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Militarism and Militancy in Kashmir Have Nipped Evolution in the Bud

By Nyla Ali Khan
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Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh has recently claimed that Kashmir will be a changed place within a year.

Subcontinental politics is ridden with mainstream political organizations and, in conflict zones, separatist organizations attempting to outdo one another in taking the moral high ground and adopting righteous attitudes, while obviating the necessity of repairing dysfunctional institutions. The deployment of violence to quell an insurrection has, historically, depoliticized societies and metamorphosed organizations which were created for the protection of borders and trained for land warfare into political stakeholders. I recall a conversation that I had with a politically influential acquaintance about the role of the Indian Army in J & K. I asked rather acerbically how the Army had become a stakeholder in the Kashmir imbroglio, and she hurriedly and just as acerbically replied that, “there are good stakeholders and there are bad stakeholders, and armed forces are, inevitably, stakeholders in an insurgent zone.” I was rather ticked off by that response and wondered how a mediator with such a mindset could be open to diplomacy and peaceful negotiations to further the India-Pakistan peace process.

If the political evolution of a society is nipped in the bud by a puissant military establishment, state policies always fall short of becoming coherent. The more the military establishment makes

incursions into democratic spaces, the more shaky institutions of state remain and the more fragmented the polity becomes. Once a populace begins to question the validity of the choices it exercises in the electoral process because processes of electioneering and institutions of democratic governance lack transparency and are debilitated, the sociopolitical fabric is ripped to pieces. The “sovereign” role played by the GHQ in Pakistan is an example of such a scenario. In civilized societies, political dissent is not curbed and national integrity is not maintained by military interventions. The more military officials get involved in issues of politics, governance, and national interest, the more blurred the line between national interest and hawkish national security becomes. Contrary to what the Indian military establishment is doing in J & K and the Northeast and what the Pakistani military establishment is doing in Balochistan, people must learn to work together across ethnic and ideological divides and insist that everyone be included in democratic decision-making and be given full access to basic social services. It is an egregious mistake and one that has severe ramifications to allow the military of a nation-state to bludgeon its democratic processes.

Belligerent political and military voices at the federal level conveniently forget that the special position accorded to J & K would enable the strengthening of a closer association between the state and India. The Constituent Assembly of India had been careful to take note of the special circumstances for which provisions had been made in J & K. It is interesting to note that while the Praja Parishad, which fought tooth and nail against the special status, constitutionally, granted to J & K and merged with the Bharatiya Jan Sangh in 1963, raised the slogan of *Ek Pradhan, Ek Bidhan, Ek Nishan* in the 1950s, a spokesperson of that organization claimed that they would strive for the replacement of the national flag of India by a *bagwa*-flag. Instead of deterring the growth of democracy, the goal should be to empower the populace of J & K sufficiently to induce satisfaction with the Kashmir constituency’s role within current geopolitical realities such that a dis-empowered populace does not succumb to ministrations of destructive political ideologies. In addition to addressing the political aspect of democracy, it is important to take cognizance of its economic aspect as well. The dominant perception of Kashmir as just an insurgent state within the Indian Union and not as a political unit with legitimate regional aspirations might benefit security hawks but will not do any long term good.

The state of Jammu and Kashmir is so geographically located that it depends for its economic growth on an unhindered flow of trade to both countries. Kashmiri arts and crafts have found flourishing markets in India for decades. At the same time, the rivers and roads of Kashmir stretch into Pakistan. Prior to 1947, Rawalpindi used to be Kashmir’s railhead, and Kashmiri traders would use Karachi as the sea-port for overseas trade. The welfare of the people of the state can be guaranteed by securing the goodwill of the political establishments of both India and Pakistan, and by the display of military discipline and efficiency at the borders. The forte of the armed forces of a country, to the best of my knowledge, is national security, not national interest or foreign policy.

The road to Kabul from India and Pakistan runs through Kashmir. Central and Southern Kashmir shares borders with India, Pakistan, and China. Pakistan-administered Northwest Kashmir shares a border with Afghanistan and China. China administers the Northeast Aksai Chin and Trans-Karakoram tract in the northeast. Various territorial disputes persist. Thus, a crucial step to

winning the peace in Afghanistan is to ensure the empowerment and stability of Kashmir's culture, economy, and democratic institutions.

The purported “statesmanship” of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his cohort has just further deterred the growth of democracy in the state. Instead of empowering the populace of J&K sufficiently and ensuring that a disempowered populace does not succumb to ministrations of destructive political ideologies, the BJP has left no stone unturned to exacerbate the alienation of the people of the state.