
PAKISTAN: ISLAMIC STATE, ETHNIC POLITY

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Religion and Ethnicity: The Theoretical Challenge

Religious revivalism and the resurgence of ethnic politics in recent years constitute perhaps the most serious challenge to Western notions of modernization and to a world order based on a nation-state system. Unwelcome intruders into the world scene, religious and ethnic activists have caused tension in international relations at a time when the world appears to be on the threshold of peace and new heights of cooperation and harmony. They challenge not only the international order, but the dominant theoretical perspective of social sciences.

Since the second world war, the social sciences have viewed modernizing change, culminating in some form of democratic capitalism within the structure of existing nation-states, as an immutable process that involves a degree of political and social secularization and a dissipation of such ascriptions as ethnic identity. While the fall of the Soviet Union and the proliferation of democratic regimes across the world may have heralded the victory of the modernization thesis at one level, the resurgence of religious and ethnic loyalties have defied its writ at another. Wide-scale democratization may support the "end of history" thesis,¹ but the rise of religious and ethnic politics contradicts it. The explosion of religiously inspired political activism in the Muslim world, along with the vociferous reassertion of ethnicity's claim to politics from Croatia to the Punjab, tends to overshadow democratization as the dominant theme in world politics and somewhat tempers euphoria over a conflict-free global order.

Religion or ethnicity often are examined in the context of their challenges to established state structures or modernizing regimes. It is usually assumed that one or the other emerges to engage the established order in direct confrontation. However, religion and ethnicity can, and often do, emerge simultaneously. Their goals may be conterminous or competing. In either case, their concurrent activism introduces a more complex picture while presenting the established

1. The reference here is to the term coined by Francis Fukuyama in "The End of History?" *The National Interest* Vol. 16 (Summer 1989): 3-4.

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order a more intractable predicament. Religious revival and/or ethnic loyalties may be checked or constricted by the other. But their competition may cause greater social conflict, shake the foundations of civil society, and challenge the political order. The dual threat of religion or ethnicity might bring greater pressure against existing state structures and apparatuses than a singular challenge of these loyalties.

Conversely, the simultaneous resurgence of religion and ethnicity could lead to an interaction which may result in more indomitable expressions of religious or ethnic zeal. Interaction also could cast religion and/or ethnicity in roles not in keeping with general expectations. For instance, ethnic forces may coopt religion, producing more potent expressions of ethnicity. That was the case in Muslim politics at the time of the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan. It is again evident in Kashmir where Islam has been incorporated to give currency to the more compelling ethnic notion of *Kashmiriat* ("Kashmiriness").² Otherwise, ethnic conflict could compel religion to bolster existing state structures, which could in turn reduce religion's political appeal as an opposition force.

Both of these scenarios can be examined in Pakistan, a state created in the name of religion, but torn by ethnic tensions. As such, Pakistan serves as a useful case study for better understanding of the dynamics between the forces of religion and ethnicity.

Islam and Ethnicity in Pakistan's History

The creation of Pakistan was the culmination of the Muslim communalist struggle in India between the two world wars when British power was declining. Hesitant to submit to Hindu domination, Muslims raised the banner of separatism. Their communalist rhetoric unfolded in the guise of ethnicity. Muslims claimed to be separate from their Hindu brethren, a people with a language, culture, and customs that, putatively, set them apart. India had no uniform identity, proclaimed the separatists. Rather, India consisted of two "nations."³ Nowhere was the ethnic dimension of Muslim communalism more evident than in the persona of its champion, Mohammad Ali Jinnah (d.1948). A secular man, Jinnah abandoned Indian nationalism to become the chief spokesman of Muslim communalism, a proof of the ethnic rather than religious intent of the separatist cause.⁴ In a similar vein, the most prominent of India's *ulama* (religious leaders), notably in the Jami'at-i Ulama-i Hind (Party of Indian *ulama*),

2. On this issue see, Ashutosh Varshney, "India, Pakistan, and Kashmir: Antinomies of Nationalism," *Asian Survey* Vol. 31, No. 1 (November 1991): 997-1007.

3. On the politics of the partition see, Ayesha Jalal *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and Farzana Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India, 1860-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

4. On Jinnah see, Stanley Wolpert, *Jinnah of Pakistan* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1984).

supported the national Congress Party's notion of a united India and refused to join the struggle for Pakistan. Their position further underlined the ethnic rather than religious nature of the separatist cause.⁵

Once Pakistan was created the tables were turned. Religion was no longer paraded as ethnicity but was charged with the task of containing it. Muslim separatism had been popular in the Indian provinces of Bihar, Hyderabad, and the United Provinces where the Muslim minority most feared Hindu domination. Pakistan, however, was created in the Muslim majority provinces of North Western India—Punjab, North-West Frontier, Sind, Baluchistan, Western Kashmir—and East Bengal. While these provinces were predominantly Muslim, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural distinctions set them apart from each other, and from the Muslim populations of the Muslim minority provinces. The language of the Muslim minority provinces was Urdu, which had very little following in Sind, Bengal, Baluchistan, or even initially in Punjab. Hence, language immediately distinguished Muslims from Bihar, Hyderabad, or the United Provinces from those in Sind, Baluchistan, or Bengal. Neither the Sindhis, Punjabis, Bengalis, nor Biharis and Hyderabadis followed the same customs and mores. They shared more with their Hindu neighbors than with the Muslims of other provinces.

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Yet, as religion dominated the struggle for independence in India, Muslims from disparate ethnic backgrounds, following different cultures, and conversant in different languages, were thrown together. Millions migrated from the Muslim minority provinces to the two wings of Pakistan, settling among people who were their religious brethren, but who were not as enthusiastic about Pakistan as the newcomers. The native population did not share the migrants' language and culture, nor those of the new state's other provinces for that matter. This problem was evident at the highest levels of government. The bulk of the leadership in Pakistan's ruling party, the Muslim League, was born and raised in provinces that had remained Indian, and hence the leaders had no political base in their new country. The newcomers' political domination was seen in measures such as declaring Urdu the national language, which raised

5. On this issue see, Yohanan Friedmann, "The Attitude of Jamiyyat-i 'Ulama-i Hind to the Indian National Movement and the Establishment of Pakistan," in *The 'Ulama in Modern History*, Gabriel Baer, ed. (Jerusalem: African and Asian Studies, Israeli Oriental Society, VII, 1971), 157-83; and Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, *Ulema in Politics: A Study Relating to the Political Activities of the Ulema in South Asian Subcontinent from 566-1947* (Karachi: Ma'aref, 1972).

the ire of the "sons of soil" as well as precipitated ethnic tensions.

Given these problems, Islam was mobilized, this time as a religious force to override the differences between the "sons of soil" and the migrants (*Muhajirs*) and between the provinces and the country's leadership.⁶ Islam became the main legitimating force in Pakistan's politics, underlying the viability of the federal unit. Since then, Pakistani leaders have had to turn to Islam, at times reluctantly, to bolster state authority.⁷ For instance, the secularist Pakistani leaders, Iskandar Mirza, Muhammad Ayub Khan, Muhammad Yahya Khan, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who ruled the country between 1956 and 1977, begrudgingly paid lip-service to Islam and manipulated its symbols to their benefit.⁸ The more war or internal conflict challenged the state, the more Islam was mobilized to sustain government.⁹

Islam, however, was not allowed a free reign, a policy which impeded its ability to legitimate the state. The aforementioned rulers' secularization policies which went beyond their nodding acquaintance with Islam, weakened the state's Islamic basis. This opened the door for the resurgence of ethnic politics that culminated in the secession of East Pakistan.

From Islamic Ethnic Consciousness to Islam v. Ethnicity

By appealing to Islam, Pakistan's leaders sanctioned the entry of religious parties into the fray.¹⁰ Islamic revivalism grew in prominence in Pakistan from 1948 on, defying the country's founders' secularist intentions. In a state faced with a serious legitimacy crisis, threat of war with India, and no national culture to bind its disparate units together, Islam was the only means capable of fostering national unity.¹¹ The impact of Islamic parties and their allies among the *ulama* was apparent in the constitutional debates of 1947-1956, and in the country's first constitution, promulgated in 1956. The need to contain ethnic consciousness and to bolster a state, itself created on the basis of an Islamic ethnic identity, placed Islam at the center of national politics and ultimately produced Islamic revivalism.

Meanwhile, ethnic tensions festered and ethnic consciousness grew in strength. Pakistan's leadership and those who had migrated from India were viewed as *Muhajirs*, an appellation that cast their rapport with their Punjabi

6. Hamza Alavi, "Ethnicity, Muslim Society and the Pakistan Ideology," in *Islamic Reassertion in Pakistan*, Anita M. Weiss, ed. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 21-48.

7. See Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

8. Freeland Abbott, *Islam and Pakistan* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968), 193.

9. Lawrence Ziring, "From Islamic Republic to Islamic State in Pakistan," *Asian Survey* Vol. 24, No. 9 (September 1984): 931-46.

10. Leonard Binder, *Religion and Politics in Pakistan* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1961) and John L. Esposito, "Islam: Ideology and Politics in Pakistan," in *The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics: Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan*, Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner, eds. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 333-70.

11. Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 92.

hosts in ethnic tones. Punjabis dominated the military and an important part of the bureaucracy,¹² a reality other Pakistani ethnic groups resented. As the Punjabi elite began to shed the cloak of Islamic solidarity, these resentments grew, giving rise to ethnic tension. A Muhajir-Punjabi alliance, which had facilitated a working arrangement between the army, the bureaucracy, and the center's political elite, began to crumble, and this precipitated a crisis.

The first to react were the Bengalis—or East Pakistanis as they were known. Numerically larger East Pakistan objected to West Pakistan, or more specifically to Punjabi, domination of the affairs of the state. More Pakistanis spoke Bengali than Urdu, which was promoted by the Muhajirs and Punjabi elite who made Urdu the official language. East Pakistanis also protested the inequitable distribution of resources between East and West Pakistan. They decried the practice of using East Pakistan's income to subsidize the development of West Pakistan in general, and Punjab in particular.

The Bhutto years aggravated ethnic tensions in Pakistan, eroded state stability, and anchored national politics in ethnic demands. The ascendance of ethnic politics, in turn, mobilized the Muhajirs and the Punjabis, who, wary of rising ethnic tensions, were eager to steer national politics away from ethnic concerns.

Unfortunately, Pakistan's leadership sought to mollify the Bengali opposition, not by redressing the disparities, but by harping on the rhetoric of Islamic solidarity. As a result, East Pakistanis increasingly lost faith in Pakistan and the promise of Islam and instead resorted to ethnic politics to protect their interests. The result was an escalation of tensions between East Pakistan and the country's leadership, which culminated in a bloody civil war in 1970-1971. The war led to Indian intervention, a humiliating military defeat for Pakistan, and the province's secession to create Bangladesh.

The debacle over East Pakistan attests to ethnic politics' ascendancy and Islam's limits to stem that tide. The challenge to the state, however, made Islam even more central to policy, making Bhutto and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) present their populist agenda under the rubric of "Islamic socialism." Similarly, when Baluchistan pushed for autonomy in the 1970s, the central government, led by the secularist Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was compelled to appeal to Islamic symbols.

Throughout his campaign for power between 1969 and 1971, Bhutto had

12. Leonard Binder, "Islam, Ethnicity, and the State in Pakistan," in *The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics*, Banuazizi and Weiner, eds., 259-66.

promised greater power to the strategically important Sind province. The Sindhis felt that they had lost control of their province to the Muhajirs (who now predominated in Sind's urban centers, notably, Karachi). Bhutto's six year rule (1971-1977) went a long way toward delivering those promises.¹³ The Sindhis were given coveted bureaucratic positions through elaborate quota systems as well as a greater say in provincial affairs. Bhutto even tried to force the Punjabi and the Muhajir bureaucratic elite of the province to learn Sindhi under the threat of losing their positions. A symbol of the prime minister's policy was that Sind was spared implementation of his much vaunted land reform measures.

Not unexpectedly, Sind's special treatment caused resentment among Pakistan's other ethnic communities. The Muhajirs in particular, objected vociferously to the prime minister's Sind policy. Soon the province was embroiled in riots, pitting Muhajirs against Sindhis. The conflict greatly weakened the Bhutto government, and led to an anti-government alliance, the *Nizam-i Mustafa* (Order of the Prophet), which eventually helped topple Bhutto.

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The new ruling establishment appealed to Islamic solidarity to obfuscate soaring ethnic tensions and to bring stability to Pakistan. The leaders also aimed at downplaying Punjabi domination of the state under the aegis of the military by harping on Islamic themes. As useful as this approach may have been in the short run, it was unlikely to prove viable in the long run. Zia had been aware that the appeal of Islamization to the Muhajirs, the Punjabis, and a host of other Pakistani ethnic groups, was unlikely to assuage the Sindhis, who had lost out with Bhutto's fall. Given the strategic importance of Sind, Zia could not remain oblivious to their unrest. Hence, he sought to placate the Sindhis at the provincial level while appealing to Islam at the national level. The government initiated a campaign of Islamizing society and politics. Ostensibly these policies acceded to the bidding of the forces that overthrew Bhutto, but Zia refused to bow to the Muhajirs' principle demand to rescind the quota systems introduced to Sind by the PPP. The general also did not arrest worsening social conditions in Karachi, which had reduced many Muhajir neighborhoods to squalor and created a volatile situation in the city.¹⁴ Zia hoped to use Islam rather than

13. On the Bhutto period see, Shahid Javed Burki, *Pakistan Under Bhutto 1971-1977* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

14. Akmal Hussain, "The Karachi Riots of 1986: Crisis of State and Civil Society in Pakistan," in

concrete action to quiet the Muhajirs' demands while he rewarded the Sindhis' cooperation.

Zia's two-tier strategy failed in the end. Rather than silencing ethnic tensions, he fanned them. The Sindhis may have come to accept the new order, but the Muhajirs' found equal if not more reason to oppose it. By 1985 it had become clear that the Muhajir community had grown distant from the Zia regime. In Karachi, the Islamic parties associated with Zia were routed in the 1985 elections. As a case in point, the Jama'at-i Islami (the Islamic Party), which had controlled the city's municipal and administrative bodies since 1979, fell from power. The Muhajirs were bitter about the government's pro-Sindhi policies and registered their dissent against the rule of the Punjabi dominated military. They began to object to the Punjabi and Pathan intrusion into the urban areas of Sind.¹⁵ Those two communities were closely associated with the Zia regime, and had benefited from government patronage, especially during the government-sponsored Afghan war. The Pathans in particular had used their networks in the North-West Frontier and Karachi to enrich themselves through trade in contraband and narcotics brought to Karachi for export from Afghanistan. The Muhajirs greatly resented these activities, especially the financial returns the Pathans accrued with the blessing of the Zia administration. Muhajir anger eventually erupted in the form of anti-Pathan riots in 1986.¹⁶

More importantly, the Muhajirs began to express reservations over their support for Islam and Pakistan. The Pakistani community with the most vested interest in the power and appeal of Islamic solidarity was now questioning its policies to date. Zia, meanwhile, sought to ride the tide of Muhajir frustration, hoping that the community's anti-Sindhi bent would overshadow its anti-Punjabi/Pathan rhetoric. This, he hoped, would restrict the PPP's activities in Sind, a job initially left to Islamic parties. After the 1985 elections it was obvious the Islamic parties would not be able to perform. Hence, Zia paved the way for the Muhajirs' rise to power in Sind. The champion of Islamization sought to prolong his rule by playing the ethnic card.¹⁷

One can hardly gloss over the irony of this shift in strategy. Zia's dexterous

Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia, Veena Das, ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 185-93.

15. Tensions between the Muhajirs and the Pathans could be traced to the 1965 presidential elections when Ayub Khan, himself a Pathan, defeated Fatimah Jinnah, who had Muhajir support. The elections were deemed unfair by a wide range of Pakistanis, especially in the Muhajir community. Moreover, when, after the elections, Ayub Khan openly aided the fledgling Pathan community of Karachi, he further angered the Muhajirs.

16. The clashes between the two communities began after a traffic accident that involved a Pathan driver and resulted in Muhajir casualties. Financial pressures on Pathan minibus drivers created tensions between them and their Muhajir passengers, who resented overcrowding in the buses as well as the drivers' dangerous attempts to complete their routes quickly. Driving accidents, therefore, quickly precipitated ethnic tensions. The initial clashes in early 1985 culminated in mayhem in 1985-1986 when police raided a Pathan township known to have been a heroin depot. Pathans reacted by attacking Muhajir neighborhoods, creating a cycle of violence in which clashes have escalated into open and bloody conflict. See Farida Shaheed, "The Pathan-Muhajir Conflict, 1985-6: A National Perspective," in *Mirrors of Violence*, 194-214.

17. *Takbir* (Karachi magazine), 7 July 1988, 12-13.

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The ramifications of these developments were no doubt momentous. Islam had been allied with the military regime and used to assert the authority of the Punjabis and to protect the interests of the Sindhis. The loyalty of the Muhajirs had been taken for granted. The Muhajirs were in turn disheartened with the alliance with Punjab and the promise of Islamic solidarity, and now looked to ethnic politics, which had proved a fruitful strategy for the Sindhis.¹⁸

Muhajir ethnic consciousness found expression first in 1986 in student activism but soon consolidated into a party, *Muhajir Qaumi Mahaz* (Muhajir National Movement, MQM). Soon after its appearance, MQM swept into power in the urban centers of Sind, taking over the mayoralty of Karachi and Hyderabad in 1988. Then, MQM set out to strip the Punjabi and the Pathan communities in Sind of their power, and to roll-back the gains made by the Sindhis under Bhutto and Zia. This led to confrontation and the province became the scene of violence and armed conflict.¹⁹

With its power on the rise, MQM became a national power broker, especially after democracy returned to Pakistan. The party won a large share of Sind's seats in the national and provincial assemblies in both the 1988 and the 1990 elections. Its legislative power has made MQM support vital to the formation of a stable national government, and a viable provincial one in Sind. This turn of events has given MQM a lever with which to further Muhajir demands at the center as well as in Sind. The party has, as a result, enjoyed greater influence with both the PPP government of 1988-1990 and the *Islami Jomhuri Ittihad* (Islamic Democratic Alliance, IJI) government which has been in power since 1990. MQM's leader, Altaf Husain, negotiated with Benazir Bhutto in 1988 and received assurances of favorable action on the Muhajir's demands from the PPP leader before the MQM supported her bid to form a government.²⁰ Then in 1989,

18. Charles H. Kennedy, "The Politics of Ethnicity in Sind," *Asian Survey* Vol. 31, No. 10 (October 1991): 938-55.

19. See *Newsline* (Karachi magazine), November 1991, for a detailed study of the law and order situation.

MQM changed alliances, joining IJI in exchange for the promise of better returns for its support. Interestingly, the PPP-MQM pact, which was formalized immediately after the fall of the Zia regime, was anti-Punjabi/Pathan, while the IJI-MQM alliance was anti-Sindhi.

MQM's ascendancy has precipitated greater conflict, turning Karachi and greater Sind into war zones.²¹ The party's success in galvanizing the Muhajirs into an effective political force has underlined the efficacy of ethnic politics and led to greater expression of ethnic consciousness across the country. Ironically, this is most evident in MQM itself. Since 1990, the party has been subject to internal tensions born of further ethnic divisions. Elements in the Muhajir community have objected to the dominant position of the Biharis in the party. Ethnic politics now divides the Muhajir community itself. Another source of tension arose with MQM's decision to become a national party, leading a group of MQM activists to threaten resignation.²² They argued that the party should protect Muhajir interests rather than act as a national force. While aims toward national power exist within ethnic politics, forces have emerged to thwart any efforts at diluting ethnic consciousness as a means of realizing power at the national level.

The resurgence of ethnic politics has not augured well for Pakistan.²³ The country has become immersed in debilitating conflicts that have left scores dead, damaged the local economy, and turned Sind into a battlefield. As a result, much capital has left that province for Punjab, accentuating the discrepancies between Punjab and the rest of the country that often underlie Sindhi or Muhajir complaints.

Conclusion

The case of Pakistan presents a dynamic and changing picture of ethnic politics, shaped in interaction with Islamic forces. The interplay between Islam and ethnicity has altered the structure of the national political discourse and the position of the state vis-a-vis society. Built on the basis of a confluence of Islam and ethnicity, the state is besieged by a stand-off between the two.

The specter of debilitating ethnic tension led initially to the invocation of Islam in order to bolster the state's position, leaving the politics of the masses to ethnic forces by default. Now those forces have occluded Islam, marginalizing its relevance in the national political discourse. Although Islam continues to play a pivotal role in Pakistan, its prominence is far less than that associated with Islamic revivalism elsewhere. The interaction between Islam and ethnicity first produced an Islamic ethnic approach to justify and sustain Pakistan.

20. *Herald* (Karachi), December 1989, 32-41.

21. Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, "Students, Islam, and Politics: Islami Jami'at-i Tulaba in Pakistan," *The Middle East Journal* Vol. 46, No. 1 (Winter 1992): 74-75.

22. *Takbir*, 3 October 1991, 9-10.

23. Hamza Alavi, "Nationhood and Communal Violence in Pakistan," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* Vol. 21, No. 2 (1991): 152-77.

Although ethnic tension served as the midwife of Islamization of political discourse, it was by no means overshadowed by Islam and its promise of national solidarity. By using Islam to justify martial rule and to manage ethnic relations, Zia pushed the political efficacy of Islam to its limits, weakening religion as a legitimizing factor when ethnic forces were rising. The result has been a crisis of government that weakens the Pakistani state and threatens the success of democratization.



