

Nation-building and identity

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Yesterday was Pakistan's Independence Day. I offer my belated congratulations.

I came to reflect on issues related to the process of *nation-building*, in general and as related to Pakistan. I shall begin with defining the term, and I will present some historical and present-day information and examples, emphasizing key elements required for nation-building. Pakistan has done a lot in its 66-year history, but can become more in tune with the modern and future looking times.

Often, when we talk about nation-building, we mean state-building and various development efforts, such as building of roads, airports, electricity lines, and other infrastructure, and the building of institutions and organizations, and provision of services, with education and health be key. Although this may belong to sub-activities of nation-building, it is not a correct definition of the term.

Nation-building is the process of defining and developing the *national identity* of a state. It can also mean to develop regional or group identity within the state. The latter is particularly common in young and diverse states which have not yet become a nation-state or have diverse populations.

Former colonies, especially in Africa, do often not have natural borders. They were constructed as overseas territories (colonies and protectorates) by the foreign powers who ruled them, based on their economic, military and administrative interests, not the interests of the people in the lands.

The border between Pakistan and Afghanistan is a 'colonial construction'. The Pashtun 'nation' is divided between the two countries. The majority of the some three million Afghan refugees in Pakistan belong to the Pashtun ethnic group, and many may feel as much at home in Pakistan as in Afghanistan, where there has been war and conflict for more than three decades.

However, the rights of divided ethnic groups can be well observed even if they live in two or more countries if there is close contact and cooperation between the countries.

The Sami people in "Nordkalotten" in the far north of Europe live in four countries, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. They have their own Sami parliament and other institutions, with powers to decide on certain local issues and advise on other issues. The Sami people are proud of their identity and yet they are also patriotic members of the countries they belong to. It should be added that the Sami people's current situation of fairer treatment by the larger states was only reached a few decades ago. Earlier they were often discriminated against.

I believe Pakistan can draw lessons from this 'model-experience' in its nation-building efforts, remembering that there are many differences between and within provinces other areas. A modern state should never only be for the majority group and the big and strong. It should as much be protective of the weak, those who have not yet received fair treatment. *Class differences* hinder the development of the process of nation-building.

In 1947, when Pakistan was created as a separate entity of the Indian Empire, *religion* was the main factor of the new country's identity. Pakistan was to be a 'Muslim homeland', but as many Muslims remained in independent India. Pakistan did not have natural geographical borders, but was made up of two separate territories. When East Pakistan and West Pakistan separated in 1971, Bangladesh's and Pakistan's borders became more natural.

Within current-day Pakistan, there are many distinct sub-groups, with different languages, cultures, traditions, livelihoods, and so on. Islam is the largest religion by far, with the majority being Sunni, but also many Shia. There are sizeable subgroups of Christians and Hindus, and some other smaller religious groups. In the years to come, Islam and other religions must be modernized so as to contribute optimally to the country's sustainable nation-building in a diverse country.

Sadly, India and Pakistan have fought three wars in spite of their short history as independent states. The two countries have many cultural other commonalities.

In the recent weeks, there has been another unfriendly cross-border episode on the Line of Control in Kashmir. I feel that the Pakistani media (and I assume, the India media) blow such episodes out of proportions in a way that is not helpful to developing closer, peaceful cooperation between the two countries, and solving the dispute so that the Kashmiri people can enjoy independences.

I believe that the nation-building process can only be successful if Pakistan finds a realistic place within the sub-continent, and can live in harmony with its big neighbour to the east, and the smaller neighbour to the west; border conflicts and escalated 'wars of words' are harmful.

In most countries, the military plays a role in nation-building. However, in Pakistan, the military has played a far too direct and visible role. In future, this role must be reduced as the state's democratic institutions get strengthened.

Pakistan must define more clearly its identity as a country within the region, but it must not do so in an antagonistic way with India or others. Neighbours are like family; or maybe they can be likened to couples in an arranged marriage; they may not have chosen each others, but they have to live together and make the best out of it. Eventually, they will realize that 'blood is thicker than water' and that, after all, neighbours are good to have.

In 2001, Pakistan was whisked into an unusually close partnership with USA and the West on the *war on terror*. This has caused internal unrest and terrorist activities. It has cost the country dearly. It is a major reason for the economy having taken a serious nosedive; it has worked against the country's integration and nation-building efforts, and it has created negative feelings towards the world's superpower, USA, and also towards Afghanistan. Yesterday, I was glad to hear the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon state, while in Pakistan that he is always against drone attacks.

Recently, but quite unrelated, Pakistan's relations with China have become closer, as is wise, considering China's being one of the world's largest economies, and also being on the rise politically and otherwise. Yet, Pakistan must not 'forget' its other neighbours and friends in the region, with whom it has closer historic ties.

Pakistan should maintain particularly good cooperation with the United Kingdom. In Pakistan's nation-building process, we should admit that there is some 'Britishness' about Pakistan, at least in certain fields and ways, such as the use of the English language. Yet, at the same time, Urdu and more than half a dozen other languages should play a more prominent role.

Pakistan is a country in the world, to state the obvious. But it still has to find most of its values from within its own borders, and be proud of them. We must become more local and more international at the same time. And, we must not be prisoners of the past but shapers of the future, finding new ideals, values and heroes. Like many countries in the West, including my home country Norway which has had a high influx of immigrants in the last two generations, there is a need for greater tolerance and openness to others. That can only be achieved through an inclusive debate. And the debate must include the 'better half' of the population, notably the women. Next time there is a presidential election in Pakistan, there should be some women candidates, and women must be more involved in creating the country's identity, values and policies.

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