

# ISAS Special Report

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## ISAS Workshop:

### **“Pakistan at 70: Politics, Economy, Sociology”**

*The year 2017 marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The Institute of South Asian Studies organised a workshop on “Pakistan at 70: Politics, Economy and Sociology” in Singapore on 11 September 2017. The event provided a platform to discuss the country’s political transformation, economic growth and societal issues in the seven decades since its independence.*

Silvia Tieri<sup>1</sup>

The Institute of South Asian (ISAS), Singapore, organised a workshop on “Pakistan at 70: Politics, Economy and Sociology” on 11 September 2017. The event was held to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, which came into existence in 1947 following the Partition of British India. The workshop aimed to discuss the challenges faced and the progress made by the country from the viewpoint of political transformations, economic growth and societal issues. The one-day workshop featured the participation of eminent representatives from Pakistan’s academia, government, military, private and non-government sectors as well as ISAS scholars.

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Dr Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury, Principal Research Fellow at ISAS and former Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, chaired the sessions during the event. Delivering the welcome remarks, Dr Chowdhury thanked the High Commissioner of Pakistan to Singapore, Mr Nasrullah Khan, for his support for ISAS' events. He explained that the Institute's keen interest in Pakistan finds its reasons in its own mandate, which is to examine contemporary South Asia and disseminate the knowledge so gained to Singapore, its immediate region and beyond. He stated that, born as a nation-state for South Asian Muslims, the original idea of Pakistan was influenced by Westphalian and Wilsonian principles. Later its basic secularism was endangered following a military regime-sponsored Islamisation. In spite of some obstacles, however, the country had achieved much in terms of its political and economic development, and in its external relations. Today, in view of its demographic, intellectual and natural resources, it has great potential for further development.

Mr Khan expressed his gratitude to ISAS on behalf of the Pakistan government and High Commission for organising the event to commemorate Pakistan's 70<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary. He stated that Pakistan had faced and overcome numerous challenges in the last seven decades and, as a consequence, stood as a confident, strong, mature, resilient nation-state today. He explained that Pakistan could count on a strong democracy, informed media and an active civil society. It was a responsible state, highly committed to the protection of minorities, women's rights and empowerment. Pakistan was also committed to play a relevant role in the field of international relations. As a proof of the country's advancement, Mr Khan added that, despite all the challenges which confronted the country, its gross domestic product had doubled in the last few months.

The inaugural session was followed by two panel discussions during which six papers on specific aspects of Pakistan's politics, economy and society were presented. The panellists included Professor Riaz Hassan, Visiting Research Professor at ISAS; Mr Shahid Javed Burki, Visiting Senior Research Fellow at ISAS and former Finance Minister of Pakistan; Mr Ikram Sehgal, Pakistani defence and security expert and former Pakistani Army officer; General Jehangir Karamat, Pakistan's former Ambassador to the United States (US) and a former Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan; Mr Shahid Hafeez Kardar, former Governor of the

State Bank of Pakistan; and Mr Muhammad Saleem Ahmad Ranjha, founding Director, Akhuwat, and Federal Secretary, Benazir Income Support Program.

In his paper, Professor Hassan focused on the role of Islam in Pakistani society and politics. He explained that Sufism was the main channel for Islam into South Asia. In the northwest of the subcontinent, Sufi brotherhoods and Sufi places of worship (shrines) became fundamental reference points not only from the religious but also the political point of view. Professor Hassan described this peculiar confluence of spiritual and temporal power as the “pir-zamindar<sup>2</sup> alliance”, which remained one of the features of the Pakistani political and religious landscape even after the Partition.

He noted that in the country, while Sufistic forms of worship remained the most popular among the population, the Ulema (Muslim scholars) championed an orthodox version of the faith, which was scripturalistic and aimed at the establishment of a political system based on Quranic principles.

Scripturalistic Islam obtained official state support with the Islamisation programme based on the Sunni Deobandi Hanafi School, launched by the government during the military rule of General Zia ul Haq. Such Islamisation created a clear conflict between the two traditions. Sufi Islam, however remained, in Professor Hassan’s words, “the Islam of the country”, while the Islam advocated by the Ulema was confined to the role of “Islam of the text”. However, contrary to the common perception, in Pakistan, scripturalistic Islam still struggled for prominence despite receiving support from the state, Saudi Arabia and the US.

Professor Hassan stated that the media usually portrayed Pakistan as being a deeply religious and orthodox country. While it was true that Pakistanis are strongly attached to their religious identity, it is not true that they prefer a rigidly orthodox version of the faith. Referring to the studies he had conducted which aimed to map the religious consciousness of various countries, Professor Hassan stated that, contrary to what was generally believed, the religious

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<sup>2</sup> *Pir* is the title used for Sufi masters or saints. The *zamindar* was, at large, an aristocrat land-owner. During the Mughal period, the *zamindars* constituted the ruling class. In 1793, the Permanent Settlement Act created the *zamindari* system, according to which, the British recognised the *zamindars* as owners of the lands and granted them the power of collecting taxes.

sentiment of the Pakistanis was far from fanaticism. The Pakistanis clearly show a preference for a pluralistic and liberal form of religiosity, which implies a clear rejection of extremism. The ruthlessness and violence of Islamic terrorism in Pakistan must be understood as a reaction by the movement itself to its own isolation and failure to gain the support of the wider population.

Mr Burki presented a paper on Pakistan's economic development. He stated that the concept of “path dependence”, that is, current events are strongly determined by those that occurred before them, is useful to understand Pakistan’s trajectory. Presenting data, Mr Burki compared Pakistan’s economic situations at the moment of its establishment and today, and stated that the country had indeed achieved remarkable progress.

He also highlighted several fundamental aspects to support his finding about Pakistan’s progress. Firstly, there was wide consensus regarding the need for representative, inclusive and accountable institutions to run the country. Secondly, Pakistan had grown enormously from the viewpoint of inclusiveness and accountability – this was an exception when compared to other Muslim-majority countries.

Mr Burki posed the question of ‘what if’ for Pakistan – a paper which he had prepared for ISAS publication – and stated that, at a certain period, it would be useful to wonder which path history would have taken if other circumstances, different from those that actually occurred, had prevailed. The questions to be asked with regard to Pakistan were the following: What would have happened to the Muslim community of British India had the Partition not taken place? What would the country be like if Islamabad, not Karachi, had been chosen as its first capital? What would have been the consequences of Pakistan adopting, as per India’s example, a Constitution as early as in 1949? And what would India-Pakistan relations be like if they had not soured from the very beginning?

Mr Burki added that Pakistan could, at the present time, count on an extremely relevant economic and geopolitical position, given the interest that China, now the world's second largest economy, had in engaging the country. Furthermore, as revealed by the latest census, Pakistan had a remarkably young population, as half of the population was below the age of

24 years, a fact that represented a huge demographic and economic advantage. In light of this, it was fair to affirm that Pakistan had what it would take to become the centre of a land-based commerce system engaging China, the Central Asian republics and Afghanistan.

Mr Sehgal presented his paper on the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). He stated that, apart from Pakistan, the ECO included Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Together, these countries covered eight million square kilometre of land mass – this was equal to 18.4 per cent of Asia and 5.3 per cent of the world. The combined population of the ECO member countries was approximately 440 million, which made up 6.2 per cent of the world's population. The ECO area had trade transactions worth US\$688 billion (S\$931 billion) and its total gross domestic product amounted to US\$1,963 billion (S\$2,657 billion) [at US\$4,303 (S\$5,825) per capita]. In terms of connectivity, the ECO member countries were linked by 800,000 kilometres of roads and 55,000 kilometres of railway.

Mr Sehgal also touched on the objectives of the ECO, which were the promotion of sustainable economic development of member states and raising the standard of living and quality of life of its people; promoting regional cooperation in economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields; progressively removing trade barriers and expansion of intra-regional trade; developing transport and communication infrastructure; and economic liberalisation and privatisation. The organisation aimed to double intra-regional trade, increase its share in global trade, and tap regional potential for economic growth. To achieve this, it was fundamental for the ECO to maximise connectivity, mobility and accessibility, by making the major ECO corridors commercially viable and operational.<sup>3</sup> He added that the other strategic goals of ECO were to enhance energy security, increase the standard of living, quality of life, economic welfare, and general well-being of the people of the member states through social protection and environmental preservation policies.

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<sup>3</sup> The ECO railway networks included the routes of Turkey-Iran-Pakistan, Turkey-Iran-Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan, Turkey-Iran-Afghanistan-Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan-Azerbaijan-Iran, Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran, Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran. The ECO road networks included Turkey-Iran-Pakistan, Turkey-Iran-Afghanistan-Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan, Turkey-Iran-Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan-Iran, Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran, Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran, Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan, and Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan.

Mr Sehgal opined that the ECO had what it would take to be a key regional organisation, although the results achieved in the years since its formation in 1985 had been less than impressive. Besides its economic potential, the ECO could also count on its geopolitical position. In addition to this, as its member states were Muslim-majority countries, it could also work as an Islamic alliance. Bilateral issues among the members, however, had hindered its effectiveness. The conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with Pakistan hosting a huge number of refugees and Afghanistan aligning with India, was an example in this respect. With both China and Russia having vital stakes in the region, however, the ECO had now, more than ever, the potential of developing into a powerful political alliance.

General Karamat delivered his paper on ‘Pakistan’s Sustained Political Progress: The Supportive Role of the Military’ which provided an analysis of Pakistan’s political progress in the context of civil-military relations. It maintained that, in spite of the commonly negative perception of the Pakistani military, it had provided fundamental support to the country’s democracy at critical junctures, thereby, being significantly responsible for Pakistan’s positive political advancement.

General Karamat explained that it was commonly believed that Pakistan’s political progress was at an impasse, and that the military had represented a threat to its democratic evolution. However, the transition of political leadership which took place recently – in absolute compliance with the Constitution and without the intervention of the army – remarkably demonstrated that Pakistani democracy was dynamic and progressing.

General Karamat noted that every intervention by the military which had occurred so far was both welcomed by the people and legitimised by the judiciary. He highlighted that the actual problematic element in the issue of military intervention in political affairs was not the intervention *per se*, as this might be performed for good reasons and with genuine intention of correcting a degenerated situation, but the prolonged military rule that followed it.

Pakistan, under military rule, witnessed stability and remarkable economic progress. Progress, also, had not been limited to the economic sphere. The negative implications of the previous phases of military rule demonstrated, as a sort of negative tutorial, that the country

had huge potential when its institutions were left to function as they should. In this sense, although there were some limitations, military rule had, by and large, contributed to Pakistan's democratic growth.

General Karamat provided specific examples of how the military had played an important role in the country's transformation. In terms of political development, it highlighted and demonstrated the capacity of good governance to achieve credibility. It had also shown that it had no political ambitions in recent times. In fact, in the last decade, it had helped to resolve serious political crises in the country either by staying completely out of the issue or by supporting the government to overcome it.

In addition, General Karamat stated that the military had put in significant efforts in the country's western border areas and in urban areas to neutralise threats and ensure a safe environment. It had been also instrumental in carrying out the long-overdue census, supporting all the elections that had been held and providing necessary inputs to the country's national security and foreign policy establishments. While there had been cases of civil-military confrontation, which could have had disastrous consequences for democracy, the military had not allowed such issues to escalate, thereby demonstrating great maturity.

General Karamat added that the military itself had undergone transformation as a result of the challenges it faced and the experience gained. It developed new forms of warfare techniques and tactics, and responses which were necessary to deal with new threats (for example, border security and smuggling). In this respect, the personnel were re-trained, re-equipped and re-integrated into the military. The military structure also underwent changes so as to carry out operations of much larger dimensions. The military had also helped enormously in developing refugee structures and in working on de-radicalisation programmes, particularly in Baluchistan.

General Karamat also recalled that, just few days prior to the workshop, the Pakistan Army Chief strongly condemned radicalisation within the army. Like in many other states, in Pakistan, too, the military recruited from across the country – it was thus a mirror of the Pakistani society. When radicalisation occurred in the society, it could also affect the

military. The military was aware of this and worked very hard within its own environment to ensure that there were no subcultures within its ranks – it had fortunately not experienced any incidences of dissent or internal attacks thus far.

Speaking on Pakistan's nuclear weapons, General Karamat noted that, since the military had always worked with the government, it had often been criticised for maintaining control over such a strategic asset. He argued that such assets, as being developed by Pakistan, should be determined by the country's needs, its environment and the challenges it faced, and not by international norms.

On the political environment in the country, General Karamat focused on the four military interventions that interrupted democratic rule in Pakistan. He traced the cause of each military intervention to the proven failure of the overthrown civilian government to retain the support of the public and, therefore, credibility. He added that, in the last decade, the entire structure of the country had been under strong political control and the government had the complete freedom to operate effectively, including managing the economy.

Mr Kardar spoke on the role of the private sector in providing quality education services in Pakistan. On one hand, the public sector had been performing rather poorly, being negatively affected by an accountability deficit. On the other hand, the demand for education had increased considerably, with the female literacy rate growing remarkably fast. The reason behind the rising demand for girls' education related to marriage marketability, as education was a desirable attribute of the bride-to-be – educated girls were more likely to receive a better marriage deal.

As a result of the economic returns from education, the country was also witnessing a growth of the middle class that, in turn, was accompanied by the related demand for education, which the public sector had thus far failed to meet adequately.

Mr Kardar provided an overview of the education services by the private sector vis-à-vis those provided by the public one. The gap in the performance of public-schooled students versus private-schooled ones was considerable – it was in favour of the latter, as shown by



comparisons of both the school examination results and the feedback from employers. Contrary to the common perception, the private sector, in delivering education, addressed the needs of all income levels and not only those of the higher-income class – it presented a high degree of inclusiveness. In addition, 95 per cent of private schools were for mix-gender, unlike public ones.

In Pakistan, the participation rates of the private sector at all levels of education were low when compared to the other South Asian countries and others countries with the same levels of per capita income. However, private education had grown rapidly, with Punjab accounting for almost 50 per cent of the enrolment. The key reason for the increasing demand for private-sector education was the poor delivery of qualitative public-sector education. Public-sector education suffered from a number of issues, including inefficient administrative structure of the school and the lack of necessary technology kits such as computers and access to virtual classes.

Mr Kardar concluded that, in light of the data on private and public education, an expansion of private-sector education was desirable and necessary. He stated that, while the government had the duty of financing education, it did not necessarily have to deliver the services alone. In fact, the government could direct its resources to funding private institutions to deliver much-needed education services in a more efficient way.

Mr Ranjha's paper focused on the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Akhuwat, of which he was founding Director, while being the Federal Secretary of the Benazir Income Support Program. He shared his personal experiences and motivations which brought him into the world of micro-finance, with the wish of extending credit to the poor and freeing them from dependency on moneylenders and exorbitant interest rates. These were the reasons for the creation of Akhuwat. Derived from the Quran, Akhuwat meant 'brotherhood' which represented the alliance instituted by the Prophet Muhammad with the settlers of Madina.

According to Mr Ranjha, Akhuwat was today the world's largest NGO providing interest-free credit. The non-collection of interest on loans was one of the main principles followed by the organisation, in compliance with the norms of Islamic finance, because interest represented a

“war against Allah and his prophet”, according to the word of the Quran. Principles like the aforementioned one had kept the Akhuwat system standing strong and stable.

Mr Ranjha explained that Akhuwat counted on a wide network of volunteers, and used a variety of venues for its meetings and credit distribution exercises. These were mainly places of religious gatherings, like the mosques, churches and temples. The impact it has had on the lives of its beneficiaries was huge, and this was supported by the fact that most of the borrowers later became donors. Besides returning the borrowed money, they contributed to Akhuwat’s funds, in order to allow others to benefit from the same credit schemes.

Akhuwat had created and run a number of programmes targeting various aspects of welfare, such as health, employment and empowerment. It had also set up, among other things, Health Service Programmes, an Education Assistance Programme and a *Khawajasira*<sup>4</sup> Support Programme.

The clothes bank, targeting the employability of transgender people, was one of Akhuwat's most successful programmes. As in the case of other countries in South Asia, transgender persons were also ostracised by Pakistani society and were often disowned by their own family members. As a consequence, they struggled to make a living and achieve economic independence while maintaining their dignity. Akhuwat addressed the issue by creating the Akhuwat Clothes Bank. Managed by the *khawajasiras*, this bank collected, washed, repaired and packed pre-loved clothes provided by donors from the upper class. Once ready, these clothes were distributed for free to those who needed them. Beneficiaries were free to return the clothes borrowed (for example, bridal suits, which were normally worn only once) or to keep them. The Akhuwat Clothes Bank was a remarkable win-win endeavour, as it catered to the employment needs of the transgender community while, at the same time, provided clothes to the needy and promoted clothes recycling. So far, Akhuwat had collected, washed, repaired, packed and sent out 1.5 million garments.

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<sup>4</sup> In Pakistan, transgender people are referred to as *khawajasiras*.

In the field of education, the NGO promoted numerous schools and colleges programmes, which included the use of technology for distance learning. It was also working on the creation of Akhuwat University, Pakistan's first no-fee university.

In conclusion, the deliberations during the workshop brought out a number of key points. Pakistan was still a young country with significant potential. As a nation state that had been facing great obstacles since the moment of its founding, it had come a long way. At a time when major superpowers, mainly the US, were in a decline, Pakistan could play a critical role in stabilising the region and the Muslim world. It could count on its key assets in the geopolitical, economic and human spheres which, if used in the correct way, would contribute to making the country a more peaceful and prosperous one.

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