

Democracy and su

VIEW



ANJUM ALTAH

There really are no single people. There never have been and there never will be. We need a political mechanism to resolve peacefully the differences among various sections of the population. And we need to do so before the differences cross the point where democratic governance would be of little help. A democracy-first approach might save us a lot of grief

JINNAH MADE THREE CATEGORICAL statements pertaining to democracy and governance in texts dated 1940, a speech to the Aligarh on March 6 and a statement in the *Time and London* on March 9.

First, that while Islam subscribes to democracy, it does not advocate a democracy that would allow the majority of non-Muslims to decide the fate of the country. Second, that the concept of democracy is based on the concept of a 'single people' and, therefore, Western democracy was totally unsuited to a heterogeneous country like India. And, third, 'party' government was not suitable for India. India needed a constitution that would enable governments, central and provincial, to represent all sections of the people.

These statements gave rise to three questions. First, what is the kind of democracy advocated by Jinnah? Second, what is meant by the term 'single people' in the context of democracy? And, third, what is the type of governance that can represent all sections of the people in a heterogeneous country?

While these questions emerge out of the statements made by Mr Jinnah, they are relevant in their own right and remain important for our future well-being. The fact that Mr Jinnah might have later changed his mind is not material in this context. On the contrary, a discussion of the reasons that might have caused Mr Jinnah to change his views, if he did, would be of much greater benefit.

The nature of the rights and obligations of minorities living in states with non-Muslim majorities is already an issue in Europe and will continue to be in salience over time with increased migration. The Islamic position on this is little known com-

pared to that of the rights and obligations of non-Muslims in states with Muslim majorities. Is there an Islamic position on this? If so, what is it and what is its practical implication? Only scholars of Islam can answer these questions and I hope they will rise to the challenge.

The claim that democracy is postulated on the existence of a single people bears examination because the notion of a 'single' people is at best an ideal, at worst a myth. It can be argued that the fewer the differences amongst people the easier would be their governance. On the other hand, democracy offers a workable mechanism for reaching compromises in situations where differences do exist. What may be of most importance for us is the realisation that if the absence of a conflict-resolution mechanism like democracy allows the differences to harden beyond a certain point, subsequent introduction of democratic governance would be unable to remedy the situation. There are limits to what we can expect democracy to undo.

Perhaps this is what Mr Jinnah might have meant in 1940 when he said that democracy would be unable to solve the Indian problem, as it existed at that time. The differences between Muslims and Hindus had congealed to the extent that the minority could not trust 'party' governance to prevent its victimisation by the majority.

Relatively few of us were alive in 1940 to be able to make a firsthand judgment on this assertion. But many of us were alive at the time of the subsequent partition of Pakistan and the parallels can certainly be used to understand the limits to democracy and the reasons for such limits. By the late 1960s the differences between Bengalis and non-Bengalis

survival

Democracy
Daily Ti 12/12/04

had almost reached the point where a democratic resolution became an impossibility — the election results confirmed the extreme polarisation. But the important question for us to ask is why the differences aligned themselves along this ethnic dimension and whether it was necessary for them to have reached the point of no return? Why and how did the 'single' people who started their journey together in 1947 come to a stage where they were two nations who could not live together?

One answer is that there are no 'single' people and there are always differences among people along numerous dimensions — class, language, ethnicity, caste, colour, gender and age, among others. Why are some differences allowed to become the cause of irreconcilable differences among people? And, what is the responsibility of the leadership in allowing those differences to reach such a point where the only solution is either extermination of (e.g., ethnic cleansing) or separation from (e.g., secession) the Other.

It is the task of historians to explain why the people of India, who were so strongly attached to caste, language and region, began to see religion as the sole determinant of their identities for a certain period of time. And why they reverted back to their primordial son-of-the-soil identities after that period was over?

And it is the task of political scientists to explain why the so-called single people of Pakistan became so divided while the heterogeneous people of India were able to muddle through reaching workable compromises under democratic governance.

The third question posed in the beginning of

this essay pertained to the nature of the constitution that would allow representation of all people and the answer to that might offer some clues to our conundrums. In order to represent all sections of the people the constitution would need to see all individuals as citizens and nothing more. Any constitution that built into itself discriminations or preferences based on religion, colour, language or sect would not be able to represent all the people equally. A system that led to political parties organising themselves around unchanging loyalty groupings (like religion, sect, ethnicity or language) would similarly undermine the desired constitution.

It might be much easier to have a constitution that was based on treating all individuals as equal citizens than to have one that tried to build in safeguards for all types of minorities. As we have learnt to our cost, there is never an end to new minorities emerging when there is political advantage to be gained from such mobilisation.

There really are no single people. There never have been and there never will be. Only Adam was single before the arrival of Eve (which created the gender divide) and the last person left standing when the carnage is over will be single again. Till such time we need a political mechanism to resolve peacefully the differences that exist among sections of the population. And we need to do so before the differences cross the point where democratic governance would be of little help.

A democracy-first approach might have saved us a lot of grief in the past. A democracy-first approach might save us a lot of grief in the future.

Email: anumaltaf@hotmail.com