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Polarization - The Structural Blowback

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Two inter-linked issues have dogged and bedeviled Pakistan's growth. These are:

- a) The imperatives of a security state which has resulted in the political domination of the military and the diversion of a large share of resources away from critical expenditures on social services; defence expenditure is in excess of US\$35 per capita as against US\$24/capita on education and health combined, resulting in almost 5 soldiers for every doctor and 3 teachers for 2 soldiers. Almost half the population has been denied access to decent education, health, and skill enhancement services and the good governance that give the less privileged classes a stake in the benefits of economic growth as opposed to that founded on patronage and the family in which they were born.
- b) The self-serving political, economic, military and civil bureaucratic elite have resisted giving up the slightest of privileges to maintain its hold over the key social and economic instruments of power, resulting in the creation of a highly unjust social order. It has been reluctant to create a more equitable society in which the less fortunate segments of society have equality of opportunity for social mobility; creating a crisis of legitimacy of the State and its institutions. It has been unwilling, even in its own enlightened self-interest, to contribute, on the basis of capacity to bear the associated burden, the resources required for a fairer society, amply reflected in a tax to GDP ratio of less than 10%.

There has been a steady decline in the quality and efficiency of government institutions and the coverage and quality of public services available to the citizenry. As a result, 'Poverty', measured in terms of access to, and quality of, basic social and economic services that would enable social mobility, has become more severe than the poverty indicators estimated on the basis of nutritional intake.

In the revolution unfolding in the shape of the knowledge based road to growth we are horribly divided over how society should be molded. The type of education available to different segments of society has facilitated this division of mind-sets. Instead of education systems being a unifying factor by providing equal opportunities for social mobility (as is the case in most societies) there are the elite schools, private schools for the lower and middle income groups and poorly endowed and managed government schools for the poorest. The products of these institutions are separated by concrete walls and not equipped to participate on largely equal terms in economic growth. More worryingly the ability of the economy to absorb this youth with limited skills has worsened over the last 5-6 years because of a growth rate-averaging below 3%- failing to accommodate even half of the annual addition to the labour force.

The unskilled, unemployed young men or those without steady jobs and with little protection from the excesses of the law enforcement agencies and their surrogates do not have enough stakes in this entrenched system. They have been left to fend for themselves by the rich whose accelerated progress has sharpened the disparities in incomes and wealth at a time when the economy is stagnating. The share of household income of the poorest income group has shrunk from 8.4% in 1970-71 to under 6% and that of the richest increased from 41.5% to in excess of 50%; reflecting the degree of permanence in polarization for structural reasons.

Consequently, the country stands dreadfully polarized between the haves and the have-nots and between the modernists and the traditionalists with their radically different world views, fuelling resentment and hatred against the pillars of the State and the iniquitous systems and structures. That a young man opts to become a suicide bomber to destroy all symbols of affluence and state power can partially be explained by his lack of stake in such a system.

Worsening the impact of these adverse developments is the continued inadequate attention to the ground being lost rapidly by the liberal and secular schools of thought to Islamic revivalists in the country. The liberals are fast becoming a minority in the country as the battle of the minds, ideas and hearts is being lost. I do not agree with those who argue that the ascendancy of religious extremism fostered by two decades of active promotion and support of such forces by unrepresentative State agencies can be checked simply by withdrawing State patronage and ensuring unfettered democracy.

The growth of Madrassas and the gains in strength of the Islamists can largely be explained by these outcomes. Not only are those enrolled in these Madrassas endowed with some reading and writing skills (that the public schooling system has simply failed to deliver), they also provide food, clothing and shelter and cater to their spiritual needs. The argument that since there are less than 5% of children enrolled in these Madrassas we should not exaggerate their power fails to capture the danger that underlies this development. There are now close to 2.5 million “students” in Madrassas being brainwashed by illiterate peddlers of odious dogmas, many of whom will soon be wielding guns and supporting these ideologues. The moth eaten, fragile and crumbling Pakistani State will be simply incapable of taming these millions of armed recruits of hate and darkness, especially with their ideas penetrating and finding resonance within key institutions of the State. The fear of their ability to silence critics is evident from the public reaction of most of the political leadership following the attempted murder of the brave Malala.

Furthermore, the politically ambitious graduates from humbler social classes would be welcomed by the religiously inclined political parties whose members and leadership comes from similar socio-economic backgrounds. They provide these young aspirants opportunities to aspire for leadership roles that would not be open to them in the mainstream political parties. In the highly charged environment of anti-west feelings they can exploit the weaknesses of the mainstream political parties, especially considering the widely held perception that they look to Western leadership for direction and support. The roots of the right wing parties and their ideology have deepened and acquired a new potency such that they can no longer be dismissed lightly, as liberals have tended to do until now, as forces with limited electoral support. In any case, they do not see their route to power through the electoral process but through other means!

Without the education and skills to become effective economic actors, in a country where weaponry is freely available, we see dacoities and kidnapping for ransom and the rise of the religious zealots that, ironically, represent our “demographic dividend” (or more appropriately “demographic nightmare”) that Pakistan has reaped.

With the whittling away of the writ of the State things have come to such a pass that no government alone will be able tackle these deep-rooted problems effectively. The mainstream political parties need to shed their complacency and their public posturing about the moderate forces of resilience in civil society. The business as usual approach will work to the advantage of the Mullahs as social mores change in their favour, and more people on the fringes find it convenient and simpler to take the easy option and join the mobs.