

Salman Beg

Pakistan – as I see it

My Perspective:

I was born 5 years after Pakistan came into being, into a family from Hunza known for its military traditions – my grandfather patrolled the Pamirs in the service of the British Raj capturing a number of Russian soldiers, my father, commissioned in the British Indian Army, opted for Pakistan and retired as a Brigadier-General in 1971. I served in the army for 25 years and for the last 12 years I have worked in the field of development.

Hunza is part of what is now called Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) a region that since September 2009 has been a quasi-province, while remaining part of the ‘disputed territory’ of Kashmir whose final status is to be resolved through a plebiscite under various UN resolutions.

The Beginning – 1947 and Before:

In order to understand Pakistan as it is today and is likely to be in the future, one needs to go back to the situation of the pre-1947 period. The British had, in their over a hundred years of colonization starting with Bengal, conquered a number of independent states comprising various people and consolidated the same into what was known as the British Raj. This was for the very first time in history that such a large region in the Indian sub-continent came under one ruler.

While Muslims had arrived in various regions of the sub-continent as traders, invaders and conquerors, they were only a minority, with a greater number of Muslims being converts from Hinduism. These had been attracted by the Islamic teachings of equality, brotherhood, compassion and tolerance, as explained and lived by the great Sufis who had traveled and taken abode in the teeming cities of the sub-continent.

The Muslims, while much fewer than the Hindu populace in the British Raj territories, were still signi-

ficant and had majorities in the East and Western areas of the Raj. The Muslims felt that with the imminent departure of the British, they would fall under the tyranny of the Hindu majority whose attitude towards the Muslims was hostile.

This is exemplified by Mr. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, known as the Quaid-e-Azam, a brilliant lawyer distinguished in the political field, a staunch opponent to the idea of a separate country for Muslims and a proponent of Hindu-Muslim unity, who was forced by the acts of the small-minded Hindu leadership to join in the demand of a separate nation. He finally successfully led the cause for Pakistan.

The struggle for Pakistan was fought on a political and constitutional level under the Quaid’s leadership, with the Muslims galvanized into a movement that looked for independence from Hindu supremacy in post-British Raj. The military and bureaucracy (subsequently termed the ‘Establishment’ in Pakistan) had no role in the struggle for an independent Pakistan.

As the movement needed to be translated into a structure for the state, the Quaid in his speech to the Legislative Constituent Assembly on 11th August 1947 laid the basis for the vision and structure of Pakistan. Simply stated, the Quaid called for a state that promoted social justice and equity where all citizens were equal. Merit was the touchstone for all undertakings, while religion was an individual’s choice only.

Where Are We Now:

Pakistan as a country is in a perpetual state of turmoil lurching from one crisis to another, and almost always at a crossroads. Today is no different. The Great Flood of 2010 is a natural disaster on an unparalleled scale. The war on militant extremism being fought mainly in the tribal regions has evident negative fallout all over Pakistan. The constant under achievements in the fields of education, health, infrastructure, ener-

gy, agriculture and industry are cause for extreme anxiety. All are plagued by incompetent governance sapped by corruption leading to poverty for millions of Pakistanis.

In spite of the early loss of the Quaid soon after independence and the many challenges Pakistan faced in its infancy; when India was not only awaiting its collapse but also trying to engineer the same through withholding resources, monies, equipment that were Pakistan's share; the resilience and determination of the people saw it march ahead.

Three factors led to the derailment of what the Quaid had envisioned. The first two were external. The first relates to the Muslim majority state of Kashmir. The Indian self-invited occupation of Kashmir of October 1947 was in Pakistan's view an act against the principles of partition. Hindu or Muslim majority areas were to go to the country that was home to their co-religionists. Even more significant was that all river sources for West Pakistan came from Kashmir, thus also termed Pakistan's jugular vein. This underscored the need to have a military strong enough to deter India. The second external factor was the United States' determination to dominate the Soviet Union and the Communist Bloc and its willingness to take on allies in Asia for this. These two external factors working in tandem allowed for the growing clout of the all important internal factor, the rise of the Establishment. Young men who had joined the British Raj as officers in the Civil Service and Army rose to very high rank rapidly, filling the vacuum of an expanding military and government trying to confront belligerent India. It must be highlighted that the bureaucracy and army, who had absolutely nothing to do with gaining independence for Pakistan, took over power around the mid 1950s and have not let go of it.

These men increasingly arrogated to themselves knowledge of what was in Pakistan's interest and

pursued policies that have weakened Pakistan while side-lining political processes entirely.

This tale of the establishment taking power and running down political processes is Pakistan's biggest challenge to date.

Religious sectarianism, extremism, militancy, break-up of the country and separatist movements are a result of this elite's doing. Democracy was not allowed the opportunity and time to mature. Whenever governments of politicians have taken power with their mandates squeezed and uncertain of their tenuous, the stage is set for failure. They are inept, have a myopic view and in the main are not in charge of foreign and security policies. Of course the political parties also provide ample ammunition to their critics by their woeful conduct.

What Do I See For The Future:

As people it must be said that Pakistanis are large-hearted, forgiving, talented and impatient. And above all, given reasonable opportunity they have always been able to realize their potential.

The hallmark of the people is their resilience. It would be difficult to imagine another people who, having suffered so much, retain their ability to continue to strive. I am optimistic for the future on this factor alone.

My hopes are also based on a number of other factors that are coming together now. Our media is creating awareness and accountability. Our resurrected judicial system is promoting the rule of law. Our youth, I notice, are forthright and aware of their rights. And finally our geography as a North-South corridor for China to connect to the Arabian Sea, and as an East-West bridge which can bring India to Central Asia, may overcome historical animosities.

These collectively promise a better future than the past we have had so far.