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THE CURRENT: How is Pakistan balancing religion and politics in its response to the coronavirus?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host Adrianna Pita.

As the number of coronavirus cases in Pakistan rose in March, it responded like many other countries with regional limits on communal gatherings of varying severity that increased as the number of cases grew. But now with Ramadan just set to begin, authorities have lifted restrictions on gatherings for prayer, allowing mosques to reopen for this holy month. The country's doctors warn that the consequences could be catastrophic. With us to discuss how Pakistan is handling the COVID-19 pandemic is Madiha Afzal, a David M Rubenstein Fellow in Foreign Policy. Madiha, thanks so much for being here today.

AFZAL: Of course, thanks for having me.

PITA: Maybe you can start us off with what is the current state of the current virus outbreak in Pakistan? I understand it's one of the harder-hit countries in South Asia.

AFZAL: Yes, as of this morning, Pakistan has 11,500 coronavirus cases and about 242 deaths. With the population of 220 million, you know, this is the fifth-largest country in the world. It's densely populated, it’s poor; the fears are hard to overstate.

So, about four weeks ago, Pakistan had around 1000 cases. The numbers have risen exponentially in the last four weeks, though not at the same rate as in other countries in the West. So, two things can explain this one. Perhaps the larger explanation is that there's not enough testing. But two, the lockdowns that Pakistan imposed early on, sometime last month, have had some effect, possibly.

Of course, you know, there are many myths that are abounding in Pakistan as well, about the effect of hot weather on the virus, on reducing it spread, and so on. Regardless, two things I think have really characterized Pakistan's response to the coronavirus in the last couple of months. One is sort of this notion of a trade-off between a lockdown and livelihoods, rhetoric that its populist Prime Minister Imran Khan has used from the beginning. It's his own sort of “the cure cannot be worse than the disease” kind of messaging. And there is a growing recognition that this problem is a hard one to deal with in the developing world, with slums, with daily wage earners, and so on. Khan has basically focused his energies on relief for the poor, which burnishes his populist credentials, while the provincial governments have focused on imposing the lockdowns. And we'll get into that, I'm sure.

The second thing that has characterized Pakistan's response is this interplay between religion, politics and the coronavirus. The fact that Pakistan is one of the only Muslim countries where mosques have stayed open throughout the pandemic and that it has recently issued a striking and very worrisome set of these standard operating procedures for mosque congregations during Ramadan, which is set to start tomorrow, there is potentially a powder keg.

Yesterday, the WHO said that, unmitigated, Pakistan's coronavirus infections could reach 200,000 by mid-July. The government's national command and control center, which is sort of this mix of civilian military officials, not enough health experts, but some there as well, says that Pakistan with the current pace of its outbreak has enough ventilators until early June. Notably, just a couple of days ago, Prime Minister Khan and President Trump spoke over the phone and Khan asked for Trump's help in getting more ventilators to Pakistan. And just yesterday, Pakistan has basically said that it's now moving to something called a “smart lockdown.” So, Khan has in recent days, relaxed not just the mosque limits but also opened up the country's construction industry with some social distancing, because traders essentially are threatening to revolt against a continuing lockdown. So, things are starting to open up a little bit. Basically, now what Pakistan is saying is that it's going to be doing the “smart lockdown” with testing, tracing, and quarantine for the entire country, and with full lockdowns only for hotspots. Pakistan's army and intelligence agencies are stepping in to help with this.

PITA: So, Madiha, what is it that happened last week that lead leaders in Pakistan to loosen these restrictions and issue this 20-point list of standards for mosques to be able to operate, to have people gather there?

AFZAL: Yeah, I think it's worth seeing how Pakistan’s federal government has reacted to mosques from the very beginning of this pandemic. And it's, in a way, not at all surprising given Pakistan's history -- and I'm happy to talk about that as well -- but Pakistan's federal government has treaded very lightly on this issue from the very beginning. It kept mosques open, it encouraged people to pray at home, and then one by one the provinces took the lead last month and went ahead and imposed five-person limits on mosque congregations. But enforcement was really limited on this and people started defying orders and started going to mosques.

So, last week the ulema came out, you know, with Ramadan approaching and essentially said, look, this lockdown does not apply to us. And we don't want limits during Ramadan, because more people worship during the month of Ramadan and this is really important. It's really important month for mosques, in terms of donations and revenue. So last Saturday, then, about six days ago, the federal government essentially caved and said look, we're going to let mosque congregations happen during Ramadan, and issued this striking set of 20 standard operating procedures: basically saying there would be hand sanitizers there, people had to wear masks, people couldn't hug or shake hands or talk or have any discussions in the mosques, people would be six feet apart and then no one over 50 would be allowed, no kids would be allowed. All of this people have said is very, very impractical. I mean, just think about how people are going to file into mosques, how they're going to file out. And it's going to be impossible to enforce in a country which has neighborhood mosques all over the country and prayers are going to be held five times a day. Enforcement is essentially going to be impossible. What this really is, is essentially an abdication of responsibility from the Pakistani state. Basically, Khan has said that the people have demanded it, so we came up with this middle ground. And the president of Pakistan, Arif Alvi, said, look, we have to do things in consensus with the ulema. And while this is an easy decision now, as I've said before, I think this is a powder keg.

PITA: Sure. Other Muslim-majority countries have also closed their mosques, they've been able to put in restrictions on communal gatherings for prayer, even, you know, very religiously conservative countries like Saudi Arabia. So, what is it that makes Pakistan different? What are the dynamics that have made this more difficult there than anywhere else?

AFZAL Sure. Interestingly, Imran Khan a couple of days ago said, look, we can't force mosque closures in Pakistan, because it is an independent nation, essentially saying because it's a democracy, we can't force this decision. Perhaps he was drawing a sly contrast there with Saudi Arabia. But essentially, this really reflects this constant struggle in Pakistan's politics, between its religious right, that is, you know, sort of the religious clergy, the Islamists, the mullahs in the mosques, and its government. And this has now played out in this pandemic as well. It's power politics. So, Pakistan's Islamist parties, while they don't win a lot of seats electorally, they exercise enormous pressure on its civilian governments. And actually, even when the military has been empowered, they've exercised enormous pressure. And they do this because of a number of things. One, they have a lot of street power, you know, they're able to bring out a lot of people onto the streets. They're popular, they just don't win direct elections. Two, they have coalition-building powers in Parliament. Three, they've actually historically functioned as a real sort of upset and a spoiler for whatever government is in power. Either they're used by the opposition parties or they're used by the military. So, they're really a politically powerful sort of tool that's been used and they've essentially pressured the government in this case to behave the way the government is behaving right now. Over the decades, they've essentially exercised huge influence on Pakistan's laws, its education system, and now basically that's extending to the health sector, honestly.

I think the one difference with Saudi Arabia, I would say is that, in Saudi Arabia, the state is sort of the arbiter of religious authority, right? It is a manifestation of the religious authority. In Pakistan in many ways, the state, while it is allied with religious parties at many times, it also butts heads with it at times. And then, you know, has to cave into it. And that is really what has happened here.

And I think the one thing I will add is that it's really not about one religion. We have also seen evangelical churches that have kept things open in the U.S. And this sort of is in some ways, that's a reflection of politics playing out. I think it reflects trust of the state, reflects trust of science, and it also reflects sort of the ability to use these muddled narratives that come from the top and make decisions that benefit the religious group themselves and not the population at large.

PITA: You've mentioned the economic concerns against having a stricter lockdown or having a longer economic lockdown. Pakistan did recently implement a massive cash assistance program for those who are out of work because of the pandemic. What does that look like and has it been effective at getting money to the people who most need it?

AFZAL: Khan has really focused his efforts on relief and initially talked about this sort of gimmick that he wanted to use, the Corona Relief Tigers, he called it. It's sort of his youth voter base would hand out relief to the people. Essentially, now he's really focused on using the current Ehsaas program. Ehsaas means empathy. It's basically a cash transfer program, and it's a repurposed program from the previous governments, which had a program called the Benazir Income Support Program. It's just a redefined Benazir Income Support Program. And it basically is a cash transfer program that functions as a social safety net to Pakistan's poor. What he has done is he's giving out 12,000 rupees to needy families through this program, and the number of families that are going to get it is 12 million. So, out of a population of 220 million people, this is 12 million families -- not individuals but families, households that are going to get it. As of yesterday, they said that they've given it to about 6 million families living in

poverty. This is right in Khans populist wheelhouse, you know, he's put in place helplines, he's doing a nationally televised telethons to generate funds for this Ehsaas program. But the important thing to note is that it's not going to reach everyone who deserves it; it's sort of the poorest of the poor. Khan has posted, his government has posted a lot of photos of these distribution sites that are all over the country where people are sitting, you know, socially distant, but they're sitting, waiting to receive the 12,000 rupees. So, certainly I think this is going to benefit and burnish has populist credentials further.

PITA: Reuters is reporting this morning, Friday morning, that Sindh province, which is home to Karachi, Pakistan's second largest city, they are responding to the medical community's concerns and they are going to be banning communal prayer during Ramadan. Is this this gap that you were talking about putting the federal government in Pakistan and the regional governments? Are the provincial governments just better able to make these kinds of unpopular decisions and to convince people why they're necessary? And do you think that now that one province has supported and done this, should we expect others to follow?

AFZAL: Yes, so, doctors in Pakistan have really voiced their concerns that this is going to be a problem. In fact, when someone goes to get tested for coronavirus in Pakistan, doctors are asking if you've visited a mosque. So, this entire pandemic has been an opportunity for provincial governments to take the lead in Pakistan, and this is largely thanks to the 18th amendment of 2010, which is to only 10 years old at this point. And this has happened in a way that provincial governments have not taken a lead in the past. We will see if the other provinces follow on this front, but Sindh has taken the lead on many fronts, imposing lockdowns last month, imposing limits on mosque congregations last month and then reiterating the limits this time around. It is led by an opposition party that has traditionally had more liberal views on religion, the Pakistan People's Party, so that plays a role. Essentially what this allows Imran Khan do is take the easy decision, avoid conflict with the religious right, have his cake and eat it too. With the provinces taking lead, he of course has left room open for this. So, he says that if people go to mosques and don't follow the standard operating procedures and if the virus spreads, we'll have no choice but to close down the mosques. So, he can actually reverse his decision too and say, look, we tried it, but it did not work. That that gives him an easy way out. At this point, though, he's letting the provinces take the lead. My concern is that the provinces will not be that effective because they weren't with the previous lock down. There was definitely people flouted orders and there was a lack of enforcement, and in the absence of a clear narrative from the top, a lack of enforcement will be the problem going forward. But it is better than nothing, and perhaps this is the political compromise that Pakistan in its sort of strange struggle between religion, politics, and this pandemic will have to use going forward.

PITA: Alright. Madiha, thanks very much for explaining this to us today.

AFZAL: My pleasure.