

THE WEDNESDAY INTERVIEW | FARZANA SHAIKH

'Pakistan is likely to continue its state of stable instability'

Pakistan knows what it stands against, but what it stands for remains obscure, says historian Farzana Shaikh

SUHASINI HAIDAR

Pakistan is often called a "security state", one in which the army has a country rather than a country having an army. Farzana Shaikh, London-based historian and author of 'Making Sense of Pakistan', however, argues that Pakistan's problem is that it is an "insecurity state", defined more by what it is opposed to than what it stands for. Excerpts:

How does one understand the events of the past few weeks in Pakistan? The Supreme Court acquitted Asia Bibi, but protests broke out and she couldn't be freed. Prime Minister Imran Khan said he wouldn't bow to extremists, but the government caved in and signed an agreement with them.

to oppose a review petition against Asia Bibi's acquittal and move to stop her from leaving the country to where her family is. The TLP hasn't stopped its threats despite that.

Such surrenders have been seen in the past too, so what is new now? Is Pakistan heading towards becoming a full theocracy, like the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan?

Well, the judiciary is just one branch of the state. While the acquittal was a landmark judgment which should have been praised, but without an act of Parliament changing the blasphemy laws and [making them] less vulnerable to the kind of abuse that led to Asia Bibi's incarceration for more than a decade, we will have many more such cases. Parliament and the government must support this judgment, heed the message they have sent out that the law itself is flawed and open to abuse. Instead, there is abject capitulation. Mr. Khan is making a habit of making grand, progressive statements and following them up by backtracking. We saw this over the appointment of Aatif Mian as an economic adviser, when the government made him step down within three days after protests from extremists. Similarly, he promised to bring the "might of the state" to bear on those questioning the judgment, and within days his government caved in and signed a peace agreement, which was just an "appease agreement" with the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) promising not

I don't think so. I don't see the state being taken over by a Taliban-type clergy. Pakistan is not Afghanistan, for better or for worse. The military will not countenance the prospect, nor would the international community. There is some truth in the old adage about Pakistan being "too important to fail" which its leaders have used to their advantage. It is a nuclear weapons state in a tough neighbourhood, and the great powers are deeply engaged with Pakistan for Afghanistan. There is a sense of frustration with Pakistan, but it is unlikely to change that engagement drastically in the short to medium term. Pakistan is, in fact, likely to continue its state of 'stable instability', which is built into its structure because of the perennial tension between the military and the political classes, and that of Islam's relationship with the state.

Yet the contradiction remains, that religious parties haven't won a large majority of votes in any



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Pervez Musharraf, General Ashfaq Kayani, General Raheel Sharif seem extremely in control, until one way or the other they demit office.

Well, Gen. Musharraf did falter and stay on. But this is an important point. Every time a new chief takes over, we are told that he will be different, more committed to democracy, peace, and so forth. And then he seems much the same as the previous ones. The military institution is much stronger than the chief. A maverick like Gen. Musharraf who tried to mould the institution was eventually slapped down from within the military. The unity and coordination of the Corps Commanders is truly impressive and the institution must not be underestimated. This is not the army of a banana republic, this is a hugely sophisticated operation run by men who have honed the politics they play to a fine art as well.

In your book, you say that no foreign policy for Pakistan is more central than the relationship with India. Yet, we now have seen a decade without any sort of substantive dialogue between India and Pakistan. Is there any pressure inside Pakistan to change that, to try to accommodate India's concerns on terrorism, for example?

Yes, it is unprecedented that there have been no talks for a decade, and I must say I am pessimistic that that will change. I think both India and Pakistan are in a difficult position over talks. The past experience of talks, the rebuffs, the impact of local politics and elections... and frankly no one has come up with a way to break this deadlock. Many ask about third

party mediation, especially over Kashmir. But Kashmir is not just a territorial dispute, Kashmir is very fundamentally tied to the self-image, the identities of India and Pakistan. India sees retaining Kashmir as vital to its secular credentials. Whatever Narendra Modi and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh maintain, India's secular Constitution aspires to be the law for everyone: Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, etc. In Pakistan, its claim to be built as a nation representing Muslim India is compromised by not having Kashmir, and it is seen as the unfinished business of Partition. Jinnah didn't give Kashmir much attention until it was too late because he expected it would fall into Pakistan's lap. He was more interested in the borders of Punjab and Bengal, and dealing with the internal tensions in Sindh and Pashtun areas. All of this is to say that even if a third party were to get involved, it would go nowhere. At the government level, I think it is a hopeless situation. But I was interested by a piece I read here that advocated allowing visas to Pakistanis to visit India. India can then create a lobby in Pakistan that would counter the hypernationalism narrative borne out of ignorance of India. And vice-versa. If they can relax visa regimes, we might see some change, but at the level of the two states, I can't see any shift. If a decade has gone without talks, who can tell if another decade won't also pass the same way. There is also the issue of Afghanistan, where Pakistan will not budge. The truth is, regardless of Trump's threats, or Russia and China's interventions, the source of the problem in Afghanistan is the conflict between India and Pakistan. Everything else is a sideshow.

Is there a way of handling Pakistan on the issue of terrorism? The world, including India, appears to have tried every tack, from incentives to threats and financial pressure, but with little success. How does one "make sense of Pakistan" on this issue?

There is no one single formula. Many like to refer to Pakistan as a "security state", one dominated by the military. But I choose to describe it as an "insecurity state", one that is profoundly unsure and uncertain of itself. We know what we stand against, that is India. But what we stand for remains obscure and is a subject of contestation. That is extraordinary. The phrase "nationalism without nation" encapsulates this negative identity Pakistan has, of the opposite to India. We were led to believe that Islam would be the cohesive force, but as we have seen, religion is the source of division in Pakistan.

As far as terror groups are concerned, look at one example. Both the U.S. and other countries like China have said they won't help Pakistan with its debt repayment crisis. But that means Imran Khan had to go and speak to Saudi Arabia. Now, Ahl-e-Hadith groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad receive support from Saudi Arabia. And it was noticed that the ban on them was lifted just about the same time it promised the government a bailout. So in these circumstances, one has to consider the benefit of taking a hard line and dropping out of Pakistan. On Pakistan, therefore, you need joined-up and united thinking in the world than on any other problem, and unfortunately joined-up thinking is in short supply at present.

election, including the most recent one this year?

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ties radicalising their discourse.

Is Pakistan's creation the heart of the problem? That a state built on religion alone, and I think Pakistan and Israel are always used as examples of that, is structurally problematic?

Structural constraints are one part of it, but culture, which is much more difficult to analyse, is a bigger part. You could argue that Pakistan's civil-military tension stems from the fact that it was a small country next to a powerful, hostile neighbour. The perceived threat from India gave Pakistan's military an importance it may not have enjoyed otherwise. You

might say that that was the case in Israel as well, but it didn't go the same way because Israel's political classes at the beginning, like David Ben-Gurion, etc, subscribed to a secularism that set a different foundation for that country, one that understood that civilian supremacy was paramount in a way that didn't happen in Pakistan. The military took power much too early in Pakistan's history for democracy to have the same effect, and became not just a political player but one that was able to use politics to increase its economic reach and become a corporate entity with significant assets as well.

Even so, unlike perhaps in other military regimes, the Pakistani military appears to have also had a tradition of institutional stability, and each Army Chief, regardless of how powerful he seems at the helm, eventually hands over to the next one. How do you explain that? So General

SINGLE FILE

Beyond ideology?

Making sense of fast-changing political developments in the run-up to the general election

SATYA NAAGESH AYYAGARY



Ideology may be dead in the Indian political landscape, except in some cranies of the Left parties. Fast-changing developments, where alliances are being forged to take on a bigger adversary, are without any long-term allegiances. These have produced a sense of déjà vu. Bitter enemies until yesterday are turning into friends, prompting wordsmiths to apply words like frenemies. Most recently, the source of déjà vu has been the decision of Telugu Desam Party (TDP) leader N. Chandrababu Naidu to build bridges with Congress president Rahul Gandhi in a bid to forge an alliance. The Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) chief Sharad Pawar has also been roped in. There is now an 'all are welcome' rush to rope in anybody and everybody who is anti-Bharatiya Janata Party. It is only a matter of time before other regional parties are wooed and brought into a united front, vindicating the proverb from Kautilya's Arthashastra: the enemy of enemy is my friend.

That begs the question: enemies when, and friends when? It is all transient and fluid. And, 'enemies' is an incorrect description. They are not countries at war for territory, where there is one with imperial ambitions and the other trying to protect its turf, in the belief that it rightfully belongs to it. These are political parties of different ideological denominations in the country that want to "serve" the people, for which they seek political power.

On the question of ideology and its relatively rare occurrence in the Indian polity, consider the TDP, whose original raison d'être was reasserting and protecting Telugu pride and anti-Congressism. It was floated as a political party in 1982 and has grown on this very cornerstone. It ruled the undivided Andhra Pradesh (A.P.) for over two decades, and now, post-bifurcation, the residual State. Given the TDP's bitter enmity with the Congress over these decades, Mr. Naidu's alliance-building exercises with Mr. Gandhi, in order to take on the TDP's former friend, the BJP, is erasing the TDP's identity. It is nothing but pure and unadulterated political expediency.

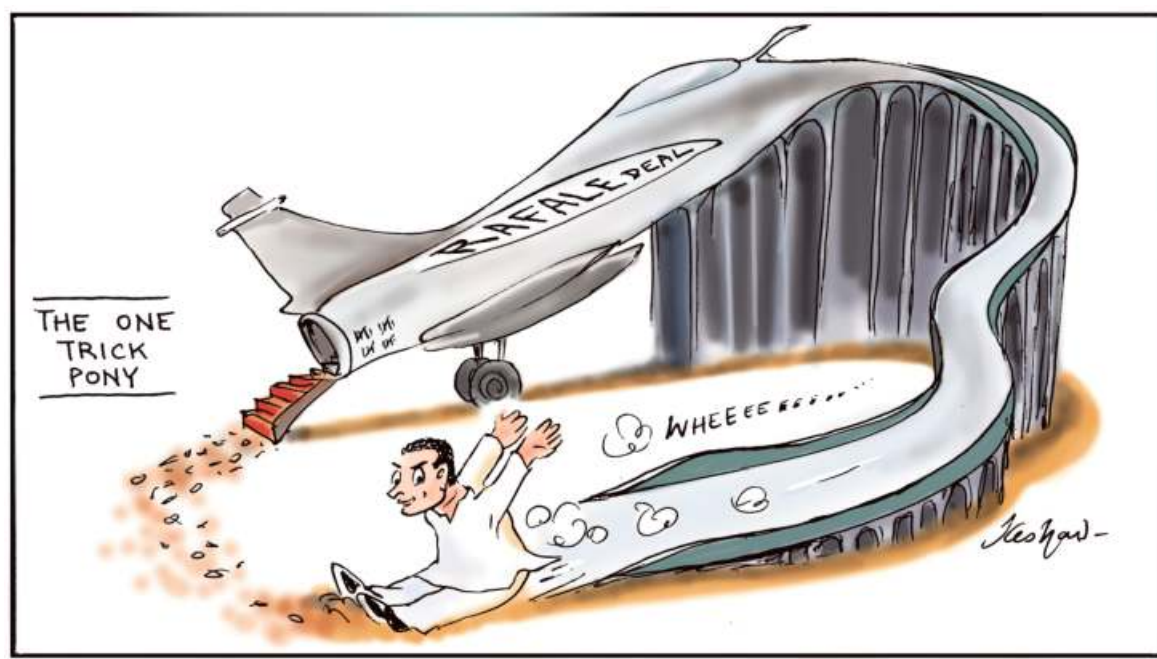
So, Mr. Naidu's recent meetings with Janata Dal (Secular) leader and former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda and DMK leader M.K. Stalin for a repeat of the strategy of 1996 hint at an underlying sense of urgency.

This urgency resonated 30 years ago too. The National Front in 1989, led by the Janata Dal under the overall leadership of TDP founder N.T. Rama Rao, and the United Front in 1996 were cases of ideological insouciance to take on a common adversary.

Meanwhile, the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh are with their Hindutva ideology, but it is strategically kept on hold, except in pockets. The Congress's socialist ideology is passé. Its secular and redistributive justice talk is amorphous with a wide chasm between word and action.

And citizens feel bewildered at these political machinations as they go about trying to decipher who stands for what and where, in this unpredictable political theatre.

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DATA POINT

Code Red on Deepavali

The week during which Deepavali was celebrated saw at least one of the top five polluted days this year, across major cities in India. The PM 2.5 level crossed the World Health Organisation's 24-hour mean limit of 25µg/m³ and the Indian Air Quality Index standard of 60µg/m³. Levels beyond these are a health hazard.

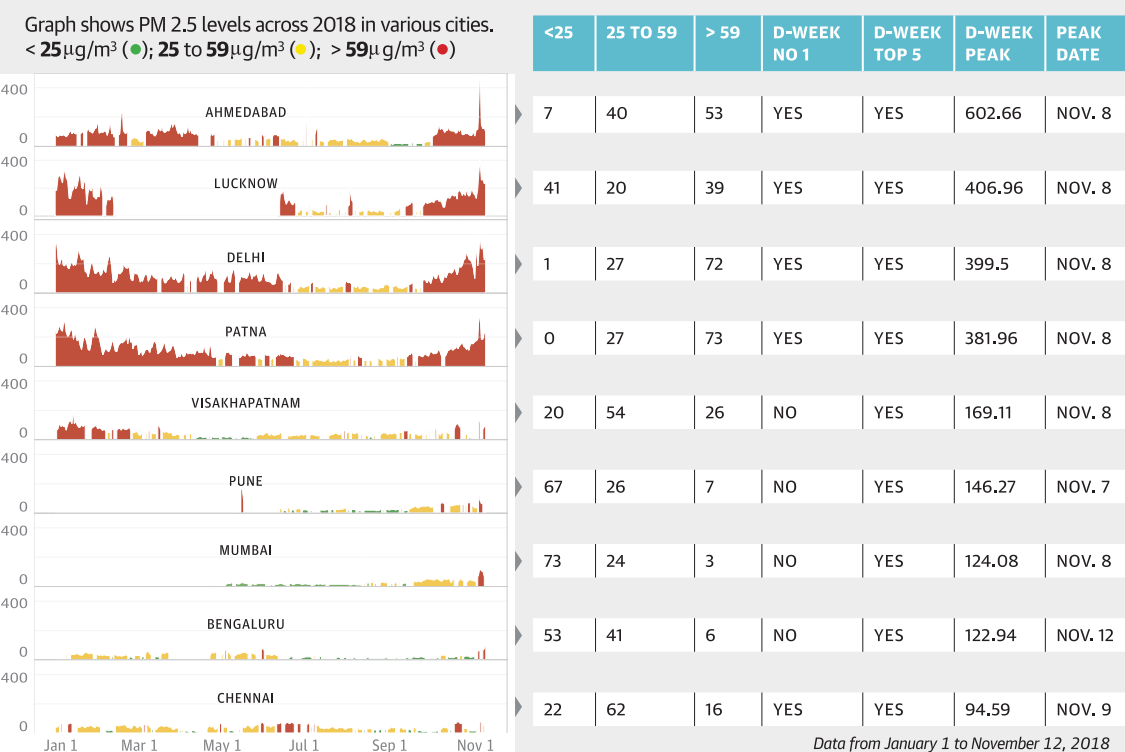
Vignesh Radhakrishnan analyses the PM 2.5 data in select cities

How to read the table

First three columns show % of days in 2018 which crossed a particular limit...

...the next four columns show the data for the week when Deepavali was celebrated

D-week no 1: Whether the day registering the highest PM 2.5 level in 2018 fell in "Deepavali-week"; D-week top 5: Whether one of the top 5 polluted days of 2018 fell in "Deepavali week"; D-week peak: Peak PM 2.5 level during "Deepavali week"; Peak date: When highest PM 2.5 level was recorded



FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 14, 1968

Car with Indian components

A car, completely Indian, for Rs. 6,000 – taxes of course, excluded. Is it just a restless young man's dream or the flash of a genius? None would know, not even Mr. Sanjay Gandhi, the 21-year-old son of the Prime Minister, unless and until he gets going with his project. He has not even given his car a name yet. "Many, of course, have called me a crackpot," the slim young man with a downish beard told me with a smile when I called on him this morning [November 13, New Delhi] at the Prime Minister's residence. Mr. Sanjay's proposal to make the car with completely indigenous material is now with the Union Ministry of Industrial Development along with the 14 other proposals for scrutiny. The shy young man apparently needed a good deal of persuasion to place his proposals before the Ministry. He did it only in the middle of August this year – the Ministry had by that time its shelves full with the proposals from the other parties.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 14, 1918.

How Germany Feels. Blockade Terms.

The Admiralty announces [on November 11 at 11-50 p.m.] an intercepted German Naval wireless message, issued through the medium of the warship 'Strassburg' to all warships, destroyers and submarines in the North Sea and Baltic, quotes the Armistice terms and adds that the blockade which was instituted in defiance of international law against the German people and which is to continue would involve their destruction. The message calls on the fleet to defend the country from the unheard of presumption. It reports that strong English forces are off the Skaw and orders submarines in the Baltic to assemble in Safnitz harbour. [At 7.45 p.m.] a wireless German official message states that Dr. Solf has sent a message to Mr. Lansing saying: "Convinced of the common aims and ideals of democracy, the German Government has addressed itself to the President of United States with the request to re-establish a peace corresponding to the principles Mr. Wilson has always maintained. Its aim is a just solution to all questions in dispute and the permanent reconciliation of all nations. Mr. Wilson declared that he did not wish to make war on the German people nor impede peaceful development." The German Government has received the conditions of Armistice.

CONCEPTUAL Group polarisation

PSYCHOLOGY

Also known as the group polarisation effect, this refers to the tendency among groups to assume positions that are far more extreme than the initial positions of the individual members of the group following a group discussion. Increased interaction between like-minded individuals can cause groups as a whole to assume more extreme positions. Such polarisation, however, may not happen when the group consists of individuals with vastly different view points. A group of liberals, for instance, may assume an extreme liberal position after a discussion. The same may not happen in a group that consists of both liberals and conservatives.

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