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For a country created to safeguard the religious freedoms of Muslims in the subcontinent, Pakistan is in the paradoxical situation of mustering the will to protect its predominantly Muslim citizens from militants brandishing a noxious ideology that they attribute to Islam. By no discernible principle of the Quran, Islamic law, and Muslim history, can the current war being waged by bands of militants in Pakistan's northwestern tribal areas be ascribed to religion, far less a jihad in the name of God. The battle being waged against the Pakistani state by militants aligned with Al-Qaeda is for state power and not, as is often mistakenly assumed, for the establishment of an Islamic order where justice and peace can reign supreme.

Those battling the Pakistani security forces do claim Islamic legitimacy, but an armed jihad can only be waged under certain conditions. For instance, jihad through military means is permissible if the religious rights of Muslims are being infringed and then too if there is a reasonable chance of success. If victory against oppression is unlikely, Muslims must migrate to safer pastures rather than engage in a lost cause. Such pragmatism is combined with a surfeit of caution. An armed jihad can only be declared by the state with the sanction of the religious scholars. Non-state actors like the Tehrik-i-Taliban are flouting this strict provision today in FATA and Swat because, in their view, the rulers of Pakistan are complicit with infidels and, therefore, traitors to Islam. But in violating the sanctity of life, property, women and knowledge, these self appointed soldiers of Islam are subverting the very basis of the shariah they are purportedly trying to establish. Islamic jurisprudence explicitly privileges order and stability, condemning those who debase human dignity as perpetrators of *fitna*, literally sedition, a notion fundamentally at odds with jihad as a central principle of Islamic ethics.

The root cause of the current upheaval in Pakistan lies in the denial of elementary justice to the vast majority of its people under extended periods of military authoritarian rule. It is the recurrent suspension of democratic politics and the absence of institutional mechanisms to ensure basic human rights, not an attachment to religious doctrines on the part of an illiterate and hapless populace, which has wreaked havoc on the delicate weave of Pakistani society. If in the initial decades after independence the political process had not been derailed, the independence of the judiciary not been subverted, the media and the educational system not denuded of critical thinking, civil society not reduced to a select club of the privileged few, Pakistan may not have become quite the dangerous place it is today. This is not to deny that the ideologues of religion have used Islam at key moments in Pakistan's history to claim a larger share of political space. The long-standing demand to declare the Ahmadis a non-Muslim minority is a case in point and their success in attaining this objective in 1974 a blot on the face of Pakistan that has darkened ever since.

Even after this major undermining of the elementary concept of inclusionary citizenship in a modern nation-state, Pakistan remained free of the scourge of religious narrow

mindedness that has so badly marred its social fabric today. Religious extremism in Pakistan, a largely moderate country ever since its creation in 1947, assumed menacing proportions only after it was transformed during the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq into a front line state in the American and Saudi supported Islamic jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The handlers of the jihad, especially the premier spy agency the Inter-services Intelligence (ISI), developed a stake in the enterprise and came to regard the militants as assets who could help the Pakistani army achieve strategic depth in Afghanistan. The Sunni-Shia conflicts in contemporary Pakistan have little to do with any doctrinal, sectarian discord, but flow directly from struggles for political power unleashed by events in Afghanistan and Iran since 1979.

Once the military dominated state began actively promoting a militant and orthodox variant of Islam, Pakistani society became a battleground not only between Sunnis and Shias but also within the Sunni majority between Deobandis, Barelvis and other schools of thought. Instead of a civil society where moderate voices could prevail, there was a mushrooming of madrasas devoted to generating sectarian hatred and distorted notions of jihad. The process became irreversible once the Pakistan army, angry with America for abandoning it after the Cold War, began pursuing a regional security doctrine geared to supporting 'jihad' in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Most of the state-sponsored militant outfits were educated in madrasas as well as government schools, which were openly contemptuous of secular and rational forms of knowledge, and effectively served as production lines for a toxic brand of religious bigotry. While the incidence of intra-Muslim enmity has been appreciably greater, mainly for local political reasons, there have been sporadic acts of violence and outright discrimination against religious minorities like the Christians and even the miniscule Hindu and Sikh communities in Pakistan. The relatively well off Ismaili community of the Aga Khan, long immune from persecution, is no longer safe in parts of the country's northern areas.

The deepening polarization is not just along lines of religion, but also class, region and gender. Accompanied by a spiral of unchecked crime and violence, these fractures in a highly inequitable society have sounded the alarm bells about the Pakistan state's ability to command the confidence of its citizens, far less govern effectively and purposefully. However, all is not yet lost. Remarkably enough, Pakistan has a vibrant and resilient civil society as well as a small but determined human rights movement. An independent human rights commission has courageously stood up for the rights of religious minorities and women. A free media has refused to be cowed into submission by authoritarian regimes.

What can the United States do in support of religious freedom in Pakistan? First, it can hold the state it supports with liberal doses of economic aid accountable and compliant with international standards of religious freedom and human rights. This, however, cannot be achieved through either coercion or condescension. Second and more important, United States must engage and be on the side of Pakistan's dynamic civil society as it struggles to redirect the country towards the path of moderation and the goal of social justice. If America is to isolate terrorists, it must avoid the temptations and pressures of isolating the Pakistani people. It must recognize that religious freedom is not an American but a universal value that Pakistanis aspire towards as much as anyone else.