

Illusory Independence | The Express Tribune

Abbas Moosvi August 15, 2022

The prospect of transitioning into a rentier economy presented itself as a lucrative means to maximise personal gains

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Since its inception, Pakistan has struggled with notions of identity, history and ideology. In a region of rampant heterogeneity in terms of class, caste, gender, creed, religion and ethnicity, the only strategy ruling elites – or in this case, brown sahibs – were able to generate for purposes of governance was a rigid, top-down and largely arbitrary one, meant primarily to coerce and control the ‘unruly’ masses.

The overarching ‘national ideology’ that dominated popular narratives in the lead up to 14th August, 1947 was one based around animosity towards India – conceived as one homogenous entity representing Hindus. These divisions, at the time (and perhaps even today) so real, had a historical context linked to ‘divide-and-rule’ policies of the colonial administration, which painstakingly cultivated rifts between social groups via extractive institutions, legal pathologies and cultural propaganda.

Following independence, the political void left by the colonisers was swiftly populated by domestic elites: indigenous in appearance, English in every other way. Naturally the education system was moulded in the same spirit, whereby students from a young age were required to learn in Urdu rather than the vernaculars, and eventually transition into English in order to be able to access key institutions: for which the language functioned as gatekeeper. The net effect of all this linguistic dilly-dallying has been a foggy and fragile sense of identity in the youth.

With countless privileges at its disposal, the new postcolonial power centre – just like its predecessor – had little interest in resetting the system and democratising. Rather than charting out a pathway for reform and recovery from years of loot and plunder, these opportunistic politicians instead chose to double down on anti-India rhetoric to artificially solidify a national identity: whatever Indians were, we weren’t.

Thus was born the ‘delicate turn’ (*nazuk mor*) phenomenon, quickly rising to prominence as a hegemonic ideology. With the people convinced that threat from India was, at any given moment, a) real, and b) imminent, the ruling class had a convenient justification to not attend to their needs and desires until more ‘pressing concerns’ were first addressed. This functioned to justify the rapid formalisation and expansion of the security apparatus, which

soon turned into a leviathan that – in the words of activist-academic Ammar Ali Jan – functioned as Pakistan’s biggest and most organised political party.

With the state fully captured by this wealthy and largely unaccountable grouping, the prospect of transitioning into a rentier economy presented itself as a lucrative means to maximise personal gains at the expense of the nation. Pakistan thus became a useful tool (idiot?) for the United States in particular to pursue its geopolitical interests in the region via close collaboration with the various domestic loci of power who, in exchange, received colossal sums in ‘foreign aid’ that they could effortlessly appropriate.

The controversial ‘One Unit Scheme’ of 1954, brainchild of then Defence Minister General Ayub Khan, was formally executed approximately a decade following independence – in which the four provinces of West Pakistan were agglomerated into one administrative territory under federal rule. This centralisation of power and attitude of contempt for sons of the soil has carried forward through the years – in which ethnic peripheries, religious minorities, transgendered individuals and the working class at large have experienced a systematic erasure of their identities.

The much touted ‘Decade of Development’ unfolded in 1960s under the military dictatorship of Ayub Khan, in which the Ford Foundation funded the ‘Green Revolution’: massive investments to ‘modernise’ the agricultural sector. What is left out of the coverage, of course, is the fact that this initiative exclusively served the interests of farmers with the most land and resources already at their disposal – gradually pulling the sector into a purely capitalist framework in which landless peasants and the rural labouring class were sidelined and left to fend for themselves.

As exploitative practices multiplied in the countryside, these vulnerable groups had no option but to abandon their deep historical roots for urban centres as a last resort – transitioning into precarious lives in which they faced fear and humiliation at every corner by elitist city authorities. No comprehensive attempt at land reform has been pursued in Pakistan, meaning allotments during colonial times have not been redressed, granting feudal lords a free hand in influencing election outcomes through a process of patronage with their respective communities.

Fast forward to the 1980s, in which General Zia ul Haq’s regime seized upon the first opportunity to get involved in Afghanistan as a hired gun for the USA, functioning akin to a private military company. Here again, in exchange for aid assistance, security agencies kick-started a massive indoctrination campaign to propagate a hyper-conservative brand of faith to mobilise economically marginalised communities for ‘jihad’ on the Western front. With major inflows into the madressa network and politically active religious groupings, a pathologically regressive culture was built from the ground up: the consequences of which are seen to this day, in which virtually anyone not identifying as a Sunni, Punjabi, male is always second-guessing their status as an equal citizen of the country.

This is not to mention the structural adjustment programmes that were introduced into Pakistan during the same decade, in which the neoliberal troika of ‘privatisation, deregulation and laissez-faire economics’ was imposed in exchange for massive loans from the IMF – and a de-politicisation of society was pursued. The costs of this, in terms of institutional fragilities, rampant indebtedness, and dwindling sovereignty cannot possibly be overstated.

Preliminary findings from over 11,000 participants in an ongoing survey by Dr Durre

Nayab at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, titled BASICS (beliefs, attitudes, social capital, institutions, community, self), reveal stark realities. Eighty-four per cent of respondents claimed they had no access to a functional library, 96% were not part of any association/organisation, 76% did not participate in voluntary work, 20% claimed they would vote ‘none of the above’ in elections if it were an option, and 40% expressed a desire to leave Pakistan if granted the opportunity.

Over the decades, Pakistani society has been perceived by the powers that be as a docile, ignorant, and ‘backward’ hoard that cannot be trusted. Seventy-five years on, the questions of precisely who gained from the British exit and exactly how sovereign its replacement was loom large.

Perhaps it is time for Independence 2.0 – this time, from the brown sahib!

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