

• **OPINION**

A bomb, a nation, a leader

ZIA MIAN | Jun 01, 1999

<https://www.himalmag.com/a-bomb-a-nation-a-leader/>

Gelling festive about nukes is one way of gelling nationalism going.

On 28 May 1998, the government of Pakistan followed that of India's and tested nuclear devices. While everyone else worried about the prospect of nuclear war in South Asia, Eqbal Ahmad predicted that Pakistan's nuclear tests would have an even more profound impact on its domestic politics than on its defence or foreign policies. As on so many other occasions, the late thinker was proved right.

In early May, the government ordered 10 days of national celebrations to mark the first anniversary of Pakistan's newfound "self-reliance" and "impregnable defence". The festivities offer a window into the minds of those heading the world's newest nuclear weapon state and warn of a dangerous future for the country.

The numerous events organised and sponsored by the state made it clear that at one level the celebrations were designed to deepen and broaden support across the country for the government and for nuclear weapons. The events announced were to include "a competition of ten best milli (nationalistic) songs, seminars, fairs, festive public gatherings, candle processions, sports competitions, bicycle races, flag hoisting ceremonies, etc." Thanksgiving prayers and special programmes for children and debates among school children were also arranged. Appropriate programmes were aired on national television and radio networks as well as local radio in the regional languages.

To make sure that no one missed out on what was being celebrated, cities and towns were decorated with banners and giant posters carrying pictures of Pakistan's nuclear weapons scientists and that of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif against a backdrop of mushroom clouds. The weapons themselves were not absent. Replicas of Pakistan's recently tested nuclear missiles and a giantscale model of the nuclear test site at Chaghai in Balochistan were put up. Even markets and crossroads were named after nuclear weapons scientists.

There has probably never been an occasion like this before. It is nothing less than glorifying the capacity to commit mass murder and, as such, is fundamentally immoral. Weapons are tools of violence and fear; and nuclear weapons the ultimate in such tools. All decent people detest them. No one should glory in their existence, let alone their possession.

Thrice-born Pakistan

But there is more here than glory. A state is using all its authority and institutional resources to build pride in having nuclear weapons into the very national identity of a people. Pakistanis are meant to rejoice and delight and think of themselves as citizens of "Nuclear-Pakistan" -a term used by the state media. To the extent the state succeeds at its efforts in creating a nuclearised nationalism, Pakistan, henceforth, shall be a country whose identity is based not just like others on a sense of a shared place, or history, language, culture, or even religion. Its identity shall be inextricably linked to a technology of mass destruction. For some, this has already happened, as Information Minister Mushahid Hussain proudly puts it: "Chaghai has become a symbol of Pakistan's identity all over the world."

It is worth considering how having imagined itself to be a nuclear nation, Pakistan will ever deal with nuclear disarmament. For nuclear hawks such as Mushahid Hussain, who have orchestrated the celebrations, that day is never to be allowed to dawn. Whenever the question of disarmament is raised, they will point to the public

support for the nuclear weapons they have worked so hard to manufacture and say: "How can we? Our people will not permit it. They want nuclear weapons." With this they are trying to close permanently the door to real peace. Far better in their view, an endless nuclear-armed confrontation with India, that in turn gives cause for demands for high military spending and excuses state failure and government excesses in other areas.

Revelling in the success of last year's nuclear tests was also meant to overcome the growing sense of fundamental political and social crisis gripping the country. The whole affair certainly had the feel of a circus, albeit a nuclear circus. It offered a national distraction, a brief respite from the grinding daily experience of failure that consumes the time, energy and resources of the people of the country. There is hardly any point in recounting either the specific failures or the crises that have created them. They are all so well-known.

The sense that in the glitter and the noise people were meant to forget that there have been 50 years of abject failure when it comes to the state providing them with social justice or basic needs is sharpened by the declaration that 28 May is the most important date since Independence. It suggests a search for a new beginning; the rebirth of a nation.

This third birth of Pakistan, after 1947 and 1971, is no more auspicious than the first two. Each birth has been violent and produced violence. The first, out of the horrors of Partition, failed to produce a viable constitution and led to military dictatorship and twice to war. The second birth, out of the slaughter in Bangladesh, failed to produce democracy and led to more dictatorship, and the sectarian demons who now haunt the land. The third life, a Pakistan born out of nuclear explosions, carries the threat of terminal violence.

Nuclearly virile

It is worth delving a little deeper into what the nuclear circus was meant to conceal. It was meant to be an affirmation of strength, pride and “virility” — at least that is what Pakistani President Rafiq Tarar called it. What this tries to conceal, if not erase altogether, is that events after last year’s nuclear tests provided clear evidence of the weakness of this country.

The sanctions that were imposed by the international community after the tests were lifted not because the world was awed by Pakistan’s new nuclear might, but because they took a really good look at it and were horrified by its obvious fragility. Sanctions were lifted because otherwise the country would have fallen apart and nobody wanted to see that happen, particularly now that nuclear weapons were involved. It was an act aimed to protect Pakistan from itself—or more accurately, to try to protect its people from the criminal stupidity and recklessness of its leaders.

It is easy to see how having to accept this realisation of weakness would have created a crisis among those who were responsible for taking the decision to test. On the one hand, they tested nuclear weapons and thought of themselves as being strong and having broken the “begging bowl”. On the other, the world offered them pity and charity, because otherwise the country would collapse. And thus the nuclear circus as a way of ridding their minds of these fears and memories. The louder and brighter the circus, the deeper the anxiety about being weak could be pushed. No wonder then that government press releases insisted the nation was united “to pay tribute to the courage, statesmanship and maturity of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif”. A bomb, a nation, a leader