

November 30, 2014

Two faces of Pakistan

Sarwar Jahan Chowdhury

It's not easy to understand a sizable country of 180 million with some diversity which is fraught with multifarious complex problems and also some bit of underlying hope. The country in question here is Pakistan. The Pakistani society often seems to embody the worrying version of Sunni Islam, although it's an apparently democratic or quasi-democratic nation. In the whole world only one or two Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's neighbor Afghanistan are perhaps in the similar category in terms of religious orthodoxy.

The modern state- traditional society dichotomy is acute in Pakistan and these two are often at loggerheads. The primitivism of the dominant Sunni Islamic segment of the society is increasingly seeping in to the somewhat modern state left behind by the colonial modernizers and carried forward by their native nationalist counterparts. Even Jinnah's "Two Nation Theory" emphasized the cultural and historical distinctiveness of sub-continental Muslims and not on religion per se. He never meant Sunni Sharia Laws to come in force and the deplorable laws like 'Blasphemy Act' etc.

The nation is in regression in many senses and involvement of major powers in the geo-strategic games in the Pakistan-Afghanistan sub-region for many decades now, has worsened the situation. In fact, the Western powers are now in an attempt to contain the fallout of that game. The outcome though is inconclusive. The jury is still out on who would prevail in that sub-region, the militant Sunni Islamists or whatever moderate mainstream political forces still exists.

We often get horrified, and rightfully so, hearing the news of death penalty of people, mostly non-Muslims, for blasphemous act against Islam. Further terrifying is the news of radical mob in the interiors taking up the law in their own hands and lynching people accused of or, more plausibly, tricked to blasphemy. The simple thing is, situation in Pakistan is no way as such that the tiny and frightened minorities would dare insulting Islam in any way. But the mob act goes on. Some day back they snatched a mentally unstable man, accused of discarding the Quran, from the police custody and lynched him to death. Recently a Christian couple met the same fate. They were severely beaten

and then burned alive to death in a brick kiln. In both cases the mob were called out from the local mosque through its mike. Few years back Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer and Federal Minister for Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian himself, were assassinated for speaking against this highly controversial blasphemy law. Any criticism of the orthodox rendition of Islam is almost becoming a social taboo in Pakistan.

Apart from these , we know and keep hearing occasionally about the persecution against all possible minorities – the Hindus, the Sikhs, the Shiites, the Ahmadis, the Christians. Massive numbers of Hindus and Sikhs, due to the conditions in Pakistan, migrated to India over the decades since independence. There is a plethora of radical factions and their cadres brainwashed to insanity for murder and martyrdom. Even, it appears that, a sizable part of ordinary Pakistanis has turned more orthodox due to the relentless endeavor of these outfits.

But if we conclude here and make a final judgment on Pakistani society, we are doomed to be wrong.

If someone travels to Pakistan, he or she will see a lot of normal modern Pakistanis getting along with their jobs and life , which are largely modern as well. They are dressed in shirts and trousers and the privileged ones in suits. They are interested in normal things like commodity, entertainment, career or business success. There are university going students both males and females. The latter although modestly dressed more in Pakistani attires like Salwar-Kamiz-Dopatta and not in western jeans and tops or skirts. But one can notice the touch of beauty, subtlety and aesthetics even in those native dress ups. There are quite some people like journalists, professors, public servants, intellectuals, civil society members, scholars and other professional who are of moderate views and who don't buy extremist ideology. These people talk sensibly most of the times and appear to have some rationality and sense of proportion. Although these educated middle and upper class people have certain national characteristics which are not fully comparable to western liberals or similar in some parts of the East, you get a feeling watching them that it's not a nation entirely crazy as depicted by certain portrayals.

These people uphold the hope, if any at all, for Pakistan. They are the ones who perhaps can reverse or prevent the regression of increasing radicalization. They need certain leverage for bringing about the changes and for that they will require both internal unity

amongst themselves and perhaps some forms of external help. No national society can be divorced from the international community anymore in this era of globalization. It is to be seen whether these latter kind of Pakistanis and the free world international community involved in Pakistan can work in effective sync to bring about positive changes in that troubled nation.

The writer is the Head of Operations in BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University.

Email: sarwar558@gmail.com