

Understanding the root causes of problems in Pakistan

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"Pakistani elites and the media do not tire of drumbeating about the great victory they achieved in getting the chief justice restored in Pakistan. While no one should decry the reinstatement of the chief justice, this does not mean that justice has been restored or that it will now become available to everyone regardless of their position in society. The people's problems are not at the Supreme Court or even the high court levels. Their daily problems are in the lower courts where officials are corrupt, and judges and policemen are easily bribed to give evidence against the poor to favor the rich and powerful."

For a state and society to function smoothly, some basic services must be provided to its citizens: security, decent education, access to healthcare, prospects of a reasonable job and sound economy. Participation in the political process as well as justice are other important considerations for peace and tranquility. Judged by these criteria, Pakistan falls short on each of these requirements. This is not to suggest that there is no security for anyone or that nobody is making money; a tiny minority is making huge amounts of money sharpening differences in society even further. The ruling elites will even point to the fact that only last March, the activist Chief Justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, was reinstated after an 18-month struggle led by lawyers and the civil society. So what precisely is the problem and why is Pakistan gripped by an endless series of crises the latest of which has been described by some as an "existential threat"?

Pakistan is not one but several societies in which people of diverse backgrounds, ethnicity and languages reside. This is not unique to Pakistan; neighboring India is far more diverse with a cacophony of languages spoken by people of different religions and backgrounds yet it does not face the kinds of problems confronting Pakistan. Why? Pakistan's divisions are not merely because of ethnicity although this is a contributing factor. It is a society deeply polarized along class lines. Most privileges and facilities are reserved for the tiny ruling minority while the overwhelming majority languishes in poverty and deprivation.

Substandard education

Take education. Its literacy rate at 50 percent (considered exaggerated by some) is lower than both India's (64 %) and Sri Lanka's (91 %). There are only a few schools that offer decent education where only the children of the rich can enroll. These schools--Aitchison College, Lawrence College, several Cadet Colleges scattered across the country, and Karachi Grammar School plus a few private schools that have opened up in Pakistan in recent years--charge exorbitant fees. Such education enables students to get admission into university or even go abroad to study in the UK or US. This is a ticket to better career prospects. Government-run schools have such poor standards and such inadequate facilities that most students end up in low-level clerical jobs.

A quick glance at some statistics would clarify this dismal state of affairs. Pakistan spends a mere 2.6 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on education while 4.5 percent on the military. About 45 percent of children drop out of school without completing elementary education. More than 7 million primary school-age children (age group 5-9 years) do not attend school at all. Nine percent of primary schools do not have a blackboard, 24 percent do not have textbooks, and 46 percent do not have desks. According to 2004 data compiled by UNESCO, out of a total of 150,644 government schools (from grade 1 to 12), 3,572 have no building structure; 29,020 are without electricity; 18,515 have no furniture; and 21,636 have no toilets. In the last five years, the situation has deteriorated further.

So where do the seven million primary-school age children end up? Many of them end up in the thousands of madrassas where they learn the Qur'an by rote and acquire some rudimentary knowledge of Islam. Most of them become khatibs (preachers) and imams in various mosques in the villages and towns preaching to people of similar background (most rich people in Pakistan do not have much time for religion. Their religiosity is confined to highly publicized trips on their ill-gotten wealth for the annual pilgrimage of Hajj or Umrah to Makkah but such trips appear to make little difference in improving their atrocious behavior). Some madrassas also impart knowledge about jihad but with a twist. In the nineteen-eighties such education was actively encouraged and financed by the US when jihad against the Soviets was considered "good" because it was seen as advancing Washington's

agenda. The University of Nebraska at Omaha had an entire department dedicated to producing books on the virtues of jihad. Now that the "graduates" of these US-jihadi schools have turned against their patron saint, the US, jihad is no longer considered good.

In a rare moment of candour, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, while appearing before a subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee on April 23, 2009, admitted: "We can point fingers at the Pakistanis. ... But the problems we face now to some extent we have to take responsibility for, having contributed to it Let's remember here ... the people we are fighting today we funded them twenty years ago ... " She could have added: "and indoctrinated as well".

The educational divide in Pakistan has created a deeply polarized society where a tiny minority, awash in wealth acquired from their vast estates where the peasants toil as slaves, and pillage of the country's resources, enjoys all the privileges while the vast majority languishes in poverty and misery. Two-thirds of the population lives on less than \$2 a day, with at least one-third living below the poverty line.

Poor healthcare facilities

Healthcare facilities are even more dismal. This spreads across the entire spectrum of healthcare. For instance, most medicines are not only substandard, they are contaminated with fake ingredients adding to the health problems of people but given widespread poverty, most people are unable to afford proper medication. At the top end of the scale, the rich can get the most advanced medical services available anywhere in the world. The difference is price: those that can afford it can get the best service available; the rest cannot. Environmental pollution has increased alarmingly causing massive respiratory problems. In many cities, industries used to discharge chemicals outside their factories contaminating surface water. With government restrictions, industrialists now pump such chemicals into the ground polluting underground water. There has resulted in an alarming increase in Hepatitis-C and cancer-related diseases.

Of the 53 million babies in the country, nearly 270,000 die before they are one month old -- the percentage is roughly 10 times higher than that in the West, according to a report by the international charity Save the Children. One in 23 Pakistani women (more than a quarter) dies in childbirth; the comparable figures for the West are one in 5,000. Each year an estimated 17,000 mothers die from pregnancy-related causes in Pakistan. Ten percent of these die on their way to a healthcare facility because of inadequate mode of transportation.

Here are some other grim statistics relating to poor healthcare facilities in Pakistan:

About 400,000 infants die annually because of diarrhea, which occurs when a majority of women do not breastfeed due to malnutrition or death during childbirth.

Pakistan is one of only four countries where polio has not been eradicated (the others are Afghanistan, India, and Nigeria) but its elite proudly proclaim that it is a nuclear power.

In the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), 135 out of every 1,000 children under the age of five die from curable diseases. This region is currently under military assault allegedly to fight the Taliban. Had the state applied half as much effort to eradicating poverty, providing healthcare facilities and education, this situation may not have arisen at all.

Water- and sanitation-related diseases are responsible for 60 percent of child deaths.

There is one doctor for every 1,300 people, one specialist for every 15,000 people, and one nurse for every 30,000 people. This is not to suggest that there is shortage of doctors in Pakistan. More than 45 percent of Pakistani medical graduates have left the country to such greener pastures as the US (their favorite destination), Canada, the UK, Europe and Australia. Pakistan spends millions of dollars on producing doctors each year but because their income levels are generally low, under the pretext of studying abroad, these doctors leave the country and seldom return. The taste of dollars and pounds keeps them away, permanently. Pakistan is thus financing the healthcare systems of many Western countries at the expense of its own people.

Pakistan's overall expenditure on improving healthcare facilities is very low. This is not because of lack of funds. Between 1950 and 1999, Pakistan received \$58 billion in foreign aid for health and population sectors, according to Dr Samia Altaf, Pakistan scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Centre in the US (lecture delivered on July 9, 2008 at the conclusion of her one-year tenure at the Centre) but the grim statistics quoted above point to a serious domestic problem. First is the culture of corruption; the ruling elites consider all foreign aid as personal property. Whatever money is given to Pakistan is used as follows: exorbitant fees for foreign "experts", filling foreign bank accounts of Pakistani officials, and the rest is sent to Pakistan but even that

is not properly utilized. The legendary incompetence, inefficiency and nepotism of Pakistani officials waste it. Dr Altaf's study found that Pakistani officials associated with foreign-aided programs were often more interested in landing a foreign assignment or benefiting in some private and personal way from the programs that they were supposed to supervise and implement in the public interest than assisting people on whose behalf the funds had been secured.

Injustice galore

Pakistani elites and the media do not tire of drumbeating about the great victory they achieved in getting the chief justice restored in Pakistan. While no one should decry the reinstatement of the chief justice, this does not mean that justice has been restored or that it will now become available to everyone regardless of their position in society. The people's problems are not at the Supreme Court or even the high court levels. Their daily problems are in the lower courts where officials are corrupt, and judges and policemen are easily bribed to give evidence against the poor to favor the rich and powerful. Cases in such courts range from a powerful landlord forcibly occupying and transferring the land of a poor farmer to assault cases, rape and murder. It is virtually impossible for a poor man to get justice in Pakistan. It has become a crime to be poor.

Even if there are honest officials, cases in courts drag on for years. Some examples would illustrate the point. Upon his appointment as Chief Justice in 2005, Iftikhar Chaudhry demanded that Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), and police produce people they had kidnapped. Hundreds of people had disappeared during the military regime of General Pervez Musharraf. Initially, officials refused to appear before the court; when the Chief Justice pressed the issue and insisted that officials make themselves available or he would send them to jail for contempt of court, this aroused official wrath. Most people applauded the Chief Justice's activism while the ruling elites saw this as a threat to their authority. In March 2007, Musharraf attempted to force Justice Chaudhry to resign offering him inducements if he cooperated; he refused. The standoff lasted until July when the Supreme Court, in a rare display of courage, restored Chaudhry to his position. This did not last long: by November, Musharraf struck again. He suspended the constitution and dismissed Justice Chaudhry.

By then, the Americans had started to view Musharraf as a liability and decided to replace him with Benazir Bhutto, their favorite daughter, to take over. A deal was struck in Washington -- yes Pakistan's destiny is determined in places like Washington and London despite the elites' claims that it is a sovereign country -- whereby Musharraf would grant immunity from prosecution for Benazir's theft of billions of dollars while she agreed not to press charges against Musharraf for violating the constitution once she came power. Without going into details about subsequent developments -- Benazir's murder, elections, Musharraf's resignation and Asif Ali Zardari's occupancy of the presidency -- the more important point is that no act of corruption and fraud by top officials is ever prosecuted. Even the activist Chief Justice has not opened cases against Musharraf and Zardari. There is widespread belief that Justice Chaudhry was allowed to assume his post under a deal brokered by the army chief, General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani. This was facilitated by the Americans and the British to ensure that their interests were not jeopardized and that transfer of power from one set of American puppets to another went smoothly.

It is interesting to note that while Musharraf struts about the world as a senior statesman even after repeatedly violating the Constitution for which the punishment is death, those at the lower end of the scale are targeted and killed. One does not have to be sympathetic to the Taliban or agree with their primitive thinking and methods to ask: does the law apply only to ordinary people and not to those at the top? This culture of entitlement and immunity for the elites has created the kind of serious problems that are driving Pakistan to the brink. While the full might of the Pakistan army is directed at defeating the Taliban -- a picture released by the army on May 22 showed a Pakistani flag raised over a ridge that the army had captured from the Taliban in Swat -- one wonders why similar feats have never been achieved against arch-enemy India for which the military consumes a major portion of the country's budget?

By taking up arms and indulging in suicide bombings, the Taliban and their supporters feel empowered. For more than 60 years, gross injustices have been perpetrated against ordinary people; in their own primitive ways, they are now fighting back. When the ruling elites say the Taliban are a threat to Pakistan, this is only partly true; the Taliban are beginning to challenge the privileges and ill-gotten wealth of the elites as well as tap into deep-seated anti-American sentiment. True, they will not deliver much relief to the masses either but that is a separate issue. What is happening in Pakistan is a struggle in which the Taliban and their supporters are using the same tools--weapons and brute force--that the elites have used against the people for decades. They have the added advantage of claiming to be anti-American while the elite are seen as agents of the US.

Even if the Taliban are completely routed and defeated in Swat -- a highly unlikely scenario -- the problem will not go away. The Taliban were created by the military two decades ago under US-British patronage to advance their agenda in Afghanistan. The hundreds of madrassas where these people are trained have now spread throughout Pakistan. Lower Punjab and Karachi are important centres for their activities. Under US pressure and promises of bakhshish, the elites have embarked on a dangerous course that may engulf Pakistan in civil war and could possibly lead to its disintegration. The Americans have long wanted this but it is distressing to note that for a few dollars, the elite in Pakistan are prepared to destroy the

country.

Pakistan's policies are being skewed to serve US interests and fight its own people. This is recipe for disaster.

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