

Recovering the progressive legacy

By *Rasul Bakhsh Rais*

Pakistan is a land of many contrasts, and like other culturally and socially pluralistic societies has allowed space for conflicting ideas and social movements to compete for acceptance and political influence. Pluralism in Pakistan has a long history, with each stream of thought having its own trajectory and roots in a section of society.

Various streams of thought and their corresponding social organisations and institutions are as old as the formative phase of anti-colonial movement. The history of ideas in the land of the Indus didn't start with the arrival of the Europeans or with their imperial adventure. But this point in our history is important for another reason: it shows how multiple revivalist religious movements and new ideas about social change and the possibility of progress began to shape social and political discourses.

The old world of ideas rooted in religion, tradition and Eastern philosophy, quite confident on their ground and with strong social moorings — were quite distinguishable from the new ideas and philosophies that came with the colonial experience. There is great debate about the questions of power, cultural influence and how British imperialism disrupted the natural growth of native cultures and ideas.

Never and nowhere did Western colonialism come in parts; it was about the totality of things — changing the economy, lifestyle and socio-political institutions. It is another matter how old institutions, traditions and ideas bounced back when the imaginative native began to feel a real loss of identity, and felt unsure about what he could retain from the past and what new ideas could be embraced.

Western social and political thought, and construction of the imperial state structure had a deep impact on everything, including political life. Colonial modernisation introduced western education that exposed the natives to different philosophical traditions, creating a challenging intellectual environment that forced to question what they believed and practiced, as well as new ideas, i.e. truly Western concepts of life, society, politics and social relations.

Among Muslims as well as among the followers of other religions in the sub-continent, two rival movements of socio-political thought emerged. One sought revival of the old — religious as well traditional — ways, and through them recovery of what was lost during colonial domination. In fact, quite a few Muslim and Hindu religious scholars thought that colonialism happened because they had deviated from the 'true path' of their respective belief systems.

For a less value-embedded term, let us designate this group as 'traditionalists'; others might prefer to call them religious fundamentalists. In their view, then and now, personal salvation, national identity, solidarity and power would flow from building post-colonial state and society on old religious and social ideas. Their anti-colonial nationalism is not just about territorial independence; it is about decolonising thought and institutions.

Their rivals, the modernists, don't reject tradition and religion, but respect them as relevant social and historical forces, and acknowledge their influence on culture and society. But they do question the hegemony in the modern world of social and ideological pluralism, a condition that had existed in the old world of the Indus and even more so — and remarkably

stronger — in post-colonial society.

What is at the root of social and ideological pluralism? It is the idea of human freedom, an individual's right to choose freely from the complex and dizzying menu of old and new values, ideas and traditions. If there is any single revolutionary idea associated with the modern age, it is rights and freedoms in every sphere of life; social morality and law constituting the only barriers to conduct. Religion and tradition matter greatly in shaping social morality more in the informal sense.

The founding of Pakistan is rooted in these modern ideas of rights — individual and national self-determination — and constitutionalism. The struggle of Muslims was about representation, autonomy and, failing accommodation with the Indian centre, about sovereign self-assertion.

The modernist and traditionalist sectors of Pakistani society accepted the pluralist framework — mutual respect and tolerance — in the initial decades. In fact, the modernist leaders that founded the country had greater influence than the traditionalists. Their progressive vision of a moderate, tolerant, culturally pluralistic and constitutionally democratic Muslim state shaped largely the state and nation building process in the initial stage. Their influence, however, didn't last very long.

The democratic and pluralistic part of the founders' vision was lost when Ayub Khan captured power. He was a modernist of very different kind. He thought Pakistan could progress only through economic development managed by benign authoritarianism and controlled democracy under his leadership. He was not alone in this enterprise; the civilian bureaucracy, business elite and landed aristocracy followed his social, political and economic prescriptions for Pakistan. The country achieved a degree of modernisation under Ayub Khan, but at a great political cost — alienation of Bengali Muslims and the smaller provinces.

The democratic, progressive vision survived Ayub Khan's rule, however, and produced a grassroots, popular social movement for democratic rights. The anti-Ayub movement, largely shaped by progressive civil society (students, labour unions and urban intellectuals), gave hope that the democratic, constitutional vision of Pakistan would be restored. The movement shaped the political outlook and progressive agenda of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

Pakistan's progressive decade from the anti-Ayub movement to Bhutto's overthrow was the best example of ideological pluralism, openness and frank debate. Bhutto's populist rule, however, was a mix at best — a hybrid of democracy, personal cult and selective repression. But he also left a great legacy of respect for the common man, people's rule and the idea of a welfare state.

This vision received the gravest blow under the rule of Zia-ul Haq. He took Pakistan in an opposite direction. What the traditionalist could never think of achieving through democratic means, they achieved by aligning with Zia, a military dictator.

What we see today in Pakistan — sectarian violence, religious extremism and armed militancy challenging the sovereign writ of the state — is blowback from that era. Pakistani society can correct itself through democratic means, popular participation and free debate; path correcting has to take place. The traditionalist forces are more organised, aggressive and violent. But the progressive, liberal elements have yet another opportunity with an assertive civil society and free media to claim their place and redefine the country.

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