

Here's a Doom and Gloom Scenario for America

By: Ayesha Ijaz Khan

Ever wondered why certain hyper-excited television anchors can't get enough of talking about the balkanization of Pakistan? They invite self-styled experts and quote State Department memos on how the fragmentation of Pakistan is imminent. In reality, this is no more possible than a break up of the good old USA itself. Ever since the Americans invaded Iraq, we have been hearing about the carving out of three federations, based on religious and ethnic differences, out of Iraq. Yet this has still not materialized.

It is not so easy to cut up an existing country, even if its institutions are on the brink and foreign interference rampant. The nation-state system has been in play for a while now and in spite of ethnic, religious and economic differences, most countries have developed enough of a national character and semblance so that disintegration of current boundaries is not so readily possible.

On the other hand, no country, big or small, rich or poor, is free of divisions. Where there are people, there will be divisions. Let's take America, for example. It is a sharply divided country. And ironically therefore the upcoming election, offering Americans two vastly different choices for President, inspires not only the most hope but also the most fear. American media self-censors beyond repair. As a result, many scenarios are not openly debated or voiced but brushed under the carpet, to present a false sense of unity.

But the undercurrents of discord run so deep that American media now speaks with two distinct voices. There is the Democrat, MSNBC crowd. And then, there is the Republican, FOX crowd. Neither side believes a word of what the other has to say and in fact engages in constant rebuttals of the other's story. In no other country have I witnessed such relentless refutation of the two sides through media channels dedicated only to this effort.

Perhaps some of this tension can be traced back to the 1860s when the Americans fought a bloody civil war amongst themselves. The southern states, known for their repressive practice of slavery, were displeased with the election of Abraham Lincoln as President in 1860 as he had expressed a desire to contain slavery. Thus they declared their secession from the U.S. and formed the Confederate States of America. The northern states considered this a rebellion and hence a four year war ensued between the Confederacy and the Union causing 620,000 soldiers and an undetermined number of civilians to die. At the end of the civil war, however, slavery was eradicated in America and the role of the federal government greatly enhanced.

Although good had triumphed over evil, evil had been far from expunged and has habitually reared its ugly head throughout American history. Slavery had been abolished but blacks continued to suffer from enormous prejudice and bigotry. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, a landmark decision in 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled that separate educational facilities for blacks and whites are inherently unequal and thus ended racial segregation in the American public school system. This ruling literally overturned the Supreme Court's earlier decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, when it was held in 1896 that "separate but equal" racial segregation was constitutional.

The decision in *Brown* led to a re-examination of the infamous Jim Crow laws, which were state and local laws enacted between 1876 and 1965 in the southern states, which mandated *de jure* racial segregation in all public facilities, including public schools, transportation, restaurants and restrooms. A courageous civil rights movement followed in which activists like Rosa Parks (who refused to sit at the back of the bus in the "coloured section") to Martin Luther King, Jr. fought for their rights and eventually managed to enact the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a sweeping legislation that prohibited discrimination of all kinds, based on race, colour, religion or national origin.

Yet the evil side of America repeatedly surfaced in spite of the dedicated fight for justice and equality. A month after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, the bodies of three civil rights workers who had been working to register black voters in Mississippi, were found in an earthen dam. An investigation revealed that they had been arrested by the police on speeding charges, incarcerated for several hours and then passed on to the Klu Klux Klan, who murdered them. Those honourable civil rights workers weren't the

only ones to lose their lives in this struggle. Malcolm X, Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy (both had supported the African Americans in their struggle) and Martin Luther King, Jr. were all assassinated.

And although the law is now equal for all black, brown, yellow and white in America, race tensions continue to run deep and ideological divides are clearly demarcated. I spent three years in a small town called Williamsburg in the south of Virginia as a foreign student and as part of the university's efforts to make us feel at home foreign students were assigned host families. Though we lived on campus, the host family would occasionally invite us for dinner or agree to store our belongings over the summer holiday. My host family, lets call them the Fosters, were God-fearing Christians from a nearby wealthy retirement community enveloped by lush golf courses. The third or fourth time I had dinner with the Fosters, I was shocked to hear Mr. Foster say, "You know, if a black family moved next door, I don't think I would move." Mrs. Foster shook her head in agreement.

The Fosters were obviously proud of how progressive they had become. That they would not move house just because some blacks moved next door. But I was shocked by the statement. And this was the nineties! I realized then for the first time how subtly racism permeates American society. It is not let on right away; and sometimes it takes forever to discover it. It's none of the in your face stuff you find in Pakistan or other developing countries. It's far more sophisticated than that. This is why they are talking about the Bradley effect possibility to Obama's election. Named after Tom Bradley, the African-American candidate who ran for governor of California in 1982 and lost despite being ahead in the polls, the Bradley effect is a proposed explanation for discrepancies between voter opinion polls and outcomes when one candidate is white and the other is not.

On the other hand, some will tell you that more important than the Bradley effect is the "feel good candidate effect". Obama is the feel good candidate: half black, half white, avoids overt discussions centring on race; gives blacks hope and gives whites reason to feel that they aren't so bad after all. He lessens the white man's burden, if you will. And what a burden the white man has! From enslaving Africans, colonizing Asians, and forcibly removing half-caste aboriginals in Australia from their families only so the colour could eventually be obliterated from their blood (a screening of the movie Rabbit Proof Fence will reveal that this heinous practice went on well into the seventies), nothing was too monstrous for the white masters. Yet if Obama wins, maybe they can clear the slate? Pretend nothing happened and move on because they are large-hearted enough to elect a black man to the White House.

In either case, the tension is grave. If Obama wins, there will be those plotting to get rid of him. America is yet to rid itself of that evil. And if McCain wins, there could be serious race riots, much greater than what we saw with Rodney King. Would either scenario be enough to plunge America into another civil war? It's possible but the chances are slim. About as slim as the balkanization of Pakistan.

So the next time one of our television anchors comes across a State Department memo on the division of Pakistan, he should put it exactly where it belongs: in the bin!

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