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Panel 24: Pakistan: State formation, identity politics and national contestation

Sufism at the ideological crossroads

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Islam, as we all know, was the basis of Pakistan's ideological identity. The new State has been branded as the "paradigm of Islamic revival" (John Esposito). But Islamic revival is no monolith and it covers a wide spectrum of ideologies and practices. As Katherine Ewing rightly points out in *Arguing Sainthood*, Islam was actually a "sublime object of ideology" (Slavoj Žižek) that succeeded in mobilizing a population, but it was an "empty signifier". The omnipresence of the Islamic reference on the Pakistani political scene as well as the fight for the monopoly of its interpretation have generated a competition among multiple actors appropriating religious symbols to define "real Islam".

Sufism, as the contested "mystical" aspect of faith, has become part of the ideologization of Islam and hence of the language of Muslim symbolic politics. (which includes competition concerning the "interpretation of symbols" as well as the "control of the institutions" which sustain and maintain them¹.)

From the reformist Mohammed Iqbal², who reinterpreted Sufism in a more dynamic idiom able to inspire the new Muslim community, to the latest political endeavours of the National Sufi Council, not to mention the doctrinal struggles between the different sects like the Deobandis and Barelwis, Sufism emerges as a relevant symbol to analyze the never ending ideological debate on the identity of a country caught in controversial political contexts, especially since the beginning of the War On Terror.

Sufism itself has indeed rapidly become politicized, since its definition has become increasingly the locus of debate within the Pakistani public sphere. It is not a static universe of meaning and action. On the contrary, Sufism is a highly ambiguous signifier, a referential matrix of language games, an Islamic "discursive tradition"³ which most players active in the political arena can never quite manage to supersede. It has acted as a foil as well as a source of inspiration for contradictory

1 Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1996, p.6.

2 A poet and a philosopher, he is considered as the main designer of the idea of Pakistan and as the spiritual father of the country.

3 Talal Asad quoted by Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam, Custodians of Change*, Karachi, Oxford University Press, p.5

ideological discourses (whether reformist, modernist, secularist, traditionalist, nationalist). It is and has been a major component of identity politics in Pakistan. It helps groups as well as individuals to negotiate and articulate their identity often in highly inconsistent ways.

Ever since the awakening of Muslim self-consciousness which gave rise to various movements of reformism, Sufism has played an ambivalent role in the Islamic revival. A rhetoric of decline, decadence and at times, downright condemnation, dominated the public discourse on “Sufism”, and particularly on the system of meaning and practices centred around shrines and pirs (the Sufi saints and their much criticized descendants gaddi nashins), whose sanctity had been naturalized in popular culture. In the vast historical process of the “ideologization of Islam”, Sufism has come under successive attacks and has gradually been objectified as a new category⁴. For many reformist thinkers, Sufism was responsible for the decadence of the Muslim world, and many of its practices were seen as innovations. Piri-muridi, the relationship between a spiritual master and his disciple, was viewed by many modernists as “authoritarian” in nature and as structuring the hierarchies of local culture and politics-hence against the democratic ethos promoted both by “Islam” and by the new post-colonial State. It is against such practices associated with the traditional social order that the Ministry of religious endowments (Awqaf) was created in Pakistan in 1960 under the regime of the modernist general president Ayub Khan.

Shrines, thought to be remains of a traditional –and backward- social order, had to become catalysts of modernization. But every successive Pakistani ruler tried to redefine Sufism and instrumentalize it for his own political benefit⁵. Sufism was redefined in socialist, liberal, modernist, even fundamentalist colours according to who was in power. But in its bid to take control of it, the State actually strengthened more than it reformed the shrine culture.

Besides, shrines, as places of huge communal gatherings, became platforms for the State to relay its ideology to the masses and, by showing allegiance to the saints, find a source of Islamic legitimacy for its own authority. For instance, during the urs of Pir Hazrat Abdul Kareem in June 2007, numerous high ranking officials supported the stance of the government on “religious extremism”: Punjab Governor Khalid Maqbool praised the government for “countering the pessimistic attitude of anti-Islamic forces”, adding that Islam is a “religion of peace promoting respect” and “categorically negates extremism and intolerance.” He hailed president Musharraf for “presenting Islam’s true position before the world” and commended the gaddi nashin for “his efforts to create unity among

4 Carl Ernst, *Sufism, An essential Introduction to the Philosophy and Practice of the Mystical Tradition of Islam*, Boston, Shambhala South Asia Editions, 2000, p.199

5 Katherine Ewing, ‘The Politics of Sufism: Redefining the Saints of Pakistan’, in AHMED, Akbar (ed), *Pakistan: The Social Sciences Perspective*, Karachi, Oxford University Press, 1990.

Muslims". The railways federal minister Shaikh Rashid Ahmed said "evil powers were actively engaged in subversive activities to destabilise the country's integrity" but added that the Holy Prophet and the Sufi saints' blessings would "shower on Pakistan"⁶. Generally speaking, ever since the beginning of the "War on Terror", Sufi saints have been once again redefined as metaphors of the ideal Pakistani nation and of the "true" Islam in the name of which the country was created that is to say peace, love, tolerance, etc. They are the indigenous identity hallmarks embodying the positive values that Pakistanis are exhorted to emulate to become truly who they are. Hence, the State remains politically and symbolically dependent on these traditional institutions which it initially aimed at reforming, but which still continue to dictate their cultural imperatives and norms to it.

As a matter of fact, in the context of the war on terror in which Pakistan plays an ambiguous role as a front-line State since 2001, the universe of Sufism, deeply embedded in Pakistan ethos, became the natural ally of power and an ideological weapon of "mass seduction".

Indeed, many in Pakistan deplore the fact that "Sufi Islam", which constitutes for many the matrix of the subcontinent's Muslim identity, has been gradually eclipsed by more "fundamentalist" versions of Islamic faith averse to the mystical tendencies of Islam, such as Abu Ala Mawdudi's Islamist party, the Jama'at-e-Islami. Sufism and Islamism have indeed been constructed as two opposite categories, including in the academic world.

Consistent with this vision, Iqbal's grand-son, Youssaf Salahuddin, has been the advocate of a version of Sufism defined as the "liberal", "tolerant" and almost "secular" trend of Islam. His idea of a National Sufi Council aimed at promoting Sufi music, poetry and philosophy was swiftly appropriated by the power that be in 2006. It was composed of the leader of the then ruling Pakistan Muslim League (Q), Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, as its chairman (who was given a turban in the Punjab House by the pir of the Indian shrine of Ajmer in a symbolic bid to promote himself as a "Sufi"), as well as other high profile politicians. The National Sufi Council was launched by Musharraf in a grand ceremony in the historical heart of Lahore at the occasion of Iqbal's birthday in November 2006. The same month, an international Sufi conference was organized by the Punjab Institute of Language, Art and Culture (PILAC) under the direction of the Chief Minister of the province, Pervaiz Elahi. The same "Sufi ideology" of love and peace was promoted to combat the expressions of "mullah⁷ Islam". The American officials in Pakistan showed a keen interest in both manifestations. Generally speaking

6 Quotations drawn from an article of Daily Times, "Islam rejects extremism, intolerance: Maqbool", June 9, 2007.

7 "Mullah" is a derogatory term used to designate the clergy, and notably the least educated one.

Sufism has become the new Islamic horse western powers are betting on. This perspective is shared by many Sufi actors and orders in Pakistan and abroad. Interviewed during the urs of Shah Jamal in April 2007, many devotees denounced the increasing trend of “talibanisation” in the country, opposing it to the teachings of Sufi saints⁸. And indeed the ideologization of Sufism has led many shrines to be attacked by extremist groups in retaliation since 2005.

In April 2006, the two representatives of Sufi Order International⁹ in Lahore, then in empathy with Musharraf’s doctrine of “enlightened moderation”, organized an international Sufi conference entitled “Universalism and Islam” which addressed the “war within Islam between those who take religion hostage (...) and those who believe in a religion of peace and tolerance.” In March 2006, an international conference organized by SAARC¹⁰ in Delhi projected Sufism as nothing less than the “panacea” to the turmoil in the region and as a voice for democratic secularism. We could multiply examples of such attempts to brandish Sufism as a symbol of reaction against “fundamentalism”, “extremism” and “terrorism”.

However, many Sufi and political actors, as well as journalists and intellectuals, criticized the Sufi venture of the government as the latest effort of a long series to manipulate the symbols of Sufism in order to present military dictatorship in mystical colours. Others denounced it as bid to use a “sweetened” Sufism as a neo-colonialist tool, giving a harmless content to Islam acceptable to western powers. “Sufis are being projected as subservient goodie-goodie Muslims”, says a civil servant who helped organize PILAC’s conference. The very same dynamics were at stakes in most authoritarian regimes of the Muslim world before the Arab spring at least, willing to fight the Islamist opposition by promoting an alternative and quietist form of religiosity.

As a matter of fact, the Pakistani State does not hold the monopoly of the interpretation of Sufism. For this heavily charged signifier encompasses doctrines, forms of organization as well as practices performed by actors belonging to the whole of the political spectrum- including the Islamist opposition.

“Sufism has become Washington’s agenda. They think Sufism will take people away from violent struggles, that it will liberalize them, modernize them, but it is not so. Sufism will only bring you closer to Islam. It will make you more fundamentalist¹¹” says a disciple of the Sufi order Naqshbandiyya Owaisia. This deobandi order counts thousands of disciples across Pakistan and in the Diaspora, who are taught

8 “Followers of Shah Jamal denounce extremism”, Daily Times, 22nd of April 2007.

9 a New Age offshoot of the Chishtiyya Sufi order initially designed for westerners but that recently came back to where it originally came from, the subcontinent.

10 South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation

11 Interview with the author, December 2006, Lahore.

a quiet “*zhikr*¹² of the heart” and an intricate system of numerous meditative stages. Its sheikh, Maulana Akram Awan, has launched in the 80’s a political wing to its Sufi order, a radical pressure group called Tanzeem-ul Ikhwan which is very popular among the army. Its ideology is to implement Islam on one’s own being before implementing it at State level. And if the sheikh does defend in one of his speeches the idea that Islam is “the religion of love”, he adds “If Mr. Bush continues with his policy of slaying innocent children, bombing elderly civilians, dishonouring women, backing Israel to destroy homes and habitations, then he should ask himself, who has ever earned love with tyranny?¹³”

Belonging to a Sufi order and indulging in Sufi practices under the guidance of a sheikh do not presuppose any given position in the political arena. As a matter of fact, pirs can be found in all Pakistani parties. But it is undoubtedly the Barelwi movement that has the most loudly claimed its Sufi identity in the political arena and in the Islamist field to which it belongs. Indeed, Barelwis are all fighting for the instauration of an Islamic state. In the Barelwi movement, Sufism has taken on an ideological dimension among organizations formalizing the fault-line of their doctrinal difference in order to transform their specific religious identity into a political resource and a sectarian stronghold. As a matter of fact, the Barelwi movement is scripted into the sectarian dynamics that have grown in Pakistan since the 80’s. But if Sunni-Chiite sectarianism has been widely studied¹⁴, intra Sunni sectarianism, especially between Sufis and anti-Sufis, has not.

As a matter of fact, in the framework of the “War against Terror”, mainly targeting Deobandi and Ahl-e Hadith groups, the sectarian dynamics have intensified. The Barelwis have finally accessed to political recognition and earned legitimization from the powers that be. The latter are using sectarian dynamics to underpin and give teeth to their fight against “extremism” in all its form. In the official narrative portraying the current war as an ideological conflict between “moderate” and “extremist” forces within Islam, the Barelwis, as self-proclaimed “peace-loving” Sufis, have indeed been identified as falling into the first of these categories and hence, have found a new political relevance in the current political context. Therefore, the Barelwi presence in the public sphere has increased. The different groups of the movement have organized many conferences and demonstrations aiming both at denouncing the “talibanization” of Pakistan and at reasserting the role of Sufis in the promotion of an Islam of “peace, love and tolerance” in contemporary Pakistan. They have been welcomed by US officials, senators, etc, in 2010, even though many Barelwi leaders are staunch anti imperialists.

12 Mystical practice consisting in repeating the divine names.

13 Speeches of Akram Awan can be found on the internet site of the order. “Islam, the religion of love”, www.owaisiah.com

14 Among others: Mohammad Qasim Zaman, “Sectarianism in Pakistan: The Radicalization of Shi’i and Sunni Identities”, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.32, N°3, (Jul. 1998), pp.689-716.

However, Barelwi actors are not all as tolerant and peaceful as they would wish to be portrayed in the current context. Indeed, it is a member of Dawat-e Islami, a Barelwi missionary group, who killed Salman Taseer, the Governor of Punjab, in January 2011. Taseer wanted to amend the law on blasphemy stating the death penalty for any offender of the Prophet Muhammad. His killer is now considered a hero, a fact which has bursted the ideological bubble of many. It is a clear sign that the hegemonic “Sufi Islam versus mullah Islam” narrative appears as one ideology among others once confronted to the complexity of social, religious and political forces in Pakistan.

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