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Pakistan: Ethno-Politics and Contending Elites

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Preface

In 1989, UNRISD launched a major research project on Ethnic Conflict and Development. Since then 14 case studies have been carried out in countries experiencing ethnic conflicts in different regions of the world. The research has sought to examine:

- the conditions under which ethnic conflicts arise and sustain themselves;
- the roles of economic, cultural, social and political factors in shaping ethnic consciousness and claims;
- the effects of development processes, state policies and international politics on the dynamics of ethnic conflicts;
- the interests and goals of ethnic movements, and what kinds of strategies and ideologies they pursue;
- the reasons why some ethnic conflicts become violent while others are regulated within existing political and constitutional structures; and
- the mechanisms which can be developed to prevent, contain or resolve such conflicts.

This paper forms part of the authors' larger study on ethnic conflict and development in Pakistan. After a brief discussion of the formation of ethnic consciousness in the context of contemporary post-colonial states, the authors describe the key features of the ethnic situation in Pakistan. The bulk of the paper is taken up with an analysis of the evolution of ethnic tensions and violence in the province of Sindh. The dynamics of these conflicts are studied within the larger context of national politics and development policies and patterns. There is also a discussion of the role played by regional ethnic associations and institutions such as the state, the political parties, the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the army in the unfolding of ethnic conflicts in Sindh.

Although Islam provided a unifying element in Pakistan, the ethnic diversity of the country proved to be a source of dissension and conflicts. The authors attribute this largely to failures of national leadership to share power and to pursue equitable development policies. The initial disparities in resources and development among different ethnic groups were exacerbated by concentration of power at the centre and discriminatory economic policies. The failure to share power and abide by the electoral process resulted in a dismemberment of the country with the creation of Bangladesh as a separate state.

The province of Sindh has been convulsed by ethnic conflicts since the early years of independence. The immediate source of its problems was the mass migration of refugees from India at the time of the partition of the sub-continent. These refugees, known as *mohajirs*, came in the subsequent years to constitute a significant proportion of the population of Sindh and to form a majority in some urban areas, especially Karachi. In view of their better education and skills, they took the place of the departing Hindu middle class professionals and business groups. Through their alliance with the ruling Punjabi elite in Islamabad, the *mohajirs* were able to obtain preferential access to resources dispensed by the state. This set the stage for their conflict with the nascent Sindhi middle class which felt deprived and discriminated against in its native lands. The conflict was further sharpened by the arrival of migrants from the Frontier Province. A portion of the massive arms destined for Afghan refugees found its way into the streets of Karachi. This, together with drug smuggling gangs operating in the country, provided a fertile terrain for a series of violent conflicts from the mid-1980s among different ethnic groups in Sindh.

The authors argue that successive federal governments sought to manipulate ethnic differences to promote their own narrow interests. Likewise, key institutions such as the army, the political parties and the bureaucracy failed to provide mechanisms for mediation and conflict resolution. While there have been periods when ethnic tensions have been dormant, no serious attempt has been made to deal with the root causes of the problem.

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Acronyms

APMSO	All Pakistan Mohajir Student Organization
CBA	Collective Bargaining Agent
COAS	The Chief of Army Staff
FATA	Federally Adminstrative Tribal Area
GNP	Gross National Product
IJI	Islami Jamhoori Ittehad
JSSF	Jiye Sindh Students Federation
JSTP	Jiye Sindh Taraqi Pasand
MNA	Member of National Assembly
MPA	Member of Province Assembly
MQM	Mohajir Quami Movement
MRD	Movement for the Restoration of Democracy
NWFP	North West Frontier Province
OPP	Orangi Pilot Project
PNA	Pakistan National Alliance
PPI	Punjabi Pakhtun Ittehad
PPP	Pakistan People's Party
PSF	People's Student Federation
R	Rupee
U.P.	Uttar Pradesh
UWF	United Workers Front

I. Introduction

1. Shaping of Identities

All individuals contain within themselves a multitude of markers that define their identity, such as gender, age, religion, profession, class, kinship and family, as well as nationality and/or "ethnicity". These various aspects normally coalesce into a cohesive whole; while all identity factors coexist, not all have equal weight or importance at all times. Individuals therefore possess a plurality of potential "we's", so that when individuals come together as distinct groups the basis of their collective identity is selected from amongst a variety of possible markers, real or imagined. While a few are immutable, such as gender and race, the majority provide a greater scope for negotiation.

Individuals may belong to several groups at any point in time, but normally only one "community" defines their political identity. Hence, the question is why a certain identity assumes primacy at a particular point in time or in a given situation. In political terms, we would hold that "identities are chosen; that is, out of an infinite range of possible cultural identities that one is selected as the political identity which is believed offers the greatest scope of political success".¹

¹ David Taylor and Malcolm Yapp (eds.), **Political Identity in South Asia**, Curzon Press, London, 1979, p. x.

We would add that while the chosen "community" identity defines and demarcates a particular group, by the same token it performs the equally significant function of differentiating one particular group from others. In the political arena, this translates into expanding political space and gaining political power through the use of "otherization" as a conscious policy. It is in consequence of such a policy that the Muslims of India demanded and acquired a separate state: Pakistan. At the same time, it is important to recognize that while certain parameters may objectively create a social group - an ethnic group - this does not automatically translate into a politically active identity.

When looking at the question of the politics of ethnicity and development, the issue is not whether certain ethnic communities exist or not but why ethnic identities have been selected as the basis of politics, how those identities have been shaped, and to what purpose. Unlike nationalist movements, ethnic groups do not seek self-determination but operate within the parameters of the state (although ethnic assertion can evolve into a nationalist movement). Thus the state is a focus for competing ethnic groups, each striving for a greater share of the pie. It can also be an agent in the creation of ethnic consciousness, such as when a powerful ethnic group strives to dominate others or to perpetuate such dominance through state politics. The appeal of ethnically defined political groups lies in their ability to replicate "in the public and adult world, the functions performed in the private and childhood environment by the family", thus satisfying the motivational aspect of both "the search for emotional security, [and] on rational grounds of utility in the search for access to desired resources". It can also be dictated by "the circumstances of people's lives which limit [any] real choice in their group affiliation".²

2. Nation States and "State Nations"

In the modern era the term "state" normally refers to nation states, i.e., peoples who, believing themselves to be nations, have delimited a territorial space within which the nation is to be formalized. The earliest evolution of such states was in Europe; in the rest of the world the nation state phenomenon blossomed in the early twentieth century, accelerating after the Second World War with colonized areas rapidly gaining political sovereignty or independence. The political organization of the world into independent nation states has become a pillar of the modern world to the point that any attempt to question state borders has been viewed as modern-day heresy by the international community, which insists that all internal disputes be resolved within existing territorial demarcations. In fact, however, most nation states are multi-national states.

An important presumption of the nation state is that the state has a direct relationship with its citizens. No intermediary mediating institutions are considered legitimate except those erected by the state itself. Thus many aspects of an individual's life are to be administered through the state's instruments or institutions, i.e., the bureaucracy, the judiciary, etc., while the only legitimate forms of opposition or protest and demands are limited to the political process. In return for giving up autonomy (self-governance), citizens expect to receive a number of benefits such as physical, social and economic security. In turn, the functioning of this social contract depends on the legitimacy of those who assume state power and the degree to which they carry out their part of the social contract.

However, the theory of nation states has made little or no differentiation between nations that have evolved into states and those rapidly created states that may or may not have been nations. The majority of ex-colonial states are to be found in this latter category, characterized by their status of states in search of a nation - which are referred to here as "state nations". As such, they have yet to achieve a universal sense of nationhood that encompasses a history of

² David Brown, "Ethnic Revival: Perspectives on State and Society", **Third World Quarterly**, II(4), October 1989, p. 6.

commonality and an identity matrix that appeals to a majority of the citizens of the state nation.

These state nations face the challenge of transforming into nation states, a process in which they are hampered by the legacies of their erstwhile colonizer such as:

- colonial structures and bureaucratic instruments of control and power;
- uneven economic development as a conscious policy;
- policies of preference and discrimination vis-à-vis different ethnic groups.

All of this militates against the evolution of a nation state that embraces the various parts of the state nation.

Post-colonial states frequently distinguish themselves by a crisis in the state's legitimacy vis-à-vis its citizens. This is accentuated when those who assume state power almost exclusively represent the interests of selected portions of the population to which they belong rather than the interests of the state's citizens as a whole. Under such circumstances the state no longer remains credible - the identity of the state is largely reduced to the identity of those who dominate the structures of power.

"In country after country, a single ethnic group [took] control over the state and used its powers to exercise control over others ... In retrospect there has been far less 'nation building' than many analysts had expected or hoped for, for the process of state building has rendered many ethnic groups devoid of power or influence."³

When state power rests with a selected group of the state's citizens, a preferred option is for a centralist state. This was clearly the case in Pakistan, where maximizing the interests of the state was interpreted by those in power as best achieved through maximized centralization.

3. Community and Nationhood

Deutsch made the distinction between community and society as two different concepts:

"Community is that group of people who can communicate easily with one another.

Society comprises all those people who are mobilized from the traditional society into the modern industrial society, thereby entering into close economic, political and social contacts with others ... If the growth of the community keeps pace with that of society the nation is smoothly enlarged; if, however, the rate of expansion of the numbers of those mobilized exceeds that of those who are able to communicate with one another, a crisis will occur and the state will fall apart or undergo some major change."⁴

In most post-colonial states the assumption that, after political independence, the adoption of democratic institutions would mediate existing contradictions in society along a vertical as well as a horizontal axis has proven largely erroneous. More often than not the institutions, classes and groups strengthened in line with the colonial imperative simply usurped the democratic high ground to legitimize the perpetuation of their power and influence. In states across much of the Third World democracy was bent out of shape to suit the interests of the military, the bureaucracy, feudals and other powerful interest groups: it was either "basic", or "guided" or otherwise appropriately prefixed to deny its central function of articulating the will of the people through elections, not to mention key processes such as accountability. Among other things, this also meant that a genuine system of political accommodation could not be put into place. Very often, society was not transformed into a community.

³ Myron Weiner quoted in David Brown, op. cit., p. 10.

⁴ Deutsch quoted in Malcolm Yapp, "Language, Religion and Political Identity: A General Framework" in David Taylor and Malcolm Yapp (eds.), op. cit., p.12.

The expectation - central to the vision of most newly liberated states - of a more equitable order, including a better life for the great majority, was rapidly demolished. The process of location within a national identity framework was undermined as the individual citizen's encounter with the state remained the same as it had been under colonial rule. This created a fundamental crisis of legitimacy for the state, the alienation of the "nation" from it and the inevitable recourse by "citizens" to narrower, more proximate contexts of identity.

4. Modernization and Elite Competition

States have the option of adopting development policies that are either functional or territorial. While the latter promotes the development of all the state's areas, the former focuses on developing certain aspects in each area - which may be done to the detriment of others. A policy of functional development in the context of raised expectations of a better life and a democratic order, by implication equitable, informing the modern nation state ideal has serious consequences in which the "fairness" of policies and measures becomes critical to judging the performance of the state.

In many states, including Pakistan, the model of modernization adopted was one that approximated, in the political sphere, the building of a centralized state by the ruling élite. All resources were "national" and hence it was the prerogative of the state to dispose of these as it saw fit in the "best interest of the nation". Given the functional model of development, this often meant that large sections of the population were marginalized as the state concentrated on developing economic sectors that it perceived as being important. Where this process was accompanied at least by a degree of accommodation between the dominant and subordinate élites, the political consequences were less severe. Where the marginalization of sections of the population has coincided with groups identifiable in terms of territory, religion, race, ethnicity, etc., the polarization has had even more serious political implications in terms of integration.

Local élites have often encouraged the modernization process to be seen in such terms in any case, as they seek to mobilize their constituencies in pursuit of privileges or redressing grievances. The symbols chosen and manipulated by these élites almost always emphasize particular markers of identity at the expense of others, depending on the circumstances.

"The game of symbol selection and symbol manipulation ... is clearly one that requires considerable skill and that is not always played successfully. Elites are indeed limited and constrained by the cultures of the groups they hope to represent. ...The great dilemma constantly faced by political élites who manipulate symbols of identity among peoples with rich cultures is that political mobilization of the community against its rivals requires unity and solidarity, which in turn requires that sets of symbols be made as congruent as possible. However, since most cultures are internally diverse, the search for additional symbols of unity often leads to internal

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