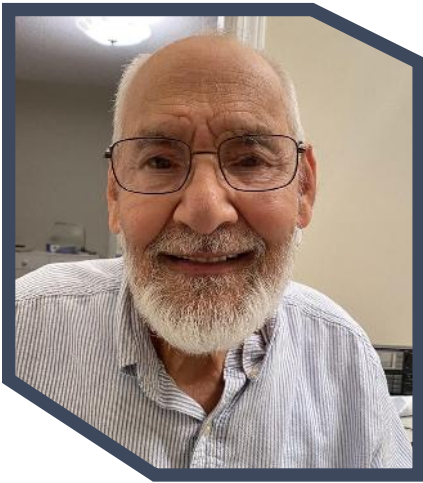


# The Untouchables



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No, I am not talking about Dalits or the “outcastes” of the Hindu caste system. (In passing, the first law minister of Pakistan, Jogendranath Mandal, was a dalit. But he had to flee in 1950 and take refuge in India where he died in 1968.) My focus is on the two seemingly weighty untouchables in Pakistan. They enjoy enormously disproportionate power and are major constraints on the efforts to build a socially-just, harmonious and prosperous country. Let me stress that they are not the only constraints, but they are probably the most entrenched and tenacious.

The first powerful constraint is the constitutional framework of the country. In his address to the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 11 August, 1947, the Quaid-i-Azam said: “If you change your past and work together in a spirit that every one of you, no matter what your relations he had with you in the past, no matter what is his colour, caste, or creed, is first, second, and

last a citizen of this State with equal rights, privileges, and obligations, there will be no end to the progress you will make..... You are free, you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State.” But the Assembly did not embrace the Quaid’s vision of a modern republic in framing the first constitution of Pakistan. The mongrel constitution of today is even more distant.

Pakistan is not a republic, but a quasi-theocratic—I should say pseudo-theocratic—state, in which the man-made laws are subservient to some divine laws. A republic is a state of free and sovereign people that guarantees its citizens equal rights and freedoms irrespective of their age, gender, race, colour, ethnicity, religion, language, and class. It helps to resolve conflicting interests and promotes common interests by the force of man-made laws and policies. A theocratic or pseudo-theocratic state, on the other hand, deprives its citizens of their basic rights and liberties with the fetters of the immutable divine laws. Leave the divine laws out of the public sphere and let them be the spiritual and ethical guide for personal life. History tells us that both religion and state are well served when they remain separate. Religious freedom should be respected, nay guaranteed, as are other freedoms. According to the contemporary and historical experience, a theocratic state not only creates divisions (fractions), but it also pursues socially unjust poli-

cies. Social justice implies equality of rights and individual freedoms. Pakistan’s constitution and laws should be made consistent with its claim to be a republic. (Qualifying a republic with a prefix or an adjective is really its denial.) There is only one kind of republic: “of the people, by the people, for the people.” It means that the people are sovereign and free with equal rights. If these conditions are not met, the country will remain in a dystopian state of confusion, strife and disharmony. You can probably make material progress but, morally speaking, at a high cost. The cost includes (a) denial of equal rights to the citizens and (b) perpetual social injustice. Is this cost worth tolerating in a civilized society? I think no reasonable person will respond to it in the affirmative.

The second major constraint is the role of the armed forces in Pakistan. Let me start with a question. Does Pakistan really need a million people in arms to defend its borders? Shouldn’t its atomic weapons be enough of a deterrent to the enemy? About one-fifth of the government budget (or four per cent of the GDP) is spent on the armed forces and the army budget is kept away from public scrutiny. Second, since at least 1958, the army has been involved in politics overtly and covertly, making and breaking political parties and their leaders. Political leaders look like the French marionettes. In fact, Pakistan’s army has assumed the role of the ideological custodian of national identity and security, literally dictating the country’s domestic and foreign policy. Third, the armed forces have developed a big stake in the country’s econo-

my by various means, most of them lawful given its political clout. It has a lot of real estate in the form of cantonments inside the cities and outside; rights to urban and rural land for the officer class; low-interest loans to buy or build assets; and subsidised housing, health care, education, and transport. More importantly, the foundations and trusts of the armed forces own and manage factories, enterprises, housing schemes, educational institutions, and hospitals. They get commercial contracts from the government departments to build and manage large-scale infrastructure projects, etc. Then there are the job quotas in the government and quasi-government agencies reserved for the army personnel.

What public good is served by these concessions and favours given to only one group in the society? I am sure one can offer arguments, almost all of them self-serving, in defense of this socially unjust sit-

uation. Pakistan's armed forces are an expensive enterprise with their corrosive effects on the society because of their enormous political and economic power. Their direct involvement in ruling the country three times and their long engagement with the so-called Mujahideen—some would call them terrorists plain and simple—have distorted if not derailed the process of political development towards a representative democracy in Pakistan. How long should “the man on horseback”—this is the title of a classic by Samuel E. Finer—be allowed to enjoy the fruits of its power in a poor country? The problem is that, once a group has acquired so much power, it would not be willing, certainly not easily, to part with it. I think Mr. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had a chance after the dismemberment of Pakistan, but he let it slip in a way that perhaps Machiavelli would have approved.

The resources saved from a gradual

retrenchment in the armed forces can be used to build human capital: increased investment in education (primary and secondary in particular), health care (for women and children in particular), and sanitation infrastructure. We know that human capital is the single most important determinant of economic and social progress. Pakistan's backwardness—compare it with Sri Lanka, India and Bangladesh in the neighbourhood—can be attributed largely to its deficiency in human capital. The two untouchables are the major obstacles in the way of building human capital. Both restrict freedoms and one of them consumes a lot of scarce resources. I suspect that these thoughts are highly contentious, but by no means seditious. Shouldn't we let the public debate them freely?

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