

Why has Pakistan experienced so much ethnic and sectarian strife since 1947?

Any answer to such a broad question is complicated enormously by the widely differing experiences of the different regions of Pakistan and the fact that this is, in itself, one of the explanations. One conclusion seems to be common to all regions, however. The interference, repressive tactics and simple incompetence of successive Pakistani governments has only served to exacerbate the strong regionalist tensions which already exist due to stark ethno-linguistic and economic differences.

Unlike in India, where ethnically-based 'communalism' tends to prevail, ethnic tension in Pakistan tends to take the form of sub-national movements demanding regional autonomy and directed against the central power. The autocratic nature of central government is viewed by these movements as evidence of Punjabi domination over the other 'nationalities' of Pakistan. Ethnicity is made up of a number of competing criteria, such as language, religion and region, so is largely determined on the part of the individual. Since 1947 radical realignments have taken place in people's perception of themselves as ethnic beings, showing an unusual fluidity in ethnic status, which suggests that regionalism, rather than racism, is the major driving force.

Pakistan's 'ruling class' are central to this argument. They consist of a mainly Punjabi 'salarial' educated for employment in state agencies. Local power-holders such as *zamindars* and tribal leaders lose out under the domination of the salariat, and have much to gain from regional autonomy. On the other hand, the subordinate classes have the least to gain from the politics of ethnicity, and have tended to support radical religious movements instead.

To bring the argument up to date, many observers suggested that the 1988 election victory of the Pakistan People's Party, and the 1990 victory of the Pakistan Muslim League, meant that the 'national question' had been resolved; despite regional biases in support for the two parties, secessionist voices were seen as having drowned under a wave of mass support for federal-level political groups. Others arrive at the same conclusion by different means, claiming that the development of capitalism has brought the people of Pakistan together, spawning a 'Pakistaniat' and the birth of a 'Pakistani Nation'. While this has some truth in it, as the general trend does seem to be towards integration, the fact remains that in some regions there are still politically and economically disenfranchised groups who have shown no qualms in the past about consolidating along ethnic and regional lines. Indeed, the overwhelming victory of the PPP in Sindh aimed to appeal to these very elements with Sindhi slogans and the encouragement of Sindhi fervour. While the 'national question' may not be as much of a concern as it was before 1988, it still exists.

It is worth dealing first with the question of religious sectarianism, as it tends to have more in common between regions than do ethno-linguistic or socio-economic problems. Pakistan was founded (in theory, at least) on the principle of Muslim nationalism. However, this is a very weak force in modern Pakistan, partly because its roots are also very weak. In Punjab before Partition, political power lay in the hands of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh landowners; the urban Muslim salariat were universally despised. In Sindh, urban society was overwhelmingly Hindu, and no Sindhi Muslim salariat existed. Sindhi Muslims tended to be either landowners or peasants, while the salariat generally consisted of migrants. Ethnic tensions quickly came to the fore. Punjabis dominated the army (with 85% of all soldiers) and the civil bureaucracy, and it was they who defined their identity as the 'true Muslims' for whom Pakistan was created. Saliariats in other regions did not, unsurprisingly, share this view, and accordingly redefined their identities as regional groups rather than as Muslims. This ideological revolution was particularly acute in Bengal, where Islamic ideology and Islamic nationalism were entirely supplanted by secularism, socialism and linguistic nationalism. The definition of 'true Muslims' narrowed on religious as well as regional fronts; over time a greater intolerance of Shias has developed, and the Ahmediyya sect were declared heretical - a move totally contrary to the inclusive, secular spirit of Jinnah. This has also prevented Islam from becoming a truly uniting force across the nation.

The Jama'at-i Islami, Pakistan's largest fundamentalist (or 'Islamist') party, has influenced politics to some extent but has always failed to control them. As the economy opened up in the 1950s and 1960s, a greater polarisation developed between rich and poor. Islam became the politics of the economically excluded, who have never had a major influence on political life in Pakistan. The success of Islamic revivalism around the world depends to a great extent on the way a state responds to the threat (witness, for example, the weakness of the Iranian Shah in response to the Ayatollah Khomeini), and this is true also of Pakistan. Liaquat Ali Khan and Ayub Khan both sought to eliminate the JI, then Ayub tried to challenge its religious authority; this failed and simply added to revivalism. From 1977 onwards the tactic of the state has been to try to involve the JI in the political process. This has allowed it to elicit concessions in the form of certain laws, especially under Zia ul-Haq, but also created barriers to its own growth and immunised the political process from its challenge. Democracy, by diversifying the scope of political debate and providing for exactly the type of political involvement likely to constrict activism, appears to be the best check on the growth of religious revivalism. Indeed, since 1989 two other religious parties (the Jami'at-i Ulami-i Islam and the Jami'at-i Ulami-i Pakistan) have split into factions over policy and have been rendered ineffective. The democratic diversification of debate shows clearly that the JI are an organisation ill-suited to implementing a political program and can easily

be labelled 'unfit to govern'. The only future for religious parties seems to be in a diminution of commitment to their original ideologies.

Ethno-linguistic factors have been a far more prevalent cause of strife in Pakistan than any religious activism. Different regions have varying experiences of this problem, so those in which it has been most acute (Sindh and Bengal) will be examined in turn. The one common factor to bear in mind is that Urdu was imposed as the national language while, in the 1961 census, it was the mother tongue of only 3.7% of undivided Pakistan and 7.5% of West Pakistan. Only 14% of West Pakistan in the 1961 census were able to speak Urdu at all.

Sindh has for centuries been a multi-ethnic province with a Sindhi majority. At Partition, Punjabi Muslims from India were incorporated into the Pakistani Punjab, while those from other regions were forced into Sindh. Communal riots were instigated in order to drive out Sindhi Hindus and make room for this influx of Urdu-speaking refugees, calling themselves *Mohajirs*. They tended to take the place of Sindhi Hindus as traders or professionals, and as the bulk of the industrial working class. The ethnic Sindhi urban population was minute, and remains so. In the following decades, Punjabi and Pathan workers began to pour into the cities of Sindh, leaving ethnic Sindhis in a tiny majority in their own province. In the 1981 census, 52% of the province spoke Sindhi, and 22% Urdu, as their first language. As Urdu was the national language, these migrants have not felt the need to learn Sindhi. Sindhi speakers are in a clear minority in urban areas such as Karachi (54% Urdu, 14% Punjabi, 9% Pathan and 6% Sindhi in 1981). The census figures almost certainly underestimate the numbers of Pathans and Punjabis, many of whom live in *katchi abadis* or slums outside the city centre. Sindhis are very attached to their language, which they claim is very advanced compared to those of surrounding areas; there is a standard script and a history of prose and poetry. The adoption of Urdu as the sole national language and suppression of Sindhi has left this group feeling very vulnerable.

There is a division in the political movement between those who wish to work with Mohajirs and those who wish to work against them. The former claim that being Sindhi is not a matter of language or place of origin: the Baluch, who have been accepted for so long, are included in this definition, as are the Mohajirs, deposited in Sindh by fate and the forces of history. Punjabis however do not qualify in this definition; they are seen as having come to Sindh on the strength of state power, as conquerors and usurpers whose roots lie in the Punjab, and who should be expelled from Sindh and their lands restored to Sindhi ownership. However, this 'united front' view is not shared by all leaders, many of whom for the sake of personal ambition try to outbid the others with even more rabid and chauvinistic expressions of Sindhi nationalism based solely on linguistic ethnicity.

Language was not such a major issue in the other provinces of West Pakistan, but was very much so in the history of East Pakistan. In January 1948 a group of students, supporting the radical faction of the Bengal Muslim League, formed the East Bengal Students League with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as secretary. On the principle that Urdu was spoken by under 1% of East Bengalis, this group launched a movement for the recognition of Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan. The government response to this (see below) helped to widen the debate from just the language issue alone to one of autonomy for East Bengal.

Even more acute than the ethno-linguistic divisions, Pakistan's socio-economic problems and variations have been responsible for ethnic and sectarian strife. Again the experience of these differs widely between regions and between sectors, so it will be shown how these economic issues relate to regional politics in the individual provinces.

Pasha and Hasan's development ranking of West Pakistani districts, based on a large number of variables such as doctors per capita and literacy rates in particular districts, shows clearly how different the regions are from one another. Karachi is taken as a separate region, as it is by a long way the leader and would otherwise warp statistics for Sindh. It appears to come from a different world to bottom-ranked Baluchistan. 91% of Baluchistan's population was in the bottom two quartiles (all 91% in the bottom quartile), while the equivalent figures were 79% (36%) for 'Rest of Sindh', 66% (48%) for NWFP and 45% (18%) for Punjab.

In Baluchistan, most industry is based around the Hub power station. This is close to Karachi, virtually a part of the city, and is owned by Karachi residents. Natural gas is Baluchistan's main earner, but the royalty to Baluchistan is only 10% of what the federal government receives in revenues from its sale. The natural gas at Sui was not made available to Quetta until after Punjab and Karachi had received it. The government has not taken any measures to change the natural bias against the least developed areas; in short, there will be no development in Baluchistan because there is no development in Baluchistan. The Zia government did improve the road network; however, this was only for military purposes and the routes constructed reflect that priority. Baluchistan thus has good grounds for charging the central government with exploitation. The main forces for regionalism are the sons of *sardars* (feudal lords) and merchants who, disillusioned with the backward country life, aspire towards bureaucratic jobs. Bin Sayeed (1980) claims that "an immediate and major source of friction between the central government and the newly-established provincial government [in 1972] was the desire of the latter to make sure that people belonging to the province concerned would occupy key positions in the government, the professions and the commercial life". Many non-Baluch administrators were at this time pressured into vacating their jobs, but the bias remains.

Zaidi claims that the NWFP contains the 'best' conditions for nationalism: capitalism in agriculture, a large bourgeoisie and junior partner status in the central bureaucracy. There is no highly visible channel of surplus extraction as there is in Baluchistan, but there is an ongoing political conflict between Pathan and Punjabi industrialists and businessmen. In the tussle for the NWFP market, the Pathans resent the competition, and direct this resentment against the Punjabi-dominated centre. As for the national market, the costs of transporting produce to main consumer centres such as Karachi are huge, and as a consequence many large industries are closing down. Pathans in central government have argued for subsidies to offset this decline. However, Zaidi argues that the dominant factors affecting the Pathan national question are non-economic; the Afghan Saur Revolution in 1979 has altered the political map of the area, inspiring the regionalists and terrifying the Pakistan nationalists.

In East Bengal there were also economic factors at work. The movement for 'full autonomy' was initially popular among the bourgeoisie and middle class, whose road to advancement was blocked by their counterparts in West Pakistan. The domination of East by West was especially acute during the years of military rule under Ayub Khan. Between 1955 and 1964, the central government spent around 19 billion rupees. Of this, 54% was spent on defence (almost all in the West) and 19% on civil administration (of which 70% was in the West). The character of the movement changed between 1968 and 1969, as the lower classes began to demand *Krishak-Sramik Raj* (rule of workers and peasants). The Awami League, sensing the public mood, added radical economic reforms to its manifesto.

Punjab is the dominant province of Pakistan in terms of its economy, population and representation in government. According to Zaidi, "For Punjab, the rest of the country is territory to which they can export their problems". It is in Punjab's interest to keep Pakistan united; taxes are heavily redistributed from Sindh to Punjab, their heavy involvement in the bureaucracy means they take the lion's share of the government budget, and migrants in other provinces send remittances back to their homes. As such, there is no major regional movement in Punjab at all.

In the 'Rest of Sindh' region, Sindhis claim exploitation on two fronts: by the Punjabis in rural areas, and by the Mohajirs in urban areas. As in Baluchistan the emerging educated class are the most vocal nationalists, demanding jobs in the Punjabi-dominated bureaucracy of Sindh Interior. The army (which is 80% Punjabi, and under 1% Sindhi) are also permanently stationed in the Interior, and years of military rule have meant that the army is heavily involved in the economic life of the country. External aid allocation is at the discretion of the central government, and comparatively little is spent in Sindh. Most contentious of all has been the allocation and cheap

sale of land in Sindh to Punjabi settlers, generally serving or retired government officials. This was in addition to the problems caused at Partition, when the land left by emigrating Hindus was given to Mohajir refugees, rather than to landless Sindhi peasants. Sindhis feel that their economic and cultural freedoms have been trampled upon by Punjabis and Mohajirs. The province became massively politicised due to the election and subsequent execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto; this politicisation did not begin as a regional movement, but became so over time.

Karachi is like a productive island in the middle of Sindh, generating 35% of all taxes in the country and employing millions of unskilled Pathan and Punjabi labourers. Mohajirs have demanded more jobs for local people, by which they mean Urdu-speaking migrants from India. There is great resentment of the Punjabi bureaucracy; Punjabi immigrants are not considered 'local' by the Mohajirs. Political parties with strong Karachi support have demanded that Karachi's wealth remain in Karachi, and for a long while Sindhi nationalists maintained a 'tactical agreement' with Mohajirs against the Punjabis.

However, the situation in Karachi is far more complex. Under Jinnah and Liaquat, Mohajirs felt that they had leaders of stature. However, the (mainly Punjabi) military takeover in 1958 meant they felt abandoned in the country they believed was their own. In the 1960s the Green Revolution also altered the political, demographic and economic balance substantially, challenging the local Mohajir supremacy. Sindhi attempts to 'reclaim' their nationality, such as the 1972 attempt to make Sindhi the official language of Sindh, and the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy in 1983 and 1986, have further isolated Mohajirs. Mohajirs at first tended to support the Pakistani state against regional ethnic movements, generally supporting the JI or the JUP in elections. One of the major Mohajir grievances is the quota system for public sector jobs and university places, which they believe discriminates against them. The Mohajir Qaumi Mahaz (MQM) was set up in Karachi in 1984, demanding that Mohajirs should be recognised as the fifth nationality of Pakistan and should be allowed a 20% quota at the centre and 50-60% in Sindh (far outweighing their proportion of the population), asking also that quotas in Sindh should be exclusively for Sindhis and Mohajirs. The MQM blames the central government for the supposed anti-Mohajir bias. Notions of Mohajir nationality were a break from the past; Mohajirs previously had opposed all ethnic movements in the name of Pakistan and Islam. This was almost an overnight ethnic redefinition. The myopic view of the MQM - "we do not support anything which doesn't contain the word Mohajir" - has led it down a blind alley, and its desperation is evident. Its failure has led to disenchantment among its constituency, and its armed wing, the Black Tigers, have resorted to terrorism in order to force its own constituency into submission. Zaidi claims that the MQM has "lived up to its fascist promise".

Karachi also has problems due to racist violence and rioting between Pathans and Mohajirs. A well-organised Pathan mafia control drugs, illegal arms and rackets in urban land whereby vacant land is seized, developed and exploited. Much of the city administration and police force are also under mafia control. A notable example is when Bihari Mohajirs settled on land in the Orangi district coveted by the mafia, large-scale rioting was instigated against them, and the police did nothing to come to their aid. Pathan dominance of transport has also caused tensions; in 1986, a Pathan driver being paid pro-rata (and thus driving dangerously fast) killed a Mohajir, sparking violent and enduring 'bus riots'. This all shows that in the special case of Karachi, socio-economic factors are far too simple an explanation.

The one clear factor in all regions seems to have been the total inadequacy of the government response to regionalist pressures. The dominance of the Punjabis within central government has led to an authoritarian system, where the absence of political negotiation has compounded the sense of alienation felt by subordinate ethnic groups.

In Sindh, examples of suppression can be seen in the language issue. According to Feroz Ahmed, the government routinely denies declarations (publishing licences) to proposed Sindhi publications. In 1975 practically all Sindhi periodicals were banned by the government. During the entire week the Karachi television station (the only one in Sindh) broadcasts only one hour of Sindhi programming, while Sindh University, due to be founded in Karachi in 1947, was moved to Hyderabad to make way for the Urdu-language Karachi University, which does not even have facilities for studying Sindhi culture or language. Despite the obvious attachment of the Sindhi people to their language, there is no need to suppress it and prevent its adoption as an official language of the state; as Urdu is the language of capitalism, Urdu will eventually dominate anyway. Ahmed describes the suppression as "attempted cultural genocide and an act of fascism", using the burning of the library at the Institute of Sindhology (Hyderabad) as an example. Ahmed continues by criticising the National Urdu Council (for the 'protection' of Urdu & the rights of Urdu-speaking people) as an hysterical response, essentially amounting to demanding Urdu's supremacy and perpetuating paranoia among its speakers. He compares it to the White Citizens' Council in the USA, formed as part of a backlash against civil rights movements.

Central government failures in Sindh are not limited to the cultural sphere. Shortly after Partition, the central government appointed Hidayatullah as Chief Minister, then made him Governor and appointed the locally popular Khuhro as Chief Minister instead. Khuhro was asked to instigate communal riots to drive out Hindus and thus create room for Mohajirs. When he refused he was dismissed and jailed. A central government puppet (Bux) was appointed in his

place, and in 1948 he pushed through a law making Karachi the 'federal capital area', depriving Sindh of its richest city (and its centre of provincial government). Bux's appointment was declared illegal in the provincial courts, so two ineffective Chief Ministers followed, Khuhro was brought back, then dismissed again. Governor's Rule was imposed under Din Mohammed, and removed under Talpur, who resisted some anti-Sindhi moves by the centre and was sacked. Sattar was brought in to head the Sindh Cabinet, then for trying to protect the rights of Sindhis, was also sacked. Finally the government brought back Khuhro (who it had dismissed twice, jailed and disqualified from public office). He was used this time around as a hatchet man of the government, to push through the 1955 'One Unit' bill which further centralised government. This was overturned in 1970, but lasting damage had been done; a whole generation had been brought up in urban Sindh which had no concept of the Sindhi region, language or culture, or of seeing Karachi as part of Sindh. This enabled a myth of Sindhi domination to be established in Karachi and exploited by the MQM. While the blame can be shared between military and civilian leaders, Ahmed claims that 'living under a military dictatorship amounts to living in an alien-occupied country because the Sindhis have no participation in the military.'

However, this political and cultural domination in Sindh is like nothing compared to the repressive tactics of the central government in East Bengal. It could be argued that what was to become Bangladesh had a more highly developed regional consciousness than the provinces of West Pakistan, and thus needed less 'prodding' by the central government in order to stir ethnic or regional passions. However this central government repression occurred on a large scale. In January 1952, Khwaja Nazimuddin, then Prime Minister of Pakistan, declared that Urdu alone would be the state language. This led to public demonstrations in East Bengal, where it was believed that due to its greater number of native speakers, Bengali should be at least on equal terms with Urdu. At a student protest in Dacca during February of that year, police opened fire on the crowd, killing several students and handing the Awami League its first real martyrs. Bengalis had virtually no role in the army, and thus virtually no role in the government during the Ayub Khan years: of the four governors of East Bengal, the first was an East Bengali police officer, the next a Pathan general, the next a Pathan civil servant, and finally an East Bengali again, but one who had been defeated so badly in the 1954 elections that he had been forced to forfeit his deposit. Between 1958 and 1964 political parties were banned, so radical student movements became the vehicle for the expression of Bengali nationalism. During this ban, Suhrawardy (the main moderating influence in the AL) had died, and the removal of the ban led to the revival of a much more radical Awami League under Sheikh Mujib. By February 1966 urban centres were in what has been described as 'mass revolution'; the government reacted harshly, putting down a general strike in Dacca by killing 13 strikers, and arresting Sheikh Mujib.

The arrest enhanced his popularity, though his support was still mostly from the entrepreneurial class. It was not until later that mass support began to develop.

Once again the nationalist movement fell into student hands, and developed a radical '11-point programme' of demands on the central government. This contained concessions to all classes, and was greeted with massive support. To appease the masses, Ayub released Mujib on 22nd Feb 1969, and at a rally in of 500,000 supporters in Dacca the next day, Mujib declared his support for the programme. Almost the entire region went into revolt against the central government. The immediate effect of this was the fall of Ayub and the re-imposition of martial law by Yahya Khan on 25th March 1969. Yahya allowed elections but designed a framework to prevent the imposition of Mujib's programs. Mujib ignored this and declared the election to be a referendum on the AL's proposals. The AL won the elections with 73% of the East Pakistan vote, giving them 160 out of 162 seats and thus a massive dominance over the PPP's 81 out of 138 seats. Mujib claimed he would implement reform in strict conformity with the 11-point programme, which alarmed the generals and also Z A Bhutto. The army, with their high salaries, entrenched privileges and enormous use of government funds, had a material stake in keeping East Bengal a part of Pakistan. Bhutto, if he accepted a constitution based on the AL programme, stood to lose his massive popularity in Punjab, where he had promised strong central government, a powerful army and 'a thousand year war with India'. He began to stir up anti-Bengal sentiment, talking of Sindh and Punjab as 'the bastions of power' and referring to the 'brute majority' of the Awami League. The uniting factor among the Punjabi elites was a distaste for a full democracy in which Bengalis could dominate. Yahya and Bhutto together tried to postpone the opening session of the Assembly, and on 23rd February 1970 the Council of Ministers of Pakistan was dissolved. Bhutto declared that he would not turn up to the inaugural Assembly meeting to "sign a dictated constitution". On 28th February he promised to organise a strike "from the Khyber Pass down to Karachi" in protest against the summoning of the Assembly, and claimed that he would "liquidate" any PPP member who turned up. This was followed on 1st March by Yahya's postponement of the session. The Students League held a rally on 2nd March in Dacca, with Mujib present, and hoisted the flag of Bangladesh. Mujib called for a non-violent non-cooperation movement against the central government. All employees in government offices, including High Court judges, absented themselves and promised to do so as long as Mujib demanded. Yahya's response was to send the hawkish General Tikka Khan to be governor and martial law administrator of East Bengal. On 7th March, Mujib addressed a rally of approximately one million people, demanding the abolition of martial law. Yahya flew to Dacca for talks with Mujib, but his troops were already preparing for a military crackdown. On 25th March, the

Pakistani army, aided by fanatics of the JI and other such groups, were instructed to loot and burn everything in sight wherever guerrillas were active.

While the ideological revolution was initiated by the leftists of East Bengal, the autonomy movement was initially a confluence of radical and secular Bengali nationalism. The refusal of the West Pakistani military dictatorship to come to terms with this nationalism turned the Awami League into a truly national resistance movement. Increased central government repression simply produced increased the hostility to itself, and its political manipulation led only to the radicalisation of the resistance movement.

Whether in East or West Pakistan, the single most important explanation for ethnic and sectarian strife has been the failure of the government to deal adequately with the massive existing pressures for regional autonomy. The central government, the army and the ulamas are unquestionably dominated by Punjabis and, to a lesser extent, migrants from India. The non-Punjab provinces have no historical loyalty to Islamabad, and the repressive, centralising actions of the government only serve to increase their sense of resentment and isolation.

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