

**Analysis: What breeds extremism? — Rasul Bakhsh Rais**

*Religion is not at risk, and does not need to be rescued through the agency of the state; it is the liberties of the citizens and the idea of a free society that are at risk if the hegemonic view of religion replaces pluralism of faith*

Some fundamental questions divide Muslim societies today: who should determine what is Islamic or not; does an individual have the right to practice or not practice religion; or should religion be rigidly imposed by the modern state through its coercive institutions?

Religion may provoke controversy in other societies, but there, the issue of the relationship between religion and the state is largely settled. Such societies consider religion to be a matter between an individual and his creator; the state does not regulate the religious lives of citizens. Through experience, these societies have learned that it is better to leave religion out of the affairs of the state, and have realised that otherwise the state would be oppressive and would leave little space for personal freedoms.

The relationship between state and religion has not been a simple issue in Muslim countries. Why?

Societies are polarised to different degrees on the principles that would guide the restructuring of state-society relations in the modern age. The consensus of the medieval period, of two separate realms — of religion and of worldly authority — based on mutual non-interference and the condition that no rule violating Islam would apply, seems to have disappeared.

New ideologies in the early decades of the last century, like communism, fascism and nationalism, stirred a debate as to which ideological stream could best fit Islamic societies. Religious intellectuals and political activists wanted to chart a new course, independent of western ideologies, much like the modern-day line of the Iranian clergy: neither East nor West.

Unfortunately, Islamic societies were divided then, and remain divided along sectarian lines, even if one ignores the cultural and regional aspects of Islamic thought and practices beyond the fundamentals of belief. The troubling question, therefore, is: whose Islam is it going to be? Who is the legitimate authority to interpret it? To what extent is religion a private matter and to what extent will it be transferred to the state?

The debate is not about finding absolute answers. If it were that simple, we would have found the answers by now and would have also achieved a grand Islamic consensus on what constitutes an Islamic political order.

All political orders have some principles or ideological foundations. Therefore, no society can hope to progress if its political order is reduced to a lawless power-grabbing game played by greedy individuals. Constitutional democracy is one such framework that restrains individuals, forcing them to stay within legal bounds.

It is the weakness of constitutionalism and democratic norms, and a general crisis of governance, in Pakistan that has created such great space for Islamist groups. An odious alliance between corrupt bureaucrats and the political class at the district level and the higher echelons of power has caused the collapse of governing institutions.

It is not really class conflicts or mobilisation of the poor by the militants that might cause a shift from traditional power structures to the Taliban order, but the erosion of hope and frustration at the lack of fulfilment of legitimate expectations. The failure of the state in performing its tasks is fuelling questions of legitimacy of the political order.

Once a political order loses its legitimacy, it becomes vulnerable to any force — religious, secular or revolutionary — that promises change. The disillusioned Muslim population of Iran turned to the clergy. Some would argue that the Iranian clergy hijacked the revolution, which comprised many fronts with the clergy being just one of the forces that shaped it.

In Pakistan, it is partly the old unsettled debate about the relationship of Islam with the Pakistani state, but also how the rapacious ruling elites have repeatedly failed to live up to the promise of building a democratic, constitutional state and exercising power within the limits of the law. They have flagrantly violated their end of the social contract, and have thus weakened the system and their own moral authority.

Can the Taliban or similar groups be the alternative to these largely discredited elites?

Some may object to the term 'discredited' on the grounds that these leaders have been re-elected and returned to power through the popular vote. True. But that is what alienates sections of society from democratic politics when corrupt politicians escape accountability. Not all of them fall in this disgraceful category, but their dominance clearly gives religious militants a propaganda point, that 'western type' democracy has failed Pakistani society.

In fact, the reverse is true. The democratic process did not get enough time and space to gel, and every democratic effort was aborted prematurely.

Extremist ideologies, including militant Islamism, have flourished not under true democracies but in less open, misgoverned societies. Like other ideological brands, Islamists have used religion as an alternative way of organising society and a panacea for all the evils inflicted by traditional elites.

Religious politics is therefore less about piety and more about power and using religious symbolism to question the legitimacy of the traditional ruling classes. Religious values become embedded in one's life, though in different degrees and practiced in different ways. Those who take a hegemonic view of religion may not accept religious pluralism and term the individual's search for true faith, if it happens to be different in any manner from established norms, as heretic deviation.

The age of such religious hegemony has long past in almost every part of the world, but not here. A section of the religious right in Pakistan rejects religious pluralism, and does not respect or tolerate the historical diversity of belief within Islam.

The religious and the secular have historically co-existed in all faith streams, more so in modern times with the increasing neutrality of the state. But what is happening in Pakistan is quite the reverse of contemporary political trends elsewhere. It is the political function of religion that needs to be examined closely and rejected as a hegemonic cultural quest.

Religion is embedded in our society, its culture and values system, and is equally a very strong force that shapes social institutions and the general attitudes of people. Religion is not at risk, and does not need to be rescued through the agency of the state; it is the liberties of the citizens and the idea of a free society that are at risk if the hegemonic view of religion replaces pluralism of faith.

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