

# Hearings on Religious Freedom in India and Pakistan: Prof. Tamara Sonn Prepared Testimony

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Islam and Pakistan: Policy Implications

Islamic trends in Pakistan are complex and dynamic, and are closely related to those in other parts of the Muslim world. I will therefore start with a very schematic historical overview of the last century in the Muslim world. In order to understand that history, it is essential to recognize the significance of colonialism and the post-colonial condition. All of the Muslim world was colonized and this reality influences all its modern history. Indeed, developments in twentieth-century Islamic thought can be looked at as a series of efforts to deal with colonialism and post-colonialism.

To over-simplify, there are four major phases. The first preceded World War I, and was characterized by efforts to develop politically, on the European model of secular philosophies and parties -- like Egypt's Wafd party, in order to achieve independence. The results of World War I caused this approach to lose what appeal it had had, which was limited to the urban elites who were its vanguard. Instead of independence, more direct colonial control was imposed throughout most of the Muslim world. France, Italy, Britain, and Holland gained control of the Muslim world from Morocco to Malaysia.

The next effort then was based on the Soviet model. Their militant socialism had been effective in overthrowing the powerful czars of Russia. Perhaps it would work in the Muslim world, too. The Baathists of Syria and Iraq, as well as the Nasserists date from this period. But again this effort failed, as was evidence by the 1967 defeat of the combined Arab forces, and in the 1971 civil war in Pakistan, for example.

It was only after the failure of these two initiatives that a more indigenous, populist approach to cultural and political empowerment gained ascendancy, one that appealed to the core of Muslim identity. Based on Islamic symbols and values, this movement is usually called Islamism or political Islam by scholars, and fundamentalism by

journalists. The two largest Islamist movements were the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world and the Jamaat-i Islami in South Asia. They had originated long before the 1960s (1926 and 1941, respectively). But as populist, non-elite movements, they took much longer than the previous two to spread and gain their chance to demonstrate their effectiveness. The two movements differ in organizational styles, but their major ideologues influenced one another and their ideologies were virtually identical. After the failure of the earlier "foreign" models of reform, both groups claim that "Islam is the solution." According to their teaching, Islam is the solution to everything - moral, social, economic, political, physical, psychological, and even environmental problems.

This approach is clearly utopian, born in suffering, humiliation, frustration. It is also defensive, bordering on xenophobic. It is characterized by deep distrust of a stereotypical "West" that seems bent on undermining and even destroying the Muslim world (in collusion with various minion states).

Ayatollah Khomeini's movement, of course, was another example of Islamism, and its success in 1979 gave a tremendous boost to the popularity of Islamism. Hopes were very high that a return to "true Islam" would restore dignity, autonomy, and solidarity among Muslim countries. Islamist groups in various countries became very active. They agitated for return to an Islamic state, beginning with implementation of classical Islamic law. They utterly rejected effects and affectations of "Westernism." This was a new assertion of "Islamic identity," symbolized externally by the veil and the beard, which became very popular at the time.

However, the 1980s dragged on without another victory for political Islam. The Iran-Iraq war ended in stalemate, devastating both secularist/socialist (phase 2) Iraq and Islamist (phase 3) Iran.

Sudan had also embarked on a well-publicized Islamization program, but it remained -- as it does today - enmired in a civil war.

The 1990s seemed even worse for Islamism. Algeria's Islamists were on the verge of parliamentary victory, when democracy was overturned by a military coup and the country descended into a hideous civil war. Its combatants -- some claiming the Islamist mantle -- drenched the country in blood. The Soviets left Afghanistan but then that country's factions -- many of whom identified themselves with political Islam -- continued a war of attrition with each other until everyone who could, had left the capital and those who remained feared for their lives. The result was the ascendancy of the Taliban, who perhaps epitomize the utopian and exclusivist characteristics of early political Islam.

By the time of the Algerian civil war and the Taliban victory

in Kabul in the mid 1990s, we begin to see evidence that many Muslims are moving beyond the utopianism and defensiveness of political Islam to a more nuanced, practical, and inclusivist approach to reform. It is still essentially Islamic. But there is greater recognition of the complexity of the challenges facing Muslim communities today, greater emphasis on the flexibility of Islamic law, and greater willingness to accept the responsibility to find solutions for their problems rather than simply to blame "the West." For lack of a better term, I call this new development post-Islamism. Evidence of its rising popularity is clear in the outcome of recent Iranian elections, not only Khatami's election in 1997, but the election of his colleagues last spring.

It is important to recognize that the rise of post-Islamism does not mean that people are any less devoutly Muslim. Nor that they are any less committed to Islamist goals of independence from foreign domination and corruption. What it does mean is that people recognize that Islamism as implemented thus far is not a practical political program for achieving these goals. Therefore, many people formerly associated with Islamism have actually become post-Islamist, advocating progressive interpretation of legal codes to deal effectively with changed social conditions -- including recognizing public rights of women -- and espousing pluralism and democracy.

What about in Pakistan? There, Islamism is likewise losing its luster. This is especially true among the educated, the professionals, the socially and politically engaged. There is in fact deep frustration with those who continue to reject social and political reforms, those who incite the non-politically engaged into emotional frenzy over issues like negotiation with India. We saw an example of this in the street demonstrations in Spring of 1999, when the former government received Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee to discuss a negotiated settlement in Kashmir. Bloody clashes with police were videotaped by the organizers and distributed widely to raise sympathy for those who characterize compromise with India as a violation of religious principles. These Islamists are now characterized by post-Islamists as impeding Pakistan's progress toward conflict resolution and, in the process, preventing Pakistan from being able to address effectively its economic and development problems.

The fact that Islamist parties in Pakistan have never been able to muster more than 3% of the vote in federal elections is clear evidence of their lack of popularity among the politically engaged. However, Pakistan is a country of perhaps 35% literacy, primarily rural still, with relatively low organized national political participation. The majority of issues are still local for most Pakistanis: employment, education, health care. Thanks to the generous foreign aid provided to them during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Islamists could provide such local services, while Pakistan's federal government could not. Pakistan's federal government still cannot provide these services, as long as it is encumbered with a massive foreign debt and is forced to compete militarily with India, a much larger and stronger economy. Nearly half of Pakistan's budget now goes to servicing foreign debt, and nearly half of what is left over goes to defense, due to the nuclear threat from India.

The situation is critical. Post-Islamists in Pakistan express fear of what is being called "the Talibanization of Pakistan." The Islamist schools established along the border during the Soviet occupation continue to operate, and continue to receive funding from who Taliban supporters. Most of these schools are based on traditional religious models and are Islamist in tone: again, utopian and rejecting compromise with "the enemies of Islam."

As long as the Pakistani government is unable to focus its resources on development, these schools will continue to be effective in encouraging Islamist utopianism, exclusivism, and rejectionism. As a result, the politically engaged people in Pakistan see the government as caught in a "Catch 22." India's massive militarization, including nuclear, its refusal to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the Kashmir flashpoint, in the context of Pakistan's foreign debt, keep Pakistan from being able to devote funds to education and development. That, in turn, keeps the majority poor and susceptible to Taliban-style influence.

What solution do Pakistan's post-Islamists see? It seems clear that United States help is necessary. The US must put pressure on India to sign CTBT, or a similar ban on the testing and use of nuclear weapons, so that Pakistan can sign it, as it wants to do, thus relieving the world of the threat of nuclear interchange in the subcontinent. The US must also assist in a negotiated settlement in Kashmir, in accordance with the wishes of the Kashmiri people, in order to establish stability for all participants in the struggle. Without US pressure, India has no incentive to implement United Nations resolutions concerning Kashmir. Finally, the US must lead international pressure to forgive Pakistan's foreign debt, so that the government can concentrate on development, especially education, which will enhance both its economy and political integration.

Therefore, there is a direct relationship between (1) India's signing CTBT or a similar treaty, (2) a negotiated settlement in Kashmir in accordance with United Nations' resolutions, (3) debt relief for Pakistan, and (4) democratization and consequent stabilization of Pakistan. That is what is necessary for Pakistanis to achieve their desire, expressed over and over again, to participate in and contribute constructively to the global community.

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