Pakistan's Partition: Search for National Identity

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Introduction

After several hundred years of being under British colony, India finally received independence in 1947. India’s independence was followed by Pakistan’s partition. During the colonization, India and Pakistan were merged into one state ruled by the British crown. India served as an open market economy for British colonizers for many years. During those years, India consisted of hundreds of different ethnicities and religions, the major religions being Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. All these different ethnic groups collaborated in order to decolonize India from the British. Independence was successful, however, it came with a big price. There were mass casualties during the early 1940s when several independence movement groups started emerging. The British Government finally realized that it could not control its colony any further, and in 1947 India was granted independence.

One of the major religious groups that lived in India was the Muslim population. After the partition, Muslims wanted to create their own state apart from India: Pakistan. The challenge for Pakistan was creating and perpetrating their national identity. Islam was the main basis in Pakistan’s national identity. Throughout the years in countries like Pakistan, there has been a tradition of “ideological polarization between orthodoxy and reform that has grown in intensity in recent time”\(^1\) (Malik 2010, 26). In its quest to define its national identity, Pakistan faced several challenges throughout the years.

Pakistan, an Islamic state, was formed primarily under Islamic ideology. The literal meaning of ‘Pakistan’ translates into “Pure Land” (Gyaunendra 2001, 27). Islam plays an important role in the everyday life of people of Pakistan. Therefore, after the partition Pakistan favored its national identity as one closely tied to Islam. Its culture, tradition, and manners are highly influenced by the dominant religion in the country. Over the course of the country’s independence, Islam shaped politics in Pakistan. Many early rulers, mainly in the military, were deeply involved with different Islamic groups in the process of gaining power. These groups were so powerful that most politicians relied upon their support in controlling the government.

Different religious affiliations have caused many skirmishes and conflicts in India, both during and after British colonization. The main conflicts were between Muslims and Hindus who managed to live under the same state during colonization, but not after. This was one of the major reasons for Pakistan’s partition in 1947 after India’s independence from British colony.

**Pakistan’s Partition**

As India was trying to gain its independence from the British, the Muslim League proposed the establishment of a separate state for the Muslim majority population that lived in India in March 1940. There were several regions where majority of the population were Muslims, including the Northwestern and Northeastern part of India. When the proposal was made formal in September 1944, it proposed one sovereign and independent state called Pakistan. This proposal was made in correspondence to Gandhi, who was at the forefront of Independence movement, and Jinnah, who was one of the leaders of Muslim League. Gandhi was not a politician, but rather a spiritual leader that had thousands of followers.

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Many observers saw the partition to be the cause of violence and forced migrations, however, they did not anticipate the mass migration that occurred later after the partition of Pakistan. Thousands of Muslims from left India to the new Pakistan. When the proposal was brought to Congress, India’s largest political party, it agreed on the establishment of “a loose federation in India, with the Muslim-majority provinces and states of north-western and north-eastern India” (Gyaunendra 2001, 22). The Muslim League was not in favor of Congress’s proposal. By August 1946, the Muslim League decided on taking a direct action with Jinnah as the leader. This was not meant to turn into military action, --though it later did-- but rather more of a constitutional negotiation movement. Congress took serious steps in order to break the movement.

On 16th of August 1946, violence broke out between Hindus and Muslims in the Calcutta region. There were several thousand casualties just in four days. This violence spread into different parts of the region, which is now known as one of the biggest conflict in the history of Muslims and Hindus. After the conflict of Calcutta, the most killings were reported in Bombay (over 300 people), East Bengal (several hundred people), and Bihar (several thousand casualties reported). Pakistan was then finally recognized as a separate sovereign state.

East Pakistan: Bangladesh

After the partition of Pakistan, another issue emerged: the movements in East Pakistan. After the independence in 1947, Pakistani government faced the challenge of welding its citizens, Western and Eastern Pakistanis, into one united Pakistani nation. To do so, the government needed to establish a national language. In November 1947 during the Pakistan

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Educational Conference, Urdu was proposed as a national language, which was opposed by the representatives from East Pakistan (Schendel 2009, 109). Since the East Pakistan did not consider themselves as Pakistani, the representatives of East Pakistan wanted to allow the Bengali language to be used alongside Urdu.

The prime minister of Pakistan, Liaquat Ali Khan, was very adamant about the Urdu language. His argument was that Pakistan was created by several hundred million Muslims who came together, all whose primary language is Urdu. This issue started dividing the East Pakistan representatives in the Assembly. It created cultural and political divisions within civilians. Because of harsh and critical speeches by the Prime Minister against Bengali language, demonstrations erupted.

To attempt to resolve the situation, the government banned any kind of demonstrations on this matter. Yet demonstrations still occurred, mainly by students in Dhaka. Students started their demonstration in Dhaka Universities, and later expanded outside the campus. Students started marching in the streets, calling people to join the demonstration. When the law enforcement got in the way, students retaliated by throwing rocks and bricks. It was in 1952 that Pakistani armed forces killed several Pakistanis demonstrating for their civil rights which prompted East Pakistan to critically turn against Muslim League.

The conflict and demonstrations went on and off for two decades when East Pakistan declared its independence from West Pakistan. The independence movement, however, faced strong military opposition. In 1970, there were several military actions against independence movements in East Pakistan. India played a key role in these events. The Indian government helped the demonstrators to gain independence, and the Congress party of India decided to get
militarily involved on pro-East Pakistan independence movement. In 1971 a new country was established—People’s Republic of Bangladesh.

_Pakistan vs. Russian identity crisis_

Bangladesh’s independence movement was very similar to the post-Soviet Russian national identity crisis. During the Soviet era, fifteen different states were merged into one, which were organized by strict social and hierarchical rule by Communist party. All the satellite states had different national histories, traditions, and custom. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, fifteen independent states emerged. Several of those states had civil wars after independence from the Soviet Union for many various reasons, including ethnic divisions, ideologies, and religious differences.

One of the primary challenges that Russian elites faced was to define their country’s national identity. What made this a challenge of particular importance was the fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union there were numerous different ethnic groups living in Russian territories. Several of those included the Northern Caucasus. Bangladesh’s separatist movement is somewhat similar to the separatist movements in Northern Caucasus in post-Soviet times.

As a result of the collapse of Soviet Union starting from 1991, the relations between Russia and North Caucasus region, especially Chechnya, worsened dramatically. Russia conducted bloody military campaigns in Chechnya, and countless bombings and terrorist actions have taken place throughout the Russian Federation ever since. Throughout the 1990s, the primary concern in the North Caucasus of the Russian federal authorities was separatist Chechnya. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Chechnya claimed independence and
provoked immediate reaction from President Boris Yeltsin, who saw this as a big threat to Russia’s and other Caucasus region’s national security.

Chechnya occupied a very special place in Yeltsin’s Caucasus policy. In December 1991, a group of experts was dispatched to Chechnya by the Supreme Soviet of Russia, but the separatist leaders refused to discuss the post-Soviet issues of the republic. Later in March 1992, Russian and Chechen leaders met to discuss the basis for settling Russian and Chechen relations (Markedonov 2011). By the end of the year Chechen leaders formulated basic principles through which Russia had to recognize Chechnya as an independent state, in return Chechnya would preserve its economic union with Russian and cooperate in dealing with security.

Defining Pakistan and Pakistani

Pakistan, just like Israel, emerged in the migration of many populations (albeit Muslim populations as opposed to Jewish ones) towards certain areas. However, there are some differences. Unlike Pakistan, the state of Israel was formed at the end of World War II when several thousand Jews migrated and settled in today’s designated areas known and recognized as Israeli state. Pakistan, on the other hand, included well-settled communities of more than 70 million Muslims in 1947. Identifying as Pakistani is a “definition that is still deeply contested” (Shaikh 2009, 46). After the independence of Pakistan, the uncertainty of defining themselves as Pakistanis was not the only challenge they faced, but also the challenge of 7 million Muslim refugees who fled India and claimed to have equal right to be considered Pakistani.

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After the independence, Pakistan used religion as a base of its national identity. This served them to some extent. However, there were still thousands of Indian Muslims who lived in India and several thousand of them fled to Pakistan. This was the time when a dilemma emerged: If the base of national identity were to be Islam, would Indian-Muslim refugees still be considered Pakistani? The country equated ‘the Pakistani’ with ‘the Muslim’. Although the majority of population is Sunni Muslims, there are still many Shia sectarian Muslims who live in the country. Taking this into consideration, the possibility of achieving Pakistani identity was highly weakened. All the factors combined, dismantled institutional protection of Pakistan’s non-Muslim minorities, and brought doubts as who was considered to be as ‘real Pakistanis’.

**Mass Indian Muslim Migration: Muhajirs**

Solidifying the state’s Islamic identity in the 1980s intensified many other concerns. One of the main concerns in Pakistan was Indian Muslim migrants. The Indian Muslim migrants were called *muhajirs*. People who were long settled in the lands that made up Pakistan considered themselves as natives and sons of the soil. The *muhajir* migration that initiated in 1947 came with long-term political and economic consequences. The mass migration was not supported by neither the Pakistani nor the Indian governments, which facilitated the rejection of *muhajirs* by long settled Pakistanis.

On 12 of October, 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India from Congress Party, stated that there was “no policy with regard to exchange of population [between the two countries] and that there was no talk of it before August 15…none of us envisioned a major transfer of population at any time”\(^5\) (Khalidi 1998, 340). Many observers assumed that after the

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partition, Pakistan would contain a majority of Muslim population, though they still anticipated to have significant number of Hindu and Sikh minorities in it.

There were three phases of migration to Pakistan. The first occurred from August 1947 to November of the same year. This was the largest phase of migration in terms of immigrants. The first phase of migration was considered to be the most violent of the three migrations. The second phase, which was the longest, went from December 1947 to December 1971. The majority of the migrants were from the Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra, and Rajasthan regions. The final phase went from 1973 to the late 1990s. This migration was different from previous two, in the sense that it mostly included educated unemployed Muslims from different parts of India. In the later years significant number of Urdu-speaking Muslims from different parts of India made their way to Pakistan.

Migration was faced with mass rejection by the early settlers. One of the biggest consequences of muhajir migration was the eruption of violence. Most of the refugees who arrived to newly independent Pakistan settled in the north-western rather than the eastern territories of the regions designated as Pakistan. Many of those settled in the towns of Sind and, Karachi which is one of the biggest and most populated cities in Pakistan. Karachi is the center of commercial and administrative hub. The violence was primarily between different religious groups. Close to 600,000 people were killed and hundreds of thousands were injured. Over a million people fled the country to save their lives from violent mobs. During the same time period, 7,200,000 Muslims emigrated to Pakistan from India. Over five million Sikhs and Hindus fled Pakistan due to cruel physical violence. Today, violence has significantly minimized between the different religious groups and ethnicities. However, discrimination still exist in a lower level against Muslims in India, and Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan.
Zia ul-Haq and the Idea of a Strong Islamic State

Since the independence of Pakistan, many political leaders have used religious sentiments as an instrument to strengthen Pakistan’s identity. The state institutions in Pakistan, more specifically its national security institutions, including intelligence services and military, have played a key role in establishing Pakistani national identity which primary basis was Islam. Not only were domestic politics influenced by Islamic ideology in Pakistan, but also its foreign policies as well.

General Zia ul-Haq was one of the leaders who was strongly in favor of establishing a strong Islamic government. At the time, Islamic groups were powerful enough that many political leaders depended on their support. He stayed in power longer than any of his predecessors. He came to power in 1978 and stayed until his death in 1988. Under his governance as a military leader, Islamist groups were supported and sponsored by the state to extend their influence to local and domestic politics. This commitment by the state gradually prompted jihadi ideology, especially during the Bangladesh war that took place in 1971. Jihadi ideology is the ideology of holy war in Islam.

Many western powers, especially the United States, coordinated with Zia in order to have influence in the region. Through the United States aid to Zia’s government, Zia sponsored many Islamic groups to overthrow Soviet Union from Afghanistan. The United States wanted the Soviet Union out of the Central Asian region, primarily because of the threat of spread of Communism as well as diminishing Soviet influence in the region. The best way to diminish Soviet influence was through economic support to Zia’s government. This influenced the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to some extent, but was not the primary reason of Soviet Union’s failure
of invasion. During the time, the Soviet system was crumbling due to excessive military spending which other satellite states were organizing independence movements.

When Zia came to power, his primary determination was to make Pakistan more Islamic and transform its political life. He considered armed forces to be crucial in his leadership. Through his leadership, he demonstrated that rather than being primarily a political leader and structuring Pakistan’s political life, planting Islam as the primary religion of the country would give him a better chance to stay in power. Zia’s purpose was “the survival and development of Pakistan. The general did not expect the political system he had constructed to survive his departure from the scene”\(^6\) (Haqqani 2005, 148). He maximized the power of religious groups and leaders in the administration without any compromising superior status of military.

**Islamization**

“Islamization is generally perceived by the respondents as a process of religious and social change which seeks to expand the role of religious institutions and the scope of religious practice in Pakistani society”\(^7\) (Hassan 1985, 263). This process was primarily adopted to reform and establish a new socio-cultural norms and institutions. Islamization was one the biggest program that the government of Pakistan adopted in order to define the country’s national identity. The primary basis of Islamization was Islam and the practice of Sharia Law was present in many aspects of governmental and social institutions. Political leaders in Pakistan have taken different approaches in implying the program both in state and local governments. Islamization,


however, required many reforms in various levels of policy making. The program created a strong connection between the state and different religious groups.

When Zia ul-Haq was in power, Islamization was the primary state ideology in Pakistan. This period represents the presence of military-controlled regime after the overthrow of the Pakistan People’s Party in May 1977. It first emerged under the Pakistan People’s Party government that was led by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. During Zia’s governance, Islamization was an ideological program which primary purpose was to establish ‘true Islamic’. Therefore, the state had direct connection with many Islamic clerics and groups. The state needed those particular groups assistance in order to fully establish reforms that it was putting forth. This meant that many Islamic groups and clerics had leverage over regular civilians, and the program gave them a chance to participate in policy-making and implementation.

Zia brought several reforms within different governmental institutions in order to implement the program. One of the major reforms were in educational system in Pakistan. In the case of educational institution reform, Islamization redefined the educational objectives. Through the educational reform, the government intended to bring an Islamic mentality to the next generation. To do so the government took several steps. During Zia’s government, all the textbooks were rewritten “with an Islamic ideological agenda”\(^8\) (Haqqani 2005, 149). One of the most prominent Pakistani historian, K.K. Aziz, stated that textbooks that were rewritten included numerous factual and historic errors. After examining tens of school textbooks, Aziz concluded that new textbooks aimed the support of military regime in Pakistan. At the same time, it

portrayed and promoted hatred towards Hindus and Sikhs. Textbooks portrayed Pakistan as best ruled with an Islamic ideology.

The government targeted those who were opposed to the educational reform. Those people were usually secular college professors who saw the reform as a government tool in maintaining power and manipulating people’s minds. These particular people were usually prosecuted or fired from their jobs. Those prosecuted were unfairly judged, since the majority of local and state court judges were appointed by the government. People who opposed the reform could not practice their civil rights, as they did not have the right to be fairly represented in court. Human rights violations were everywhere. The majority of judges were Islamic clerics who previously were *mullahs*-Islamic religious leader in their communities.

Reforms were brought to the legal system of the country as well. Leaders reformed the existing court system. Previous judges were replaced with Islamic leaders. The process made the court procedures simpler and less bureaucratic. Islamic scholars, *Ulima*, restructured the existing laws in the judicial process.

Mass media was controlled by the state. The primary role of the media was teaching of Islam and promote its ideology. Through media, the government intended to reform its cultural and traditional institutions and involve Islamization traditions and customs. All the television programs were government-sponsored, movies released had to be investigated by the government officials to make sure it promoted Islamic ideology.

*Conclusion*

India and Pakistan share several same traditions and customs. However, the religious division between the two nationalities have caused many issues both during and after the
colonization. Throughout the history of Pakistan, positioning Islam as a source of identity has caused many problems to the country. Many political leaders have used the religion as a tool to gain political power.

The same Islamization that has been the biggest step in defining Pakistan’s identity has also caused Pakistan both social and political issues. The independence movement of Bangladesh was primarily because leaders of Pakistan focused only on Pakistani people when defining the identity and setting up the national language. Through social and governmental reforms, the government intended to use Islam as a base for Pakistan’s national identity. Today, Pakistan is an Islamic country, and political tension still remains as a main issue with India.
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