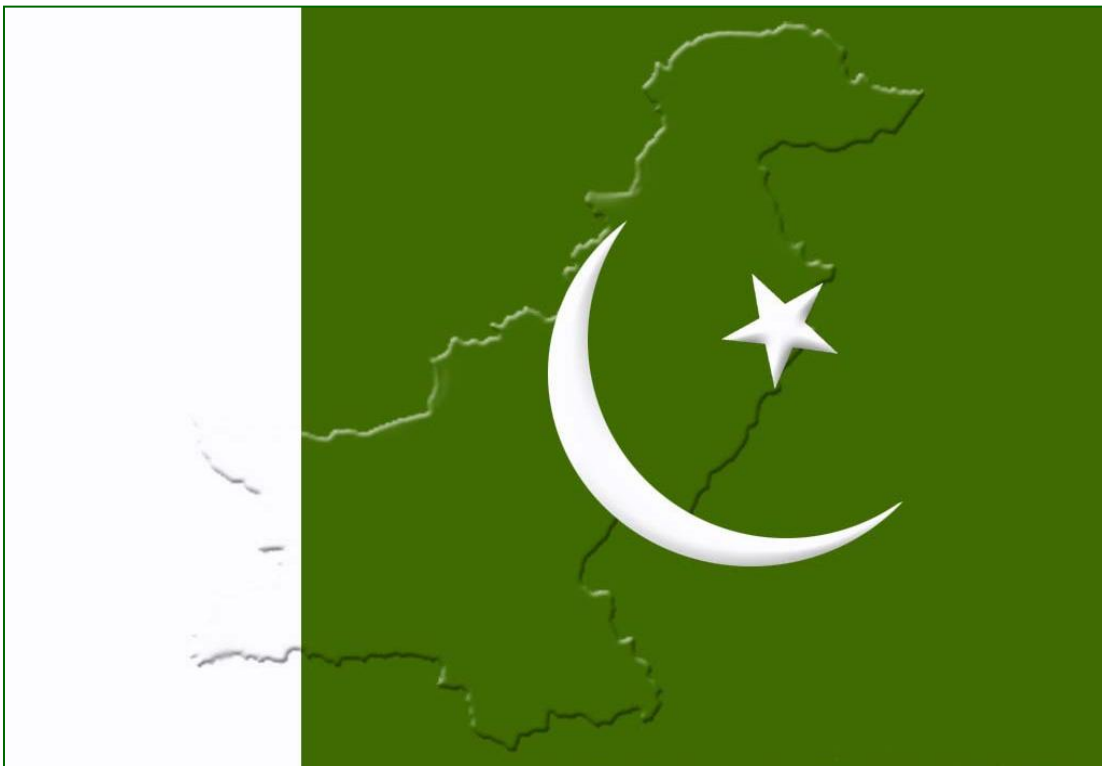


AsianAffairs
presentation

Pakistan's Floundering Government:
What's at Stake for Pakistan and the World



FARZANA SHAIKH

Associate Fellow, Asia Programme, and Director, Pakistan Study Group,
Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), London

in conversation with

SUDHEENDRA KULKARNI

Chairman, Observer Research Foundation, Mumbai

22nd February, 2011

Pakistan, which faces grave existential threats stemming from religious violence and an unprecedented rise in hard-line Islamic militancy, must be encouraged to revive the common syncretistic traditions of “Indian Islam,” said Dr. Farzana Shaikh, Associate Fellow, Asia Programme; and Director, Pakistan Study Group, Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), London. She was engaged in a vigorous conversation with Shri Sudheendra Kulkarni, Chairman, Observer Research Foundation Mumbai (ORF), on the issue of ***Pakistan’s Floundering Government: What’s at Stake for Pakistan and the World***. The discussion was organised under the aegis of its *Asian Affairs* presentation series by the Asia Society India Centre, in collaboration with ORF.

Besides the incisive dialogue with Shri Kulkarni, Dr. Shaikh also answered with utmost candour, honesty and outspokenness the questions asked by the audience, which comprised of several eminent personalities including Shri. Viren Shah, former Governor of West Bengal; Mr. Stephen Waters, Consul-General of Australia; Mr. Chung Ying Lin, Consul-General of Singapore, and Mr. Alexey M. Mzareulov, Acting Consul-General of Russia.

Indian Islam: The only way forward in Pakistan

Pakistan needs to revive the broad, pluralistic and syncretistic traditions of “Indian Islam”, common to the Indian subcontinent as a whole, which reflect the great diversity of the region and which stand against the narrow, literalist reading of “Arabian Islam” favoured by religious hard liners in Pakistan, seek to impose it by violence. “The great damage done



Dr. Farzana Shaikh addressing the gathering.

to us in Pakistan today is the consequence of loosening our links with our indigenous traditions, which are common not only to India, but also extend to, and are deeply rooted in, the territories of Pakistan. Pakistan detached itself from these pluralist traditions of local Islam to accentuate its Islamic profile and underline its distinct identity vis-à-vis India by espousing a version of Islam informed by the more homogeneous culture of the Arabian peninsula that was judged to be “purer” and “uncorrupted” by Hinduism, Buddhism and other indigenous Indian religious traditions,” she said.

Tracing the genesis of Pakistan from the turbulent days of Partition in 1947, Dr. Shaikh drew attention to the failure of Pakistan’s founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, to establish a broad based consensus on the ideology of Islam, which progressively resulted in the “deepening ideological confusion” in the

country. When Pakistan was created, Mr. Jinnah’s vision was to form a modern, moderate Muslim country, premised on the equality of all its citizens. However, since there was no agreement on which version of Islam was to embody the state, successive governments – military and civil – sought to overcome the ideological confusion by attempting to impose a consensus that was underpinned by an exclusivist approach to Islam that encouraged an exclusive definition of both ‘the Muslim’ and ‘the Pakistani’, she explained.

“Mr. Jinnah failed to realize that religion, in this case, Islam, was a tiger he could not ride so easily. Having unleashed it, he found it impossible to rein it. Pakistan is living with the consequences of that decision. If today Pakistan’s politicians routinely misuse religion for political reasons, it is a legacy that we have inherited from Mr. Jinnah”, she remarked, pointing out that this legacy had fuelled chronic uncertainty about the equation between religion and nationalism, and about being Muslim and being a Pakistani.

Pakistan needs to revive the broad, pluralistic and syncretistic version of “Indian Islam”, common to the Indian subcontinent as a whole, which reflects the diversity of Indian society and which stands against the narrow, literalist reading of “Arabian Islam”, which the hard liners in Pakistan are violently trying to impose today.

The pervasive climate of intolerance against non-Muslim minorities as well as those judged to be “merely posing as Muslims” or “not real Muslims” such as the Ahmadiya or the Shia Muslim minorities is symptomatic of the lack of consensus over Islam, she said. She pointed out that this ambiguity over the role of Islam is what largely accounts for the precarious position of Pakistan’s religious minorities and the beleaguered state of its liberal-minded Muslim citizens. “The ghastly incidents that have unfolded in Pakistan since the assassination of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, who openly dared to challenge the notorious blasphemy laws, have demonstrated that far from being totally independent of each other, faith and citizenship are locked in a deadly embrace in Pakistan,” she said.

The Blasphemy Laws: Backbone of Pakistan’s ongoing crisis

Dr. Shaikh maintained that growing political misuse of the blasphemy laws was one of the main reasons for growing religious conflict in Pakistan. She explained these laws in detail:

In the mid-1980s, Pakistan’s military ruler Gen. Zia ul Haq amended the blasphemy laws, introduced under British rule, to impose penalties ranging from two years to life imprisonment for the defilement of the Quran and/or the death penalty for derogatory remarks against the Prophet Mohammed. However, what has since rendered these laws especially notorious is the imposition of the mandatory death penalty for blasphemous remarks against the Prophet. The measure was enforced in 1991 by the government of the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif after the National Assembly failed to take action that allowed to pass unchallenged a ruling by the Federal Shariat Court in 1990, which upheld the mandatory death penalty for blasphemy. However, to date, no one charged with blasphemy has actually been executed in Pakistan, Dr. Shaikh pointed out.

The notorious blasphemy laws that have been openly misused against the minorities in Pakistan and often wielded as a weapon to silence the liberal voice in the country are a grim reminder that far from being totally independent of each other, faith and citizenship are locked in a deadly embrace in Pakistan.

Nevertheless, it is now commonly acknowledged by human rights groups and liberal Pakistanis that the laws are brazenly discriminatory and have been widely abused. Non-Muslim minorities in Pakistan, who have for long suffered the ignominy reserved for second class citizens, have been the chief targets although as many Muslims have also been victimised. It is estimated that since 1986 about 1300 people have been charged with blasphemy in Pakistan, with under half of those numbers affecting Muslims, including those judged not to be Muslims, notably the members of the Ahamadiya community.

Condemning the vague wording of the laws and their frequent recourse to flimsy evidence to bring a prosecution, Dr. Shaikh advocated urgent reforms to the laws, if not their outright repeal – a sentiment that many liberal Muslims in Pakistan share but are helpless to pursue. Nonetheless, three decades on, the laws remain unchanged, and their misuse, sadly, widespread.



Resistance to change has come mainly from religious parties, but mainstream parties – ever beholden to the language of Islam to shore up their fragile legitimacy – have been no less vocal in their opposition to laws they judge to be in keeping with Pakistan’s Islamic identity.

What has been particularly damaging, however, is that this opposition has also muddled the debate over reform of the laws by perpetuating public confusion over their relation to, on the one hand, the violation of human rights in Pakistan in contravention of clauses guaranteeing the equality of all citizens under Pakistan’s Constitution and, on the other, the defence of Pakistan’s putative Islamic identity.

“Nowhere has this been more in evidence than during the controversy triggered by the death sentence imposed last year on a Christian woman Asia Noreen, also known as Asia Bibi, for blasphemy and the events that followed the brutal murder of Governor Taseer,” she remarked. Both have fuelled acute uncertainty and blurred the distinction attached to quite separate issues involving checks to prevent abuse of laws to ensure protection of human rights, measures to amend the laws and make punishment more commensurate with the crime, and attempts to repeal the laws in line with a more enlightened version of Islam. “Together these uncertainties have deepened divisions in the Pakistan society today. They have paralysed the PPP-led government and fuelled international concerns to tackle Islamic extremism and promote stability in the region,” she explained.

If today in Pakistan politicians routinely misuse religion for political reasons, it is a legacy that we have inherited from Mr. Jinnah... A legacy that has fuelled chronic uncertainty about the equation between religion and nationalism and about being Muslim and being Pakistani.

The fallout

The most immediate fallout of Governor Taseer’s assassination is the manner in which it exposed more sharply than at any other time the deep divisions that now scar Pakistan. These divisions centre overwhelmingly on the gulf that separates the so called liberals – more often than not equated with the ‘elite’ – from so called conservatives, more often than not equated with the pro-Islamic ‘underclass’.

However, these divisions are more complex and disturbing than may appear at first sight. For ranked against these liberal classes seeking for the law to take its course to bring the murderer of Taseer to justice are the very forces of justice, i.e. groups of lawyers, which until recently were widely held to be at the forefront of liberal, progressive change in Pakistan. “Today, while the prosecution of Taseer’s murderer remains stalled over the failure to recruit a team of prosecuting lawyers willing to present a case in court, more than 500 of their counterparts have come forward to offer their services free of charge to defend Taseer’s murderer who they hail as a hero,” said Dr. Shaikh, highlighting how Islamic militancy had overwhelmed the Pakistani psyche.

But if Taseer’s murder has exposed these deep divisions, it has also helped conceal others, she explained. It is arguably the case that religious parties in Pakistan, long fractured by sectarian differences, especially between the Deobandis and the Barelvis, have found in their joint campaign in defence of the current blasphemy laws, the means to paper over these cracks. “Taseer’s murderer is neither a Taliban extremist, nor is he a man force fed on a diet of Deobandi rations. Instead, he is a loyal devotee of mainstream Barelvi Islam, hailed in Pakistan and abroad as an agent of moderation; indeed hailed as the ‘right kind of Islam’ for Pakistan,” Dr. Shaikh pointed out.

Today, the purveyors of Barelvi Islam, whose practice of Sufi shrine worship is judged by Deobandis to be deserving of violent attacks, have united with their erstwhile foes to openly threaten to exact revenge on all who would seek to weaken Islam in Pakistan by reforming the country’s blasphemy laws. The combined force of these Islamic extremists have now come together on the premise of ‘an enemy’s enemy is a friend’, to regard any

reform of these laws as a design to weaken Islam in connivance with western powers – notably the U.S. This is fast leading to a very volatile situation that many analysts fear is set to unleash an imminent “clerical tsunami,” Dr. Shaikh warned.

The Pakistani government, with its survival at stake, sadly chose to seek refuge in its Islamic credentials and coyly fell in line. The tone was set by Pakistan’s interior minister, who while anxious to avoid being seen to endorse Taseer’s murderer, assured a baying crowd that he would shoot any blasphemer himself. The current law minister, who claims to be a religious scholar of sorts, dared anyone to change the blasphemy laws under his watch. Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, too, has come out defiantly announcing that as a Syed, a direct descendent of the Prophet, he could never contemplate a change in laws designed to protect the Prophet.

Blatantly burnishing its Islamic credentials in the wake of twisted hard line opinion can potentially prove to be the bane of the Pakistani Government... keeping alive the idea of a moderate Pakistan is vital to keep the country afloat on the back of billions of dollars pumped in the form of civil and military aid.

Not surprisingly, liberal critics of the government have rounded on the government and condemned it for retreating on its pledges to review the laws and make them less open to abuse and discriminatory practice. They include the PPP leader and former Information Minister Sherry Rahman, who earlier this month withdrew her plans to table a bill aimed at amending the laws after learning that P.M. Gilani had not only ruled out any change in the laws, but would refuse to support her campaign. “This marks the onset of a significant and worrying development in the Pakistan, as for the first time in its history, a broad swathe of opinion in Pakistan finds itself effectively bereft of a credible vehicle for progressive reform and rule of law,” Dr. Shaikh said.

However, blatantly burnishing its Islamic credentials in the wake of skewed hard line opinion is potentially risky for the government as it could fuel the concerns of an international community that is still heavily invested in the idea of a moderate Muslim majority in Pakistan, which it believes will see off the threat of extremism in the region and ensure a viable settlement in Afghanistan. Keeping alive expectations of a ‘moderate’ Pakistan has been vital for the PPP-led government in its efforts to shore up Pakistan with the help of billions of dollars in civil and military aid. “There is no question that the government’s retreat in reforming the blasphemy laws and its less than unequivocal condemnation of Taseer’s killer has revived international fears not only about Pakistan’s appalling human rights record, but its resolve to tackle the extremist threat at home. But it is also clear that international pressure on Pakistan needs to be calibrated and pressure points carefully selected,” Dr. Shaikh remarked.

Is there a plausible solution?

Given the total dominance of the extremist forces, the separation of religion and politics seems to an implausible solution to the crisis. But the agony of seeing her homeland suffer endlessly did inspire in Dr. Shaikh some equally implausible, almost dream-like, solutions to strike an ideal balance between faith and citizenship in Pakistan.

“It would entail at a very minimum, for the state to adopt a principled distance from all religions. It would involve some version of political neutrality that would allow the state to help or hinder different sorts of believers and unbelievers to an equal degree. It would also require that the boundaries between religion and politics be respected. It would entail a state that would deal equally with its citizens irrespective of their religion – a state that is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion; a state that does not seek to promote or interfere with religion; a state that guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion. It would rule out any attempt to forge a constitutional settlement resting on the notion of one or other variant of Islam as truly representative of Pakistan. As a consensus on the terms of Islam will always elude Pakistan, it would entail a Constitution that formally and categorically rejects any provision that empowers or grants special privileges to the country’s citizens on their relationship or non-relationship with Islam,” Dr. Shaikh said, literally hoping against hope.

Pakistan’s retreat in reforming the blasphemy laws and its failure to condemn Taseer’s assassination has revived international fears about its poor resolve to tackle extremism at home... It is clear that international pressure on Pakistan needs to be calibrated and pressure points carefully selected.

“In these grave times, moving toward such a constitutional settlement would also serve another more urgent purpose. It would strip the religious leaders of the moral high ground and would also clear up the question of what we in Pakistan are really fighting for. The answer is clear. The fight in Pakistan is not a struggle for the defence of Islam. Nor is it a fight to pit good Muslims against others,” she concluded. “It is, above all a struggle for a Pakistan premised on the rich diversity and equality of all its people.”

However, Dr. Shaikh was also open to another, more realistic solution, which has been propounded by Dr. Parvez Hoodbhoy, a respected nuclear scientist and faculty at the Quaid i Azam University in Islamabad, who is apparently resigned to Pakistan’s fate and in a recent interview, declared that he sees the current turmoil in Pakistan as a ‘raging forest fire that couldn’t be extinguished till it burns itself out.’

“While it would appear that this almighty coalition of forces of religious parties and groups is ranged against a beleaguered liberal minority, there are very deep and fundamental divisions within this coalition itself. Barelvi and Sufi shrines are being blown up by believers of a different sect of Islam, viz: the Deobandis and others. There is a real danger that they will eventually consume each other. But in the process, they will inflict such damage on the state of Pakistan that there may be nothing after that for us to salvage – that’s where the real risk is,” Dr. Shaikh warned.

For better or for worse, Pakistan is now regarded as a pivotal state, heavily militarized and nuclear armed – what happens to Pakistan will affect the world. Pakistan will not be allowed to sink. Given its strategic location, the U.S. and international community have little choice but to remain heavily invested in Pakistan... the stakes are too high for them.

Dr. Shaikh also made a fervent appeal to India to take a more tolerant stand to understand its beleaguered neighbor, which is fighting a battle for its very existence and survival. “For better or for worse, Pakistan is now regarded as a pivotal state, heavily militarised and nuclear armed – what happens in Pakistan would affect the world. Pakistan will not be allowed to sink. Given Pakistan’s strategic location, the U.S. and international community

are heavily invested in Pakistan. That Pakistan is not able or willing to deliver the returns and dividends as per the expectations of the international community, is a different matter. But the stakes are high. Pakistan is not a Somalia or an Afghanistan. Pakistan's going under will have very grave global repercussions. And if only for that, global forces will ensure that the country somehow holds together. But what of the millions of Pakistani citizens? We need support and help. We need the support of our neighbours. We are a country that is on the defensive and we need our neighbours to understand us and our actions that we are constrained to take, and sometimes, in good faith," Dr. Shaikh appealed.

Role of the U.S.

- "Interference by the United States in Pakistan has distorted the country's perceptions about things like democracy and secularism, ideals that were once freely espoused and aspired for by liberal Pakistanis."
- "The U.S. finds itself in the unenviable position of being Pakistan's largest benefactor and the target of deep popular antipathy. That antipathy has escalated sharply in recent weeks in the wake of U.S. pressure on Pakistan to release one of its officials, Raymond Davis, who shot dead two men in Lahore in January this year, but whose release is being sought by the U.S. on grounds of diplomatic immunity. The serious diplomatic standoff which has gravely affected relations between Pakistan and U.S. could prove to be potentially explosive, coming as it does in the midst of the current blasphemy controversy. It would be foolish to rule out a concerted bid by religious parties now to try and cast their campaign in defence of the blasphemy laws as a move to defend the sovereignty of Pakistan and its laws against the U.S., embroiled in pursuit of its own war on Islam."



Dr. Farzana Shaikh makes a point as Shri Sudheendra Kulkarni (left) and Ms. Bunty Chand (right) look on.



The audience listening to the conversation with rapt attention.

Expressing his gratitude to Dr. Shaikh for being extremely forthright in her views and for her constructive criticism of Pakistan's floundering government, Shri Kulkarni recited the well known poem 'Bol' (Speak) by Faiz Ahmed Faiz: *Bol ki lab azaad hai tere... Bol zabaan ab tak teri hai...!* "But when the time came to speak up, it is sad that many educated people in Pakistan did not speak out against the terrible crime and injustice against the minorities. Instead, it is the lips of the extremists who spoke louder. We have to appreciate and applaud Dr. Shaikh for speaking out so courageously," he said, adding that we in India should think of how to help Pakistan. "Pakistan is an integral part of our civilization which is multi-faith and tolerant. India is not an enemy of Pakistan."

Incidentally, this is the birth centenary of the great poet, who was brave enough to travel from Lahore to New Delhi to attend Mahatma Gandhi's funeral at a time when the conflagration of the tragic Partition was still smouldering. Shri Kulkarni also announced that ORF will soon organise a programme to commemorate the poet's birth anniversary.

The event began by a brief welcome speech by Ms. Radha Vishwanathan, Research Fellow, ORF, who also recited the poem 'Hum Dekhenge' by Faiz: *"And over the heads of despotic rulers, thunderclaps will burst... When crowns will be toppled, when palaces will be demolished..."* Words written a century ago, resounding in their eternal relevance given the unprecedented wave of change sweeping across the Arab world.

Ms. Bunty Chand, Executive Director of Asia Society India Chapter, in her initial remarks, introduced Dr. Farzana Shaikh and said that in the coming days, Asia Society would partner ORF to organise programmes to commemorate Faiz Ahmed Faiz's birth centenary.

Post Script

Days after Dr. Farzana Shaikh's talk at ORF, the world woke up to the news of the ghastly murder of another Pakistani liberal. Self-described Taliban gunmen shot dead the country's Minorities Minister, Shahbaz Bhatti, an advocate of reform of the blasphemy laws in Islamabad on 2nd March 2011. Two assassins sprayed the Christian minister's car with gunfire, striking him at least eight times, before scattering pamphlets that described him as a "Christian infidel". The leaflets were signed "Taliban al-Qaida Punjab". Bhatti's assassination was the second killing of a politician in Islamabad over blasphemy in as many months, following the assassination of the Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer outside a cafe a few miles away on 4th January.

About Dr. Farzana Shaikh

Dr. Farzana Shaikh was born and brought up in Karachi, where she received much of her education. After an M.A. in Political Science from Karachi University, she pursued her studies at the Columbia University where she received her PhD. Soon after her doctorate, she was elected to a Research Fellowship at Clare Hall, Cambridge. Since then she has lectured at universities in the U.K., Europe, U.S., and most recently was named a Visitor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. She is an Associate Fellow of the Asia Programme and Director of the Pakistan Study Group at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, also known as Chatham House, in London. She is the author of *Community and Consensus in Islam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India, 1860-1947* (Cambridge, 1989) and the critically acclaimed, *Making Sense of Pakistan* (Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2009).

About ORF Mumbai

Observer Research Foundation (ORF) is a leading non-partisan Indian Think Tank that seeks to influence public policy formulation. It was established in New Delhi in 1990 by the late R. K. Mishra, a widely respected public figure, who envisaged it as a broad-based intellectual platform pulsating with ideas needed for India's nation-building.

In its journey of twenty years, ORF has brought together leading Indian policy makers, academics, public figures, social activists and business leaders to discuss various issues of national importance. ORF scholars have made significant contributions toward improving government policies. ORF has produced a large body of critically acclaimed publications.

Until recently, ORF's activities were based mainly in New Delhi. Beginning 2010, ORF Mumbai has been established to pursue the Foundation's vision in India's business and finance capital. It has started research and advocacy in six broad areas: **Education, Public Health, Inclusive Development, Urban Renewal, Youth Development, and Promotion of India's Priceless Artistic and Cultural Heritage.**

ORF Mumbai's mission statement is: Ideas and Action for a Better India. It will champion the cause of balanced socio-economic development and a better quality of life for all Indians. It will also work towards strengthening India's democratic institutions to become more responsible, responsive and sensitive to common people's needs and concerns, especially those of most vulnerable sections of the society.

Besides conducting diligent research in its above six core areas, ORF Mumbai also pursues wide-ranging initiatives like:

- * Maharashtra@50 Study Centre
- * Forum for India-China Citizens' Dialogue
- * Centre for the Study of India's Ancient Knowledge Traditions
- * Gurus of Science Series



For more information, please contact Dhaval D. Desai, Research Fellow and Programme Coordinator, ORF Mumbai, at dhaval.desai@orfonline.org or 022-61313800.

Observer Research Foundation Mumbai, NKM International House, Behind LIC Headquarters 'Yogakshema', Near Nariman Point, Mumbai - 400020