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Pakistan: The Ethnic Equation

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Overview

Pakistan is a synthetic country, an amalgam of ethnic groups with differing social structures from two dissimilar culture worlds. The struggle to create a nation-state with common goals from these disparate elements has preoccupied a succession of administrations in Pakistan.

A dichotomy of forces—Islamic fundamentalism and ethnic nationalism—strongly influences the direction of political development in Pakistan. Belief in the community of Islam was the bonding element in the formation of the Islamic State of Pakistan at Partition in 1947, and continues to be a key unifying influence. At the same time, appeals to parochial ethnic interests lead to agitation for provincial autonomy and separatism.

The fragility of relationships among the four major ethnic groups—the Punjabis, the Sindhis, the Baluchis, and the Pushtuns—is a continuing threat to the political stability of the country. Resentment of the politically dominant Punjabis is widespread among the other ethnic groups and is a paramount factor among the many strains and tensions that permeate Pakistani society. Currently, the most disaffected ethnic group is the restive, belligerent Baluchis.

Islam is a way of life that encompasses not only religion but also politics, culture, and economics. The appeal of the Islamic way of life in Pakistan includes hope for economic betterment, within the Islamic model of development, along with pride through identification with the newfound power and prestige of Muslim oil-producing states.

Pakistan has an uncertain future, and the overriding problem confronting the leadership is still one of how to survive surrounded by strong and unfriendly neighbors, notably the USSR and India. Political association with the Islamic Persian Gulf States—and the growing economic promise this holds—appears the most likely direction that Pakistan will take.

Should the expectations inherent in an Islamic association fail, however, then Pakistan could turn elsewhere. Although the shock of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan resulted in a temporary anti-Soviet-focused unity, the longer range threat posed by Moscow on Pakistan's northern borders could lead to some form of accommodation with the Soviet Union. Another possibility is that Pakistan will renew its efforts to improve relationships and possibly reestablish regional ties with India. And finally there is the chance that an intensification of ethnic nationalism could lead to political fragmentation—a precedent established almost a decade ago when the Bengalis of East Pakistan opted for an independent Bangladesh despite their Islamic religious ties with Pakistan.

Pakistan: The Ethnic Equation

Introduction

Pakistan has never been an ethnically united country. From its inception at Partition in 1947, a succession of administrations have struggled to create a nation-state with common goals out of a coalition of disparate ethnic groups whose primary bonds were their belief in Islam and their reluctance to become minorities within a Hindu-dominated India. More than three decades later, unresolved conflicts among the Punjabis, Sindhis, Baluchis, and Pushtuns remain. One of the most troublesome of these ethnic conflicts—between the Punjabis and Bengalis—was bloodily ended with the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

National cohesion still is an elusive goal. Progress has been slow and halting in integrating the tribal societies of the Baluchistan and North-West Frontier Provinces with the rest of the country. Moreover, resentment of the politically dominant Punjabis by all of the other ethnic groups has heightened political unrest in the country. (c)

Islamic fundamentalism (an orthodox approach to the Islamic way of life) and ethnic parochialism are strong, countervailing forces in Pakistani society. Membership in the Islamic community and defense of Islam, especially when threatened by powerful non-Muslim groups such as Hindus and atheistic Communists, continue to be unifying influences. At the same time, appeals to narrow ethnic interests lead to agitation for provincial autonomy and separatism; deep-seated, regionally based, ethnic tensions and rivalries underlie much of what ails the body politic.

Ethnicity in Pakistan

Pakistan is an amalgam of two culture worlds that meet along the Indus River. The river, whose waters are the economic lifeblood of Pakistan, is a major border in the historical conflict that separates nomad from farmer and hillman from plainsman. A short distance west of the river an escarpment rises, clearly and physically marking the border of the mountainous, basin-range landscape that stretches into the Middle East. Within this vast territory lives a variety of

culturally related, tribally organized societies with traditions of nomadism. The Baluchis and Pushtuns are a part of this culture world. The alluvial plains of the Indus and the lands to the east are the homelands of the Punjabis and Sindhis, who are culturally allied with the sedentary peoples of the Indian subcontinent. The structures and cultural traditions of these peoples are significantly different from those of the tribal societies to the west. While these two culture worlds do interact on an economic level, they are not mutually interdependent.

The provinces of Pakistan are divided generally along ethnic lines, allotting each major ethnic group a core area. Provincial boundaries, however, have been drawn so as to include significantly large ethnic minorities within each jurisdiction. Additionally, all but the Sindhis are ethnically part of groups that span Pakistan's international borders: the Pushtuns with Pushtuns in Afghanistan, the Baluchis with fellow tribesmen in Iran and Afghanistan, and the Punjabis with ethnic—but religiously separate—cohorts in India. Each ethnic group has its own literary tradition and language. Although Urdu is the national language, it is not the mother tongue of any of the groups; English is widely spoken among the educated and is the second language in government and business.

Punjabis are the dominant group in Pakistan, owing to their superiority in numbers and their higher level of education—consequently, they prevail among bureaucrats, the professions, and the higher echelons of the business community. Each of the other ethnic groups—the Sindhis, the Baluchis, and the Pushtuns—believe they have just cause for their feelings of discrimination at the hands of the Punjabis. All have harbored thoughts of autonomy, even independence.

The brief history of Pakistan provides clues to the relationship between ethnic divisiveness and what is often termed the "bond of Islam." The bloody attempt of the Punjabi-dominated Pakistani Army to subjugate

Bengali-populated East Pakistan nine years ago contradicted that cliché when ethnic factors proved stronger than religious ties.¹ Although the physical separation had some bearing, the Bengali-Punjabi example does raise questions as to the fragility of relationships among the four remaining ethnic groups in Pakistan and their importance in assessing the greater questions of political stability in Pakistan.

Punjabis. The Punjabis are an aggressive, martial, and industrious people whose dominant role is in part related to the location of their fertile homeland astride major tributaries of the Indus. The Punjab has been inhabited—and coveted—for more than 4,000 years by Greeks, Moguls, Afghans, and many other diverse peoples who crossed the Hindu Kush passes bound for the plains of India. Many came as conquerors, some as simple travelers; all contributed to a proud heritage for the present generation of Punjabis.

Much of the confrontation between India and Pakistan over the past 30 years has originated among Punjabis. Punjabis have a mixed religious background—about one-half is Muslim; the remainder is Hindu or Sikh. Underlying the disagreements between the two countries is the bitterness generated by religious differences (Muslim/Hindu as well as Sikh/Muslim and Sikh/Hindu) and intra-ethnic rivalry among these Punjabi groups. At the time of the dissolution of British India 33 years ago, the Muslim Punjabi leaders and intellectuals, fearing discrimination in an overwhelmingly Hindu India, strongly supported the concept of a pan-Islamic state. Thus, at Partition, the Punjab was divided roughly into two parts: the western half became the province of the Punjab in Pakistan, and the eastern half the state of Punjab in India. At a later date, the Indian Punjab was again divided to provide separate states for the Sikhs in Punjab and the Hindus in Haryana.²

¹ Punjabis, who hold most high offices in Pakistan, were reluctant to concede political control of Pakistan a decade ago to the more numerous Bengalis as dictated by the results of a national election. Proud, some say arrogant, Punjabis believe that although all Muslims are created equal as stated in the *Koran*, some (Punjabis) are more equal than others. That friction between Punjabis and Bengalis has ethnic roots is evidenced by the continuing rubs between these Punjabis and Bengalis who live in India.

² In constitutionally secular India, the justification for the division was linguistic—Punjabi in the Punjab and Hindu in Haryana.

Pakistan: Major Ethnic Groups

	Punjabis	Sindhis	Baluchis	Pushtuns
Millions				
Total population *	73	18	4	20
Pakistan	47	16	3	12
India	26	2	0	0
Afghanistan	0	0	NEGL	8
Iran	0	0	1	0
Percent				
Share of total population in Pakistan	60	20	3	17
Language				
	Punjabi	Sindhi	Baluchi	Pushtu

* Estimated, as of January 1979. Total estimated population of Pakistan is 77,860,000.

The legacy of Partition had other effects that deepen the intensity of distrust between India and Pakistan. A massive flight of religious refugees at that time literally depopulated the Indian portion of the Punjab of its Muslim population; equally, no Hindus or Sikhs remained in the Pakistani Punjab.

Muslim Punjabi society has been modified through its long association with the Hindu caste system; the result is a social structure based on class groupings that runs counter to the egalitarian precepts of Islam. Consequently, Muslim Punjabi society exhibits little vertical social movement from the large peasantry underclass up through the hereditary village artisan segment to the landed upper class. An exception has been the enhanced standing of the small middle class, which filled the void created throughout Pakistan by the departure of the Hindu and the Sikh business communities, thus providing a pattern for Punjabi economic and bureaucratic dominance in the new state.

Punjabis view Sindhis with condescension, and Pushtuns and Baluchis as crude barbarians incapable of self-rule. They resent the large subsidies needed to bolster the economies of the Baluchi and Pushtun tribal areas. The additional costs of providing for the Afghan refugees—mostly Pushtuns—in the frontier zones can only increase this resentment. Punjabis are also apprehensive about the overwhelming mandate given Indira Gandhi in India in January 1980. The Punjabi countryside and cities bore the brunt of the military actions between India and Pakistan in 1965 and 1971. If another confrontation were to occur between the two powers, the Punjabis fear the Pakistani Punjab would be absorbed by India. There has been little evidence of interest in Pakistan for reunification of the two Punjabs, in contrast to the periodic calls for a united Pushtunistan and for the creation of a Greater Baluchistan.

Sindhis. Not an aggressive people, the Sindhis chafe under an inferiority complex. They resent Punjabi assumption of superiority, the presence of Punjabi administrators in the Sind, and Punjabi influence in Sindhi affairs. The resentment spills over into the economic arena. Much of the economic welfare of the Sind and Sindhis depends on irrigation, primarily on water from the Indus. As the lower riparian province vis-a-vis the Punjab, the quantity and quality of the Sind water is hostage to Punjabi actions. The Sindhis are particularly concerned about the growing concentration of salts in the Indus carried downstream from soil-flushing operations in the Punjab and the rising amount of industrial effluents in the river. Quantity is also a worry in dry years when not only is the total flow of the river reduced but also the amount released into the irrigation system, which is controlled by dams and barrages in the Punjab.

Sindhi ethnic rivalries extend beyond those generated by the Punjabis and include problems created by an influx of Muslim refugees from India and emigres from Bangladesh, principally to the cities. The Sind is 40-percent urban, and the larger cities, particularly Karachi, Hyderabad, and Sukkur, have non-Sindhi majorities.

Much of the urban tension in the Sind relates to the structure of Sindhi society. Sindhi society is rural oriented: political and social power in the province

resides in a conservative landed aristocracy (*wadera* or *zamindar* families), with a large underclass of tenant farmers and village artisans. Mullahs and *pirs* (saints or Muslim holy men), who are representatives of the strong *Sufi*³ influence in the Islamic community, also frequently attain considerable local political power. This feudal, rural-based social organization has precluded development of a strong, Sindhi urban class.

Tensions between Sindhis and the newcomers sometimes erupt in confrontations, occasionally in riots and violence. Members of the Urdu-speaking, non-Sindhi groups are largely better qualified than local Sindhis in the professions, as skilled technicians, and as tradesmen in a very competitive job market. In addition, the Sindhi landowner-politicians often view the Urdu-speaking, urban commercial elements as predatory middlemen and business rivals in sugar and rice commodities and in the textile industry. In spite of these tensions, Sindhi attitudes toward Indians are less stridently hostile than those between Punjabis and Indians.

Some tension also exists in the rural areas of the Sind between Sindhis and Baluchis. A million or more Baluchis live in the province. Many are seasonal workers in agricultural areas; some are migrant herders from the hills of Baluchistan who have permission to graze their flocks in post-harvest fields in return for their help at harvesttime. Ill will between Sindhis and Baluchis has erupted periodically over allocation of settlement rights on newly developed tracts of irrigated land west of the Indus in the vicinity of Jacobabad in the Sind and as far as Sibi in Baluchistan. Moreover, the extension of irrigated land in these areas is gradually restricting the traditional winter grazing lands of the Baluchi nomads in the region.

Baluchis. Ethnic nationalism is particularly strong among the Baluchis. They resent the dominance of Punjabis in all aspects of provincial administration and the meager allocation of national development funds to projects in Baluchistan. The massive presence of the largely Punjabi Pakistani Army in Baluchistan is a constant reminder that it is in fact an army of

³ *Sufism*—Muslim mysticism, the vehicle for Muslim popular culture.

occupation. The Baluchis have been strong promoters of regional autonomy since the formation of Pakistan and openly revolted from 1973 to 1977. Some of the more radical Baluchis advocate independence and union with fellow tribesmen in Iran and Afghanistan to form a Greater Baluchistan.

Baluchis have more in common with Pushtuns than either group has with Sindhis or Punjabis, even though considerable rivalry exists between the two groups in Baluchistan. More than one-third of the population of the province is Pushtun, concentrated in the region north of Quetta.

Both the Baluchi and the Pushtun societies are tribally organized, although the patterns of authority are different. The Baluchi system is autocratic: tribesmen owe their allegiance to an all-powerful tribal leader, a *zamindar*, who in turn dispenses justice and protection to the tribesmen. In the past, loyalty and compliance of all Baluchi tribesmen could easily be effected through subsidies to these tribal leaders.

The feudal Baluchi system is resistant to change from within or without and does not easily adapt to the introduction of modern institutions. The *zamindars* are especially opposed to government attempts to abolish tribal law and to substitute the Pakistani civil code in tribal territory, which would effectively abrogate much of their power. Another worrisome factor for the *zamindars* is the growing opposition to the traditional tribal system within Baluchi society itself, particularly among the young and those who stand to profit from a new status in wider Pakistani associations outside the tribal structure.

Baluchis are organized into a large number of tribal groups of varying size. The largest and most powerful tribes are concentrated in the hill lands around Quetta; most of the rest of Baluchistan is thinly populated. For this reason and because of the strategic location of the city astride the principal route from southern Afghanistan to the Indus valley, any subversive penetration of Baluchi tribes in Pakistan would most likely occur in this region.

The atmosphere in Quetta exemplifies the problems and tensions of the Baluchi territories. Around the city swirl all the politics and intrigue of the frontier: the

historic antipathy and rivalries among the tribal groups, Baluchi confrontations with the Punjabi-dominated Army and provincial bureaucracy, rumors of Soviet subversion among dissident groups of tribesmen, the sullen dissatisfaction of Baluchis with their economic plight, the search of university-educated youth for new political directions, and the tensions generated by the influx of Afghan refugees and their herds onto local grazing lands.

The Baluchis' search for support in the struggle against Pakistani domination—which the Baluchis equate to Punjabi control—has included dalliance on the part of some influential tribal leaders with Marxist philosophy and perhaps a willingness to accept material support from the Soviet Union. These leaders include members of Baluchi groups such as the Baluchi Student Organization and the Baluchi Liberation Front. Certainly, as an ethnic group the restive, belligerent Baluchis are vulnerable to appeals to ethnic nationalism.

Pushtuns. The Pushtuns, a martial group of tribes loosely associated by language and common social customs, inhabit the borderlands in the North-West Frontier Province. They are as aggressive as the Punjabis, but are far outnumbered by them in any contest for political power. Pushtuns do, however, constitute a significant minority in the Pakistani armed forces, one of the strongest Pakistani institutions.

In contrast to the Baluchis' concentration of authority in a tribal chief, Pushtun tribal structure stresses individualism. Every tribesman has a voice in the *jirga*, the meeting called to determine a course of action in response to a specific tribal problem. Although democratic, the system can also be anarchistic; combined with tribal customs that breed dissensions arising from blood feuds and internecine squabbles, the probability of united tribal action on any subject is significantly reduced.

Ethnic nationalism among the Pushtuns emerges most often on the issue of Pushtunistan (the homeland of the Pushtuns). The Afghan-Pakistani border, known as the Durand Line, bisects Pushtun tribal territory. The border, a legacy of the British Empire in South Asia, was established by treaty with the Afghans in 1893

and represented at the time the outer limits of British control rather than the ethnic or tribal settlement patterns. Consequently, the issue of Pushtunistan—the reunited Pushtun tribal territory—surfaces periodically in both Pakistani and Afghan politics. [REDACTED]

In Pakistan, Pushtunistan has been promoted most vigorously in the past by the Yusufzais—the largest of the northern Pushtun tribes—as a means for procuring provincial autonomy within Pakistan. In Afghanistan, irredentist aspirations for Pushtunistan have been a regular part of the political rhetoric, whether monarchist or Communist. Undoubtedly, there is some appeal among the tribesmen for a return to the legendary days of glory when the Pushtuns were the undisputed lords of the region. Thus, Pushtun political strength in Pakistan is derived from periodic threats to unite with their Afghan kin, a potent issue that limits Pakistani initiatives with Afghanistan. [REDACTED]

The Afghan-Pakistani border cuts through comparatively densely populated tribal areas and across traditional patterns of trade and movement. The border has always been ignored or used by the Pushtun tribes as it suited their interests. Within the last year, large numbers of Afghan Pushtuns have crossed into Pakistan, using the frontier zone as a sanctuary from unsettled political conditions in Afghanistan or for reequipment operations in support of resistance efforts against the Communist regime. [REDACTED]

The Pakistani Government cannot effectively prevent the influx of refugees, nor the movement of small groups back into Afghanistan. Although Pakistani military forces control the principal passes, the major towns, and the areas adjacent to military installations, they have never exercised authority elsewhere in tribal territory. The mountainous terrain crisscrossed by numerous remote, less frequently used passes precludes absolute border control. Most of these routes, used by local tribesmen and smugglers, are not accessible to vehicles and therefore cannot be easily monitored on the ground; nor is helicopter monitoring always a feasible alternative because of difficult operating conditions. [REDACTED]

The presence of over 900,000 Afghan refugees, particularly those who brought flocks totaling approximately 15,000 animals, poses a new and highly volatile factor for producing local tensions in the borderland regions. Population pressure on cultivable land, grazing areas, and water resources in the arid frontier areas is already high. It has been alleviated in recent years only by out-migration of males seeking temporary or seasonal work on the plains or in the Persian Gulf countries. [REDACTED]

Although the Pakistani Pushtuns are susceptible to appeals based on ethnic nationalism, the insurgency in Afghanistan—in many ways a war between the Pushtuns and the Soviets—will severely limit Soviet ability to influence them. In fact, given the Pushtuns' tradition of vengeance and their ability to keep animosities alive, it may be decades before resentment over the Soviet invasion dies. Some dislike of the British still survives for acts of a century ago. [REDACTED]

Islam: Unity in Diversity

Religion is the unifying factor in Pakistan. Pride in Islamic heritage and civilization reinforces the reasons for the existence of the state, and religious faith serves as the principal emotional bulwark against the increasingly powerful, traditionally perceived enemy, Hindu India. [REDACTED]

Pakistan is about 97-percent Muslim. The remaining 3 percent reflects small minorities of Christians, Hindus, Parsis, and other groups, almost all in urban areas.³ About three-fourths of the Muslims are Sunnis, predominantly of the Hanafi school, including almost all of the tribal population of the Baluchistan and North-West Frontier Provinces. The remaining one-fourth of the Islamic community is made up of Shiites, some Ishma'ilis (followers of the Aga Khan), and the Ahmadiyahs, a small aberrant sect. [REDACTED]

The strong tide of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan parallels the revival of traditional Islamic values in other Muslim societies in Southwest Asia. The turning inward of the Islamic community toward an orthodox organization, with its all-encompassing moral, legal, and economic precepts, represents a retreat from the

³ Minority status in Pakistan refers to religious, not ethnic, background. [REDACTED]

societal pressures of the 20th century to an idealized existence that was successful in the simpler, less crowded world during the Golden Age of Islam. Seeking allies, Muslim Pakistanis look westward to find reassurance in the economic power and prestige of the newly prosperous Muslim countries of the Middle East; few Pakistanis look eastward for association with the 70 million Muslims in India.

In spite of the strong religious fervor in Pakistan, deep cleavages exist within the Islamic community. Sectarian schisms between the Sunnis and the Shiites are weakening efforts to forge a society—Nizam-e-Islam—in Pakistan based on orthodox Islamic principles. The two groups differ in application of important aspects of the *sharia* (Islamic legal system), especially those principles affecting taxation, the dispensation of justice, and the role of religious leaders in the government.

Basic to the vision of an Islamic way of life is the concept of a just society consisting of individuals motivated by high principles rather than material self-interest. The ideal withers in practice. The political status of the Ahmadiyas illustrates the preoccupation with dogma as well as the pervasive undercurrent of economic tensions in Pakistan.

A prosperous, self-contained community not unlike the Mormons in the United States, the Ahmadiyas arouse envy and resentment among their neighbors. The major point of contention, however, is the Sunni charge of heresy: that Ahmadiyas accept a subsequent prophet to Muhammed as the spiritual leader of the community. Friction between the Ahmadiyas and Islamic fundamentalist groups, which is especially sharp in the Punjab, generated passage of a 1975 constitutional amendment, denying the Ahmadiyas status as Muslims in Pakistan. On another level, religion tinged with pragmatism is typical of the tribesmen in the borderlands, where *jihad* (holy war against infidels) combines ideology with mercenary aspects bordering on banditry.

No government in Pakistan—Islamic or secular—has successfully coped with 20th century pressures epitomized by the high population growth rate and the crowding in the countryside, the fragmentation of landholdings decreed by Islamic laws on heredity, the

loosening of traditional ties through rural-urban migration, and the increasing competition for jobs. Among the Pakistan population as a whole, enthusiasm for the new Islamic society advocated by the fundamentalists and General Zia-ul-Haq may be on the wane, with concern for one's livelihood overriding the idealism of the *Koran*.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan has created new security problems for Pakistan, threatening to deepen the regional, cultural, and ethnic rivalries that have strained the country's political system since independence. The question now is: Will traditional Islamic opposition to Communism prove sufficiently strong to override bitter ethnic rivalries, or will Pakistan once again fragment along ethnic lines?

Outlook: New Directions?

The Pakistani search for security and economic progress most likely will continue to emphasize Islamic associations, particularly in view of the new economic power of the Muslim Middle East countries. Should these associations prove inadequate, however, the discontented among the ethnic groups may turn in other directions. Despite the initial shockwaves caused by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, there are indications that some groups could be vulnerable to the blandishments of Moscow. And although a deep and abiding fear and mistrust remain, Pakistan conceivably could seek to renew ties with India with a goal of some type of regional security relationship.

The Soviet presence across the border in Afghanistan is the new unknown that will complicate Pakistan's future political orientation. Any signs of material progress toward a better life for Afghans under a Soviet-directed administration could have an appeal, especially among the young. Disillusionment with the lack of economic progress in Pakistan and dissatisfaction with the maldistribution of wealth between the developed and underdeveloped countries of the world are widespread. The youth of Pakistan in all ethnic groups are searching for a better life through change in existing institutions. Much of the appeal of the Islamic way of life among them includes the hope for progress in economic development along with pride in identification with the new power and prestige of the Muslim oil-producing countries. Although Pakistanis generally

are beginning to accept the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan with a complex mix of feelings ranging from anxiety to apathy, there remains a preoccupation with the longer term prospects of Soviet subversion and separatism in Baluchistan. ■

The deep-seated regional and ethnic divisions within Pakistan will continue to be a threat to Pakistan's fragile political stability. When tested almost a decade ago by divisiveness between Punjabis and Bengalis, the religious bond proved to be weaker than the force of ethnic nationalism. If religious ties among the Pakistanis loosen, ethnic and cultural factors could again emerge the stronger, tearing asunder the "bond of Islam" and once again fragmenting the state of Pakistan. ■