POLICY SUMMARY: PLURALISM, COEXISTENCE AND CONFLICT: MAJORITY AND MINORITY COMMUNITIES IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES

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In almost all the Muslim societies examined in the workshop, colonial legacies played a significant role in shaping ethno-religious identities as also post-colonial political structures that then managed, in many cases mismanaged, ethnic and religious diversity. In Pakistan, for instance, most political leaders responsible for creating the new state were Muhajirs (from those regions that now fell to India), an ethno-linguistic minority in the multi-ethnic, multi-regional country. Lacking a popular base, averse to democratic governance, they relied instead on the inherited "steel frame" of the British Indian Empire to retain power. As a result, the civil bureaucracy soon captured power, serving first as the senior and subsequently the junior partner of a Punjabi-dominated military, ethnically skewed because colonial recruitment patterns that were retained in the new state.

Bengalis in the east wing, ironically the majority population in united Pakistan, strongly opposed the political, social and economic dominance of a post-colonial, ethnically skewed and unrepresentative elite. Centralized authoritarian rule and the denial of ethnic rights transformed ethnic competition into conflict, leading to the dismemberment of the state in 1971. In truncated Pakistan too, Sindhi, Baloch and Pashtun minority communities have struggled for basic rights through representative governance but democratic transitions have been repeatedly disrupted by direct and indirect military interventions.

The drawing of colonial boundaries, now dividing Imperial India, have also distorted Pakistan's political development since the conflict with India over the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir is used by the politically dominant military to justify control over all spheres of policy on the grounds of national security. At the same time, the military has forcibly suppressed ethnic dissent; ethno-regional movements for the devolution of power and authority, particularly by the Sindhis and Baloch are depicted as threats to national security,

While centralized and authoritarian state structures have widened ethnic fault lines, the military has proved incapable of even retaining the support of its Punjabi base. Instead, Punjabis, Pakistan's largest ethnic community, rejecting military or military-dominated governments, have supported either one of two national-level, moderate and pro-democracy political parties, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). This lack of a reliable civilian base has forced the military to rely on Islamist parties to counter its civilian opposition. Over time, the restructuring of legal, judicial and constitutional structures by military or military-dominated regimes in favor of Sunni orthodox sects has and continues to fuel sectarian conflict, including intra-Sunni violence--between the state-supported Deobandi/Salafi factions and the majority moderate Hanafi community—as well as between Sunni ultra-orthodox groups and the Shia minority.

Colonial legacies are equally responsible for ethnic and sectarian divisions in other Muslim majority and minority states. In Sudan, for instance, colonial polices were responsible for the divide that exists till date between the north and the south and Christians and Muslims. In the Balkans, Muslims transformed from a politically dominant minority under the Ottoman Empire to ethno-religious marginalized minorities in the post-Ottoman and post-World War Two socialist states.

As the Pakistan example shows, governing structures, with many cases shaped by the past, play an important role in determining the dynamics of pluralism, co-existence and conflict in Muslim majority and minority states. The role of external powers can also be crucial, with U.S. support for successive Pakistani military regimes, for instance, empowering the security apparatuses, undermining domestic consensus and bargaining and thus setting the stage for internal conflict. In the Middle East too—U.S. support for an authoritarian regime in Egypt thwarted democratic forces. Saudi Arabia's role has been equally significant, as the Wahabi-Salafi regime, motivated by self-survival, relies both on domestic authoritarianism and support for Sunni minority and majority regimes, thus exacerbating Sunni-Shia sectarian rifts.

While democratic transitions promise some hope for restructuring internal politics along more pluralistic and egalitarian lines, there is inevitably a pushback by entrenched elites. Pakistan, for instance, is currently a parliamentary democracy. Representative institutions certainly have the potential for transforming ethnic conflict into cooperation; major constitutional and political reforms have already been enacted to devolve power and authority from the center to the federal units. Yet the Punjabi-dominated military refuses to cede control of internal security policy, thwarting attempts by elected institutions to redress ethnic grievances and demands. Continued military operations against dissident Baloch have, for instance, derailed the civilian government's attempts to bring them back into the political fold. As a result, Baloch attitudes have hardened and assumed the shape of a province-wide insurgency. Meanwhile, continued military backing for the minority Mohajir community against the Sindhi majority, the ruling PPP's constituency, is fueling violent ethnic strife and could potentially destabilize the entire democratic enterprise.

Similarly, the military's continued reliance on Sunni extremist proxies to advance perceived national interests in India and Afghanistan is primarily responsible for sectarian violence. Yet religious extremism is not the main threat to the security of the state and the citizen, and could be countered successfully through effective law-enforcement. Unlike the Middle East, where the suppression of Islamist parties by authoritarian rulers has given them both legitimacy and popular support, and hence opportunities to exploit the Arab Spring, the Pakistani military's backing of the Islamic parties undermines their domestic standing and hence electoral clout. Unlike most movements in the Arab states that have recently overthrown authoritarian regimes, Pakistan also has organized and politically entrenched mainstream moderate parties, and a history of democratic functioning, no matter how fragile. However, in Pakistan, as in the Middle East, spoilers, particularly the state security apparatus, could still undermine the prospects for democratic and pluralistic governance. This is more than evident in

Egypt where the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces is now the one of the main hurdles to the popular democratic struggle.

Authoritarian states utilize a number of tools, legal as well as political, to control ethnic minorities; for instance, China suppresses the Uyghurs' belief and practices, which are perceived as a threat to both political cohesion and security. In multi-ethnic countries still in the throes of conflict, gains made by ethnic minorities remain fragile. In Afghanistan, the Shia Hazaras, an ethnic and sectarian minority in the Sunni majority state, have certainly benefited from the U.S.-led post-Taliban political order. Yet consolidating these gains will depend on the strengthening of fragile representative institutions, a process that is already at risk since the intended international withdrawal could once again spark a civil war along ethnic, regional and sectarian lines.

However, even in consolidated democracies, the rights of religious and ethnic minorities are not assured, particularly when narrow interpretations of nationalism feed into ethnic and religious fissures. Indeed, democratic processes and institutions require more than just electoral processes, particularly in multi-ethnic states. In India, for instance, one of the world's largest, and consolidated, democracies, Hindu nationalism has and could continue to undermine the rights and status of the Muslim minority. In Indonesia, too, where nationalism is seen as synonymous with the Sunni Islam of the majority, violence both against Muslim minority sects such as the Ahmadis as well as Christians is on the rise. In Turkey, considered by many as a model of a transitional democracy, where the military appears under firm civilian control, the minority Kurdish population is forcibly denied its due rights and just demands. Politico-religious polarization in countries such as Malaysia remains a useful tool by ruling elites to retain power. By contrast, in Yemen and Tunisia, where the path to democracy seems more certain, democratic forces appear, at least for now, to have placed security forces under civilian control and are seeking constitutional and legal structures to underpin democratic functioning.

If majority/minority relations in Muslim minority and majority states are to be managed in ways that minimize the potential for conflict and advance pluralism and coexistence, it is essential that:

- Democratic transitions are uninterrupted, with consolidation including:

a) Inclusive processes and representative institutions for ethnic and sectarian bargaining and consensus.
b) Centralized state structures are replaced by the devolution of power and authority to all ethnic and sectarian communities, including through democratically devised constitutional and legal structures.

- Consolidated democracies must shun narrow interpretations of nationalism and provide political, legal and social space to ethnic and sectarian diversity.
- Mechanisms should be devised to prevent or at the very least minimize the counter-productive role of powerful external actors in determining domestic dynamics.
- Above all, the internalized and normative acceptance of pluralism and democratic functioning can transform ethnic and sectarian conflict into peaceful coexistence.