**Cultural imports and the state**

BY U M A I R J A V E D 2021-04-05

OVER the past two years, online debates over mass culturalidentity and the Pakistani state`s rolein defining and shaping it have taken a new turn on account of the small, but growing, imprint of Turkish cultural imports. Turkey remained a political and economic partner for decades, but in recent years this relationship has deepened at multiple levels. At the political-economic level, the conservative-populist leadership of Erdogan and the country`s economic growth performance has been cited as a model worthy of emulation by several Pakistani governments Accompanying the political basis of that appeal is increased people-to-people contact at the upper-middle and upper-income level, with Pakistanis travelling to Turkey for leisure and business. Self-reported accounts of what makes Turkey attractive refer to the ease with which it straddles socially liberal Western freedoms in consumption choices, while retaining facets of a distinctive cultural identity through architecture and ritual. Coupled with the fact that it`s a Muslim country where Pakistani migrants and visitors are generally treated with respect (unlike the Middle East), Turkey`s appeal by way of cultural, political, and material aspiration continues to grow.

Like any cultural phenomenon, however, it remains open to contestation. For example, in this year`s Republic Day parade, the participation of the Turkish armed forces band a fairly common occurrence and its performance of an old Ottoman military tune that doubles as the soundtrack of the Ertugrul: Ghazi television show a significantly less common one solicited various strands of questioning. What, for example, is driving the Pakistani state`s, and by corollary various sections of society`s, apparently uncritical embrace of Turkish cultural exports? More pointedly, is this a potentially troubling development? Such questions relating to cultural change and cultural aspiration are contentious because they tend to pitch competing forms of self-identification and different moral visions of the universe against one another.

In the same vein, the role of religio-communal assertion and its negative outcomes in countries like Pakistan is well established, as is the historical conflict between ethnic groups and the state over both material distribution of resources and the sanctity ofcultural identity, which involves linguistic rights and the freedom of self-identification and recognition. It is precisely in this backdrop that debates over cultural change take heightened value.

Part of the anxiety around such change stems from the, to put it mildly, imprecise resolution to questions of national cultural identity. Muslim modernism the idea that Muslims of South Asia constitute a defined political group acted as the basis of statehood, but the transition from a political community (a population that is governed by a state) to a cultural one (a population that shares its identity under a state) has been arduous and, arguably, still incom-plete. It is a transition that has witnessed, at its extreme an implosion of the political community itself through civil war, insurgency, and demands of secession. It has also witnessed the recurrence of centrifugal politics away from greater centralised state authority; a tendency that is yet to be resolved in at least one out of the four provinces.

Nevertheless, 73 years of statehood, conflict, coercion and centralised cultural propagation, along with the gradual incorporation of different ethnopolitical and cultural elites into the `mainstream`, means that the political community, at least, has achieved a degree of permanence that is unlikely to dissipate.

What has also been achieved, through the same dynamics listed,is the idea of some notion of `Muslimness` in the self-identification outlook of the vast majority of the population. Simply put, alternative conceptions of national cultural identity remain peripheral in their attempts to resolve the central question of squaring politics, ie the territorial state, with culture; while the state has all the resources to continue with its particular propagation and to shoreup its authority in the cultural domain.

The appeal of Turkish cultural imports makes sense in light of the country`s more recent history of Islamist violence. One recurring critique of Pakistani state-sanctioned religious nationalism, especially in its 1980s era proximity to Middle Eastern variants, was that it opened itself to being outflanked by Islamism of a more fundamentalist type. That is exactly what happened in the preceding two decades, as religious groups utilised the cultural opening provided by the state to challenge the authority of the state itself.

Battling this militarily and culturally has exacted a heavy toll, one paid too dearly by populations locate din the political and geographic periphery. The response by the state,in particular over the last three years, has been to revert to under-formed ideas of Muslim identity and communal harmony but with a stronger republican/statist bend. This makes the Turkish retelling of Ottoman pan-Islamic history a particularly viable cultural crutch, because it reaffirms a sense of religiously grounded self-identity and belief, but remains suitably geographically and historically dislocated from local conflicts a characteristic missing from the South Asian and Middle Eastern Islamic legacy. At a societal level, this crutch helps with the pre-existing material and political appeal of Turkey for middle and upper-middle income urbanites, who both ascribe to statist nationalism and want to link their own presence to a wider international community.

Finally, a point of concern that cannot be brushed away is the potential of this latest round of state-led cultural propagation, which amplifies religious identity, to the deepening of communal conflicts in the country, as the case has been in the past. It`s still too early to say just how wide the traction of this cultural shift is going to be; the fact, however, remains that there are pre-existing majoritarian trends that are deep-rooted and pose significant risks to the safety of minority communities. As the state has done little to resolve them, the opening up of another potential source of majority assertion may be something to keep an eye out on and remain wary of in the future. The writer teaches politics and sociology at Lums.

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