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EMERGING INTERNAL CHALLENGES IN THE SUBCONTINENT

with special reference to Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the need to focus on the rule of law is the greatest internal challenge faced by Pakistan and other South Asian States. This is intricately related with ensuring good governance and political stability. The paper also argues that while democracy works in the subcontinent and the practice of competition in a multiparty environment is maturing, there is greater need to develop mechanisms and conventions for intra party democracy. It suggests that devolution of power at the local level will provide the necessary ground not only for better governance but also for recruiting a new political class which may provide leadership to their parties through an internal democratic process. By analyzing the recent most Pakistani elections this paper maintains that the charisma of Bhuttoism has seen its last day, thus Peoples Party will have to develop a new bond to keep itself an active political force.

If People Party fails to introduce internal democracy it may not resurrect itself from its massive failure in 1997. The disappearance of Bhuttoism will also force the Muslim League which had so far used anti Bhuttoism as a strong bond, to find other bases for keeping together a wide spectrum of interests. The paper also briefly addresses issues of ethnic and religious tensions, the debate on human rights and the environment as challenges faced by Pakistan and other South Asian States. The globalisation of human rights and environmental protection is seen as a complex issue which will have to be faced by South Asian States at both conceptual and practical level.

I

INTRODUCTION

At their fiftieth anniversary of independence from British colonial rule, the countries of South Asia still explain many of their maladies to the social, political and administrative legacy of the British Raj. It goes to say that a major transformation has not taken place in any of the constituent countries of South Asia, which might have rendered an episode that ended half a century ago as only of historical relevance. There is nevertheless a fervent urge to move on. Thus every one of the South Asian states would like to emulate the nations of East Asia, the Asian Tigers, as they are so enviously referred to, whose colonial past has ceased to be of much contemporary relevance.

During the nineties, the three large countries of South Asia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have experienced noticeable restlessness about their inability to extricate themselves from the vicious cycle of misgovernance, poverty and under development. The issue of corruption among custodians of the state has been a major focus of political life in all three. It is ironic that the heads of government have either been arrested or prosecuted on charges of corruption in each one of them: Ershad in Bangladesh, Rao in India and both Benazir and Nawaz Sharif in Pakistan during the same period. In the past the leaders of these countries had a history of being insultingly thrown out of government or even violently eliminated, but the nature of charges and the manner of scrutiny were quite different. Apparently, the state is now much more than a symbol of identity. Its emotive value is of less significance compared to its material effects. Hence the management or mismanagement of the state apparatus is increasingly the test of political leaders. For whatever its value, charisma of political leaders is taking a back seat in public evaluation. Charismatic Benazir Bhutto's unceremonious defeat in the recent Pakistani elections at the hands

of a person who has generally been characterised as 'lackluster' is the recent most expression of the new political mood in this region.

Ethnic tensions combined with religious and sectarian strife punctuate a generally weak law and order environment in the region. The drama of administrative breakdown is written in the script of these tensions more than in the guise of industrial unrest or peasant movements of an earlier time. Life in general is primitive in terms of basic infrastructure. Housing, streets, sewerage and sources of water supply are in many cases a continuation of the distant past. But attitudes have changed. Amidst the squalor of a primitive age, the inhabitants are under the influence of nerve shattering new influences. They watch TV, listen to the radio, even read newspapers. They travel, many of them to distant lands or keep in touch with their compatriots who live in completely transformed environments. Thus, despite its primitive character life is not static. People expect that things should change. They have seen change around them. Upward mobility of nations as collective entities, and of individuals similar to themselves, within and outside their immediate environments has created a hope that things will change for the better. Opinion surveys on hope and despair show that forty to sixty percent of the population in any given year expects that things will change in the following year for the better. A land mass inhabited by over a billion people is expectant of betterment. In a way this is the greatest emerging challenge faced by South Asia. Can the state and society come up to their expectations? If they do not, will the state and society survive in their present form? Will they fail, and face the specter of failed states and societies? How does the success or failure of this region affect the world community at large? These are some of the questions which we are likely to address in our presentations and discussions. While I may refer to other countries of South Asia in passing, the focus of my presentation will be on Pakistan. Keeping in view the recently held national elections I shall pay special attention to explaining the internal challenges faced by the country through the prism of the 1997 national elections.

At age fifty, Pakistan is inhabited by approximately 135 million persons. Only a small fraction of them, or 12% were living, and less than 3% had reached adulthood when the country was created in 1947. In fact only 36% were living, and 15% had reached adulthood as recent as December 1971 when the country was divided to form two separate states of Pakistan and Bangladesh¹. One half of Pakistan's population is under 18 years of age, and 70% is under 30 years. Thus it is a youthful nation, bearing both the possibilities and the problems of such an age structure.

The basic infrastructure in terms of development is weak. Approximately twenty percent of the population lives in 30 cities, another ten percent lives in nearly 400 small towns and the remaining seventy percent live in some 40,000 villages.

Only 40% of the adult population is literate and less than 5 percent have college education.

The per capita income is low. In nominal terms the per capita income is approximately 450 US dollars. In purchasing power parity terms the per capita income is 2150 US dollars, compared with 1350 in India and 1300 in Bangladesh².

II

THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL STABILITY

During the last twenty years, since 1977, no government in Pakistan has been removed through street action or long drawn popular agitation. Yet five governments have

¹Compiled by the author on the basis of data provided by the Federal Bureau of Statistics, Islamabad.

changed hands during the same period. In contrast during the ten years prior to that, 1967-77, two governments were removed through popular agitation, the government of Ayub Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. In a sense political stability has increased and not declined in Pakistan. While the Constitution had to be suspended to change the governments in 1968 and 1977, all successive changes have remained within the limits of Constitutional provisions. Having made this point, it must be recognised that all is not well with Pakistan's political performance. Never in Pakistani's history has one chief executive handed over power to another in normal circumstances. In all cases, prior to and since 1977, the change of power has come about through extraordinary measures. The national assembly was dismissed by the President, albeit within the constitutional provisions, four times in eight years since 1988. As a result all governments in recent years have worked under circumstances of extraordinary uncertainty. Since none of its recent predecessors has completed its tenure, only 40% of the voters who elected the recent most government in 1997 believed that the government which they were electing would complete its five years tenure³. In this sense political stability has remained absent from the political scene of Pakistan. Besides hurting the process of economic development, it has also meant that political institutions have not sufficiently matured. The parliament, political parties and the cabinet have remained weak and under developed as institutions. None of the three institutions is clear about its legitimate role. This particularly applies to the institution of political party which is devoid of inner functioning thorough democratic procedures. Furthermore the institution of local governments has been intermittent and patchy. The local government, political party and parliament are training grounds and vehicles for grass root politics. In their absence the process of developing a legitimate political cadre has remained extremely weak. The relative weakness of political compared to bureaucratic institutions is the most widely recognised explanation for the weakness of Pakistan's political system.

³ World Development Report, World Bank 1996.
⁴ Gallup Exit Poll Survey, 1997.

III

THE OUTCOME OF RECENT ELECTIONS

During the span of a year the three major countries of South Asia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have held a national election. In each case their governments changed hands. While there are conflicting interpretations of whether the emergence of regional political forces in India is a sign of weakness or strength, one might conclude that the political systems in all three countries have moved towards greater political maturity. In every case the courts assumed greater authority and reference to the rule of law assumed greater attention, thus strengthening the notion that democracy is a system of government whose bedrock is the rule of law. Elections are becoming a vehicle to articulate the interests of various sections of the society. In India elections have provided an outlet for expression to different caste groups and regional identities, as well as to Hindu nationalism. For a while it seemed that popular democracy in India stimulated some of the meanest emotions in human beings, unleashing religious intolerance and oppression, but there is enough evidence to suggest that democratic functioning contains within itself a countervailing momentum to check such phenomenon. Democracy provides a fertile ground for the surfacing of both positive and negative features of social reality. But, on the whole the open conflict of competing social tendencies may lead to the strengthening of positive tendencies. Democracy has fueled corrupt practices in state functioning, but then it has also become the means to expose and check them: Witness events in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan alike. Democracy has provided dividends to those who fanned religious and sectarian strife. But, there are indications that the lure of wider appeal eventually checks the exclusivist content of sectarian and ethnic appeals. Benazir Bhutto's government was punished by the electors for its lack of competence and financial misdemeanor. The BJP was unable to form a government in India partly because its version of Hindu nationalism appeared to disrupt the pluralistic realities of society. In Bangladesh a majority of voters under the banner of Awami League finally returned to

power after a long sojourn in opposition, and under circumstances in which its authority would be under check from an equally strong Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). It is abundantly clear that democracy does work in South Asia. However, in order to produce good government it ought to be reined in by a strong judiciary and through strengthening the institutions of government and civil society. Popular will has strongly endorsed the need to combine representative government with strict judicial control. The role of judiciary in holding elections in Bangladesh, its role in providing legitimate grounds for calling a fresh election in Pakistan and improving the election rules and ensuring that money and influence plays a diminished role in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh alike are seminal developments that can not be ignored. This is not to exalt the judiciary itself to an institution without any blemish. But, in an imperfect world, South Asia is beginning to practice (through not discover) the virtues of institutionalization of checks and balances among competing power centres, every one of whom is vulnerable to committing excesses. The general tenor of election campaigns in the recent elections in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan was a definite improvement on the past, and it would be important to sustain this trend.

It is pertinent at this point to explain the outcome of the recent most elections in Pakistan in some detail. The 1997 elections are the fourth national elections in a matter of just over eight years. In an ironic fashion Pakistan seems to have paid penance for not holding frequent enough elections in its early years. During the eight years leading up to the 1997 elections, the country witnessed the shaping up of two major political parties, the Peoples Party and the Muslim League, each of whom was hardened through the tests of experiencing the temptations of government and the tribulations of being out of power in the opposition. Unlike the experiences of Pakistan's earlier parliaments, the two parties managed to control cross over of their members to government benches during periods of tribulation. They also ensured to maintain wide appeal to a cross section of the population during this period. Thus the Peoples Party which had caught popular imagination as a party of protest in late nineteen sixties attracted the sympathies of a section of the landed elite and the establishment, while

the Muslim League which had been resurrected by the establishment in mid eighties from virtual non existence, soon become and exponent of a broad spectrum of the population including the under privileged in both the rural and urban areas of the country. Exit poll surveys show that in 1988 the electorate of the PPP was relatively downscale compared to the electors of the Muslim League and its allies: it had a tilt towards more poor, more illiterate and more young. This composition has however been changing, and by 1997 the social composition of the electors of the two parties is almost identical. Each one of them now constitutes around 60% poor among their voters.

The Muslim League made steady gains in the first three elections and then a sharp upturn in the fourth. In 1988, Muslim League and its IJI allies together polled 32%, against PPPs 37% votes; in 1990, the two polled almost equally at 37%; in 1993 Muslim League, now without an alliance, polled 40% against PPP's 38%. In 1997, however Muslim League polled 46% and PPP polled 22% vote. There is evidence to suggest that the quality of support among PPP voters had been eroding since 1988, but each time the election was held they rallied back to the party fold. This steady erosion in quality of support finally took its toll in the 1997 elections when PPP voters staged a massive walk out. Indeed they had been signaling warnings for quite some time, and the party leadership did not listen. This author has shown in a separate paper that in 1997 elections nearly a quarter of PPPs voters switched loyalties and voted for Muslim League, while a slightly lower number stayed home and did not vote. PPPs vote was nearly halved compared to the vote it would receive if its 1993 rating had remained unchanged. In percentage terms PPP lost 16% points (down from 38% to 22%) while Muslim League gained 6% points (up from 40% to 46%). Interestingly Pakistan moved in the direction of electing one dominant party at a time when India has gradually moved out of a dominant Congress party phenomenon to a proliferation of several strong parties, none of whom can form a government on its own. While the situations are quite different the Muslim League in Pakistan will be well advised to learn from the dynamics of the Congress Party during its period as a dominant party.

Other countries, notably Japan and to some extent Malaysia have also had a tradition of electing a dominant party, and can serve as relevant reference point. It is only natural that dominant parties give birth to politics of factions within the party. The essence of democracy lies in legitimate competition, both within and across parties. While the major political parties of Pakistan are beginning to learn the dynamic of inter party competition, they are still novices in developing appropriate institutions and traditions to deal with legitimate competition within parties. Having successfully rehearsed four inter party competitions, they are now on the calling to demonstrate their ability to develop mechanisms for intra party competition. PPPs massive defeat in 1997 has worn off the charisma of Bhuttoism. In the aftermath of the demise of Bhuttosim, PPP can still sustain and rejuvenate itself as a grass root party provided it develops appropriate institutions and conventions to provide authority to party membership at different levels. It would have to shed its fear of facing institutionalised dissent. The PPP has always shied away from participating in local government because like all other national parties, it is likely to find factional groupings among its supporters at the local level. PPPs detractors accuse that in its history of nearly thirty years the party has never held intra party elections. So far the charisma of Bhuttoism could provide a bond for competing factions and disparate elements in a popular party. Now the bond would come through institutions rather than the power of personality alone. It is ironic that the demise of Bhuttoism will equally affect the Muslim League. The fear of Bhuttoism provided a binding force among the disparate ranks of Muslim League, its leaders and voters. Once that fear is no more, and the party assumes a dominant character in the parliament, it is only natural that the bond of solidarity should come from elsewhere. Nawaz Sharif has emerged as a likeable person among the leaders and voters of Muslim League, but he does not enjoy the charisma of a Messiah, as Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto did. Nawaz Sharif is a leader whose strength is party owed to his mass appeal but equally importantly to the grass root politicians who toiled hard with him to win his present position. Once in power, jockeying for positions among a host of factional interests within Muslim League will begin. Nawaz Sharif can continue to enjoy the respect of both winners and losers in intra party

clashes if he plays by the rules. Such rules can be ambiguous and uninstitutionalized for only so long; hence intra party democracy will have to be soon developed. It is a challenge for which the past credentials of Nawaz Sharif are not very strong. He is prone to rely heavily on close associates rather than on factional leaders. He prefers to spend more time with executive or semi executive rather than with political colleagues. There is a lot which the present leadership of Muslim League has to learn about how political parties ought to work in a competitive parliamentary system. This is all the more necessary and a bit complicated because grass root party machines have recently been losing some of their relevance. Modern communication technology has reduced their role as intermediaries for political communication. Major party leaders can afford to circumvent middle level leadership and party cadres by reaching out to voters directly through the electronic media. Modern printing technology, advertising agencies and professional managers have further reduced the role of traditional local party bosses. But, these superficial changes should not deceive political players. An apparently successful electoral campaign across the country can prove to be hollow in results if grass root organisation and factional leadership at the local level is missing. Imran Khan's successful election campaign could not win him many votes, partly because of this phenomenon. Political parties bring together and channel a variety of local as well as socio-economic interests. Despite the new technology, grass root politics will continue to enjoy a vibrant role in Pakistani politics. Both Muslim League and Peoples Party should develop party structures to harness, order and channel the energies of local politics to legitimately influence national affairs.

While modern technology detracts attention from the need to organise local parties, there is the countervailing trend for devolving government to local levels. In the post cold war era citizens are reluctant to look up to their governments for providing them with a world view or inspiration. Instead their expectations are quite mundane such as jobs, stable income, roads, sewage facilities, garbage cleaning, personal security, education for children and health care. Many of these functions are performed best at a local level. Thus, the devolution of government with greater citizen participation is the

most popular current recipe. Fortunately there is a tradition for neighborhood government in South Asia. In India it has been revived under its traditional title of 'Panchayat', and is known to be working well. Pakistan would be well advised to quickly embark upon reviving local governments. In addition to their inherent advantage, local governments will provide a basis for developing a mechanism for participation in party affairs at a wider level.

Local governments in both rural and urban areas will provide an outlet for political participation to Pakistan's burgeoning educated and professional elite. Each year the country produces thousands of college graduates and an increasing number of engineers, doctors, accountants, lawyers, ulema and business graduates, many of whom are keen to make an entry into a political career. But, so far the openings to a political career for professionals, businessmen and those who have no family background in politics are quite limited. A large majority of current incumbents in the parliament have inherited their positions. The exception to this are those who entered politics through local governments when they were functioning well in the nineteen eighties. The politically less privileged professional cadre in the country has a feeling of being disenfranchised from public affairs. This explains their attraction towards a third party which emerges at the time of every election, but for good reasons subsides and fails to make an impact. A country like Pakistan requires a large number of professionally competent persons who are well versed with popular aspirations and at the same time familiar with technocratic functioning of a modern government. They are the basic raw material for bringing a modern participatory government. Local government at different levels would be most suitable to recruit and acculturate them to a political government. In recent years there are certain successful experiments of spearheading social development projects through Non Government Organisations. But, so far they are dependent on foreign assistance and without genuine roots in the local environment. Yet they have played a useful seeding role. A local government financed and supported by politically representative institutions can facelift the NGO culture whose credibility has been tarnished by excessive foreign dependence.

The devolution of day to day government at a lower level is a strong check against separatist tendencies. Much is said about the lack of national integration in Pakistan, and it is feared that regionalist feelings may undermine the cohesion of a multi-lingual country. But, there is little evidence of sustained emotional antipathy of one linguistic group against the other. So far different linguistically based political groups have emerged and gradually reconciled with the national mainstream. The success of such groups with their voters is not rooted in a sense of common identity but in the hope that their solidarity would be a vehicle to promote their interests against an otherwise distant and uncaring government. Since Benazir Bhutto, who hails from Sind, owes all except one of her current National parliamentary seats to the Sind province, some observers have feared an ethnic divide in the country. The fact that she had hinted about her persecution for being a Prime Minister from Larkana (Sind) against another Prime Minister (Nawaz Sharif) from Lahore, Punjab lent a mildly dramatic effect to this thesis. But election results show that in voting percentage terms her loss of vote is roughly equal in Sind and Punjab. And since Punjab is twice more populous than Sind, the majority of Benazir Bhutto's voters in the 1997 elections, as in the previous ones, still come from the province of Punjab. She secured 22% of the vote in Punjab, exactly the same as her national average. The party which was known and once legally tried for its anti federal tendencies in the NWFP is now the closest ally of Muslim League, which may be regarded as the party with scant regionalist tendencies. Thus, the resentment against the Federal Government is not be rooted in emotional or identity issues, but on the simple question of mismanagement. Local governments and devolution of authority is the best prescription to address this ailment.

Much lip service has been paid to these concepts in the past. But, in practice authority has remained concentrated in the federal government. The reasons are complex. Local and provincial institutions are weak and thus unable to exert their authority. Federal government sometimes erroneously feels that for the cause of common good it should intervene even where its jurisdictions ends, or where it lies in the grey area. But above

all the transgressing of power beyond suitable jurisdiction occurs because people in authority are disdainful of what their constitutional and legal limits are. In their functioning they violate these limits, sometimes for personal and in other cases for supposedly a public cause. The Nawaz Sharif government which has just been placed in authority is as likely to practice this fatal mistake as any other previous government. In fact in its enthusiasm to deliver quick results, and being more self confident because of a massive popular mandate, it may be more prone to overstep its constitutional and legal limits in various spheres. A bureaucracy which is too rigid on some occasions, and too susceptible to political pressure on others, provides the ideal accomplice for such detours.

The greatest internal challenge in Pakistan, as for perhaps the rest of South Asian States is to ensure that they operate within the parameters of law. The central or federal governments at the end of this century are not the custodians of a state which claimed the ultimate obedience of its citizens, or one whose sovereignty on almost all matters was a cornerstone of the world order, at least in theory. The authority of state is being eroded by claims from both sub national and supra national aspirants who claim part if not all of the writ that runs in a state. We now hear of a 'perpetually negotiated' rather than absolute sovereignty⁴. The central or federal government can maintain its superior claim to that sovereignty only if plays by the rules which are adjudicated by appropriate mechanisms and hence trusted and respected by all concerned parties. It is critical that the process of law making and its enforcement assumes a central role in the thinking of our rulers. This is not an easy task because governments would wish to show quick results and deliver economic welfare, a goal which may consume most of their attention and energies. Truly, economic welfare is the first priority of voters, but accountability and the need to check corruption is a close second⁵. It is not entirely self evident, but the door to corruption is wide opened when governments trespass their legitimate authority in any sphere. The enhanced role

⁴ Biersteker and Weber, Beyond Sovereignty

⁵ Ibid

of judiciary in national affairs is a welcome sign and it must be steered forward in a meaningful way.

From what they have witnessed recently in their countries, the rulers in South Asia must surely realize that voters are furious about subjecting their political leaders to accountability. Their political support to all and sundry is subject to this new passion. Thus a pre election Gallup poll in Pakistan found out that while a clear majority supported Nawaz Sharif as the future prime minister of Pakistan, 80% of his prospective voters favoured disqualifying him from politics if he was found guilty of defaulting on his loans⁶. It goes to show that voters have become enormously conscious about the need for a clean government. Indeed it is a formidable challenge for rulers in the region.

IV

RELIGIOUS AND SECTARIAN TENSIONS

Except for a tiny proportion of the current population of Pakistan who grew up before the subcontinent was divided, most Pakistanis are not familiar with living with people of other religions. Ninety five percent of the population is Muslim and the five percent non Muslim population is unfortunately excluded from the mainstream on social and economic grounds. The single largest non Muslim population of Christians are historically ghettoed in a few lowly professions, while the Hindus population is mostly restricted to certain districts of the Sind province. For reasons of state, as well as those which date back into the history of the subcontinent, Muslims and Hindus of the subcontinent have demonised each others image. Such attitudes may not find support from the strict religious injunctions of Islam, but they are strongly entrenched among the masses. There is recent evidence that the pent up emotions of the Hindu population can be manipulated for political causes through acts such as the desecration of the

⁶Gallup Elections Survey, 1997.

Babri mosque in India. In Pakistan there are a few, but sadly increasing number of cases in which the clashing personal or group interests of local Muslim and Christian families are expressed and exploited in religious terms. As modern technology ushers us into a global existence, it would soon be realized that every one is faced with a pluralistic existence in real or, as the new terms goes 'virtual' terms. Indeed it would be a challenge for the populations in South Asia to come to terms with this new reality. The Pakistani population is beginning to learn that no matter how few, or how weak, the religious minorities may be, they are a part of the society and can cause a new set of problems. Islamic teachings about tolerance must be observed seriously in Pakistan.

The Shia Sunni tensions are not new, but in recent years they have taken on a violent colour in certain parts of Pakistan. There are at least three pockets in the country, Ilang district, Northern Areas and Waziristan where Shia Sunni conflict erupts quite frequently and has become part of the local political and social culture. In the rest of the country Muslim sect solidarity is playing a decreasing political role. The Shia vote which rallied in large majority in the past to only one political party, the PPP, has in recent elections been dispersed among the two mainstream political parties. In the 1997 election the voters of Shia denomination (Maslak) were equally divided between the PPP and PML(N), with the latter enjoying a slight edge⁷. The different sub sects within the Sunni Maslak have also lost much of their political relevance. The political system and its peculiar electoral form has compelled particularistic tendencies to establish working political relationship with broad social coalitions such as the Muslim League and the Peoples Party. In this sense, a "winner take all" system has helped Pakistan to defuse particularistic tendencies. A proportional representation electoral procedure might have produced quite the opposite results.

The religious and sectarian tensions in Pakistan do cause sporadic unease, but they are manageable at the moment. Yet, there is a need for encouraging greater tolerance for inter faith and inter sect differences. This new attitude is necessary for harmonious functioning in an increasingly pluralistic existence in the new real and virtual world. It should be possible for Pakistan to move in this direction, given the emphasis on tolerance in the fundamental teachings of Islam. An important factor on the issue of religious tensions are international interests. Religious intolerance and the manipulability of such emotions for political ends is not restricted to Pakistan. Thus the attitudes of the European community for Christian population and of India in the case of Hindu population are not to be ignored, even when they are an exaggeration or distortion of ground realities. This equally applies to the attitude of Iran regarding Shia Sunni tensions. Without jeopardising the sovereign authority of the Pakistani state on domestic issues, it may be important to publically discuss in normal times the underlying truths and falsehoods of sectarian and religious clashes, without waiting for an ugly instance which highlights them. The protection of minority rights, whether political, social, economic or religious, lies at the heart of democracy. It distinguishes democracy from tyranny and should therefore receive proper attention from rulers who wish to lead the country to become prosperous and self respecting within a democratic framework. Rapid economic growth causes a host of tensions that look for suitable channels through which they can be expressed. It is most dangerous to allow religious or sectarian tensions to become a vehicle for expressing such tensions while a new government in Pakistan begins its programme of rapid economic growth. The new government should simultaneously take steps to introduce greater respect for all religious and religious orientations. Of course this is different from treating all of them with equal disrespect, a path which certain countries espouse or observe. While, social attitudes are shaped over a long period of time, it is never too late to take a desirable initiative.

THE DEBATE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

The debate on human rights is a welcome addition to the social and political discourse in Pakistan. The debate is not completely new to the local scene but its extension beyond the traditional issue of infringements on political opposition to such subjects as the condition of women, child labour and minority rights has brought a fresh perspective. Economic welfare and political freedoms may serve little purpose if they do not eventually help citizens achieve their legitimate human rights. In principle social concerns such as the question of human rights can remain politically non-partisan, and yet retain strong political weight. The human rights activism in Pakistan is still in its early stage. As the debate begins to unfold itself one realises the magnitude of the task. The infringement of economic, social and political rights is deep rooted in the South Asia societies. Its awareness is being triggered off by what one might call as a combination of sincere and politically motivated quarters on the fringes of the national mainstream. This is only natural. As the movement gets stronger, it will attract adherents from all sections of the society which will make it more fair in the choice of issues and the arguments to uphold its positions. Since concerns about human rights do not know national boundaries, the human rights movements are beginning to cut across borders in South Asia and globally. But in an unequal world the transnational flow of influence is un-directional from the strong to the weak. This creates an oppressive atmosphere wherein countries like Pakistan have accused Western nations of using the accusations of human rights violations as a stick to master commercial or other vested interests. A year ago the President of Pakistan accused that the restrictions on the export of Pakistani hand woven carpets or sports goods on grounds that the industry used child labour, was a commercial ploy to hurt Pakistani exporters. The high profile interference by German and Swedish governments, among others, on issues of minority rights and freedom of speech in Pakistan and Bangladesh were resented by the local public opinion. On the other hand political organisations and government agencies have appealed to world wide human

rights organisations to influence India to check violation of human rights in Kashmir. India, in turn, has highlighted the violation of human rights in the city of Karachi. Thus the completely new focus on human rights has made it an important emerging challenge. The challenge has to be addressed both conceptually and practically. In essence human rights is a moral issue, whose cause will be projected by not just moral but several amoral motivations. In the past many statesman and religious scholars have argued against the propriety of keeping moral issues on the agenda of amoral states⁸. But, this is not the position that a state such as Pakistan, with its emphasis on religion as part of state functions, can take. The question of globalising the protection of human rights will be an important issue in the years to come.

V

ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

A quick rundown on the environmental problems of Pakistan may be necessary to put it in perspective⁹ :

- 5,000 of the 50,000 industrial units were a major source of pollution. The worst of these discharged more than 590 billion litres of untreated waste water with over 35,000 tonnes of chemical and biological pollutions.
- 80% of the 26,400 tonnes of the daily rural excreta was deposited in open fields. More than half of the 8,000 tonnes in the cities went into sewers and the rest became solid waste, dispersed on roadsides or drained through the waterways.
- Ravi and Indus were rated as the world's third and fifth filthiest rivers in terms of pollution from suspended solid loads.
- 70% of the 3.5 million vehicles were below safety standards in the smoke and carbonised and lead-mixed fumes they emitted. The average vehicle compared to one in the US was emitting 20 times more hydrocarbons, 25 times more carbon monoxide and 3.6 times more nitrous oxide in grams per kilometer.

⁸Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man in an Immoral Society*, 1951.

⁹Reproduced from *State of Human Rights in 1995*, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

- In Sind more than 70% of all agricultural land was waterlogged. In Punjab 40% was salinised. Watershed level in Balochistan dropped by another one meter during the year. Erosion did further damage to the soil, silting depleted the capacity of the reservoirs in Punjab, overgrazing reduced fodder production of the rangelands to one-third of their capacity.
- Deforestation ravaged over 7,000 hectares of growth. The juniper forests suffered further depredation on an extensive scale.
- The daily discharge of 682 million liters of garbage, raw sewage and industrial effluents caused one-third of the siltation in Karachi harbour and its creeks and channels. There were also oil spills and organic waste from the fish harbour.
- Indiscriminate increase in use of fertilisers and pesticides was affecting the food chain and investing ground water with high concentration of nitrate and fish with ammonia toxicity.
- 15 out of 151 mammal species and 25 out of 476 bird species stood in threat of extinction from environmental pollution.
- Among humans, gastro-intestinal diseases accounted for 30% of the ailments, and 60% infant deaths occurred from infections and parasitic diseases, mostly water-borne. A sample survey showed over 70% patients in Karachi suffered from chronic bronchitis, pulmonary emphysema and lung cancer.

In a recent article Tariq Banuri, who heads the Sustainable Development Policy Institute in Pakistan has argued that a concern about the protection of environment and its hazards is taking roots in Pakistan¹⁰. But this is a slow process. Once again environmental hazards and their cures are transnational in character and are hence subjected to the same issues which are earlier raised about the globalizing of human rights.

¹⁰ Tariq Banuri, Rio Revisited, The News, Jan 21, 1997.