

Troubling historical roots

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CUES for the many problems Pakistan faces today, including those that President Musharraf has placed high up on his list of priorities, are to be found in the country's tortured history. To understand the genesis of some of them we must go to the very beginning, to the time of the country's birth.

Historians — those who have written about Pakistan's history as well as its politics and economy — have not focused on one event that helped to produce today's Pakistan. That event was the mass movement of people in 1947 across the as yet undemarcated border between Pakistan and India.

India was ruled competently and reasonably well by the British for nearly a century. In the aftermath of the 1857 Indian Mutiny, London took over from the East India Company the task of governing India. It went on to establish an administration headed by a royal appointee operating out of New Delhi, the newly designated capital. Called viceroys, these rulers left their mark on India, its economy and its political system.

However, none of this competence and not much of the experience the rulers had accumulated over the years were in evidence when the British finally took the decision to partition India — to divide their domain into a Hindu majority India and a Muslim majority Pakistan. For a number of reasons Pakistan bore the brunt of the sloppy way the British departed from the subcontinent. A series of mistakes were made and a series of wilful steps were taken by the administration in New Delhi that deeply influenced the way Pakistan evolved as a state, and as a nation.

pating a total breakdown in law and order that was about to take place in the western parts of the United Provinces and in Delhi and Punjab. The situation was exacerbated by Mountbatten's decision not to announce the final boundary until after the two countries, India and Pakistan, had already come into existence.

The belief that Punjab's partition and the disturbances in a number of Hindu majority provinces in what is generally referred to as the "Hindu belt" would not result in a mass movement of people was shared not only by India's British administrators, including Mountbatten. The leaderships of both the Muslim League and the Congress Party who were to become leaders respectively of Pakistan and India also did not anticipate the ethnic cleansing that took place in what is today's Pakistan and what were about to become the northern states of India. As historian Patrick French wrote in 1997: "Most Muslims saw Pakistan as a homeland from which they would come and go at leisure; even Jinnah himself did not sell his house on Malabar Hill in Bombay, apparently on the assumption that he would flit cheerfully

number of refugees in 1951 at 7.2 million of which 6.5 million were in West Pakistan — today's Pakistan — and another 700,000 were in the new country's eastern wing, today's Bangladesh.

My own work pertaining to this aspect of Pakistan's history — done while I was a graduate student at Harvard University and based on a district by district analysis of the censuses of 1941 and 1951 — suggests a much higher number. It appears that some eight million Muslims moved into Pakistan in the three year period between 1947 and 1950 while six million Hindus and Sikhs moved in the opposite direction. This transfer of population had a profound impact on Pakistan's future development, not just demographic but also social, economic and political.

The refugees entering West Pakistan were made up of two streams. The largest number of migrants came from the eastern part of Punjab and Kashmir and were settled mostly on the lands vacated by the Sikhs. They numbered more than six million people. The second stream came from what is now called India's Hindu belt — the provinces of Bihar,

Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and the capital city of New Delhi. Included in this stream were also Muslims from Gujarat, Maharashtra and later the state of Hyderabad. They settled mostly in the large cities of south Sindh, particularly Karachi and Hyderabad. Once the refugees were resettled they transformed in several different ways the economic, social and political landscape of Pakistan.

According to the census of 1951, they constituted slightly more than 50 per cent of the population of eight large cities in the country. Contrary to the general impression, Lahore with 70.6 per cent of its population made up of refugees compared to 49.6 per cent for Karachi, was the largest "mohajir" city. Even

At the time of partition, the Hindu-Muslim ratio of population [in Sindh] was roughly 30:70. In 1951, Sindh's Hindu population was down to only 1.9 per cent of the total. The same was the case in Punjab. The Muslimization of our population resulted in Pakistan's departure from Jinnah's original dream — to create a country in which Muslims would have a large majority but in which people of all other religions would have complete political, social and economic rights.

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Pakistan had to carry was the need to accommodate a large number of refugees who arrived in the country soon after partition. It was the partition of the province of Punjab and the attendant displacement of people and the arrival of more than a million refugees to Karachi, the new capital, that left Pakistan with a host of problems. These were obviously not foreseen in 1947 and Pakistan is still tackling them nearly sixty years after its birth.

The first mistake the departing British made was to task Sir Cyril Radcliffe to draw the new border between the two emerging states. Radcliffe was a lawyer with practically no knowledge of India and absolutely no familiarity with the disputes among the country's many communities. Also, he is reported to have had little taste for consultations. "Free speech is all right as long as it does not interfere with the policy of the government," he told one of his biographers.

Having entrusted such an enormous task to be completed within a short period of time, the Delhi administration failed to shelter Radcliffe from political influence. The myth of total impartiality was later advanced by Radcliffe and Lord Louis Mountbatten, India's last viceroy, in the aftermath of independence. However, there is now enough evidence available to historians that "there is no question, as people like Ronnie Brockman [Mountbatten's personal secretary] and Campbell-Johnson maintain, that [Radcliffe] kept aloof."

As the historian Alastair put it: "There is no way that the Government of India would have allowed somebody with so little experience of India to make the key decisions. Radcliffe was a barrister following a brief." The brief was provided by Mountbatten. The word that Radcliffe was coming under the influence of Mountbatten who, in turn, was listening to Jawaharlal Nehru reached Mohammad Ali Jinnah as the Boundary Commission was about to conclude its labour. Jinnah dispatched Chaudhri Muhammad Ali to consult Radcliffe's associates but by then it was too late. Radcliffe's mind had been made up for him.

After appointing an uninformed barrister to draw the boundary line and then influencing him to demarcate it in favour of India, the British administration in New Delhi made the third mistake by not antici-

between India and Pakistan."

That, of course, did not happen and Jinnah along with millions of others who had come across the border stayed put in the new country. Could the British have prevented the mass killings and mass movement of people that occurred in 1947? The answer to that question is most definitely yes but it would have required a much larger presence of British troops on the Indian soil than London was prepared to commit.

When the British were preparing to leave India, London's attention was focused elsewhere. It was diverted to the problem it faced in dealing with the debt it had secured from a number of countries that had partnered with it in the war against Germany. Large amounts were owed in particular to the United States which Washington, with the war successfully concluded, wished to recall. Faced with near-bankruptcy, the government of Prime Minister Clement Attlee was not prepared to commit troops to India to smoothen the transfer of power to the successor states.

That the Muslim and Hindu communities would come into violent conflict had already been demonstrated by the riots and killings that had occurred in Bihar and Calcutta in the months leading up to India's partition. Into this cauldron, the British threw in the Sikhs who were dispersed all over the province of Punjab. The uncertainty surrounding their future caused a great deal of anxiety among the members of the community. The Sikhs were small in number in the context of India but they had a significant presence in Punjab. At one point Jinnah tried to convince the leaders of the community that their rights would be protected by Pakistan. That assurance did not work especially after an incident in Rawalpindi in March 1947 in which a Muslim mob attacked and killed scores of Sikhs. That provoked an exodus of some 80,000 Sikhs into eastern Punjab.

The result of all these missteps and manoeuvrings was an extraordinary incidence of "ethnic cleansing" in 1947 that had no precedence in world history. It is still not clear as to the total number of people who were involved in this two-way migration; Muslims from India to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India. The first population census taken after Pakistan gained independence estimated the total

"mohajir" city. Even

Faisalabad had a larger proportion of refugees in its population than Karachi.

Nonetheless, the Punjab cities offered more or less the same cultural environment to the newcomers than did Karachi and Hyderabad, another Sindh city that absorbed a significant number of newcomers. Punjab's urban areas were able to assimilate much more effectively the refugee population than Karachi and other urban areas of southern Sindh. The stage for the mohajir politics of the last quarter century in Karachi with all the attendant conflict and violence was set by the 1947-1950 transfer of population.

While the impact on the politics of Karachi of the influx of refugees has received considerable academic attention, what has totally escaped notice is another effect: the "Muslimization" of the population of Pakistan as a consequence of the demographic trauma of the 1940s. In 1941, the areas that were to become first West Pakistan and later, in 1971, today's Pakistan had a population of 32.6 million people. Of these 6.3 million or nearly one-fifth of the total were non-Muslims.

In 1951, with an addition of two million people to the population as a result of migration in and out of the country, the country's population reached 39 million. Of these, the non-Muslims constituted only a tiny proportion, 3.2 per cent. Partition and its aftermath had thoroughly cleansed Pakistan of almost all non-Muslim population.

For instance, at the time of partition, "the Hindu-Muslim ratio of population [in Sindh] was roughly 30:70." According to one estimate, based on the 1951 census, only 140,000 Hindus were left, mostly in Sindh. In other words, Sindh's Hindu population was reduced to only 1.9 per cent of the total. The same was the case in Punjab.

The Muslimization of our population resulted in Pakistan's departure from Jinnah's original dream — to create a country in which Muslims would have a large majority but in which people of all other religions would have complete political, social and economic rights. Instead, the post-partition transfer of population set the stage for the pressure to Islamize Pakistani society. It also created the environment in which Islamic extremism could throw deep roots — one of the four problems General Musharraf says engage him the most these days.