



پاکستان!

A MUDDLED IDENTITY

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Pakistan has, since its inception in 1947, attempted to construct a national identity that hinges upon a collective paranoia of perpetual threat from India – equated with Hinduism, in turn equated with the force that subjugated Muslim communities pre-partition. (Khattak, 1996: 346) Saba Khattak, in her paper titled “Security Discourses in Pakistan,” outlines the major historical events that have served as national identity markers for Pakistan up until 1975 – and virtually every single one is directly linked to hostility towards its Eastern neighbor, whether it be in the context of Kashmir, India’s role in the breakup of Pakistan in ‘71, or its nuclear experimental explosions in ‘74. (344)

This has naturally functioned to grant the armed forces a unique form of authority in the political domain, which it has frequently meddled in – having instigated three coups to present, each followed by a decade or so of military rule. State narratives have also evolved to project the army as the guardian of the republic and torchbearer of progress and Muslim universalism; a convenient alternative to “local ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities.” (Rizvi, 2019: 7)

The notion of guardianship largely comes from its colonial heritage – the armed forces in the subcontinent under the British had indeed been “entrusted with both external defense and internal security,” ensuring that the diversity of existing communities never challenged the hegemonic presence of the Empire. (Hussain, 1976: 929) In the words of Frantz Fanon, “The men at the head of things distrust the people of the countryside; moreover this distrust takes on serious proportions. This is the case for example of certain governments which, long after national independence is declared, continue to consider the interior of the country as a nonpacified area where the chief of state or his ministers only go when the national army is carrying out maneuvers there. For all practical purposes, the interior ranks with the unknown. Paradoxically, the national government in its dealings with the country people as a whole is reminiscent of certain features of the former colonial power. ‘We don’t quite know how the mass of these people will react,’ is the cry; and the young ruling class does not hesitate to assert that ‘they need the thick end of the stick if this country is to get out of the Middle Ages.’ But as we have seen, the offhand way in which the political parties treated the rural population during the colonial phase could only prejudice national unity at the very

moment when the young nation needs to get off to a good start.” (Fanon, 1967)

Along with all this, the military has also – since colonial times – sought to strengthen itself by leveraging the economic sphere; granting land allotments to individuals in exchange for their recruitment to the cadres – and collecting tax revenues on the ownership of the newly privatized property “to fund its warfare across the globe, thus creating a tradition of military fiscalism as the primary end of tax revenue.” (Rizvi, 2019: 17) Over time, this evolved into an elaborate corporate empire – structured, disciplined, and profitable – that the armed forces have used to expand the resources available to them and flex their

muscles, all in a manner that is 'shadowy' in its nature rather than via outright, explicit means. Naturally, with plenty of 'skin in the game' within the corporate sphere, it has promoted and pursued socioeconomic policies that will grant it the most leverage – coincidentally the same as those proposed in the 'structural adjustment programs' of the International Monetary Fund: privatization, deregulation, and laissez-faire.

The consequences of the system of land distributions during the colonial era cannot be overstated – leading to a system of elite capture based on a combination of coercion and patronage. Dynastic politics has always been one of the prime impediments to governance in Pakistan, stifling efforts to enhance the democratic process and pursue structural reforms that can undo the extractive nature of institutions that the British established. The independence movement was fueled by hopes of sovereignty and a basic sense of dignity, respect, and autonomy for the people in the subcontinent – and yet, 75 years later, elections still revolve around appealing not to the citizenry at large but landed elites, industrial hubs, men in uniform, international bureaucrats, and other 'power centers' that together shape the political economy of Pakistan.

Pakistan's education system is also a linguistic hodgepodge, with children expected to absorb information that is not communicated to them in their mother tongues, i.e. the vernaculars, but rather Urdu and, eventually, English. This is despite the overwhelming evidence of learning outcomes being directly correlated with ease of comprehension, in turn linked to whether teachers are using a familiar language in the classroom. These top-down efforts to artificially homogenize a country that has a total of 74 operational languages is bound to create adverse long-term ripple effects, whereby the majority of time at school is spent navigating arbitrary obstacles rather than learning. (Shamim and Rashid, 2019)

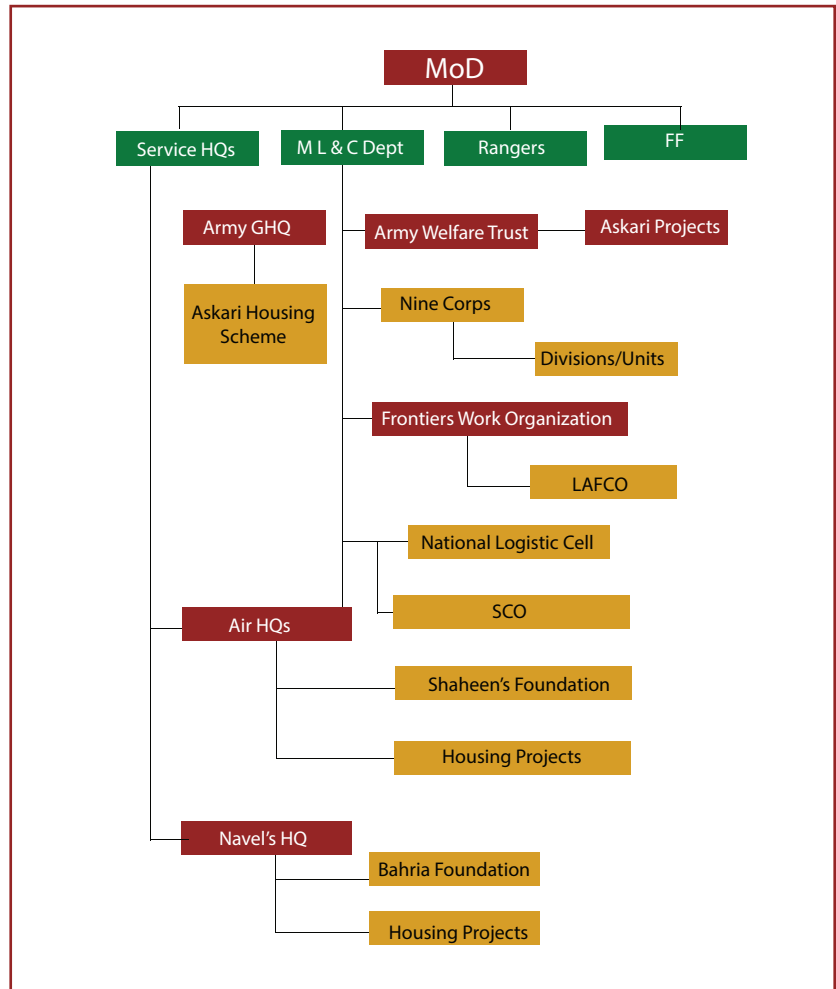
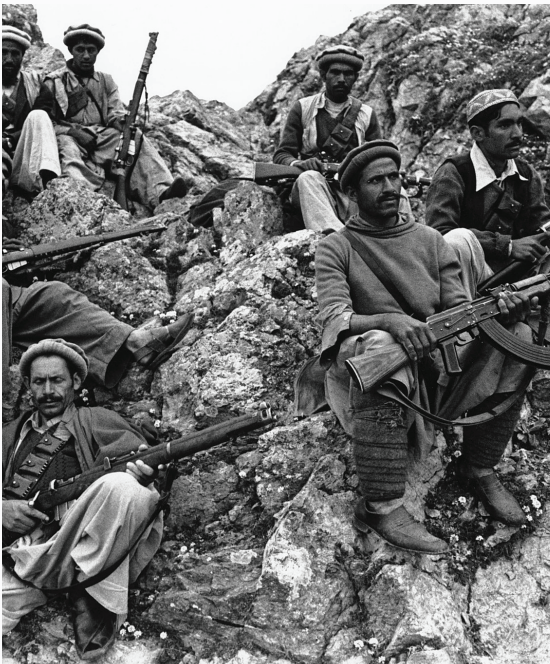
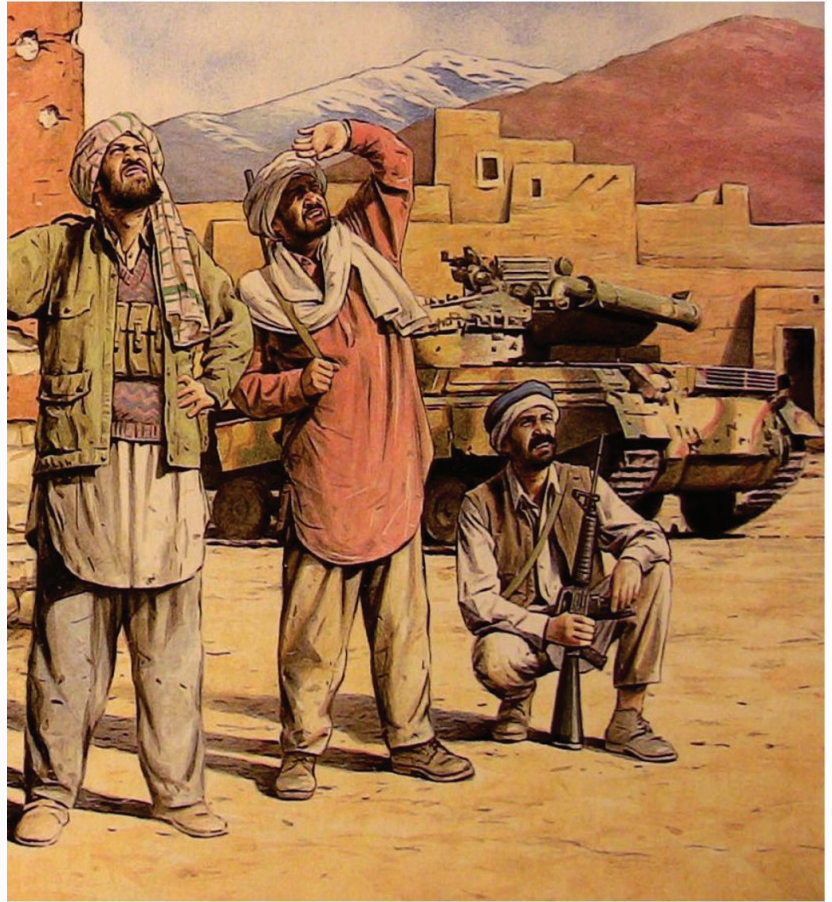


Figure 1. Organizational Chart - Armed Forces of Pakistan
Source: Military Inc., 2017

English plays a specific role in Pakistani society, functioning as a gatekeeper for key institutions in the military and bureaucracy – a carryforward from colonial yesteryears. This naturally creates pressure on already confused children in the education system, dilly-dallying between their native tongues and Urdu, to embrace a third language – complicating matters further. The justification for this is that it will aid students gain admissions to high-profile higher education institutes, well-paying jobs, and access to the global financial system. These are, of course, fair points. However, no efforts are currently in place to revise these institutional norms to minimize the elitism of English, and subsequent education ministers have done little to put in place mechanisms to facilitate the transition from Urdu to English at the high school level. These

factors all contribute to the production of graduates that emerge as confused, incompetent, and resentful individuals with no sense of purpose or direction – and without the cognitive toolset to critically assess their situations, end up gravitating towards reactionary populists that opportunistically deploy their grievances to capture power.

This is besides the rampant confusion around religious values, which took on an entirely different shape following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 – in which the Pakistani military and intelligence apparatus, under the command of General Zia ul Haq, functioned as nothing less than a hired gun for the United States to drive out the Russians. In order to accomplish this, however, a systematic overhaul of cultural values and religious beliefs was required. Thus began the Islamization process, in which a hyper-conservative brand of the faith was inculcated with the help of aid funding – involving the ideological brainwashing of impressionable minds at madressas and local communities as part of a larger recruitment strategy for the war. Thus the Mujahideen were born, illiberalism reigned supreme, and a comprehensive militarization of society was witnessed – in which women and minorities of all kinds were relegated to the sidelines in a deliberate and structured manner.



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All this is not to say that further homogenization of Pakistani society ought to be pursued in the name of statecraft, stability, and national identity – but rather that a wide scale acknowledgment be made about Pakistan’s inherently diverse, complex, and multilayered internal dynamics and identities. An identity based, in other words, not on hate of an imagined enemy – Indians, Pashtuns, Hindus, women, the poor, or the corrupt – but rather heterogeneity itself. This will naturally be a difficult task and require rethinking some of the fundamental beliefs that have ossified over the years, including those to do with Islam, the armed forces, and arbitrary hierarchies based on caste, ethnicity, gender, etc. In the words of eminent scholar Iqbal Ahmad, “peoples and governments with an uncertain sense of the future manifest deeply skewed relationships to their history. They eschew lived history, shut out its lessons, shun critical inquiries into the past, neglect its remains but, at the same time, invent an imagined past -- shining and glorious, upon which are super-imposed the prejudices and hatreds of our own time. The religion-political movements of South Asia bear witness to this truth. Many Hindus and Muslims alike glorify their history -- that is what they imagine to be their history -- in ways that separate them from the other; rather, pit them against each other.”



Pakistan is a country that, since independence, has been chasing ghosts: imaginary entities conceived as the cause of all troubles. This is deliberate – a carefully designed political strategy (and ideology) to convince the masses that they cannot be attended to before ‘bigger concerns’ are addressed. Of course, these concerns are conceived in a manner that they cannot possibly be so. What’s more, it fosters a divide-and-rule landscape, whereby people are painstakingly kept at one another’s throats in a manner that prevents them from seeing and realizing that their struggles are, in fact, mutual. All this works out fairly well for ruling elites who have merely lined their own pockets while in power – in collaboration with bureaucrats at international financial institutions advancing imperial interests. Perhaps it is time for Independence 2.0: this time, from the brown sahib.



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