

Islam in South Asia

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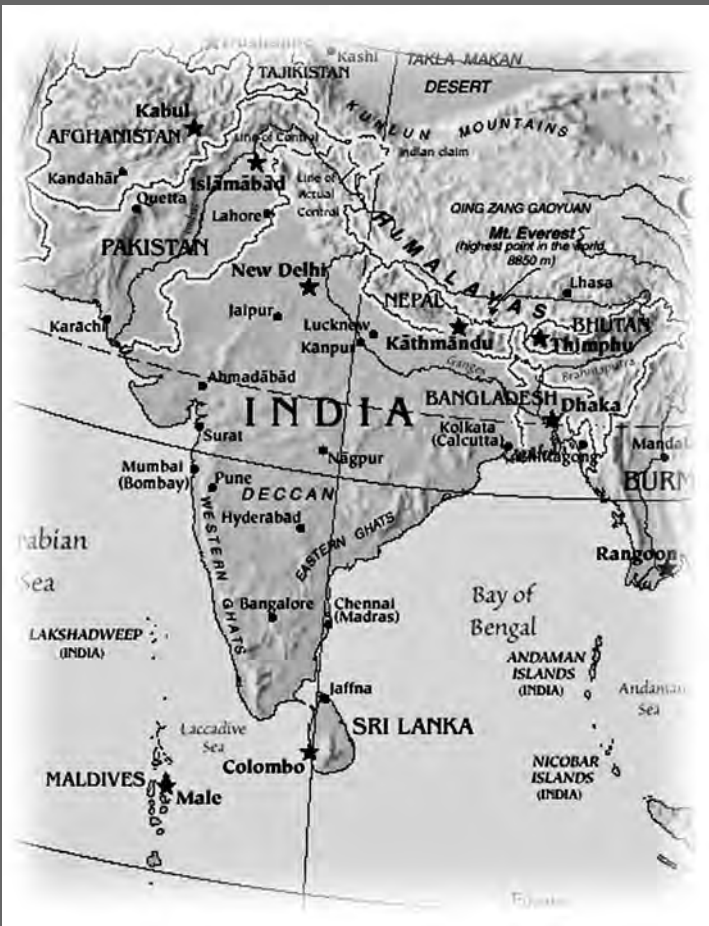


Image: South Asia
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Religious identity is a decisive force in the political and social life of many South Asians. Religion was the basis for the 1947 partitioning of British India into Pakistan and India. Today, the impact of religions, particularly Islam, continues to shape the political geography of South Asia. India and Pakistan have fought several wars to control the Muslim-dominated Kashmir region. Decades-long political conflicts in Afghanistan are centered around the imposition of strict Islamic ideology. This and other conflicts between the followers of Islam and other religions of South Asia, as well as followers of different sects within Islam, have taken the lives of thousands of innocent civilians. The primary objective of this article is to present salient characteristics of contemporary Islam in the countries of South Asia. This will be accomplished by providing an overview of contemporary manifestations of Islam in a number of countries.

From its origins in western Saudi Arabia, Islam spread to vast regions of Asia and Africa in a relatively short period of time. Islam entered Pakistan around the eighth century AD. From there, it spread first eastward into northern India and Bangladesh, then into southern India after AD 1250. Islamic sultans (monarchs), who began to rule portions of the Indus and Ganges Plains during the eleventh century, contributed in spreading Islam to the plain. After the sultans, the Moghuls established a vast empire extending over most of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh in the sixteenth century. Over the next two centuries, Moghul emperors controlled much of the Indian sub-continent, and their rule gave immense institutional status to Islam as a distinct religious faith with accompanying political legitimacy.¹

ISLAM IN THE COUNTRIES OF SOUTH ASIA

The Maldives

All citizens of the Maldives are Sunni Muslims, and citizenship is restricted to followers of this branch of Islam. In 1997, the national Constitution designated Islam as the official state religion. The importance of Islam in the Maldives is further evident in the lack of a secular legal system. This country's legal system is based on the traditional Islamic law code of *sharia* as interpreted to conform to local Maldivian conditions by the president, the attorney general, the Ministry of Home affairs, and the elected legislative Parliament. Non-Muslim foreigners are allowed to practice their religion privately, but the government prohibits non-Muslim clergy and missionaries from proselytizing. A 1968 law prohibits speech considered inimical to Islam.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan, another homogenous country in terms of religion, is divided by ethnic conflicts and competing political ideologies. Of the total population of 27.8 million, eighty-four percent are Sunni Muslims, fifteen percent are Shia Muslims, and other religions make up less than one percent. The distribution of Sunni Muslims is more or less uniform, but Shia Muslims are mainly concentrated near Iran. Among all major ethnic groups, only the Hazara people are Shia Muslims. With ten million or thirty-eight percent of the total population, Pushtuns (also called Pathans or Pashtuns), are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Predominantly Sunni Muslims, they share their ethnic identity with sixteen million Pushtuns, who live across the southeastern border of Afghanistan and are the predominant population of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) in Pakistan. This common identity across the border

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sustains a latent aspiration for a single nation of Pushtuns, a potential threat to the unity of Pakistan.²

Because of hostile geography, ethnic complexity, and the presence of religiously conservative feudal and tribal leadership, it has always been difficult for the people of Afghanistan to exist as one nation under a common legal system. However, this problem notwithstanding, a 1964 Constitution proclaimed that Islam is the "sacred religion." Not surprisingly, this did not prohibit the practice of other religions in Afghanistan. The political instability of the 1970s finally forced the former Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan in 1979. Mujahideen (strugglers), a coalition of Islamic fundamentalist groups, were involved in guerrilla warfare to oust the Soviet forces. Strengthened by rising Islamic-fundamentalist zeal, encouraged by Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, and financed and armed by the United States, the Mujahideen forces were successful in overthrowing the pro-communist government of Afghanistan in 1992.

Responding to the armed conflict, an estimated three million refugees entered Pakistan and two million fled to Iran. In Pakistan refugees were housed in camps, most located near the border. The war, however, continued among Afghan factions, particularly between Mujahideen and the Taliban (seekers of religious knowledge). The Taliban, a Pushtun-dominated ultra-conservative Islamic group, is largely made up of uneducated young refugees. Backed by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, this group seized two-thirds of the country in 1996 and gained total control of Afghanistan in September 2001. The Taliban government immediately imposed a strict code of Islamic law in the regions under its control, prohibiting music, movies, and television on religious grounds, and freedom of religion was severely restricted.

Most severely oppressed by the Taliban rule were women, who were deprived of job and educational opportunities. Girls' schools were closed and women were not allowed on the streets. The former Afghan culture had denied education to ninety-five percent of its women. The Taliban denied it to the remaining five percent. Severe punishment was inflicted on barbers who cut women's hair in the style of Western infidels. The situation has been improving since the Taliban was forced from power in 2002, but the biggest challenge is to modernize the country in ways that do not conflict with Islamic principles.

Pakistan

Pakistan was created in 1947 by partitioning British India to protect the freedom and cultural integrity of Muslims in the subcontinent. This division created two wings of Pakistan: a smaller but more populous East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), and a larger, dominant West Pakistan (now Pakistan). These two wings were separated by nearly a thousand miles of Indian territory. However, within less than a quarter century, the Muslims of East Pakistan engaged in a war of liberation against the Islamic Republic of Pakistan to gain independence in 1971. This made Pakistan more homogeneous because the new nation of Bangladesh contained higher percentages of religious

minorities. Muslims account for ninety-seven percent of Pakistan's total population. The remaining three percent are mostly Christians and Hindus. Of the Muslims, seventy-seven percent belong to the Sunni tradition, the remainder are mostly Shia with a small number of Ahmadiyas.

From the very beginning Pakistan was confronted with a lack of effective leadership. Unfortunately, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the father of the nation, died after thirteen months of independence. Liaquat Ali Khan became his successor and was assassinated in 1951. The country is still struggling not only politically, but also ideologically; Pakistan's struggle to become a modern democratic Islamic republic has been the most difficult of all nations of South Asia. With support from both civilian and military governments, and from conservative religious leaders and landowners, Islamic fundamentalism has been growing in Pakistan. As a consequence, the country's interfaith and intra-faith conflicts pose serious threats for social, political, and economic development.

Although religion has always exerted a powerful influence on the politics and life of Pakistanis, an intense Islamization process began during General Zia's regime in 1977. Zia's consolidation of power in Pakistan coincided with the collapse of the reign of the Shah of Iran, the rise of Saudi Arabia as a power in the Middle East, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. All these events contributed to the rise and even acceleration of extreme Islamic fundamentalism in many Muslim countries, including Pakistan. During Zia's regime, Ahmadiyas were declared non-Muslim and the army was Islamized to its greatest extent.³ The Ahmadiya sect was founded in the late nineteenth century in Pakistan with the professed goal of reviving Islam by stressing non-violence and tolerance.

With generous support from local communities and Saudi-based international Islamic charities, numerous Islamic schools, or madrasas, mushroomed throughout Pakistan during Zia's regime. Madrasas are often considered a breeding ground for religious extremism. The Taliban was born in similar madrasas in Pakistan's NWFP and in Afghan refugee camps, where they promoted a new radical and extremely militant model for "Islamic revolution."

Since the 1980s, the number of violent incidents against Christians, Hindus, Shias, and Ahmadiyas has increased significantly. The imposition of the religiously sanctioned "Hudood" Ordinance and blasphemy laws, which were made more stringent through legislation undertaken during 1980–1991, left Muslims in Pakistan more intolerant towards non-Muslims as well as toward women. These laws have been used to persecute minorities and even Muslims for alleged violations of Islamic law. The UN Commission on Human Rights reminded Pakistan that blasphemy laws over the years have resulted in religious intolerance and violence against Christians, Hindus, and members of the Ahmadiya community. The UN Commission called upon Pakistan to repeal all discriminatory laws and to ratify its unratified human rights treaties.⁴

All political parties in power in Bangladesh since independence seem to use Islam as a political weapon in the interest of their own survival and preservation of dominance. They have used religion to cover up their inability to control lawlessness, improve economic conditions, and to divert public attention away from these problems.

Along with religious minorities and minor sects, development has also become the victim of rising fundamentalism. A World Bank report identified the fertility rate among women to be sixty-five percent higher, infant mortality thirty percent higher, and literacy twenty-five percent lower in Pakistan than the average of the world's poorer nations.⁵ More upsetting is the fact that female literacy is half that of men, reflecting the traditional expectation of female subservience and seclusion in Islamic society. General Zia affirmed this attitude as national policy when making his commitment to Islamization in 1983.

Almost all civil and military government leaders in Pakistan, particularly General Zia and later Nawaz Sharif, found it politically effective to place emphasis on the Islamization of the country in support of their rule. This not only diverted attention from increasing economic instability and other political issues, it also served to contain the potentially volatile force of religious fundamentalism as a threat to stability in the country. Pakistan needs to progress economically, politically, and socially, while remaining genuinely faithful to the teachings of Islam and by not using Islam to attain political objectives.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is the most diversified country—from a religious point of view—among all Muslim-dominated countries of South Asia. Muslims constitute eighty-seven percent of its population, with an overwhelming majority of Sunni Muslims. Small populations of Shia Muslims and Ahmadiyas number less than 100,000 for each faith. With twelve percent of the total population, Hindus are the largest minority in Bangladesh, followed by Buddhists and Christians, who form the remainder of the population. Although constitutionally Bangladesh is a Muslim state and began as such with the partition of India in 1947, until recently the country has been more tolerant of those who follow faiths other than Islam.

Exactly one year after independence, December 16, 1972, Bangladesh accepted a constitution based on four fundamental principles: nationalism, democracy, secularism, and socialism. This restricted all religious parties from being directly involved in national politics. All Islamic parties opposed the war for independence and collaborated with the Pakistan government in 1971. Additionally, the 1972 Constitution prescribed certain measures for implementing secularism, such as no political recognition of any religion by the state, the elimination of exploitation of religion for political ends, and barring discrimination on religious grounds.

The military takeover that occurred on August 15, 1975, and resultant demise of the authoritarian Awami League (AL) government, ushered in a new era of Bangladeshi political and religious history.⁶ The new military government first suspended the Constitution, then amended it, dropping secularism and socialism in 1977, and replacing these principles with “total faith in Allah” and “social justice.” It is often argued that these measures were undertaken to curb

the alarming growth of Islamic fundamentalism.⁷ Ahamed and Nazneen claim that vigorous efforts have been made since 1977 to uphold and propagate the ideals and values of Islam.⁸

In 1988, the Constitution of Bangladesh was amended again to make Islam the state religion. The Islamization process that had begun after the 1975 coup was given legitimacy—initially by dropping two of the four founding principles from the Constitution, and by declaring Islam the state religion. This ideological swing helped strengthen ties with oil-rich Middle Eastern countries that became wealthy overnight following the hike in oil prices in the world market in the early 1970s. Saudi Arabia started channeling large amounts of aid to Islamic organizations, which encouraged the growth and strengthening of pro-Islamic feeling in Bangladesh. With funds donated by the Middle Eastern countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, numerous madrasahs were established throughout the country. It is claimed that religious-based parties and Islamic militants spread their network to the madrasahs, where they recruit cadres.⁹

Similar to madrasahs, the number of mosques in Bangladesh has increased significantly. Both domestic and external aid helped in the construction of new mosques and the extension, repair, and/or beautification of old ones. These mosques have always played an important role in propagation, spread, and establishment of social reforms and services in line with the principles of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* (record of Muhammad's teachings). A number of socio-religious and cultural organizations have been working to promote the Islamization of Bangladeshi society; several of them have found new converts through their network of service delivery systems and welfare projects.

All political parties in power in Bangladesh since independence seem to use Islam as a political weapon in the interest of their own survival and preservation of dominance. They have used religion to cover up their inability to control lawlessness, improve economic conditions, and to divert public attention away from these problems. Even the first AL government was sensitive to the Muslim consciousness of the majority of its citizens.

A careful analysis of recent events suggests that Islamic militancy has been growing in the country, reflected in increased attacks against religious minorities, particularly Hindus; bomb attacks on cultural functions, cinema halls, and mazars; and burning of Hindu temples and Christian churches. Additionally, there is strong pressure from extreme Islamic groups for declaring the Ahmadiyas non-Muslims.

Although Sufis played an important role in the expansion of Islam in Bangladesh, the Islamic radicals believe that worshipping at Sufi shrines amounts to idolatry. Unfortunately, in most cases, the government has failed to bring charges against attacks on the above targets. If the government ignores these attacks and does not take proper action, the long-held tradition of living peacefully with people of other religions while glorifying one's own will be history. At the

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same time, it will undermine what Bangladesh has achieved to date regarding issues such as empowering women and alleviating poverty.

Other South Asian Countries

Muslims are a minority in India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. As indicated, India has more Muslims than three of the four Muslim-dominated countries of South Asia. Muslims constitute twelve percent of the population of India. Slightly over ninety percent of them are Sunni and the rest are Shia. Although Muslims are spread throughout the country, large Muslim populations are found in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala. They are a majority in Jammu and Kashmir, and Muslims of Kashmir have been seeking political independence from India. The militancy of Muslim separatists in Kashmir against Hindu minorities and the Indian military response has accounted for more than 30,000 deaths since 1989.¹⁰ Pakistan's claim of Kashmir and its support of insurgency there have been major issues of contention between India and Pakistan since their independence in 1947.

The constitution of India provides protection of religious freedom and the central government has generally respected these provisions in practice. However, it hasn't always acted effectively to counter societal attacks against religious minorities, including Muslims. Frequently, Hindu-Muslim tensions rise and translate into widespread destruction and bloodshed. Worst among these uprisings was the destruction of a Babri mosque in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992, and the Gujarat violence in February and March, 2002, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were in power in the central government. The BJP, a Hindu nationalist party with links to Hindu extremist groups, strongly supports institutionalization of "Hindutva," the politicized inculcation of Hindu religious and cultural norms to the exclusion of other religious norms.

Approximately seven percent of the population of Sri Lanka is Muslim. Most are Sunni, a small minority is Shia. Muslims live in many other areas, but make up a particularly high percentage of the population in the east. They originally came from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Muslims in the Tamil strongholds along the northeast coast have been victims of terror and ethnic cleansing. There were also some attacks on Muslims in the Sinhalese areas of Sri Lanka in the wake of Taliban destruction of ancient Buddhist statues in Afghanistan. In general, members of the various faiths tend to be tolerant of one another's religious beliefs in Sri Lanka.

Muslims constitute only four percent of the population of Nepal and their presence in Bhutan is negligible. Most Muslims of Nepal belong to the Sunni branch and live in the Terai, the low-lying, southernmost region of the country. After the killing of twelve Nepalese workers in Iraq by forces opposing American intervention, there was Hindu-Muslim tension in October, 2004. Similar tension arose after Kashmiri and Pakistani extremists hijacked an India aircraft in December, 1999. With few incidents, adherents of the country's many religions generally coexist peacefully.

Conclusion

Since the late 1970s, most Muslim-dominated countries of South Asia have attempted to introduce strict Islamic law. In doing so, Islam as a peaceful and tolerant religion has turned intolerant in the minds of many Muslim and non-Muslim citizens in South Asia. Although a truly Islamic state is the guardian and protector of human rights and poses no threat to the non-Muslim, the reality is quite different, particularly in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. This dichotomy has occurred primarily because politicians of these countries exploited the religious zealots to consolidate their power rather than establish the fundamental principles of Islam.

Since Muslims not only live in the Muslim-dominated countries of South Asia, and since non-Muslims in varying proportions live in most Muslim-dominated countries, an oppression of minorities in any country in this region will likely spawn a chain reaction of revenge all over South Asia. This will end one of the admirable historical eras in the region. In this author's opinion, historically, South Asia has been more successful than most, if not all, of the world regions in accommodating people of different religions, cultures, language, and ethnicity. This accommodation has meant not only relatively equal treatment of various groups, but has also traditionally included pluralism, syncretism, and synthesis. This is consistent with an Islamic state, which, according to Iqbal (2003), is an independent, sovereign republic, humanitarian and equalitarian in spirit, and governed by the tenets of the *Qur'an* and sharia.¹¹ ■

NOTES

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5. Norton, 87.
6. S. M. Shamsul Alam, "The Military and the Crisis of Political Hegemony in Bangladesh," *South Asia Bulletin* 10, 2 (1990): 32-41.
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9. J. Ali Manik, "Shrine Blast: Investigators Chase Militant Links," *The Daily Star* 4, 350 (2004): 1.
10. Norton, 54.
11. Iqbal, 54.

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