistan. This version contradicts former Indian Minister Jaswant Singh’s assertion that Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel were primarily responsible for the partition. Harrison argues that from the beginning Pakistan being an artificial entity that put together different ethnic groups was bound to be dysfunctional.

The independence of Bangladesh is a testimony to the artificiality of the creation of Pakistan because religion alone cannot be the binding force of nationalism. Had that been so then so many Arab countries with same religion and same language would not have existed nor would so many Western countries professing Christianity. If religion cannot be the binding force then what can?

It has been found that inequity can be a forceful contributor to disintegration. A case in point is the simmering discontent in Baluchistan of alleged repression and taking away their natural gas out of Baluchistan to other provinces paying less royalty. But then the Baluch rebellion against Pakistan is more political and embedded in history than sectarian conflict.

In the case of Pakistan sectarian conflicts were the inevitable product of “Islamization process of the Pakistan society, in particular the of the tribal areas during the regime of General Zia-ul- Huq who saw Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as an Indo-Soviet plot to destroy Pakistan and hence his determination to form a force to defeat this“plan”. In the process General Zia encouraged in the army devotion to Islamic ideals

and practices and was blind to the growing religious extremism in Pakistani society. This policy was followed by General Musharraf who saw his interest in dominating Afghanistan and fighting India being served by the religious extremists both in the armed forces and outside.

South Asian expert Stephen Cohen writes (in his book THE IDEA OF PAKISTAN) that the Taliban, basically Sunnis, grew out of a generation of leaders who had received their education in Pakistan's religious schools in NWFP and Baluchistan who sought to gain power in Afghanistan and then purify it of contaminating elements. Their success was due in part to support received from Pakistani intelligence and various Pakistani military groups, especially JUI.

Unfortunately for Pakistan the Taliban began to see Pakistan itself as a ripe fruit to be plucked. The defeat of the Taliban at the hands of the Western powers had a blowback effect on Pakistan in the form of sectarian violence, appearance of drug culture, easy availability of guns and general social breakdown that came with a big cost to the socio-political structure of the country. Bruce Riedel paints a black picture that the terrorists may be able to tap into the deep anger of the landless peasants in the India--bordering provinces of Punjab and Sindh where the extremists already have considerable support to mobilize a mass movement similar in some respect to the one that toppled the Shah of Iran. His thesis is supported by reports that anti-landlord agitation partly contributed to the Islamist's victory in Swat.

Will sectarian conflicts remain a permanent feature of the Islamic world or can the viciousness of the conflicts reduce with economic development and literacy among the people? Will democracy help in the expression of the voice of the religious and other minorities that will lead to lessening tension between the majority and the minority communities and make the majority community more accountable for their actions and accommodative in their attitude? These and some more will be questions for the international community to grapple with. In the short term possibility of Pakistan coming out of religious extremism and sectarian conflicts appear to be bleak.

Pakistan is expected to hold on to the rationale of its creation-a land for the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent. This unflinching attachment to Islam as the governing principle of the state will not abate and in course of time will attract Islamic radicals to grab state power. Should that happen then al-Qaeda and Taliban may possess nuclear weapons with disastrous consequences for the international community. The moderates of the world should beware that such a possibility never comes to pass.

The writer is a former Secretary and Ambassador of Bangladesh.

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