

# Pakistan and Islam Sixty Years Further On<sup>1</sup>

THOMAS W. SIMONS JR.

U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan (1996–98)

Visiting Scholar

Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies

Lecturer in Government

Harvard University

PAKISTAN was founded in 1947 as a refuge for Muslims, carved out of British India when it received its independence from Britain. There are many states in the world with Muslim majorities, but Pakistan was the first state intentionally created as one. It did not emerge organically from some long historical process; instead, it came into being as a result of political decision. Because of this element of intentionality, Pakistan has been condemned to define its version of relations between religion and politics, between Islam and the Pakistani state, through political struggle.

We read about the contemporary phase of that struggle in our newspapers almost every day. One morning brings news of yet another negotiation between Pakistani officials and tribal and Taliban leaders in the country's Wild West; the next morning we hear the army has recaptured Swat and is gearing up for Waziristan. The outcomes are important for U.S. national security. In a world where few Muslims are terrorists but most terrorists are self-consciously Muslim, Pakistan is both a producer of terrorists and an important ally in the global fight against them. We are therefore engaged in its dilemmas, and it may be useful to give a brief account of their evolution over time.

Church-state relations are complicated everywhere, including this country. But in Muslim-majority countries they are complicated for reasons that are specific to Islamic traditions, and Pakistan has its full share. Religious authority in Islam is highly dispersed; there is no pope, no *magisterium*. Instead, religious authority is provided by scrums of

---

<sup>1</sup>Read 25 April 2008.

scholars who seek consensus views through continuous debate with each other, views that can only be partial, never definitive. It is such scholars who must legitimize political authority, and they do so by defining legitimacy in terms of how rulers treat *them*, their mosques, their schools, and other aspects of public worship.

This accent on public worship means that Muslims often care more about *orthopraxy*—correct public behavior defined as Islamic—than they do about *orthodoxy*—correct belief. There is no Inquisition, but whole populations can mobilize over headscarves or cartoons depicting the Prophet.

Finally, there is a utopian strand in Islamic discourse that longs for a return to the time when there was in fact no distinction between religion and politics for Muslims. This was the time of the Prophet and the Four Righteous Caliphs who succeeded him, down through his son-in-law ‘Ali, who was murdered in 661 of the Common Era. Ever since the civil wars that followed ‘Ali’s death, political authority over Muslims has been religiously contested, has required outside religious legitimation. But ever since, there have also been Muslims who insist that this early unity of religious and political authority is the Islamic *norm*. Authentic but usually marginal, this strand of discourse has moved into the Islamic mainstream only in the past half century or so, drawn there by the bitter disappointments that followed decolonization. But of course that half century or so is all of Pakistan’s history.

Pakistan itself also has special features that make it especially hard for Pakistanis to sort out their religion and their politics. The Muslims of British India who became the population of Pakistan were overwhelmingly rural and illiterate, and most of them practiced an Islam centered on shrines and tombs of saints kept by holy men and their lineages: their Islam was ecstatic, populist, and eclectic. The literate, legalistic Islam of the scholars that we are more familiar with from the Middle East was confined to India’s cities, which were relatively few. Scholars from India’s ‘ulema had tried for centuries to discipline and purify the inadequate Muslim rulers they lived with and the inadequate Muslim peasants who surrounded them. Under late nineteenth-century British rule, this urge to purify then produced every new movement in Indian Islam: the simplifying rigorism called Deobandi, the more benign eclecticism called Barelvi (both named for scholarly centers in central India’s United Provinces, now Uttar Pradesh), and the Islamic modernism of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh (Muslim) University he founded, working earnestly to reconcile religious and scientific knowledge and practice. As British rule became problematic in the twentieth century, this urge to purify then produced Muslim nationalism and finally the Pakistan movement itself: the name “Pakistan” is an

acronym for Muslim-majority provinces—Punjab, Afghanistan, Kashmir, and the like—but it also means “the land of the Pure.” All these movements came from cities, however, and they all had to force their way through a heavy sea of comfortable and tolerant popular Islam that threatened to swallow them at every moment.

These Indian Muslim populations were also immensely diverse. Muslims were spread all across India, and they included poor and middling peasants and great landlords and Western-educated intellectuals who had very little in common. This meant that when Muslim nationalism arose in the 1920s and 1930s, there was no practical way to give it an ethnic or class basis; the only possible common denominator for its constituencies was Islam itself.

Yet there has never been agreement on what kind of Islam it should be. By the end of British rule in 1947, the Pakistan concept had indeed become a common denominator for many of India’s disparate kinds of Muslims, but neither then nor since has there been a stable consensus on what kind of institutions and what kind of Islam a nation for Indian Muslims should have and embody.

The actual process of becoming Pakistan then made it even harder to find such a consensus. The rending of India and its two largest Muslim-majority provinces into India and Pakistan took place in a bloodbath. Upward of fifteen million people fled both ways across the new borders, and perhaps a million were butchered as they did. It was a time when full trains pulled into Lahore and Amritsar stations with only the engineer alive. Ethnic cleansing still left India with half as many Muslims as Pakistan, but it made Pakistan itself 97 percent Muslim, and this had fateful consequences. Pakistan’s founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had assumed that each new state would have a substantial minority of the other state’s majority, perhaps twenty-five million Hindus in Pakistan and twenty-five million Muslims in India, which would force them both to negotiate a *modus vivendi* based on equal rights and individual citizenship under law. India today has such a minority, and it has remained that kind of secular state. But being 97 percent Muslim has saddled Pakistan with a communitarian concept of citizenship—to be a full citizen is to be a Muslim—and created a permanent license for Islamist overbidding in politics. The only restraints on headlong pursuit of the ideal in Pakistan’s real world must come from other Pakistani Muslims, who are then easily accused of being *bad* Muslims.

Nevertheless, such restraints have in fact been in force throughout Pakistan’s history. Pakistan’s rulers and its voters (when there are elections) have kept Islamists a pronounced minority in the body politic. But those restraints have come at a cost: for they have been applied by

Pakistan's civil and military elite, largely Western-educated, largely in charge of the post-colonial state it inherited from the British, and with very little incentive to reform it.

In the first generation, their rule was justified by the military threat from a hostile and substantially more powerful India, with which Pakistan fought three wars. But after 1971, when India won the third war and liberated Pakistan's eastern half as Bangladesh, Islamism came to the fore as a necessary second crutch for the crippled country. In the decade of political crisis that followed, politically mobilized Islamists often seemed to hold the balance of power. First Benazir's father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, tried to subordinate *all* the feckless old elites to a new populism whose loyalty would be exclusively to him. As the elites coalesced against him in response, he pandered outrageously to the Islamists, promising the sky and Shari'a rule just before the most powerful elite left standing, the army, arrested him in 1977. It hanged him in 1979 and then presided over a decade of authoritarian rule. His hangman, Zia ul-Haq, proceeded to implement Bhutto's Islamization promises and then went much further, both in terms of Islamic legislation and in terms of opening the elites, and especially the army, to Islamist forces and people. Both Bhutto and Zia, in other words, chose to ride the Islamist tiger hoping to control it. Zia succeeded, but again at a cost: it was the old unmodernized post-colonial state that was still in charge when he was blown up with a predecessor of mine in 1988. And with each round of Islamization this Pakistani state governs less well, loses traction and authority, becomes less capable of dealing with pre-modern and modern challenges alike.

Nor has that downward spiral been reversed over the two decades since Zia's death, either under his immediate civilian successors, Benazir Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Sharif, or under General Pervez Musharraf, who ousted Nawaz in 1999 and ran a military regime until it gave way again to formal democracy in 2008. The Pakistani state has remained more or less in charge; the Islamists have not taken over. The trouble is that Islamists are now *part of the state* in key national-security areas; and with their connivance the state has sacrificed authority to self-professed Islamists in area after area of public life. The dereliction is worst at the margins, in the mountain valleys of Waziristan and Swat; but it has extended to the cities, to Sunni and Shi'i hit squads and more recently to suicide bombers. In national politics, Musharraf stood up to Islamist crowds after he abandoned the Afghan Taliban following 9/11, promoting a moderate and tolerant Islam in language no Arab leader has ever used in public, and he won; it can be done. In 2002 he gambled by making Islamists his favorite political partners, and he won there, too, for they so discredited themselves where they

held power that the February 2008 election swept them from formal power everywhere.

Yet they are still there, eating away in Pakistan's nooks and crannies, in her tribal areas and city tenements. That is where the U.S. cares about them, too, since the Taliban and al-Qaeda find their safe havens in those tribal areas, and since it is among newly educated young men in the shabby cities that Islamists recruit their fighters. An editor I know did a survey of all the Pakistani terrorists he could identify, some thousands, and reported that every single one of them was at least a high-school graduate. In the mountains and now on the plains, the hardy sclerosis of Pakistan's premodern structures in state and society keeps their appeal alive and gives them allies within its elites, more and more fearful perhaps, but certainly myopic, from long successful practice in manipulating socially inferior troublemakers. And the threat could get worse, for a paradoxical reason.

For economic progress in Pakistan may breed Islamism on an altogether unprecedented scale. One reason Islamism has had relatively little political purchase in Pakistan so far is that there has been *so little* development. For Islamism is a product and a function of modernity, of development. And unlike Arab countries or Iran, Pakistan has *not* destroyed its agriculture, it has *not* exploded its cities, and it has *not* educated up large cohorts of young men from the country or small towns who leave school into economies that offer them neither jobs nor dignity. The young fighters who cross into Afghanistan to the cry of "Allahu Akbar!" are drawn from just this demographic; but they have been *relatively* few. If Pakistan seriously develops and modernizes its economy, however, then the old comfortable, tolerant, popular Islam of a strongly rural society may no longer be good enough. If and when the countryside empties out into towns whose infrastructure cannot contain it, the seventh-century utopia of purity and unity set over against corrupt renegade Muslim rulers may have more and more massive appeal.

And since Pakistan has more people than Russia, if that happens we should all watch out.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Andrabi, Tahir, et al. *Religious School Enrollment in Pakistan: A Look at the Data*. Cambridge, Mass.: Research Programs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2005. Funded by the World Bank. [http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/Research/wpaper.nsf/rwp/RWP05-024/\\$File/rwp\\_05\\_024\\_khwaja.pdf](http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/Research/wpaper.nsf/rwp/RWP05-024/$File/rwp_05_024_khwaja.pdf). Also issued as World Bank Policy Research Working Paper WP 3521, 16 February 2005.

Haqqani, Husain (now Pakistan's ambassador to the U.S.). *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005.

- Jaffrelot, Christophe, ed. *Pakistan—Nationalism without a Nation*. London/New York: Zed Books, 2002. Especially S.V.R. Nasr. "Islam, the State, and the Rise of Sectarian Militancy in Pakistan."
- Jalal, Ayesha. *Self and Sovereignty. Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- . *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Lau, Martin. *The Role of Islam in the Legal System of Pakistan*. Leiden/Boston: M. Nijhoff, 2006.
- Malik, Jamal, ed. *Madrasas in South Asia: Teaching Terror?* New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Marsden, Magnus. *Living Islam. Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Metcalf, Barbara D. *Islamic Contestations. Essays on Muslims in India and Pakistan*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Nasr, Vali. "Pakistan after Islamization: Mainstream and Militant Islam in a Changing State." In *Asian Islam in the 21st Century*, ed. John L. Esposito, John O. Voll, and Osman Bakar, 31–48. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Qadeer, Mohammad A. *Pakistan: Social and Cultural Transformations in a Muslim Nation*. New York: Routledge, 2006.