**The soul of Pakistan**

BY M U H A M M A D A M I R R A N A 2021-02-21

R ELIGIOSITY has begun to define the Pakistani citizenry. Those who wield power see it as a positive trend that can achieve national cohesion.

Unfortunately, instead of helping to inculcate better ethics and integrity, this phenomenon is encouraging a tunnel vision.

The recent hounding of Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai on social media over her response to a tweet by the fugitive militant Ehsanullah Ehsan reflects the mindset of a large segment of Pakistan`s social media consumers who are not willing to stand by a girl under threat from terrorists. The trolls are spewing what they have absorbed over the years religious, politico-ideological and patriarchal sensitivities and biases. They are also casting doubt on Malala`s patriotism because, after the attack on her, she was medically treated and educated in the UK.

Such trolling in Pakistan is not new as many campaigns of the sort have been unleashed over the years. The ideological and political credentials of many of these trolls are very well known. It does not matter why a specific segment of social media consumers launches smear campaigns against sane voices in Pakistan; indeed, one can see it as a form of collective response by that class. What is of greater concern is that countering responses to such campaigns are either missing or very weak.

The social media campaign against Malala was mean; most of the trolls appeared willing to allow concessions to a notorious militant, who had claimed responsibility for the killing of hundreds of innocent Pakistanis. Does this relate to support for Ehsanullah`s `religious credentials` and the state`s provision of impunity to him, or was it a manifestation of inherent biases against Malala and others of her ilk? The government`s response was vague. Initially, the prime minister`s focal person on digital media stated that the tweets threatening Malala were posted from a fake account. However, it was proved later that the account was not fake as Ehsanullah confirmed this statement which was a veiled death threat to Malala. The government was not takingthe issue seriously and wanted to brush it under the carpet as it usually does with issues relating to religion or religious groups.

Interestingly, the government itself uses religion to express its vision about Pakistan`s future as a welfare state. The prime minister often refers to the `state of Madina` in his speeches but hardly contests the radical views of extremist religious groups on statecraft and governance. If the government really believed in the state system established by the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in Madina, it would be projecting Misaq-i-Madina as the document of its vision. Misaq-i-Madina was the social contract formed to defuse tensions among different communities, including those between the Muslims and the Jews of Madina.

Sticking to a religious ethos could be an attempt by the government to exploit the religious sentiments of the people as well as to confront political challenges thrown at it by religious political parties. The JUI-F is one of the ruling PTPs major political rivals, and uses religion as a tool against Prime Minister Imran Khan by casting doubt on his loyalty to Islam and Pakistan. On the other hand, the religion-oriented vote is increasing in Punjab and Sindh, which worries the security establishment. The Tehreek-i-Labbalk Pakistan is still relevant to the political landscape of the country; it had more than two million votes in the 2018 general election. The religious parties would gain more power if the PTI government failed.

Ironically, the establishment has been promoting the idea of a transparent political order led by a clean man for the last three decades, which has damaged the political landscape by depoliticising all political nurseries from educational institutes to local bodies.

The `third party` mantra had somehow worked in the last election, but sofar the affairs of the state haven`t seen any radical change and the government has failed to cope with the challenges or introduce any radical reforms in governance and the economy. Failure of the PTI government to deliver will add to the prevailing disillusionmentof the middle class and marginalised segments who will be exploited mainly by the religious political parties.

For the common man, the state of Madina is an ideal welfare state based on a just society. Who can exploit this concept more than the religious parties? And the establishment will see no harm in sharing power with the religious parties if matters reach a level where no other choice is lef t. After all, all religious groups have remained partners of the establishment at various levels and for different purposes.

For the establishment, only religion can glue the nationtogetherthoughitdoesnotshareitsideas on statecraft with the religious parties. It has its own reasons which various scholars have tried to justify in different ways.

Faisal Devji, professor of Indian history at the University of Oxford and author of Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea, has attempted to see the phenomenon through the lens of the caste system as well. One of his recent articles shows how the caste system still shapes the power structure in India and Pakistan and has an important role on the power chessboard. The bania (business community) holds on to an austere kind of religiosity, which the Brahmin (clergy) claims. Their alliance either with the Kshatriya (civil and military bureaucracy), Brahmin or Shudra (labour class) in power brings more focus on bhakti (accommodative religious tradition).

He argues that in Pakistan, the equivalent of the Kshatriya-Shudra grouping became an absolute majority with the separation of the eastern wing.

As for the clergy, their declining status has allowed them to emerge as ideological brokers for groups making claims to power in the name of religion.

Perhaps they will soon be successful in evolving their alliance with the civil-military bureaucracy.

One can imagine what the country would look like.

May Malala`s dream for a prosperous and progressive Pakistan come true. The writer is a security analyst.