

ETHNIC GROUPS AND REGIONALISM IN PAKISTAN

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INTRODUCTION

History of mankind is a chequered history of bloodshed, violence, and disintegrating influences. From primitive groupings to the Crusades, from the disintegration of the Hapsburg and Ottoman empires to Nazi Germany, from the liquidation of French, Italian, and British empires to the present breakup of the Socialist Bloc, history bears testimony to the fact that mankind seeks identification through aspirations of the principle of nationality as distinct ethnic groups or regions in trying to create political and administrative units which they can dominate.

Nationalism symbolises the feeling of belonging to a group distinct from others because of some common racial, linguistic, ethnic, historical ties identified with a particular territory. The carnage in Kashmir and Bosnia are cases in point.

Regionalism and ethnicity came into sharp focus in the subcontinent after the disintegration of the Mughal Empire, and acquisition of the British who followed them to agree to partition along regional, linguistic, and historical lines: the Hindus and the Muslims. The nation-states of India and Pakistan were born in spite of their people having lived in communal harmony for centuries. The spirit of nationalism which had been dormant surfaced in its extremity in a violent form culminating in unnecessary bloodshed. Friends became enemies, and enemies enemy became friends.

The course of the history of Pakistan has never run smooth after 1947. Cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity has played a key role in keeping the people further subdivided into ethnic and regional groupings. Disparity in development has only intensified the conflict resulting in nationalistic and regional movements. The author of this paper has tried to examine this problem of post-1971 Pakistan. The analysis comprises the embodiments of the principles of national-

ism along the linguistic, racial, and historical lines.

HISTORICAL PREMISE

The 20th century is replete with the phenomenon of the integrating and disintegrating roles of the principle of nationalism. According to Smith:

The rise of nationalism has stimulated the crystalization of ethnicity in many parts of the world. Nationalism is the claim of ethnic groups to self-determination. When an ethnic group achieves sovereignty in a certain state, it will become a nation which then excludes the other ethnic groups. The excluded ethnic groups are then forced to get organized and to seek a national minority status and an ethnic autonomy.¹

This organization along nationalistic lines aggravates the problem and political stability remains an illusion.²

Islam as a comprehensive religion advocates a new basis for the organization of human society and an equity-based framework for the flourishing of a united yet diversified and genuinely pluralistic society.³ The Islamic model ensures justice for all, those who join the fold of Islam and become part of the Islamic Ummah, and also for those who remain outside it, and as such are accepted as part of a wider family of nations or religions and cultural communities.⁴ Islam does not any time deny cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity but rather propagates the principles of unity, and harmony. Nor does it deny the baser elements of human nature. It provides a complete code of conduct based on faith and moral excellence. History reveals that these baser elements of human nature superimpose their degrading influences on human frailty, and the tendency can only lead to destruction. History bears witness to the fact that it is people who make and break the system. In the words of Allama I.I.Kazi "The greatest mischief is generated by those who profess to be one's followers".⁵ Islam has not failed the people, the people have failed Islam.

It is the Muslim people who were beguiled by Western powers to be instrumental in breaking the unity of the Muslim Ummah, and to be goaded into creating independent national states on linguistic, cultural, racial, and regional parameters. These independent Muslim states generated further problems of ethnicity and regional groupings. Pakistan being no exception

has miserably failed in national integration. The causal factors of this phenomenon are domestic and international.

ETHNIC GROUPS AND REGIONALISM

It is generally argued that regionalism is the by-product of ethnic national movements. That these movements received their impetus from the policies of successive governments of Pakistan both civil and military. The people manning these successive governments came from common backgrounds of established elites comprising the tribals, the feudals, the well-to-do business class, and the supra-elitist civil-military bureaucracy for their self interest was everything and everything was their self interest. This is evident even today. The pursuit of self interest by a few at the expense of the general impoverished class can only breed discontent, and an ingrained desire to seek redressal. In a developing country the problem is acute reaching chronic proportions resulting in violence and anarchy. On the international front, the pursuit of national self-interest persists taking many shapes and forms: ideology, economic supremacy, and so on.

The Pushtunistan Movement had its roots in prepartition India. Its mass appeal spilled over into Pakistan. The Sindhi, Baluchi, Mohajir, and Seraiki movements gained momentum in the 1970s, whereas, they had enjoyed little public support before.

With the informal take-over of the power by the military-bureaucratic structure in 1953 in Pakistan, the composition of the decision-making elite was such that the Punjabis, the Mohajirs and the Pushtuns dominated the top echelon of the power elite while the Sindhis, the Baluchis (and also the Bengalis) remained less effective. The Military-bureaucratic elite pursued certain political, economic and cultural policies which on the one hand failed to integrate the people into one ideological community and on the other generated and fed ethno-national tendencies in Sindh, Baluchistan, and the then East Pakistan (Bangladesh: 1971). Especially, the policies pursued during the Ayub era (1957-1969) and re-incarnated in the Zia era (1977-1988) bear a remarkable similarity to each other in terms of content as well as their consequences. Both

regimes favoured some version of 'controlled democracy' model in political sphere, both considered economic development as the panacea to ethnic problems, and both attempted to impose unitary cultural policies and administrative structure though under different slogans. The consequences of the policies were similar in the case of Sindh and Baluchistan.⁶

Ethno-national cultures were born in the Ayub era and were matured during the Zia era. The political role of unrepresentative military-bureaucratic elite, proved to be the real inner disease, which has stirred the ethnic pot boiling in Sindh and Baluchistan,⁷ and to some extent in the Seraiki belt of the Punjab.

Pakistan comprises four provinces, namely: North-West Frontier Province (N.W.F.P), Punjab, Sindh, and Baluchistan. Punjab with 26% of the total area has more than a half (56.1%) of the total population, followed by Sindh (22.6%) and N.W.F.P. (13.1%). Baluchistan having the largest area i.e., 43.6% has only 5.1% of the total population. 96.7% of the total population is Muslim. Other important minorities include Christians (1.6%), Hindus (1.5%), and Ahmadis (0.12%).⁸

Defined in linguistic terms, the peoples of Pakistan form the product of mingling successive waves of migration from central Asia and the Iranian plateau with the indigenous people.⁹ In broad sense, there are five major ethnic groups in Pakistan: the Punjabis, the Sindhis, the Mohajirs, the Pushtuns, and the Baluchis. The term 'Mohajir' (refugees) refers to people who migrated from India in the wake of the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Originally, the term referred to all refugees who migrated from India. However, over time, it has become identified with the urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated from Northern India and were settled in Sindh. The Punjabi Muslims who migrated from East Punjab were amalgamated into the West Punjabi population which had the same language and culture.¹⁰ Each ethnic group has a transnational character. They live in not only their own provinces but also live in India (Punjabis, Sindhis, Mohajirs). The Pushtuns live in Afghanistan and the Baluchis live in Iran, Afghanistan, and the independent states of the former Soviet Union. The exact number of these ethnic

groups in these countries is not known and has been a matter of conjecture among the scholars.¹¹ There exist wide linguistic, social and cultural variations within these groups.

Over more than two decades, these ethnic groups are and have been demanding regional autonomy and/or to some extent some semblance of independence or semi-independence. Most prominent today are the Mohajirs and Sindhis. Particularly those Mohajirs who are living in Sindh. Sindhis are opposed to the division of their own native land. Pushtuns and the Baluch also figure in this regionalism followed by the Seraikis and people who live in areas under Federal control.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion it can be surmised that ethnic groupings and regionalism has entrenched itself in the politics of today's Pakistan. the degree of ethnicity and regionalism has all the more intensified due to misplaced policy are the need of the hour to diffuse tension and conflict. A dialogue for compromise is needed to bring about rapprochement and appeasement. The spirit of nationalism is not to be crushed but needs to be channeled towards co-existence and tolerance. Multi-culturalism should be advocated, and diversity be given equal respect. Tolerance breeds respect, and respect breeds co-existence, and that is Pakistan's last and final salvation as a stable and sovereign Islamic Republic.

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