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## The Pakistan Army Playbook: Competitive Sectarianism and Ethnic strife in Pakistan



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### Introduction

The case study of the making of Pakistan in 1947 could be considered as one of the biggest orchestrated mythology. The result of this experiment is well known—a nation and its people torn apart, lands and family divided, a mental scar and trauma of the mayhem—the residual emotions of all these years are yet to heal for the people of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Ironically, while on one hand, India and Bangladesh have since stabilised and moved on— in social and economic terms, on the other hand, Pakistan keeps continuing to ‘burn and simmer’ in the slow cauldron of its own sectarian and ethnic strife.

As of 2021, Pakistan has become an ‘ugly

### Key Points

- Pakistan as an idea of Jinnah has proven a failure. Pakistan exists today because of its Army which along with its Intelligence has become a ‘larger-than-life’ figure in controlling Pakistan.
- Pakistan’s story today is of Punjabi Sunnis who, along with the Army, which is dominated by them, have cornered other ethnicities in terms of power, resources, budgets and National priority.
- If it was not for Army, Pakistan would have been history. But for how long can Army continue this charade, at a great cost to economy, social spends, infrastructure, hygiene and health of its people, remains to be seen.
- This paper presents how the Army is responsible for Pakistan’s suffering and how its continued misplaced policies will eventually press the key to self-destruct button.



agglomeration of sects and ethnicities' who are fighting with each other for political dominance, mindshare, and territoriality, while the Pakistan Army uses terror as an instrument of state policy. It has sadly become the 'survival of the fittest' with zero accountability of human values. The dream of Jinnah— to make a Pakistan based on faith and a "land of pure" as one Islamic Ummah for all Muslims— is sadly over.

The idea of Pakistan has founded itself in confusion and it has always been for the last 74 years. The main aim of the paper is to highlight the reasons for 'competitive sectarianism' and 'ethnic strife'.

### **Faultlines**

This agglomeration has two fountainheads —strife and glue.

- The **first fountainhead** of this faultline is the regional ethnicity which pegs the majority Punjabis who are mostly Sunnis (at approx. 50% of the population) vs the rest of Pakistan which includes the Sunni Pashtuns, Sindhis, Balochis and the Shia majority Baltis & Ismaili inhabitants of Gilgit. It famously also included the Bengalis till 1971 until the subsequent formation of Bangladesh. In the 'West Punjabi' world view of things, Punjab is Pakistan and Pakistan is Punjab. This world view has still not changed even post 1971. Pakistan continues to be dominated by Punjabi Muslims. In fact, this sect dominates in terms of industrial growth, economic activities, defence, agriculture, military and religious power cleft. The rest of Pakistan i.e. Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, Baluchistan, POK and Gilgit-Baltistan, are treated and viewed as buffer provinces of Punjab (Pakistan side).
- The **second fountainhead** of the faultline is the sectarian ideological differences that are present at multiple levels— between Muslims and Non-Muslims; between Sunnis & Shias and between Sunni Intra sect battles for dominance. As of today, the Sunnis are:
  - At odds with the minorities of Pakistan vis. Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs etc.; at odds with fellow co-religionists like Shias and between both Sunni and Shias they have sidelined Qadianis (called Ahmadiyyas) as non-Muslims. Ironically, the Shias and Ahmadiyyas were one of the biggest vocal supporters of India's partition and formation of Pakistan.
  - At odds within themselves— the fountainhead of this strife lies in the various theological movements in Sunni majority Pakistan (80-85% of the Pakistani



population) and includes the Barelvis, Deobandis and the recent Ahl-e-Hadees movements. The sectarian fights between the Barelvis, Deobandis, Ahl-e-Hadees, has brought Pakistan to halt multiple times.

The above faultlines became evident when the Bengalis realised that they are headed nowhere during 1971 War. Since, they were at the receiving end of the first faultline, they took the step to dissociate with Pakistan for survival of their culture and ethos, which resulted in the formation of Bangladesh and this paved the way for rest of the Pakistani ethnicities to review their respective positions as well. However, post 2007, the above two faultlines got reinvigorated in Pakistan.

### **The Glue**

The Pakistan Army has ruled Pakistan for the majority of its 74 years of existence— directly or indirectly. The Army has been the ‘unofficial custodian’ of the idea of Pakistan since its formation. While its history has been chequered with slow and systematic destruction of democratic institutions, they have been creating a superstructure dominance over everything else and positioning themselves as Ghazis, who are the torchbearers of Allah’s will.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is said that while ‘most countries have an Army, in Pakistan the Army has a country’.

Now the Army wants to employ the same tactics in the *Naya Pakistan* scheme of things that is where the Army has receded in the background and is happy to ‘pull the strings’ of the democratic government from behind; provided that the democratic government is able to realise the Army’s end goals that is its continued direction to define internal home and state policies, its imprint on all foreign policy tie-ups, its economic interests, its status quo as *numero uno* institution in Pakistan and sufficient defence budget allocation.

The eternal question is: Is the Army slowly leading Pakistan down its final destruction?

Is Pakistan replicating the final pathway of the Soviet Union – another manufactured entity of various ethnicities?

Will this story culminate in its implosion?

### **The Slow Churning**

The Pakistan Army sustains its foothold with an elaborate network, cultivated over the years, into what has become the Army-ISI-Mullah-(AIM) complex.<sup>2</sup> The Army had effectively ‘put the lid’ on the Ethnic and Sectarian divide of the nation which were simmering as an



undercurrent all this while. The multiple phases of the institutionalised decline of all legislative and judicial branches of the constitution since the 1950s have seen the AIM Complex work in tandem to keep the Army and the orthodox theocracy on a permanent strong foot and weaken the democratic establishment and its institutions. But the question is why was this needed in the first place?

The simple answer is the primacy of Islam as a religion in the body fabric of Pakistan's consciousness. This consciousness has disabled Pakistan's ability to see anything outside that prism. It has also led to competitive bidding on the Islamic mindshare in Pakistan. It's not hard to see as to why the democratic polity failed in Pakistan because it's an alien concept in the entire Pakistani value system. Islam has no mention of democracy in its operating philosophy. Out of the 56 Islamic nations on the earth, hardly two or three practices any form of viable democracy which may itself have survived more than 30 years at a stretch in any country. It is in this race, that the Army has positioned itself as the custodian of Islamic values and by that logic of the idea of Pakistan. The upending of this idea of the Army being supreme to the interests of the Pakistani State is where the problem statement lies. The Army has lost all its wars with India which was the catalyst of the first division of Pakistan in 1971 and continue to still dominate because Pakistan 'as an idea' will crumble unless this glue comes into play.

### **Ethnic Strife and the Army**

As part of its faultline of ethnic power games, Pakistan started essentially as a self-serving state for its 'Punjabi Sunni' populace. Somewhere, along the way the Army also transformed as an agent of a military expression of the Punjabi Sunni Military Complex to dominate Pakistan (as the Punjabi Sunnis are the most dominant faction of the Army) and treat the rest of ethnicities as buffers. To control other ethnicities, the Army was deployed to exert control.

The first to break this cycle were the Bengalis (non-Muslims) of East Pakistan in 1971, who realised that the Punjabi Sunni domination can exploit the other ethnicities of Pakistan. Post 1971, Pakistan had to finetune its approach so that the other non-Sunni Punjabi ethnicities do not break off as the Bengalis did. But nothing changed. Only the strategies of preventing another breakaway changed. As a measure, the Army, through a conscious policy of demographic change, encouraged the migration of Sunni Muslims from other



provinces especially Punjab. This, in effect is bringing both an ethnic and sectarian change in these buffer provinces.

Pakistan seems to have borrowed this from the playbook of its close ally China. In a way, this could be seen as a mirror reflection of how the Han Chinese' expansionist methodology in China with its buffer provinces of Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang (Sinkiang) and Xizang (Tibet) has worked and how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its military arm– the People's Liberation Army (PLA) were instrumental in extending the Han dominance across China and its buffer provinces. Today, the Han Chinese immigration has changed the demographics of Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang (Sinkiang) and Xizang (Tibet).

However, with respect to Pakistan, such a situation was bound to draw certain counter-reactions from all provinces of Pakistan.

- **Sindhis.** The Sindhi movement (1972), to break away from Pakistan, was a rather significant one post the liberation of Bangladesh. Sindh has historically been the gateway of the Indian subcontinent and was the first province to fall to an Islamic invading army in 712 AD. The *Sindhudesh movement* or the *Jiye Sindh movement* started right after the Bangladesh war in 1972. The *Jiye Sindh movement* demanded that Sindh be treated equally in Pakistan's say of affairs. Sindh has close to 25% of the population of Pakistan (at around 50 million people). Karachi single headedly holds 25-30% population of Sindh (at around 14-16 million which is 40% dominated by Muhajirs).<sup>3</sup> Ethnic Sindhi's were around 68-70% of Sindh's population. But today, Sindhi's are seen as a minority in Pakistan's largest city—Karachi. Within Karachi, they are not more than 15-20%. The influx Muhajirs from UP, Bihar and the rest of non-Punjabi immigrants into Sindh (and not Punjab) have been a sore point and there is a feeling that Sindh took the disproportionate share of Muhajirs than Punjab.<sup>4</sup> The ethnic Sindhis still view the partition and creation of Pakistan as a lose-lose scenario for Sindh and Karachi which ultimately led them to lose their ethnic majority in Pockets. However, Sindhis had faced a second partition wherein the Muhajirs started a *Jinnahpur movement* to secede from Sindh and create a Muhajir majority province.
- **Balochis.** Balochistan comprises 9% of the entire Pakistani population (at around 18-19 million) and 44% of the entire landmass. But the ethnic Balochis themselves are now close to a minority in Baluchistan. They have been at the receiving end of the Punjabi Suuni Domination through the Army-ISI combined network for the last 70



plus years. The integration of Balochis with Pakistan is still tenuous at best. There have been at least 5 counter insurgency revolts against the Pakistani state since 1947— when it was ‘acquired’ by Pakistan in the form of Kalat Princely state. The Baloch Liberation Front, The Baloch Liberation Army have spearheaded some of these struggles and continues to do so. Being a mineral and natural gas-rich state, Balochis have not been able to capitalise their own strength. Even today at least 70% of the population is below the poverty line while 45% is still illiterate.<sup>5</sup>

- **Pashtuns.** The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) comprises 18% of the entire Pakistani Population (at around 36 million). Pashtuns are the only ethnicity that has around 90% domination in KPK. Additionally, an estimated 10 million more Pashtuns are spread between Punjab, Sindh, and Balochistan. It is probably the only ethnic group that have safeguarded its independence in the form of Pashtuns/Pathans of KPK and the tribals of the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region.

It is also a known fact that, KPK has been the nursery of the original Mujahideen movement of the 1980s and that the Taliban/Haqqani proxies of Pakistan have been majorly Pashtun in nature.<sup>6</sup> But the Pashtuns identify themselves more with Afghanistan than Pakistan. The Army’s biggest nightmare is an ethnic independence movement on the lines of the Independent Pakhtunkhwa movement which may finally end up joining the larger Afghanistan at some point of time.<sup>7</sup> The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) movement was one such movement that went rogue on the Pakistani establishment in 2007. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) started as an offshoot of the Pashtun frustration as they were not seen as national priorities. Perhaps for the first time in Pakistan, a peaceful movement like PTM had challenged the Army directly to stop extrajudicial killings for enforcing rights under the constitution.

- **Gilgit-Baltistan (GB).** The only Shia majority area of Pakistan. The total population of GB areas is not more than 2 million. The GB people have always maintained that they are the least priority of all ethnicities in Pakistan. In response to the 1988 Gilgit massacre, a local freedom struggle was also started in other non-Punjab provinces of Pakistan under the banner of the Balwaristan National Front (BLF). GB’s main problem is its indefinite status within Pakistan’s Constitution for the last 70 years— they were not recognised by the Pakistan Constitution for a provincial status all along and Pakistan had kept their representation angle in abeyance.



Pakistan felt that its position on the Kashmir issue will be compromised with any changes in GB status. But with the CPEC running through GB, the Chinese were insistent that the status issue is cleared at the earliest to reduce India's chances of raking the issue of legality of CPEC passing through GB areas in future. Therefore, in 2018, GB was given a representational status as a province with a roadmap of 2 years for transition into a full-fledged province. Recently, with the changed status, massive protests broke out due to the Army's handling of Human rights issues. They are not keen on these changes unless the political prisoners are released and state machinery acts to stop human rights violations in those areas.

### **Sectarian Strife and the Army**

While the Barelvis are a more flexible agglomeration who emphasises on moderate & Sufi practices and dominates 50% of the Pakistani Sunni population<sup>8</sup>, the Deobandis are a relative minority with 25% of the overall Sunni population, and more inclined to have a relative orthodox view of Islam than the Barelvis. However, these two are superseded by the 'ultra conservative' 'Ahl-e-Hadees movement', which is more of a 'Salafist takeaway' of the Arabian Peninsula but has a minority of 5-6% of the Sunni population. The Shias comprise 10-15% of the population and the rest 5% are made up of non-Muslim minorities of Pakistan.<sup>9</sup>

The Army has cultivated sectarian groups for its various external and internal proxy uses. Sometimes, these are used to weaken democratic governments. Sometimes they are deployed to create external disturbances in the neighbours inimical to Pakistan's interests vis. Afghanistan and India and in very rare instances even Iran. Sometimes these sectarian groups are made to fight with each other for survival. In effect, they become proxies of both Pakistan's State Policies and Pakistani Foreign Policy towards India and Afghanistan in the form of the Pakistan Army's extended branch of non-state proxy militant organisations<sup>10</sup> like the TTP, Afghan- Taliban, LeT.

The need to maintain a regular army of proxies has resulted in at least 65% of Pakistani Madrasas and Islamic seminaries being dominated by Deobandis while the Barelvis have only 35% seminaries. The mindshare dominance of Deobandis in Pakistan has also coincided with the decline of the plural polity of Pakistani politics and society. Pakistan has become more ultra conservative in its attitude towards women empowerment, health, minorities and education. There has been a rise in extremist worldview on multiple social



and political issues. All of this has resulted in Pakistan witnessing a decline in multiple measures of social, health, education metrics as these thoughts have pervaded increasingly in the last 5 decades. The increasing radicalism reflects in all spheres of Pakistani society — politics, sports, army, judiciary or governmental institutions and it has slowly weaned away from the ‘syncretic flavour’ of Islam prevalent originally in 1947.

The Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) is a by-product of the collective frustration and aspiration of the Barelvi movement that has a deep base in Punjab’s (Pakistan side) rural areas more than in its urban areas.<sup>11</sup>

The TLP’s formation in 2015 has also been over a Sectarian Faultline— its real focus was to elevate the Barelvi dispensation in the Pakistani Power equation. It recalibrated its Deobandi approach to the external-facing proxies and started cultivating the Barelvis for its internal-facing proxies to maintain optical parity and keeping everyone engaged. Thus lies the spectacular rise and continuance of the Barelvi TLP.

The Army ensured that it engages its proxies as time-tested methods to further its interests, only this time, to fan the internal pressure points. But the TLP, with a series of success, started becoming the proverbial ‘genie’ that refused to go back into the bottle. It started behaving like TTP of 2007.

### **The Beginning of the End**

This domination by one state (Punjab has 20% of Pakistan’s land but has 50% of its Parliamentary seats and 50% of its population) has always had a bearing on Pakistan’s policies, distribution of natural resources, priority to military etc. This has ensured that the nation always has a Punjabi dominated ruling complex and has always managed to keep itself in the driver’s seat of Pakistan, especially post 1971.<sup>12</sup>

This need for domination is so huge that efforts by the Seraiki Punjabis, who are one-third of Punjab population and almost 16% of the overall Pakistan population, have been fighting for South Punjab for the last 60 years was rebuffed lest it breaks the numerical majority of Punjab and has not been yielded to by the AIM Complex along with the controlled democratic dispensation, lest it impinges on Punjab’s lion share of Pakistani resources.

Within this, the Punjabi Sunni domination along with the Punjabi Sunni Military complex have become the biggest threat to the Indian subcontinent’s security complex.<sup>13</sup> This unique combination has repeatedly put a question mark on the holistic progress of the countries of



South Asia / Indian subcontinent in direct and indirect ways as compared to the rest of the world. South Asia is the most populous region of the world and continues to be one of the most impoverished regions and countries that are still struggling to provide basic Human Rights, education, health and Hygiene as compared to the rest of the World.

The Army owns a substantial proportion of the economic value chain of Pakistan from as diverse to fertilisers, housing, garments to food industries. It is estimated that the Army has officially 50 commercial entities<sup>14</sup>—these are just official records of the Army running these enterprises.

The institutionalised corruption in Pakistan is the reason for 50% of the population being actually Below Poverty Line as per the 2011 UNDH report.<sup>15</sup> The Pakistani Rupee has declined by 40% since 2007. Even Bangladesh which broke away from Pakistan in 1971 does better on most economic, health and human growth indices than Pakistan. At USD1284 per capita income, Pakistan trails Bangladesh which is USD1855 per capita income and almost half of India's USD 2020 per capita Income. Food prices have grown to such an extent that, it has been offered Rice as aid from Saudi Arabia. Official unemployment is under 5%, but this fails to capture the true picture because much of the economy is informal, and underemployment remains high. Decades of internal political disputes, strife, terrorism as a state policy, ethnic and sectarian clashes, minority harassment have triggered low levels of foreign investment that in turn have led to slow growth and underdevelopment in Pakistan. It's stuck in a low-income low growth trap.

But despite all this, the Army remains insulated by the vagaries of Pakistan's spiral and steady descent. In 2020, during the peak of the coronavirus pandemic, the Pakistan Government raised the defence expenditure by 4.5% over the previous year's budget estimate to USD 8.5 billion. While India has seen a sustained dip in its military expenditure i.e. from 17.08% in 2016-17 to 13.73% of its government expenditure now— Pakistan has been consistently raising it since 2013, from 15.9% to now around 18.4% of Pakistan's expenditure.<sup>16</sup>

The danger for a militant infested, spiralling economy like Pakistan coupled with ethnic and sectarian strife is that if it's not resolved, the issue could escalate at multiple levels. This triggered with a nudge from any external push, will see a future case study of a state whose army pushed it to extinction. While some sense has prevailed of late in the Pakistani Army establishment to control the conflict along the Line of Control by seeking a cessation of



hostilities with India, there has been no concrete measures to ensure reduction/eradication of support to anti-India terror organisations. Peace is never a one-way street when it comes to India-Pakistan relations and while the white flutters in the spring of 2021, the Pakistani Army establishment may not like to see it that way for long. It seems everyone is wondering when the final hammer will be struck.

## End Notes

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