

Book Review

Raisul Bakhsh Rais, Islam, Ethnicity, Power Politics: Constructing Pakistan's National Identity. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2018, 324 pp. Rs1250, ISBN 978-19-940759-0.

Identity politics is a contested issue in Pakistan. Which identity should be the basis of Pakistan's nation-building has remained a contentious issue. Professor Rais, who has been writing on identity politics for more than a decade, made a comprehensive intervention to the discussion on identity politics in Pakistan in his recent book *Islam, Ethnicity, Power Politics*. He traces the root of contemporary identity conflicts in Pakistan in the power struggles of three dominant groups in the country: nationalists, regionalists, and Islamists. He argues that the conflict escalates because of these groups' singular but often conflicting imagination of Pakistan identity. Nationalists want to construct a central national identity that excludes many ethnic and linguistic identities. This is where regionalists differ from nationalists arguing that without emphasizing regional linguistic and ethnic particularism and accommodating and genuinely respecting them, nationhood cannot survive. Rais seems to agree with regionalists at this point as he argues that nationalists' imposition of Urdu language and culture generated fear and anger in different regional pockets of Pakistan that eventually led ethnic conflicts and the 'separation of East Pakistan' in 1971.

Islamists, on the other hand, intend to construct a national identity posing faith as a unifying actor that, in their words, was the basis of the creation of Pakistan state. Rais criticizes this Islamist position denoting it as an utterly mistaken claim. He argues that Islamists manipulate the claim of a state for Muslims to creating a state based on Islamic identity (ultimately

establishing an Islamic state), on the one hand, and misinterpret the statements of founders of Pakistan, on the other. None of the founders, for Rais, ever remotely associated Pakistan with a theocratic state. He, nonetheless, acknowledges that founders used religious rhetoric to garner support for Pakistan, but that ended with the establishment of Pakistan as a modern nation-state. He is critical to the emergence of Pakistan's dominant Muslim identity but has a distinctive position to conventional wisdom. The historian Ayesha Jalal, Sarah Ansari, David Gilmartin, among others, emphasize that the Muslim identity became dominant in Pakistan because the Muslim ruling elites' lack of experience in government that led their failure to manage the identity construction. Rais, however, claims that the domineering rise of Muslim identity was a conscious making of the first decades of Pakistani leaders who saw Islam and its values, beliefs, attitudes, and practices as a unifying factor of communities. For him, this dominant Muslim identity "fails to recognize, let alone positively consider, ethnic identities, and local cultures and languages" (63). Rais, however, wisely shows the overlapping features among these otherwise seen as irreconcilable groups, nationalists-regionalists-Islamists. He argues that in the question of the use of religion in nation-building, regionalists and nationalists come in consensus against Islamists. At the same time, all three groups unite in the issue of external security threats to Pakistan, especially during the tension against India.

Nevertheless, Rais correctly argues that this different way of imagining Pakistani identity and nationhood is counterproductive. It is not necessary to have a central national Pakistani identity that these groups intend to construct from their vested viewpoints. Rais states that this collective national identity inevitably subjugates and eliminates regional and ethnic cultures and identities. In his words, "identity is shared and pluralistic and is not exclusive to any group" (p. 37). To him, it is shared in the sense that all ethnic and linguistic groups belong to it, recognize it, and productively contribute to its formation. But how to reconcile and produce a

notion in Pakistan's collective psyche that this otherwise seemingly polarized identities are not contradictory and could function in their autonomous spaces? What institutional mechanism should the state initiate? Rais does not have a convincing answer to these concerns. He tacitly mentions in the introduction that reimagining and restructuring Pakistan's federalism-devolution of power to the provinces would contribute to this composite formation of nationhood. He, however, did not elaborate on its strategies and the process of reconciliation of the power struggles and tensions prevalent among nationalists, regionalists, and Islamists.

He rightly indicates the dilemma of the state in Pakistan in solving identity conflicts. The rise of Pakistan as a strong-centralized state with its hegemonic idea of the nation tends to curtail the autonomous status of provinces. In contrast, provincial elites want Pakistan state as a composite political entity that implies securing constituents' inviolable rights, dismantling the central government's cultural and political hegemony, and rearranging political powers in a way that satisfies fundamental concerns of provinces. Rais contends that the state should take the lead to construct a composite identity. His argument, in this case, overlaps with Adeel Khan's that it is the power of the modern Pakistan state that can only shape its composite ethnic identity (*Politics of Identity: Ethnic Nationalism and the State in Pakistan*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Ltd, 2005). Rais's state centrism and apparent faithfulness to liberal institutionalism generate a dilemma. On the one hand, he advocates liberal ideas such as pluralism, equity, tolerance with the belief that they would contribute to the formation of composite identity, and on the other, on several occasions, he maintains that liberal ideas cannot be emulated in the post-colonial Pakistan state. How to engage liberal ideas in the context of Pakistan, then, remains unexplored in his discussions.

The problem of an identity crisis, for Rais, also lies in the centralized nation-building project of Pakistan that was not

organic but imposed from the above, excluding regional ethnic causes and concerns. There was a lack of appropriate institutional architecture and political institutions to accommodate diversity. It gave a sense of fear and discrimination to ethnic groups that contributed to ethnic conflicts in different provinces in Pakistan. The fear is both real and imagined. For example, the Baloch has both real and imagined fear of becoming a minority in its own province, and the Sindh nationalism grew against the fear that the Mojahir population may surpass them and be dominant in the power dynamics of the province. Although Rais mentions that the root of ethnic conflicts lies in the power struggle of regional elites, he did not elaborate on it much. It would be more clarified to readers if he elucidated more on how regional power struggle intertwined with ethnic identity.

This centralized nation-building attempt, Rais argues, facilitated the rise of Muslim culture in Pakistan. Unlike conventional wisdom that mostly accuses of Islamists and military regimes for the making of Muslim culture, for Rais, this happened with a concerted effort of the first-generation political leaders, Islamists, and military regimes. He claims that except for the Bhutto regime, no other political regime tried to revive a national culture accommodating local folk and ethnic cultures of the country. This Muslim culture, thus, remained exclusionary, failed to recognize the particular shape Islam took with the assimilation of Indian civilization. The Muslim culture wanted a revival of Islamic civilization that created a particularistic cultural imagination and gave space to Islamist puritan Islamic culture. Rais is not denouncing Islam and its culture here. He is rightly critical to particularistic Islamic culture while appreciative of a distinctive Indo-Islamic culture that emerged with the intermingling of core Islamic values, local cultures, Indian civilizational features, arts, music, and literary tradition. He contends that while Islam is the foundation and the cornerstone of Pakistani culture, we must not use it “to stomp out or downplay all other cultures and traditions” (p. 135). This vision of Pakistani identity beyond any secularist-

Islamist, nationalist-regionalist binary, and claim for a composite-multiple Pakistani identity is undoubtedly promising.

Apart from the admirable intellectual force, Professor Rais’s book is also penned with excellent clarity—written in an accessible language and structured in an easily approachable way. The introduction offers theoretical underpinnings and a clear roadmap of the book; chapters two to four elucidate the key arguments, and the concluding chapter summarizes the arguments. Some parts of the book are repetitive but not monotonous; rather, it seems to be helpful to the clarity of the arguments. The book neither takes a broad-brush approach nor digresses from the topic; it is entirely dedicated to the exploration of different aspects of identity politics in Pakistan. It will not, perhaps, be an overstatement if claimed that this book should offer considerable satisfaction to a reader wishing to read only a book to have a good sense of the identity politics in Pakistan.

Md Mizanur Rahman

University of California, Santa Cruz, USA.