

# Home truths

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Pakistan is far from being the country many of us think. Fatima Bhutto dispels a few myths.



Everybody seems to be an expert on the Islamic Republic of Pakistan these days. You can't turn left without running into some pundit or pontificating layperson moaning heartily about Pakistan's future, lording it with their imaginary Pakistan PhDs over all and sundry. Baronesses, David Miliband, the fellow who reads the news - they're all Pakistan wonks now.

It used to be that, upon telling someone you hailed from Pakistan, you'd get a benign smile: "Oh, yes, next to India." Yes, next to India, and Iran and China and Afghanistan. Now, the mere mention of Pakistan elicits a knowing wink. "Where's Osama hiding, then? Ha ha ha." We don't know, he doesn't send out a monthly newsletter. Detroit, I would venture.

But just as no one knows anything certain about Islam in today's "I'm an authority because I saw a documentary once" age, there is no country with more mythology surrounding it than my Pakistan. Here are my three favourites:

## **1. Pakistan was created so fundamentalist Muslims - and no one else - would have a country of their own to call home.**

In his address to the constituent assembly of Pakistan on 11 August 1947, three days before the country's independence was to be celebrated, Muhammad Ali Jinnah called for liberty in the new nation. "You are free. You are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed - that has nothing to do with the business of the state."

Moral of the story? Religious extremists are made, not born. You can thank General Zia ul-Haq, our pro-Islamist president from 1977-88, and his financial backers Mrs Thatcher and Mr Reagan for that. What you have today is not how it's always been. It is said that the indigenous inhabitants of Sindh, one of the four provinces of Pakistan, were the Dravidians. Then came the Aryans. Then the Arabs. And it was with them - pardon the rush through thousands of years of history - that Islam, and Sufi Islam, came to our lands.

Today, the struggle for the soul of Pakistani Islam is being fought between the qawwali- singing, tolerant Sufis and the puritanical Wahhabi Muslim sect, which has been supported for years with funding from orthodox Sunni Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

Who will win? The Sufis, according to Ayeda Naqvi, who teaches Islamic mysticism. "It was Sufis who came and spread the religious message of love and harmony and beauty. There were no swords . . . And you can't separate it from our culture - it's in our music, it's in our folklore, it's in our architecture. We are a Sufi country." And it is worth noting that religious, or Islamist, parties have never prospered on a national level in Pakistan. They peaked in 2002, winning 17 per cent of the seats in the National Assembly after the US invasion of Afghanistan, but dropped back to 1 per cent in 2008.

## **2. Sufis? No, no, no. Pakistan is a nation of madrasa-educated, bearded Taliban enthusiasts.**

In fact, it's not Islamic schools but rampant corruption that's brought the Taliban and their ilk to the forefront. As Jinnah presciently noted in that same early speech, corruption and bribery are a threat that Pakistan must put down with "an iron hand". He called corruption (and nepotism, in case you were wondering) our "great evils". But no one listened. Puppet parliaments, military dictatorships - every single one of them supported by western powers - and corrupt but pliable civilian rulers all but ensured that our young nation's wealth would be spent on those great evils and little else.

Take the last budget, with its total outlay of 2.5 trillion rupees. Of that, Rs32bn were set aside for education, with another Rs22bn towards higher education. That sounds interesting - not too spectacular, but not too shabby either. Until you read on, that is: Rs166bn were earmarked for the construction of dams; federal ministries walked away with Rs262bn for their own costs; and an income support scheme named after the president's late wife, under which poor people line up to receive charity cash payments (photo with president optional) received Rs70bn. Our politicians prefer these projects to spending on health and education, because it is easier to siphon off funds from them. So, is it any wonder that Islamists who turn up and build madrasas and medical camps end up becoming popular? No. But we owe that to corruption, not to their attractive political philosophies or their ability to grow beards.

## **3. Pakistan funds religious terrorists such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda.**

But so does the US, notably Sunni militias in Iraq and once even the Taliban in Afghanistan. Find me a country that doesn't stash its cash in dirty bank accounts and then we'll talk.

Pakistan's problems, like Islam's, are myriad. But CNN doesn't define them for us. They are the problems faced by most people in my country every day - the difficulty of getting access to

drinkable water, the rising price of food, the struggle to secure employment when most people are illiterate, the absence of justice and law and order. But no one wants to be a pretend authority on those subjects when there are US drones to drop bombs on villages and a sexy war on terror to talk up. Let's not forget that diarrhoea still kills many more children than the Taliban do in our nuclear-armed state. That's the crux of 21st-century Pakistan's problems.