



The Afghanistan crisis and its impact on Pakistani federalism

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Pakistan's support for the international alliance in the wake of September 11th added a new dimension to the Pakistani establishment's relations with its own citizens, especially religious groups.

All of a sudden, the fundamentalists were no longer considered allies. Though always devoid of mass support, the consistent backing of the political establishment had given these religious groups a false sense of invincibility. They not only thought that they could take on the USA by fighting alongside the Taliban inside Afghanistan, but they also thought that they could easily jam the government machinery in Pakistan.

But all estimates of their so-called strength proved wrong. The speed with which the Taliban surrendered Kabul took them by surprise and sent them into deep shock. They were still awestruck when the bubble of the exaggerated vision of their power in the Pakistani street also burst.

A lot is going to change now in Pakistan, and for Pakistani federalism as well. With any luck, the current developments in Pakistan can lead to greater respect for minorities, greater provincial autonomy, and a revival of a culture of peace among Pakistani citizens, influencing not only inter-communal relations in Pakistan, but also Pakistan's relations with its neighbours.

Islamic Fundamentalism and Pakistan

Before independence from British colonial rule, the Muslims of India rejected the Muslim religious parties. They gathered under the banner of the All India Muslim League, a party with a liberal leadership. In the general elections of 1945-46 – the last before independence and the partition of India – the Muslim League won a landslide victory.

The leader of Muslim League and future founder of Pakistan was Muhammad Ali Jinnah. He envisioned Pakistan as a modern democratic state.

An influential group of politicians and bureaucrats consisting of Urdu-speaking immigrants and Punjabis dominated the key positions in the newly created country. From the early days of Pakistan they started using religion and the Urdu language as tools to consolidate and maintain their hold on the state apparatus. People demanding rights for federating units and minorities were instantly dubbed as being against the religion and ideology of Pakistan.

Jinnah, who was suffering from tuberculosis, died in September 1948. The political-bureaucratic elite ruling the country buried his vision of Pakistan with him.

On 12 March 1949 the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan adopted the Objectives Resolution, tabled by the country's Prime Minister Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan. It declared Islam to be the state religion. All of the non-Muslim members, and some Muslim members of the assembly opposed the Resolution.

Thereafter, the Pakistani establishment consistently used religion to deny provincial rights and to suppress ethnic groups and minorities.

This brought the religious elements – who have never won a single election in the country – close to the Pakistani establishment. Taking advantage of this, they gradually made inroads into the state institutions – especially the armed forces, educational institutions and media organisations. By the time of General Zia ul Haq's Martial Law, they were holding key positions in the government institutions.

Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan

The democratic forces in the country were struggling against Zia's regime when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. It was a God-sent opportunity for General Zia. Not only did the Western powers grant him legitimacy, but he also received billions of dollars of much-needed economic and military aid.

Under Zia, Pakistan became a frontline state in the West's fight against communism. Before Pakistan's involvement, the war in Afghanistan was limited to Afghans only, where liberal elements resisted the communists. As Pakistan joined in, the war was transformed into a *Jihad*, or holy war, between Muslims and communists.

Pakistan's seminaries have a historic link with the religious elements of Afghanistan. For centuries, Afghan youth have been coming over to these seminaries to receive religious education. Using his power over the Pakistani religious elements, Zia ul Haq brought together a group of Afghan religious leaders who sent their disciples to war – soon joined by hundreds of Muslim zealots from around the world.

The death of Zia ul Haq in 1988 and the restoration of a democratic order in Pakistan resulted in a decrease of Pakistani moral and material aid to Afghanistan. With the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, the West also lost interest in Afghanistan, and the flow of international aid started to dwindle. This made Afghan religious warlords look for new supplies of military and financial resources to maintain their positions.

Infighting for the control of scarce resources broke out along sectarian lines, and plunged Afghanistan into total anarchy. Hungry, aimless armies started looting areas under their control. The

long war had turned Afghanistan into a dump of armaments, left by Soviet forces and the Afghan army. Sophisticated US-supplied weapons that were left unused were available in abundance.

Afghan religious warlords had offices in Pakistan, linked with Pakistani groups of their own sects. Gradually, the infighting spread to Pakistan. Afghan armaments started finding their ways into Pakistan's cities and towns, which turned into mini battlegrounds between various religious factions. A large number of innocent people were killed as the groups started settling scores. To improve their financial resources a number of warlords started giving protection to the drug mafia. The flow of foreign investment dropped sharply and life became insecure. Economic activity was greatly affected by this atmosphere.

This was the context in which the Pakistani establishment decided to distance itself from the fundamentalists. They needed the right time and opportunity to make their exit.

When the international alliance asked Pakistan to extend its support against international terrorism following the tragic incidents of 11 September, there was no hesitation. Pakistan was forthcoming.

After September 11th

The first major problem Pakistan is likely to face now is that Taliban elements could obtain safe haven in the 2,430 km-long border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Pushtoon and Baloch tribes inhabit both sides of the border. They share common languages, cultures and religion. The whole border region is mountainous, making it difficult to police, and nomads living on both sides of the border frequently cross over in search of pastures. Most of the border regions have also been autonomous since colonial times under treaties concluded between the British colonial government of India and the rulers of Afghanistan. The reach of the Pakistan government in these areas is limited.

If Taliban elements manage to hide in these regions, it will be very difficult to trace them – especially without the help of the local people. Pakistan can overcome this problem by wooing the old political elite of the tribal areas, who

have lost their power to the religious leaders over the past two decades. Pakistan also needs to take bold steps and gradually merge these areas into settled areas. Such steps might provoke resistance from the tribal people, but would help avoid this kind of situation from developing in the future.

After being impressed by the propaganda of religious elements, a number of Pakistanis – especially from these tribal areas – had gone to Afghanistan to fight along side the Taliban. Their fellow tribesmen are hostile to the new Afghan government – and the Pakistan government for supporting it. It might take a lot of time and effort to pacify these people, though their number is not great, perhaps only in the thousands.

Pakistan's economy suffered losses of about US \$3 billion on account of the Afghan situation. Although the international community has taken some steps to offset this impact – including writing off some loans, bilateral aid, rescheduling of debts and favourable terms to increase exports – yet more steps may be needed to help Pakistan overcome its economic woes.

On the positive side, the fundamentalist religious elements have finally been isolated from the Pakistani establishment. This development will help Pakistan in a number of ways:

- Factional fighting and killings of opponents might end.
- A liberal atmosphere is likely to return to Pakistan, as well as a revival of cultural and social activities.
- The Pakistani establishment has been using these religious elements against people who demanded provincial autonomy, as well as rights for ethnic and religious minorities. *This trend is likely to be reversed, and as a consequence, it is likely that the federation will be strengthened.*
- For a long time these religious elements had been acting as the main pressure groups against the normalisation of relations with India. With the weakening of these groups, there is every possibility of normalizing the relationship (assuming the Kashmir conflict can be resolved!)
- With the establishment of a proper government in Afghanistan, the inflow of arms and drugs from Afghanistan to Pakistan might also decrease.

- Since the start of the war in Afghanistan, Pakistan has been a host to about 2.5 million Afghan refugees. With the restoration of peace in Afghanistan, the bulk of the refugee population will return to Afghanistan, easing Pakistan's economic burden.
- Pakistan's relations with its neighbours – especially Iran – which were badly damaged due to its support for the Taliban will improve. Relations with Iran are already much better than before, and a promising dialogue has begun.

The first-ever elected governments in the districts have been a great help in thwarting attempts by the fundamentalist elements to create law and order problems in the country. In the past such situations had provided the centre with room to impose stringent measures, restrict civil liberties and send in federal security agencies.

The elected district *nazims* (mayors), by giving full support for the central government's policies and measures vis-à-vis Afghanistan, have provided more than enough political support to the government, enabling it to move ahead with its liberal agenda.

The National Reconstruction Bureau, the official think-tank assigned the responsibility of preparing a constitutional reforms package, is likely to come out with amendments that will provide constitutional status for the district governments. It will also redefine the relationship between the federation and provinces making it difficult for the centre to interfere in provincial matters. And, the Bureau is likely to suggest amendments that will ensure that the Pakistani state functions as a liberal democratic polity as against its present identity as a religious state.

But all this depends on continued international support to the Pakistani leadership. The religious forces and some of the opposition parties in Pakistan are already threatening to launch a movement against the Musharraf government. In order to destabilise his government the religious forces will also make an effort to further deteriorate Pakistan's relations with India. If stability is disturbed in Pakistan, there is every chance that forces of reaction will rear their heads, endangering the entire region. (6)