

# DAWN

## End of ideology

by Muhammad Amir Rana | April 2, 2023



**THE Islamic Republic of Pakistan is the world's second-largest Muslim-majority state and the self-declared fortress of Islam. It has the world's largest network of religious institutions and seminaries. Yet, it has contributed the least to a growing debate in Muslim societies about reforming the state and society. Political pragmatism is shaping the contours of Muslim states, opening up their societies to radical transformations.**

Muslim states and societies have been facing multiple challenges on their path to geostrategic and geopolitical balancing, democratic reforms, and social and politico-ideological progression. These factors have been pushing the states towards reform. The Gulf states, mainly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are rapidly transforming and gaining a soft image globally. States hesitant to take the path of reform and reluctant to initiate a debate on critical issues are heading deeper into crisis.

One can argue that Pakistan, despite its 40,000 seminaries, 500 public and private religious institutions, and a vast network of religious groups and religious-political parties, has failed to produce minds that can fathom or join in the current debate in Muslim societies. One popular criticism is that the methodology employed in religious institutions hinders modernisation in their physical structures and thinking process. However, this is a deeper issue that needs an in-depth inquiry into the construct of the state and society.

A review of what is happening in the Muslim world and how academic and dogmatic debates are changing the state and society may be of help. For one, in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam and a major economic partner of Muslim countries, Islamic scholars and clerics are debating the reform of Islamic jurisprudence on whether or not apostasy is punishable by death under Islamic law. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has nominated himself as wali al-amr, or Islamic guardian of the state, with the authority to issue the final verdict. Some commentators in the West have compared him to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk for his bold measures in countering the ritualisation of religion.

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Then, Indonesia has been contributing significantly to the development of another discourse on Islamic jurisprudence. Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest civil society movement that is sometimes also called Nahdlatul Ulama, has been advocating for abolishing the concept of caliphate and replacing it with the idea of the nation state. It has also issued a decree or fatwa to erase the concept of kafir or infidel from Islamic jurisprudence and replace it with the idea of citizenship.

It is worth mentioning that Nahdlatul Ulama has initiated a dialogue with the hard-line Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, in which Indian Muslim organisations have also been engaged. Though the process is slow, many have hoped for a dialogue between Muslim groups and the RSS.

The case of the Islamist party Ennahda in Tunisia is often presented as an example of a post-Islamism movement that has brought massive change in political thinking. The party advocates individual freedoms, including women's rights. It has categorically declared that it will oppose any move to impose any particular way of life. The party is playing an important role in the debate on constitutional reforms, and its head, Ghannouchi, has said in an interview that "there shouldn't be any law to try to make people more religious".

These are just a few glimpses of the ongoing debates in Muslim societies which are transforming religious thought. These debates may be heading towards the 'secularisation' of religion, but this process is looked upon as purification from Western influences over Islamic thought, which was started in the 18th century and that gave birth to political Islam movements. Interestingly, Muslim societies, which have initiated a debate on reforming their thoughts, are becoming more religious and practising, but are freeing themselves from the burden of political ideologies.

The three examples presented here show that the state, civil society and a political movement have taken the lead in triggering a debate. It is hard to imagine one initiating such debates in Pakistan;

those who had the courage to do so faced consequences. Constitutionally, Pakistan is an Islamic state, and, according to the Council of Islamic Ideology, most of its laws are compatible with Islamic laws. However, religious parties still demand compliance with Sharia in the country. This is not an issue of their political economy but is deeply rooted in the idea of a ‘caliphate’ state. Many such parties cannot imagine a Muslim society following the model of a nation state, fully or partially.

Can Pakistan’s ulema initiate a dialogue with RSS to ease tensions and gain a greater understanding of the changing dogma in the Hindu religion? Pakistan and Indian Muslim scholars don’t have an extensive relationship, despite their common routes and sources of inspiration. Gradually, religious institutions in both countries became different from each other under their respective political compulsions and state pressures. State institutions have narrowed their ideological views; their insertions have shaped religious nationalism in Pakistan and are now reconstructing nationalism in India.

The changes in the Muslim world are not confined to transforming religious institutions and internal social transformation; they are also reflected in states’ foreign policy. The debate on restoring Iran and Saudi diplomatic ties is still ongoing, and now Saudi Arabia’s cabinet has approved a memorandum awarding Riyadh the status of dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. This is a major development, as the SCO is a political, security and trade alliance that lists China, Russia, India, Pakistan and four Central Asian nations as full members. Countries on the path of reform are diversifying their global engagement options. Countries that are inflexible are not only suffering, they are also gradually becoming parasite states.

The various paths of reform in politics, society, and religion go together; they not only complement each other but also open up space for wider engagement. Ideology hinders such reforms and needs to be replaced with functional pragmatism.

*The writer is a security analyst.*

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