

ROOTS OF EXTREMISM IN PAKISTAN

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The common belief in Pakistan is that Islamic radicalism is a problem only in FATA, and that madrassas are the only jihad factories around. This is seriously wrong. Extremism is breeding at a ferocious rate in public and private schools within Pakistan's towns and cities. Left unchallenged, this education will produce a generation incapable of living together with any except strictly their own kind. The mindset it produces may eventually lead to Pakistan's demise as a nation state.

For twenty years or more, a few of us have been desperately sending out SOS messages, warning of terrible times to come. Nevertheless I, for one, am surprised by how quickly these dire predictions have come true. Even as the flames of terrorism enveloped Mumbai and captured world attention, on the scale of things, that too was a relatively small matter. A full-scale war is being fought in FATA, Swat, and other "wild" areas of Pakistan with thousands of deaths. It is only a matter of time before this fighting migrates to the Peshawar and Islamabad (which has already seen Lal Masjid), and then onwards to Lahore and Karachi. The suicide bomber and the masked abductor have crippled Pakistan's urban life and shattered its national economy.

Soldiers, policemen, factory and hospital workers, mourners at funerals, and ordinary people praying in mosques have been reduced to globs of flesh and fragments of bones. But, perhaps paradoxically, in spite of the fact that the dead bodies and shattered lives are almost all Muslim ones, few Pakistanis speak out against these atrocities. Nor do they approve of military action against the cruel perpetrators, choosing to believe that they are fighting for Islam and against American occupation. Some of the political leaders in Pakistan have no words of kindness for those who have suffered from Islamic extremists. Their tears are reserved for the victims of Predator drones, whether innocent or otherwise. By definition, terrorism is an act that only Americans can commit.

What explains Pakistan's collective masochism? To understand, one needs to study the drastic social and cultural transformations that have made this country so utterly different from what it was in earlier times.

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For three decades, deep tectonic forces have been silently tearing Pakistan away from the Indian subcontinent and driving it towards the Arabian peninsula. This continental drift is not physical but cultural, driven by a belief that Pakistan must exchange its South Asian identity for an Arab-Muslim one. Grain by grain, the desert sands of Saudi Arabia are replacing the rich soil that had nurtured a rich Muslim culture in India for a thousand years. This culture produced Moghul architecture, the Taj Mahal, the poetry of Asadullah Ghalib, and much more. Now a stern, unyielding version of Islam — Wahabism — is replacing the kinder, gentler Islam of the sufis and saints who had walked on this land for hundreds of years.

This change is by design. Twenty five years ago the Pakistani state pushed Islam on to its people. Prayers in government departments were deemed compulsory, floggings were carried out publicly, punishments were meted out to those who did not fast in Ramadan, selection for university academic posts required that the candidate demonstrate knowledge of Islamic teachings, and jihad was declared essential for every Muslim. Today government intervention is no longer needed because of a spontaneous groundswell of Islamic zeal. The notion of an Islamic state — as yet in some amorphous and diffuse form — is more popular today than ever before as people look desperately for miracles to rescue a failing state.

Villages have changed drastically, driven in part by Pakistani workers returning from Arab countries. Many village mosques are now giant madrassas that propagate hard-line Salafi and Deobandi beliefs through over-sized loudspeakers. They are bitterly opposed to Barelvis, Shias, and other Muslims who they do not consider to be Muslims. Punjabis, who were far more liberal towards women than Pukhtuns, are now beginning to take a line resembling the Taliban. Hanafi law has begun to prevail over tradition and civil law, as is evident from recent decisions in the Lahore High Court.

In the Pakistani lower-middle and middle-middle classes lurks a grim and humorless Saudi-inspired revivalist movement that frowns on every expression of joy and pleasurable pastime. Lacking any positive connection to culture and knowledge, it seeks to eliminate “corruption” by regulating cultural life and seizing the control of the education system.

“Classical music is on its last legs in Pakistan; the *Sarangi* and *Vichitarveena* are completely dead”, laments Mohammad Shehzad, a music aficionado. Indeed, teaching music in public universities is violently opposed by students of the *Islami Jamaat-e-Talaba* at Punjab University. Religious

fundamentalists consider music *haram*. *Kathak* dancing, once popular with the Muslim elite of India, has no teachers left. Pakistan produces no feature films of any consequence. Nevertheless, Pakistani elites, disconnected with the rest of the population, comfortably live their lives through vicarious proximity to the West. Alcoholism is a leading problem for the super-rich of Lahore, a curious irony for this deeply religious country.

Islamization of the state and polity was supposed to have been in the interests of the ruling class, a classic strategy for preserving it from the wrath of the working class. But the amazing success of the state is turning out to be its own undoing. Today it is under attack from religious militants, and rival Islamic groups battle each other with heavy weapons. Ironically the same army – whose men were recruited under the banner of jihad, and which saw itself as the fighting arm of Islam – today stands accused of betrayal, and is almost daily targeted by Islamist suicide bombers.

Pakistan's self-inflicted suffering comes from an education system that, like Saudi Arabia's system, provides an ideological foundation for violence and future jihadists. It demands that Islam be understood as a complete code of life, and creates in the mind of the schoolchild a sense of siege and embattlement by stressing that Islam is under threat everywhere.

The government approved curriculum in my view, is the basic road-map for transmitting values and knowledge to the young. By an act of Parliament passed in 1976, all government and private schools (except for O-level schools) are required to follow this curriculum. It was prepared by the Curriculum Wing of the Federal Ministry. The mast head states that it has been prepared by Iqra Publishers, Rawalpindi along "Islamic lines". Although not an officially approved textbook, it is being used currently (2008) by some regular schools, as well as madrassas, associated with the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), an Islamic political party that had allied itself with General Musharraf.

The world of the Pakistani schoolchild was largely unchanged even after September 11, 2001 which led to Pakistan's timely desertion of the Taliban and the slackening of the Kashmir jihad. Indeed, for all his hypocritical talk of "enlightened moderation", General Musharraf's educational curriculum was far from enlightening. It was a slightly toned down copy of that under Nawaz Sharif which, in turn, was identical to that under Benazir Bhutto who had inherited it from General Zia-ul-Haq. Fearful of taking on powerful religious forces, every incumbent government has refused to take a position on the curriculum and thus quietly allowed young minds to be molded by