

The Slow Poisoning of Pakistan

Pakistan is a difficult country to run. Since its creation, the revolving door of civilian governance and active military rule has paralyzed the country's growth, leaving Pakistan's citizens despondent and resigned. The twin promises of economic prosperity and social harmony are merely an echo of convenient political rhetoric. Pakistan's growth has instead been eclipsed by socio-ethnic fragmentation rife with sectarian violence and extremism and a political class that remains tethered solely to its land. Education, job creation and real institutional development remain absent within the ethos of Pakistan's governance narrative. Pakistan's provinces are faring no better, with Baluchistan and Northwest Frontier becoming unruly, de facto states within a state. Pakistan, for lack of a better term, is being slowly poisoned by its own failings. The disintegrated painting of Pakistan requires, now more than ever, a leader who can deliver a work of true craftsmanship, one who is both competent and incorruptible to effectively bring about wholesale reform of a dysfunctional government culture.

The social and economic malaise of Pakistan is not difficult to diagnose. A country comprised of a heterogeneous population, divided further by tribe and caste across provincial villages, Pakistan has never seen a strong, centralized government structure that seamlessly integrates its disparate citizenry. The feudal system has given rise to an aristocratic class that has shackled the masses. Distrust among the people has led to a breakdown of inter-provincial trust and cooperation for development purposes.

This is most strikingly illustrated by Pakistan's enormous water wastage. Pakistan lacks efficient water reservoirs, resulting in millions of gallons of water lost to the Arabian Sea annually. Pakistan needs to develop infrastructural mechanisms and attract fresh international capital for a healthy public-private water industry to develop. Financial investment, technical expertise, management skills and modern technology are desperately required to infuse new vitality in Pakistan's economic engines, without compromising local talent and businesses which can be absorbed as working assets. Similarly, Baluchistan's vast natural gas and oil reservoir remains unused for the benefit of its people and for Pakistan's national economy. Its ancient tribal system and refusal to indulge any meaningful educational reform threatens the viability of a truly unified nation state.

Endemic corruption on every conceivable level, insurmountable foreign debt, distrust among its population, a mercurial judicial system, extremist ideologies, and unequal wealth distribution have all exacerbated Pakistan's internal divisions. While Pakistan's economy is slowly suffocating under the weight of foreign debt and extraordinary inflation, its next door neighbors, China and India are consistently hitting 7-8% GDP growth yearly. Like Wal-Mart, India and China, while the latter being Pakistan's strategic ally, are engulfing the region through exerting wholesale economic prowess. Pakistan has become the small shopkeeper, unable to keep up with the Wal-marts of the world. The country's unique offerings, rich array of commodities and natural resources, and a large, young population eager to apply their skills, are left to the dustbins of small town history in a globalized world economy.

These examples are merely illustrative of the perpetual challenges facing Pakistan. Pakistanis simply do not see a hopeful future for their country, one that is on the verge of being a failed

state. Attempts have been made to solidify the national interest, most notably under the umbrella of Islam. But this has always been used as for political expediency, often at the expense of sectarian harmony. The prose of religion has become a tool of violence against the faithful masses and political opponents alike. The county has become a killing field, where the harvest of ideas has been decimated by the burning bushels of religiously-motivated politics.

Instead, the only common agenda that has organically maintained Pakistan's integration has been the military. The overall physical security of Pakistan, including its provinces, has yielded a powerful military apparatus. With India and Afghanistan surrounding Pakistan, the military itself is the agenda-setter, propagating the idea that Pakistan's survival depends on regional security. Pakistan's armed forces, while powerful and swift at navigating the treacherous waters among hostile neighbors, can only do so much to prevent the country's internal implosion. Imagine a country becoming ripe for the taking and subsumed within the subcontinent without any external military power used or war fought. Such a possibility exists and remains a formidable, if silent, threat to Pakistan's viability.

The gravity of Pakistan's problems requires leadership that is not beholden to special or feudal interests. It requires an individual who can set the right course for institutional development and the privatization of land and industry. Leadership that maintains a stronghold on Pakistan's resources is not leadership; it is state-sanctioned theft from the people. Pakistan requires leadership that embodies vision, integrity and courage to face the onslaught of the inevitable social, political and religious forces seeking the preservation of the status quo. Anything less will simply enable the demise of this once promising nation, a memory of a bygone idea that was once envisioned upon the highest intellectual principles of our time.

Adeel A. Shah
www.shahadeel.com
Washington, DC