

Jinnah's Nightmare: What Went Wrong in Pakistan

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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When Muhammad Ali Jinnah envisioned the creation of Pakistan as a secular state for Muslims in the 1940s, he had little idea that his dream country would turn into an Islamist republic that enforces religion over its citizens, a hunting ground in which liberal Muslims are killed, and a safe haven for the world's most wanted terrorist.

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Understanding what went wrong in Pakistan is necessary not only for the country's sake, but also because it provides us with lessons on the role of religion in politics, especially at a time in which many Muslim-majority societies are busy redefining themselves during the Arab Spring.

Pakistan's current messy state of affairs, from the assassination of liberal Muslim politicians such as the governor of Punjab province, Salman Taseer, who was killed for saying no to the persecution of Christians -- as any good Muslim should do -- to the chilling discovery that Osama bin Laden lived in a military suburb of the nation's capital, is a product of a process of Islamization that started in the 1970s under dictator Zia ul-Haq.

Against the backdrop of the Cold War, many in Washington thought, and Zia agreed, that injecting religion into the fabric of Pakistani society and that of other Muslim-majority countries lying on the southern flank of the Soviet Empire, namely Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey, would stave off the risk of these countries being taken over by leftist ideologies. Preventing communist takeovers in these countries would serve the larger strategic Cold War goal of blocking Russian access to warmer seas.

Known as the "Green Belt Theory," this strategy was devised by the Western intelligence community to immunize these four nations against communism. But the strategy, which worked, has had unintended consequences: Religion has become the moral compass of these societies, long outlasting communism. Today, political Islam has penetrated the fabric of each of the four countries in unique ways: Pakistan is an Islamist republic, Afghanistan had become Talibanized, Iran fell prey to an Islamist revolution and Turkey, though a democracy, is under what is slowly becoming the ever-more permanent rule of the authoritarian and Islamist-inspired Justice and Development Party, or AKP.

Among the four countries, Pakistan provides the most chilling case of what can go wrong in Muslim-majority societies if religion becomes politicized within the context of global politics. Pakistan's Islamization started after Zia ul-Haq ousted the leftist leader Zulfikar Ali Butto. To fight off Butto's popular ideology, Zia used religion as the antidote. Compulsory religious instruction became part of the national curriculum. Courts, media outlets, financial institutions, nongovernmental organizations and charities guided by and promoting conservative Islam were promoted. The government expected its citizens to observe religion in a narrowly defined way as stipulated by Zia, and religion defined the modus operandi of Pakistan's foreign policy, including its support for the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan and the Kashmiris. Jinnah must have turned over in his grave as Pakistan left its secular outlook and Zia made Islam the moral compass of the Pakistani society.

Though nothing is wrong with conservative values, making religion the moral compass of any society produces unintended results: Religious purity is an ideological beauty competition in which the ugly guy always wins. Centering religion as the moral compass in religiously homogenous societies can produce further unexpected results, as the Pakistan case demonstrates. Given Islam's frequent emphasis on orthopraxy (defining practice in its orthodox form as the right of passage to being a good Muslim), demographically homogenous Muslim societies lose their secular ethos and divergent forms of Muslimness wither away once a single, narrowly defined form of political Islam dominates. As the recent assassination of Salman Taseer demonstrates, it has become virtually impossible in Pakistan to be a Muslim in any way other than that imagined by the jihadists, the winners of the ideological beauty competition.

Pakistan's Islamization has produced further unexpected results in the post-Sept. 11 era. The singular role ascribed to religion in politics, domestic and foreign alike, is now a combusive process, triggering radicalization along the lines of al-Qaeda's rhetoric of a clash of civilizations and war between Islam and the rest of the world.

Mixing religion with politics is an irreversible process with harmful and unexpected consequences. What is more, assigning a key role to Islam in politics can unleash violent dynamics in post-Sept.11 Muslim majority societies. Religion and politics are like fire and powder, better keep them apart -- Jinnah was right.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the [Turkish Research Program \(/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#) at The Washington Institute. ❖

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