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Pakistan

What to do about Religious Fundamentalism?

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Pakistan has been top of the world news with the recent visit of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to firm up Pakistan support for US policy in the region. This article examines the role of religious fanatics in Pakistan politics and US responsibility for their current strength.

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"Let's deal with the ISI [Pakistani Intelligence Agency] and the Pakistan military and let's go recruit these mujahideen. Here is a very strong argument which is... it wasn't a bad investment to end the Soviet Union but let's be careful with what we sow... because we will harvest," Hillary Clinton, 23 April 2009.

Once again Pakistan has become the focus of world attention. Every day there is news about the latest suicide attack or military operations, with killings, injuries and displaced communities. Lately schools were ordered closed for over a week. Even children talk about death and suicidal attacks.

With over 125 police checkpoints in Islamabad, it has become a fortress city. Lahore and other large cities suffer the same fate: there are police road blockades everywhere. After each terrorist attack authorities issue another security high alert and set up additional barriers. How ironic that, until recently, officials and the media described these "terrorists" as Mujahidin fighting for an Islamic world.

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Under immense pressure by Obama administration, the Pakistan government has launched a series of military operations in various parts of the country. This has led to an unprecedented wave of killings, with hundreds of thousands more forced to leave their home for temporary shelter.

Pushed out of Afghanistan after 9/11, religious fanatics from different nationalities have found refuge in Pakistan. They have two aims: to make Pakistan more Islamic and to teach the government a lesson for its close relationship with American imperialism. However the price is paid by ordinary people.

Religious fanatics are new fascists. They believe in the physical elimination of their political opponents. Although they may appear to be anti-imperialist, they are not a progressive force. Instead they are an extreme right-wing force that wants to turn back the clock of the history.

The religion of the state

Pakistan is also known as Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Religion is part and parcel of the state. The constitutions and the judiciary are all beleaguered with Islamic demagoguery. Most of the educational syllabus is also colored with Islamic ideology; even scientific explanations somehow manage to drag in religion.

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Religion has become a way of life. Every donation to charity ends up in coffers of the religious institutions. Life without religion is unthinkable.

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Although the only rationale for the Pakistani state is to be a place for Muslims, it was to be a secular Muslim state. When the state was formed in 1947 the population was not fundamentalist. But as time went on Pakistan adopted an Islamic ideology that today gives these fanatics a more favorable ground for the promotion of their dream of an Islamic country.

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At the end of the 1970s, with the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, Washington decided it needed to develop an indigenous counter force. In order to fight "communism" in Afghanistan, Washington worked closely with Pakistan's military dictator, General Zia Ul Haque, and the Pakistani intelligence, the Inter-Services intelligence (ISI). There are dozens of books explaining the rise of Taliban and Mujahedeen under the direct guidance of the Americans, but the ISI had no reason to cut off the funding after the Soviet retreat in 1987. If the Americans were no longer interested in these guerillas, the ISI found these "jihadis" useful in its conflict with India over Kashmir.

Second, there are many religious political parties in Pakistan. Jamaati islami and Jamiat Ulmai Islam, along with other Sunni and Wahabi political parties, are all for an Islamic revolution. They also give a political support to the religious fanatics of Taliban and Alqaida.

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Hillary Clinton admits American role

Even Hillary Clinton, the US foreign secretary, acknowledged Washington's responsibility in promoting the religious fanatics. Here is her admission to a US Congressional sub-committee on April 23, 2009, that the Americans had effectively created the current disastrous situation in Afghanistan:

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"It was President Reagan in partnership with Congress led by Democrats who said you know what it sounds like a pretty good idea. let's deal with the ISI [Pakistani intelligence agency] and the Pakistan military and let's go recruit these mujahideen. Here is a very strong argument which is. it wasn't a bad investment to end the Soviet Union but let's be careful with what we sow. because we will harvest."

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However, it is not only Americans that are harvesting what they have sown. Numerous Pakistani governments were ready to do whatever the Americans wanted them out of sheer financial greed. Since 1978 the different governments have all been a close US allies. This includes 20 years of military dictatorship under Zia (1977-1988) and General Musharaf (1999-2008). These various governments enabled the religious fanatics to establish religious educational institutions that have changed the country's religious culture.

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The Madrasas' tactics

One of the main strategies used by the religious fanatics to bring jihad to the youth of Pakistan was "through opening religious schools (madrasas). They mushroomed under the General Zia ul Haque dictatorship. At present, there are religious schools throughout Pakistan." Of the "more than 15,000 registered" madrasas, about half are in the Punjab. Experts estimate the numbers are higher: when the state tried to count them in 2005, a fifth of the area in the province refused to register.

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The "madrasas" found a place among the working people as they were marketed as offering a free education with religious teachings. In fact, failure of the government to provide adequate resources for free public education paved the way for the progress of the "madrasas. Pakistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world. The government spends less than 3 percent on education. Only about half of Pakistanis can read and write, far below the proportion to countries with a similar per-capita income, such as Vietnam. According to UNESCO, one out of three school-age Pakistani children does not attend school; of those who do attend, a third drop out by the fifth grade. The enrollment of girls is among the lowest in the world, lagging behind Ethiopia and Yemen.

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Though "madrasas" make up only about 7 percent of primary schools in Pakistan, their influence are amplified by

the inadequacy of public education and the innate religiosity of the countryside, where two-thirds of the population lives. These madrasas are the real breeding grounds for religious fundamentalism.

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More than 15,000 registered religious seminaries in the country cater to more than 1.5 million students and over 55,000 teachers. Before 2002, according to the Religious Affairs Ministry, the number of registered madrasas in Pakistan were not more than 6,000. After 9/11, the religious fanatics who left Afghanistan came to Pakistan and with the help of the two provincial governments of religious alliance MMA, North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan; they were able to quickly establish more madrasas. By 2007 there were around 13,000 registered seminaries across the country. At this time General Musharaf was a partner in the so-called "Alliance against terrorism." He was manipulating both the fanatics and the imperialists.

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By March 2009, the number of registered madrasas in Pakistan reached 15,725.

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The growth of religious fanatics

The partnership of religious fanatics with American and the Pakistani intelligence agencies went unchecked until 9/11. Then the whole scenario shifted. The Mujahedeen was labeled terrorist and America wanted a military solution to the growth of religious fundamentalism.

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The growth of religious fundamentalism was not only the result of the American and Pakistani intelligence agencies but also the complete failure of the civilian and military governments to solve any of the basic problems of the working class and its allies. Successive regimes have been unable to end the grip of feudalism, the absolute exploitive nature of Pakistani capitalists and their humiliating treatment of workers and farmers, the repression of smaller nationalities and exploitation of natural resources they possessed.

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The ruling class has failed miserably to bring about democratic norms. That is why whenever the civilian government was overthrown by a military dictatorship, the vast majority of the masses did not offer any resistance to dictatorship.

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Establishing Islamic courts

The present civil government of the Pakistan Peoples Party has been contradictory in dealing with religious fanatics. In the Swat area, they have gone from peace talks to agreements with the fanatics to establish Islamic courts. The religious forces were decisively defeated during the general elections of 2008. Where in the 2002 general elections they received 15 percent of the vote, in 2008 they got less than three percent.

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Just after the 2008 general elections, when the masses had rejected the religious forces, instead of a mass mobilization to end religious fundamentalism, the present regime opted for negotiations. This gave the fanatics an incentive to go further: they demanded Sharia laws in the Malakand division. This was accepted and an agreement signed. It was real boost for the religious fundamentalists who then went further in their attempt to control more areas and therefore giving an impression that they were not far from Islamabad.

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In a panic, the regime, with full support of the Americans, went for a full military operation in the Malakand division in June 2009. The result was over 3.5 million internally displaced people and over 5000 killings. The present government boasted a military victory over the fundamentalists and then asked people to go back home. But this was not the army's military victory but a temporary retreat of the fanatics. Able to save their infrastructure, the fanatics did

what Afghan Taliban did during the October 2001 military attack. That too was a military retreat, only to re-emerge later.

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The celebration of a military victory over the religious fanatics had not last even one month before the fanatics were able to attack the military's general headquarters, the famous GHQ, along with several police training centers in different parts of the country during the month of October 2009. This month was seen as the bloodiest with killings on both sides.Â

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Saying there was no other option, many liberals in Pakistan have supported the military actions against the religious fanatics. But no military solution can eliminate the religious fundamentalists. It has been the case of Afghanistan and so it will be in Pakistan. It can only push them back to other areas. The religious fundamentalists have used the tactics of urban terrorism. An urban terrorism cannot be eliminated by invading areas considered to be under fundamentalists' control. Military actions in Malakand division and now in Waziristan have pushed the fanatics to other parts of Pakistan.

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The fallacy of short-term and long-term strategies

Military solution has been presented as an immediate step to the ultimate solution to fight against fundamentalism. It is like the old Stalinist theory of minimum and maximum goals. "Demand minimum to get the maximum" was the philosophy. It was known as minimum and maximum stage of revolution. In social circles, this has been presented as short-term and long-term strategies.Â For them, military solution is a short-term strategy while the long-term strategy requires reforms and more development. But this is all false; it will not solve anything. This is just an excuse to please American imperialism.

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There is no in between the short-term and long-term strategies. If the fight against religious fanatics has to go forward, it must begin with a revolutionary programme. It had to start with the political will to separate religion from the state. It has to deal with the question of the nature of Pakistani state. Religion cannot become the basis of a nation. Pakistan's two nation theories were torn apart by the events of the '60s and '70s when Bangladesh came into existence. Now a more severe crisis is erupting in Baluchistan over similar lines. There is strong movement developing that calls for the independence of Baluchistan.

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A whole package

There has to be a concrete programme to fight religious fundamentalism. It has to combine an immediate dealing with the suicidal attacks and curbing the activities of the fascist forces from their strongholds along with an overall plan of action in economic, political and social fields. This should include the nationalization of religious madrasas and retraining of teachers. It should include an immediate increase in workers' wages in both the private and public sector to at least 12,000 Rupees a month.

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All discriminatory laws must go and all citizens of Pakistan should enjoy equal constitutional status. At present there are several laws that make religious minorities second-rate citizens. The government should be committed to fully back local resistance to the religious fanatic. Civil society organizations in the stronghold of the religious fundamentalists should be given full backing by the state so that they can function. The state must help to strengthen and sustain the local defense committees to fight the religious fanatics.

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What to do about Religious Fundamentalism?

All trade union rights must be restored in all the public and private sector with full freedom of speech and gatherings. The present civilian seeks military solutions. Most of the discriminatory laws are still intact, including the blasphemy laws. The government has no plan to do away with these discriminatory laws promulgated under military dictatorships so the organizations of civil society must demand governmental action to restore rights.

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The forces of religious fundamentalism organize on an international basis. A fight against them has to be organized at that same level. The Americans' "war on terror" is fueling more religious fundamentalism. It is seen as a war on Muslims. The occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan by the imperialist forces is providing the religious fanatics a political justification for their terrorist activities.

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Clearly occupation must end. The campaign to end the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and no support to the fanatics can be the basis for a united action of progressive forces internationally. The campaign against religious fundamentalism must be part and parcel of an anti-globalization campaign by all progressive forces.

We must oppose both occupation and religious fundamentalism.

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No support to one against the other. The fight between the religious fundamentalism and the imperialists is a fight between bulls. There is not much to gain in siding with one against the other, but to end the fight and open the space to create an alternative way of living.