

## **The state turns the corner?**

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Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's observation that he wants to make Pakistan a liberal state and Maulana Fazlur Rehman's rejoinder that he and his fellow clerics will never allow this to happen has revived the debate on how liberal this country, in the given situation, can be.

What Mian Nawaz Sharif meant by liberalism is not clear but what the religious leaders criticise liberalism for is, to a large extent, known. For them, giving women the right to choose their spouses, prohibition of child marriage, protection of women against domestic violence, co-education in schools, women's participation in public life, and promotion of arts, particularly performing arts, are aspects of a liberal culture that cannot be permitted in the Islamic Republic. Besides, they have successfully challenged all post-1988 governments' capacity to undo Gen. Zia's so-called Islamisation measures.

Viewed in this context, the country's enlightened sections have been carried away by some of the government's recent gestures, such as honouring documentary film-maker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy in the Prime Minister's Secretariat (this in a country where Iskander Mirza and Ayub Khan went back on their promise to give away film awards) and promising a tough law to suppress what are called honour crimes against women, the adoption of a women protection law by the PML-N-ruled Punjab government, references to changes in the blasphemy law to protect those who are wrongly accused under it, and some signs of restrictions on and punitive action against the once highly privileged leaders of extremist organisations.

Some people see in these developments signs of a break from conservatism while some others would like to keep their fingers crossed.

The word 'liberal' has generally been used everywhere to denote freedom from traditional ideas in the areas of belief, education, politics, culture and social norms. The Pakistani Muslims inherited the traditions of a liberal Islam, in the sense they were less conservative or rigid in interpreting their faith than the followers of other schools of thought elsewhere. What this meant in social terms, apart from their open-mindedness towards music and shrine culture, was a willingness to co-exist and interact with followers of other religions. During the Mughal period, Dara Shikoh was accepted as the symbol of liberal Islam and Aurangzeb as the champion of the conservative orthodoxy.

Liberalism appeared as a challenge to Muslims in the sub-continent when they came into contact with the European culture. Those who modified their life-style, their attire and eating habits, or participated in public entertainment and allowed women to discard the veil began to be called liberals while the rest sanctified their conservatism under the label of a divinely ordained path.

One area of distinction between the two camps was children's education. Some chose to arrange for their young ones what was described as liberal education — the whole range of instruction in humanities and sciences — while the others remained faithful to the traditional madrassa

curriculum. With the passage of time, the former group grew in numbers while the latter became progressively smaller. Today, the leaders of madrassas claim recognition for offering the pupils liberal education along with instruction in religious disciplines.

In the realm of politics the liberals, that is, those who accepted the advent of representative government, elections, and the role of opposition parties, had relatively easy successes. The conservative religious parties do not accept the democratic agenda. They have not given up their doctrinal rejection of the existing system of election, presence of opposition party in an Islamic country or the law-making functions of elected assemblies. Yet, they all take part in democratic politics and fight elections, want to enjoy the perks of opposition leaders, and justify this peace with liberalism with hopes of using this “alien system” to establish orthodoxy’s rule.

Likewise, liberal ideas have achieved considerable acceptability in terms of political behaviour, permission to women to enter politics and the various vocations, and the barriers to performing arts have been lowered. As a result, the conservative agenda has shrunk to campaigns against obscenity (*fahashi*), women’s empowerment (especially in the family) and preserving the clerics’ veto power in the area of legislation. Yet, politicians who consider themselves liberal are all the time afraid of the conservatives and their ability to threaten them with street power.

To some extent, their fears have been reinforced by the fact that most of the anti-establishment movements in Pakistan have been conducted under the banner of religious orthodoxy. Only the other day, the clerics forced the Nawaz government to agree to consult them on the Punjab Protection of Women Act by simply reminding it of the PNA movement of 1977, the most prominent case in Pakistan’s history of the abuse of religious slogans to secure political gains. Pakistan is a strange country in the sense that its society has become more liberal than ever and, at the same time, it has become more fearful of the conservative backlash.

The reason lies in the liberals’ inability, for tactical reasons, to break from the umbilical cord of tradition. Most of them are progressive in public and conservatives in private life. They felt they could not sell democracy without using Islamic as a prefix and unknowingly they opened the way to slogans like Islamic science and Islamic carpentry. And this happened in other Muslim countries, too.

When the Pakistan People’s Party added to its slogans of democratic politics and socialist economy devotion to the Islamic faith — to the extent of declaring Islam as the state religion — it was only following the text of Jamal Nasser’s constitution for the United Arab Republic.

This explains the fact that while the conservatives can pose as liberals when it suits them the liberals have tried to keep one foot in the traditional boat.

The question to be faced by students of politics in Muslim societies is as to why the liberals are in retreat throughout the Muslim world. A certain clarity of thought on this issue will enable us to understand Pakistan’s current predicament.

The liberal ideas of democracy, equality of human beings, rights of women and the minorities, tolerance of dissent, et al, are values acquired by us from external sources and these are at

variance with the value system into which most of the Pakistanis open their eyes and grow up with. When the adopted system fails to satisfy the people's minimum expectations of returns and rewards the people tend to fall back on the inherited values they had deviated from. This is one of the explanations for the revival of the religious sentiment in all Muslim countries, including Pakistan and Turkey, where liberalism at one stage seemed fairly well-entrenched.

The second and more important reason for the liberals' ordeal is that they have treated liberalism largely as an exclusive privilege of the social elite and left the majority to wallow in conservative beliefs and prejudices.

For instance, liberal politics in Pakistan depends not only on a total rejection of authoritarian concepts and practices but also regular cultivation of democratic, federal and pluralistic values. This has not happened in Pakistan. The elected governments created after the overthrow of dictatorial regimes have shown little capacity to purge their conduct of authoritarian practices and tendencies. Every attempt is being made to resist the transition to a genuine federation and the bosses in the areas of education and culture deny pluralism in practice, even if they occasionally pay lip service to the ideal.

Likewise, a liberal society is inconceivable without ensuring equality among human beings but Pakistan has made the capital mistake of blocking the process of social change towards this goal. A majority of the population is still trapped in the medieval relations of production. Despite the fact that the rural population is becoming aware of liberal ideas, from the international media and from the experiences of expatriates, they are unable to break through their conservative modes of thinking and behaviour because of a lack of state's interest in their liberation from conservative bonds.

The problem has been aggravated by the difference in the tactics adopted by earlier liberals and the present-day players. Jinnah was a liberal who made a temporary pact with conservatives and tried to break with them even before Pakistan was born and pleaded for inclusive politics. The present-day rulers do not check the orthodoxy's encroachments in the political field by promoting inclusive politics; they try to work around them. These tactics may enable them to get away with demolition of mosques for widening roads or laying an Orange Line train track but are unlikely to help them in defending the rights of the vulnerable — women, religious minorities, smaller Muslim sects, peasants, workers and the wide category defined as poor.