Can The Left Become Relevant To Islamic Pakistan?

written by Pervez Hoodbhoy | May 28, 2010

THE LEFT HAS ALWAYS BEEN A MARGINAL actor on Pakistan's national scene. While this bald truth must be told, in no way do I wish to belittle the enormous sacrifices made by numerous progressive individuals, as well as small groups. They unionized industrial and railway workers, helped peasants organize against powerful landlords, inspired Pakistan's minority provinces to demand their rights, set standards of writing and journalism, etc. But the Left has never had a national presence and, even at its peak during the 1970s, could not muster even a fraction of the street power of the Islamic or mainstream parties.

A comparison with India is telling. While the Indian Left has also never attained state power — or even come close to exercising power and influence on the scale of the Congress Party — it looms large in states like Kerala, Tripura, and West Bengal where it successfully ended iniquitous feudal land relations. Across the country it helps maintain a secular polity, protects minorities, keeps alive a broad focus on progressive ideas in culture, art, and education, and uses science to fight superstition. Today, a Maoist movement militantly challenges the depredations of capitalism as it wreaks destruction on their native habitat. Left-inspired movements noticeably impeded passage of the U.S.-India nuclear deal. Indeed, for all its divisions and in-fighting, the Indian Left is a significant political force that is a thousand times stronger than its Pakistani counterpart.

Surely this difference begs an explanation. The answer is to be found in Pakistan's genesis and the overwhelming role of religion in matters of the state. Understanding this point in detail is crucial to the question: how can one hope to make the Pakistani Left relevant in the future? Are there intelligent ways to deal with a major handicap?

Pakistan's Early Years

CARVED OUT OF HINDU-MAJORITY INDIA, Pakistan was the culmination of the competition and conflict between natives who had converted to Islam and those who had not. On the whole, Indian Muslims had less education and were less willing than Hindus to accept alien ways of thinking, including communist and socialist ideas. They opposed the British for obvious nationalistic reasons, but they also saw science and modernity as alien impositions. In 1835, for example, more than 8,000 Muslim notables in the state of Bengal signed a petition against the teaching of English and modern ideas.

Realizing the conservatism of his constituency, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, later to become the founder of Pakistan, demanded a separate country for Muslims based upon his 1940 articulation of the Two-Nation Theory. This stated that Hindus and Muslims could never live together peacefully within one nation state. An impeccably dressed Westernized man with Victorian manners, secular outlook, and a taste for fine foods and wines, Jinnah nevertheless eloquently articulated the fears and aspirations of an influential section of his co-religionists. The Communist Party of India thought poorly of him, but, seeing that enormous communal forces had been unleashed, many of its Muslim members eventually chose to support the demand for a separate Pakistan. After Partition they went on to form the nucleus of Pakistan's Left, which bravely struggles on despite the odds.

Interestingly, Jinnah was also opposed by a section of the conservative Muslim *ulema*, such as Maulana Maudoodi of the Jamaat-e-Islami. They argued that Islam was a universal religion not to be

confined within national borders. But Jinnah and his Muslim League, by enlisting the influential Muslim feudal and bourgeois class, won the day by insisting that Muslims constituted a distinct nation which would be overwhelmed in post-British India by a larger, wealthier, and better-educated Hindu majority.

Pakistan's basis in religious identity soon led to painful paradoxes. An overbearing West Pakistan ran roughshod over East Pakistan and was despised as an external imperial power. Jinnah's Two-Nation theory was left in tatters after the separation of East Pakistan in 1971, and the defeat of the Pakistani military. The enthusiasm of Muslim Bengalis for Bangladesh — and their failure to repent decades after the separation — was a blow against the very basis of Pakistan. Nevertheless, contrary to dire predictions, the Pakistani state survived. Its powerful military crushed emerging separatist movements in the provinces of Baluchistan and Sind.

For a while after 1971 the question of national ideology fell into limbo. Aware of the popular demand for economic justice, the newly-elected prime minister, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, also knew that anything that smacked of Marx's "religion is the opiate of the masses" could not work. The shrewdest politician that Pakistan has ever had, he invented "Islamic socialism" and inspired an agenda for progressive change. But land reform for him, as a big landlord, would have meant too much personal sacrifice. For all his electioneering rhetoric, he also did not wish to alienate the other pillars of the Pakistani state: the army and industrial class. Social reform took back-stage. Instead Bhutto chose to raise national fervor by promising revenge for the loss of the East Wing, declared a "war of a thousand years" against India, and started off Pakistan's quest for the atomic bomb. Although anti-Indianism served temporarily as a rallying cry, the military coup of 1977 that sent Bhutto off to the gallows was to revive the national identity issue.

Zia Remakes Pakistan

SOON AFTER HE SEIZED POWERR, General Zia-ul-Haq announced his intention to remake Pakistan and end the confusion of Pakistan's purpose and identity once and for all. The word soon went out that Pakistan was henceforth not to be described as a Muslim state. Instead, it was now an Islamic state where Islamic law would soon reign supreme. To achieve this re-conceptualization, Zia knew that future generations of Pakistanis would have to be purged of liberal and secular values.

Thus began a massive decade-long state-sponsored project. Democracy was demonized and declared un-Islamic, culture was purified of Hindu contamination, Hindi words were removed from Urdu to the extent possible, capital punishment was freely used, left and liberal opinion was silenced, and religion was introduced into every aspect of public and private life. Education became a key weapon.

Zia's generation is everywhere today in Pakistan. A moderate Muslim majority country has become one where the majority of citizens want Islam to play a key role in politics. The effects of indoctrination are clearly visible. Even as the sharia-seeking Taliban were busy blowing up girls' schools (457 to date), a survey by World Public Opinion.Org in 2008 found that 54 percent of Pakistanis wanted strict application of sharia while 25 percent wanted it in some more dilute form. Totaling 79 percent, this was the largest percentage in the four countries surveyed (Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia).

A more recent survey of 2,000 young Pakistanis between 18-27 years of age found that "three-quarters of all young people identify themselves primarily as Muslims. Just 14 percent chose to define themselves primarily as a citizen of Pakistan." The youth are deeply worried by lack of employment, economic inflation, corruption, and violence. In this turbulent sea, it is not surprising that most see religion as their anchor.

For some, violent change is the answer to the country's problems. This is precisely what Zaid Hamid, Pakistan's self-styled Hitler-clone, advocates. A fiery demagogue who claims to have fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan, he builds on the insecurity of the young. Enthralled college students pack auditoriums to listen to this self-proclaimed jihadist rail against Jews, Hindus, and Christians. Millions watch him on various TV channels as he lashes out against Pakistan's corrupt rulers and other "traitors," praises the Afghan Taliban as heroes and a force of resistance, and promises that those who betrayed the nation's honor by joining America's war on terror will hang from lampposts in Islamabad. In his promised Islamic utopia of amputations and stonings, speedy Taliban-style justice will replace the clumsy and corrupt courts established by the imperial British.

Just as Hitler dwelt on Germany's "wounded honor" in his famous beer hall oratory in Munich — where he promised that Germany would conquer the world — Hamid calls for the Pakistan Army to rebel against its American masters and go to war against India, liberate Kashmir, Palestine, Chechnya and Afghanistan. Pakistan's flag shall *inshallah* soon fly from Delhi's Red Fort, he announces. The students applaud wildly.

Hating America

PAKISTAN IS PROBABLY THE MOST anti-American country in the world. Right, center, and left share the antipathy. Surveys show that the United States is disliked far less in Cuba, Iraq, and Afghanistan — all countries that have been attacked by Washington. A private survey carried out by a European embassy based in Islamabad found that only 4 percent of Pakistanis polled speak well of America, 96 percent against. The United States has displaced India as Pakistan's number one enemy, at least for now.

Why these intense feelings? Drone strikes are often quoted, but these are relatively precise strikes on Al-Qaida and Taliban targets in Waziristan, which have devastated the Islamist leadership while killing some civilians as well. Although the death of innocents is terrible and deserves condemnation, it is utterly insignificant compared to the carnage in Vietnam's cities which were carpet-bombed by B-52's in the 1970s. Nevertheless, the anger in Pakistan leads to a ferocious anger far greater than ever existed in Vietnam.

The explanation may lie in wounded pride and Pakistan's dependence syndrome. U.S.-Pakistan relations are frankly transactional — America today pays Pakistan to fight a war that is primarily for America's benefit. It is a separate matter that Pakistan must now fight the war for its own survival. Some Pakistanis use the crude image of a condom to describe the U.S.-Pakistan relationship; Pakistan will be used for the business at hand and be cast off immediately when the business is concluded. This self-loathing is typical of what a client state develops for its paymaster. One sees this in Egypt as well.

Pakistan's excessive dependence on external powers comes from its long-standing dispute with India over Kashmir. This called for much military hardware, soon acquired by turning towards the West. In the 1950s, Pakistan entered into the SEATO and CENTO military pacts aimed against communism. This made the Pakistani Army the most powerful and well organized institution in the country. In time it developed huge corporate interests and has, directly or indirectly, run Pakistan since the first military coup in 1958.

Pakistan has a litany of other grievances as well. An early one is that the United States. did not aid Pakistan in its 1965 and 1971 wars against India where, according to Pakistan's understanding, it was required to do so. Other grievances are pan-Islamic while yet others derive from Pakistan's bitter experience of being a U.S. ally in the 1980s. Then at the cutting edge of the U.S.-organized jihad against the Soviets, Pakistan was dumped once the war was over and left alone to deal with

numerous toxic consequences. Among them was a large army of ideologically-charged fighters, willing to put their finely-honed skills to use. But disadvantage was soon turned to advantage when the Pakistani state hit upon using these fighters for bleeding India in Kashmir, as well as securing strategic depth in Afghanistan. The dragon seed, planted by the Pakistan Army, is only half regretted today.

The Conspiracy Industry

IN A COUNTRY THAT CAN BOAST OF few achievements in improving the lot of its own people, legitimate criticisms tend to be conflated with illegitimate ones. After all, it is human nature to blame others for one's own miseries. Today the United States is frequently held to blame for Pakistan's ills, old and new. Absurdities abound. Surely America should not be held responsible for the sewage-contaminated water that Pakistanis must drink, the pitifully low level of taxes collected, the barbarity of the police, or the massive theft of electricity by rich and poor alike. Nor can it be blamed for the fact that Kashmir is unresolved and that Pakistan's generals foolishly thought of winning it through covert war.

Of course, Pakistan is not the only country where America provides a rationalization for internal failures. U.S.-bashing is a structural phenomenon where, at least sometimes, it has nothing to do with what America actually does. For example, one recently saw the amazing spectacle of Hamid Karzai threatening to join the Taliban and lashing out against the Americans because they (probably correctly) suggested he had committed electoral fraud.

In the present anti-American climate, the manufacture of conspiracy theories has become Pakistanis' single biggest industry. Various polls show that the events of 9/11 are assumed by most Pakistanis to have been a CIA-Mossad conspiracy designed to malign Muslims and a part of the West's war on Islam. It is also believed that Osama bin Laden did not carry out these attacks and, even if he did, that he died long ago. Many think he is an American agent trained and armed by the CIA, while Blackwater is believed to be behind suicide attacks in Pakistani markets and mosques. On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban are often pictured as simply freedom-loving people trying to free their country from foreign occupation. Just when one feels that the limits of absurdity have finally been crossed, some popular television anchor throws out a conspiracy story that leaves one gasping.

Example: for months one heard the theory from various popular anchorpersons that leaders of the Pakistani Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud and Hakimullah Mehsud, were U.S. agents. But there was deafening silence when these leaders were killed by American drones. And, by the way, what happened to the *khatna* (circumcision) theory — that suicide bombers were uncircumcised and were either Blackwater employees or Indian agents? Now that one can check the carcasses of suicide bombers frozen in cold storage, that theory has conveniently disappeared from the market.

Pakistan's collective psychosis is painful to behold. When a suicide bomber walked into the female cafeteria at the Islamic University in Islamabad, followed by a second bomber in the male cafeteria, one might have thought that great anger would have been expressed at the Taliban. Instead, the brainwashed students vented their anger at the university administration, government, and America instead of the perpetrators of this heinous deed. The Jamaat-e-Islami and other religious political parties flatly refused to condemn the suicide attack on students.

Ordinary Pakistanis — including the bearded and burqa'ed ones — have fully bought into America-bashing. So does the Westernized elite which yearns for a Green Card, sends its children to U.S. universities, listens to American pop music, and drives out in fancy cars to a McDonald's. It also includes Pakistanis permanently settled in the United States, who writhe in guilt knowing they live off an anti-Muslim superpower — as they see it.

Tragically for Pakistan, anti-Americanism has played squarely into the hands of Islamic militants. They vigorously promote the notion that this is a bipolar conflict of Islam versus imperialism when, in fact, they are actually waging an armed struggle to remake society. They will keep fighting this war even if America were to miraculously evaporate into space. Created by poverty, a war-culture, and the macabre manipulations of Pakistan's intelligence services, religious militants want a total transformation of society. This means eliminating music, art, entertainment, and all manifestations of modernity and Westernism. Side goals include chasing away the few surviving native Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus from the Frontier province.

There is certainly legitimate reason for countries across the world to feel negatively about America. In pursuit of its self-interest, wealth and security, it has waged illegal wars, bribed, bullied and overthrown governments, supported tyrants and military governments, and undermined movements for progressive change. But nutcase conspiracy-thinking of "foreign hands" being behind most ills is deadly for a nation's mental health. If some "foreign hand" is imagined behind everything, then that kills self-confidence and one's ability to control outcomes. Imagining these "extra-terrestrial" forces deadens the ability to think rationally and sharply reduces the capacity to deal with terrorism — which is here to stay in Pakistan for the foreseeable future.

Pakistanis, who desperately want someone to stand up to the Americans, have bought into the notion of the Taliban as being somehow anti-imperialist. Today, in a country that is divided on everything else, strong anti-U.S. feelings provide a rare point of consensus. Sadly, some in the Pakistani Left seek to cash in on this.

Is The Left's Negativism Helpful?

GO TO A LEFT-WING RALLY and the standard chants are: down with religious extremism, down with the Army, down with American imperialism, down with the drones. This position of "downing" everyone and everything is laudably pure and pious. But it scarcely helps us answer the question: who shall protect Pakistan's population from religious militants, stop the daily dynamiting of girls' schools and colleges, prevent human bombers from exploding themselves in mosques and markets, and end the slaughter of Shiites?

The notion that protection can come from "mobilizing the working class" is laughable. The demonstrations in Pakistan against the U.S. invasion of Iraq were miniscule compared to those in Europe and America. It is irresponsible to think that somehow the fierce onslaught of an army of fascistic holy warriors can be stopped by two dozen earnest people holding colorful placards.

So what is to be done? Every option is a bad one: local militias (*lashkars),* the police and Frontier Constabulary, the Pakistan Army, and the American drones. The *lashkars* often have criminals within them and are certainly known to avenge old tribal scores; the police and FC are notorious for corruption and brutality; the Army originally fathered the Taliban and is still a dubious quantity; and the Americans cynically manipulated religious fanaticism when it suited them. But without some combination of these unsavory forces, there will be carnage of ordinary people.

Let us recall what happened in Swat. A weak-kneed state, earlier complicit with the Taliban, had allowed the fanatics to devastate this idyllic tourist-friendly valley before it was brought to its senses and finally persuaded into using military force against the fanatics. Women had been lashed in public, hundreds of girls' schools were blown up, non-Muslims had to pay a special tax *(jizya),* and every form of art and music was forbidden. Policemen deserted en masse, and institutions of the state crumbled. Thrilled by their success, the Taliban violated the Nizam-e-Adl Swat deal just days after it was negotiated in April 2009. They quickly moved to capture more territory in the adjacent area of Buner. Then barely 80 miles from Islamabad (as the crow flies), their spokesman, Muslim

Khan, crowed that the capital would be captured soon.

Had the Pakistan Army not moved against the Swat Taliban, the consequences for the rest of the country would have been grim. Today the situation there is far from good, but it is immensely better than it was a year ago when headless corpses were strewn in public squares in Mingora and Saidu Sharif. The Army is popular there once again, a supreme irony because it was responsible for having let the Taliban establish themselves in Swat. It will never be decisively established whether Maulana Fazlullah, leader of the Swat Taliban, was put up by the Army. But it certainly did nothing to stop his fiery broadcasts until he finally turned against the Army.

Terrorism is here to stay in Pakistan, and the battle has only begun. And although there are no good guys, nothing can be worse than the Taliban. Through terror tactics and suicide bombings they have made fear ubiquitous. Women are being forced into the burqa, while anxious private employers and government departments have advised their male employees in Peshawar and other cities to wear *shalwar-kameez* rather than trousers. Coeducational schools across Pakistan are increasingly fearful of attacks — some are converting to girls-only or boys-only schools. Video shops are going out of business, while native musicians and dancers have fled or are changing their profession. A sterile Saudi-style Wahhabism is beginning to impact upon Pakistan's once-vibrant culture and society.

The cancerous offshoots of extremist ideology continue to spread. Another TTP is important — Tehrik-e-Taliban Punjab. Indeed, one expects that major conflict will eventually shift from Pakistan's tribal peripheries to the heartland, southern Punjab. The Punjabi Taliban are busy ramping up their operations, with repeated successful suicide attacks on the police and intelligence headquarters.

The future: dazed by the brutality of these attacks, the army's officer corps finally appears to be moving away from its earlier sympathy and support for extremism. At least for now, tribal insurgents cannot overrun Islamabad and Pakistan's main cities, which are protected by thousands of heavily armed military and paramilitary troops. In reaction, rogue elements within the military and intelligence agencies are instigating and organizing suicide attacks against their own colleagues.

Pakistan must find the will to fight the Taliban, and the Left must consider its duty to help in this fight. The national and provincial governments must protect life and law rather than simply make deals that fall apart no sooner than they are made. As an Islamic state, Pakistan is falling into anarchy and chaos, being rapidly destroyed from within by those who claim to fight for Islam.

Can The Left Become Relevant?

WHAT CAN THE LEFT DO to turn the situation around? The answer is: not very much. It is too small. Although its efforts for creating a better society will not and should not cease, it has no realistic chance of becoming a major national force in the foreseeable future. Instead, given the bankruptcy of Pakistan's Islamic and mainstream parties, perhaps the Left's real importance lies in being a moral force that helps nudge Pakistani society in a positive direction.

To do this, leftists must use simple direct arguments instead of convoluted explanations that conflate all adversaries together at the same time. Examples:

1. Take the brave struggle of peasants in Okara, rightly helped by numerous small left-wing groups, for preserving their land from a predatory military that seeks to displace them. This is a conflict between the tillers of the soil and those who seek to grab the wealth of others. In this case it is right, proper, and essential to challenge the Pakistan Army because it has illegitimate claims to the land. But why the slogans against imperialism, which neither knows nor cares about the Okarans? All that this does is muddy the waters.

2. Why even imagine that the Taliban want liberation? While religious extremists indeed derive some support from marginalized social groups, they do not demand employment, land reform, better health care, or more social services. There is nothing progressive in their agenda, and no place for social justice and economic development. There is silence about worldly things like roads, hospitals and infrastructure. The Taliban are not the Maoists of Pakistan, nor do they subscribe to some form of South American liberation theology. Instead, they see their reward lying in heaven. It is also false that the Taliban constitute an ethnic "Pakhtun movement," as some prominent left-wingers argue. This serves only as an excuse for tolerating their barbarities. Most Taliban victims have been other Pakhtuns. If the Taliban is a Pakhtun movement then what about the Punjabi Taliban, who are as ethnically different from Pakhtuns as chalk from cheese? The Pakhtun and Punjabi Taliban share an ideological commitment — and that is precisely what Talibanism is all about.
3. The Baluch, Sindhis, Siraikis, Baltis, and many other ethnic groups have legitimate complaints against the arrogant center in Islamabad. They certainly deserve support from progressive people. But ethnic groups sometimes look through a very narrow, parochial lens that should not be condoned. After all, the vision of the Left is for a society where economic justice for all is the goal. A person's ethnic origins, religion and nationality are mere products of circumstance. There is no need to glorify any one of these — at least from a left perspective.

Let me state the bald truth: Pakistan needs reform not revolution. The Left needs to know that there is not a chance in a million of capturing state power in the foreseeable future. In fact, the only ones who can even conceivably bring about a revolution are the Islamists. And their revolution is to be dreaded because they will wipe out every little gain made in sixty years. Therefore the Left must pick its fights, and not try to fight everyone at the same time.

At a time when the country needs clarity of thought, one must not look at everything through the prism of fossilized ideologies. Nor should one pose moralistic questions like: "Is America good or bad?" Of course America is just as selfish as most other countries, has repeatedly committed aggression overseas, has worsened the Palestine problem, and maintains the world's largest military machine. We also know that it will rush to make a deal with the Taliban if that is perceived to be in its self-interest, and will do so even if that means abandoning the people of Afghanistan to blood-thirsty fanatics. But for Pakistanis the important question is: what are the options for Pakistan's people today?

Instead of chasing demons, Pakistan's leftists need to reaffirm their allegiance to what truly matters: the ideals of economic justice, secularism, universalistic ideas of human rights, good governance, women's rights, and rationality in human affairs. Washington must be firmly resisted, but only when it seeks to drag Pakistan away from these goals. It is futile to frame the debate in pro- or anti-America terms; the key point is to be pro-people. The Left has a hugely important role to play in setting the moral compass. Only then will it matter to Pakistan.

Footnotes