

# DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

**Secularism is a commodity for the elite: Pakistan's Islamists on the rise**

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**While the world public is focusing its attention on Afghanistan, ideological warfare between secularists and militant Islamists is shaking Pakistan's polity. Prevailing impunity is severely affecting the security of the people.**

Salmaan Taseer was murdered on January 4, 2011 by one of his own security guards, who ostensibly killed him to protect the religion of Allah. Taseer, governor of the largest province in Pakistan, had taken a position on the blasphemy law and supported the cause of a Christian woman who was sentenced to death under this law. A couple of months later, Shahbaz Bhatti, the Federal Minister of Minority Affairs and the only non-Muslim member of Pakistan's Federal Cabinet, was gunned down.

The aftermath of Governor Taseer's assassination was marked by the eulogizing of his self-confessed murderer. Religious parties rallied, demanding the killer's release. Protests by religious parties around the country were attended by tens of thousands. The leaders of banned sectarian groups openly addressed the meetings. The murder of Taseer served to highlight and deepen the ideological fault lines in the country.

The Taliban insurgency has plagued Pakistan for a long time. Yet the past eight or nine months have brought the ideological conflict more strongly to the fore. The picture that has emerged from this confrontation reveals two completely mismatched sides: the vocal majority that leans towards the Islamic right, and a minority of urban liberals.

## **Islamist militancy was already growing stronger 30 years ago**

The genesis of militancy and the corresponding ideological warfare can be directly traced back to the 1980s. The Soviet Afghan war, when Pakistan supported Afghan mujahideen in the fight against their government, coupled with the Islamist military dictatorship of General Zia ul Haq in Pakistan, started the process of radicalization of the Pakistani polity. Zia deliberately attempted to amend the Constitution to make it more Islamic. He aimed to instil the Saudi Arabian brand of puritanical Islam into the national character and therefore introduced measures to make state institutions lean towards the conservative right.

The Pakistan Army is a prime example. Its original national motto was "unity, faith and discipline", which was replaced by "Imaan, Taqwa, Jihad Fi Sibil-lillah" (belief, piety and holy war in the name of Allah). The Pakistan Army has not been a secular institution since. Recently, one brigadier and four majors from the Pakistan Army were arrested for having links to the banned Hizb-uk-Tahrir, a pan-Islamic organisation that calls on all Muslims to unify into one Islamic state. This alleged disturbing connection is not surprising given the radical nature of the rhetoric regulating the armed forces of Pakistan.

Similarly, the judiciary has been moulded into yet another Islamist institution. The laws have been amended and replaced to ensure they conform to Islamic injunctions and thus leave little room for the judiciary to wriggle out. The Lawyer's Movement from 2008 and 2009 has further complicated the situation. This mass protest was started by the lawyers of Pakistan as a reaction to the unlawful dismissal of Pakistan's Chief Justice by the military dictator Pervez Musharraf in 2007. The movement helped create a new high court with the support of the public. Hence the judges now feel compelled to act in accordance with populist demands – and populist demands remain Islamic. The treatment of the accused in Salman Taseer's murder case is one example. He has repeatedly and publicly confessed to the killing, and yet has not been sentenced, whereas various cases involving political leaders are heard and disposed of on a daily basis.

### **Civil society on the defence**

The above narrative seeks to demonstrate that the primary conflict in Pakistan is no longer physical: the Pakistani Taliban attack with impunity. They have the comfort of knowing that many national leaders will not condemn a suicide attack – not even one on women and children – without including a diatribe against the drone attacks, and hence drawing a false causality. The United State's drone attacks in the north-western regions near the Afghan border are aimed at defeating Taliban and Al-Qaeda militias.

The opposition parties – both political and religious – have used the ideological divide between Islamist and secular groups to capitalize on the growing discontentment of the population with the government. They chose to demonize the West in general and the United States in particular. However, by doing so, they fuel the religious fervour and thereby inadvertently provide impetus to the militants.

The equation of civil society versus militancy has been drastically altered in the past year or so. With the attacks on Taseer, Bhatti and others, the secular, moderate and largely urban civil society has gone on the defensive. This has created a vacuum in the national discourse. This space is now being filled by a familiar, hyper nationalist rhetoric that inextricably links the Pakistani national consciousness with the Islamic, largely Saudi Arabian, identity. This was already the aim of General Zia-ul-Haq's social engineering program in the 1980s.

### **Contest between two non-compatible identities**

Distinctions among the Taliban, Pakistani Taliban and Al-Qaeda are not easy to make in the highly permeable and fluid interplay between these entities. However, what remains clear is that using military force is unlikely to suffice as a single measure. The war has already spilled over from the tribal areas of Waziristan to the streets of Lahore and Karachi, Pakistan's two largest cities. Any effort to overcome the radicalization in society would have to include a serious effort to reclaim the territories dominated by radical groups as an integral component. This ground has partly been surrendered by civil society, and in part civil society has been pushed out. At the same time, though, secular forces have been reduced to a closed clique.

The most salient example of this warped and solid divide between secular and religiously radical parties is the hegemonic discourse of the Urdu and English media. Whereas the English press offers free and candid discourse on an issue as sensitive as the blasphemy laws, it is almost unthinkable to expect that in the vernacular press. The problem is that only about ten percent of the population has access to the English media. The result is that secularism and liberalism in Pakistan is a commodity for the elite, whereas religious and often violent rhetoric remains the masses' daily consumption. This is a frightening thought.

If one were to take a reductionist approach, the conflict in Pakistan could be reduced in a nutshell to a contest between two competing and non-compatible identities. Pakistan can be a theocracy or a popular representative democracy – it cannot be a bit of both, at least not for long.