

Interview - Paulo Casaca

Written by E-International Relations

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Paulo Casaca is founder and Executive Director of SADF, South Asia Democratic Forum. He is also the founder of the international co-operation association ARCHumankind, "Alliance to Renew Co-operation among Humankind", of the "Euro Reform Initiative" and of the consultancy company on sustainable development, Lessmeansmore, Land and Energy Sustainable Systems. He was a fellow of the German Marshall Fund of the US in the first semester of 2010. Mr Casaca was a Member of the European Parliament from 1999 to 2009 where he chaired the delegation for relations with NATO Parliamentary Assembly. He is the author of several books and reports on economics and international politics.

South Asia Democratic Forum has currently two research ongoing programmes, one on democracy the other on regional co-operation. Within this context, which ongoing debate seems more exciting to you?

Within our regional co-operation research programme we are collaborating with the European Regional Science Association and the Institute for South Asian Studies of the Sichuan University in Chengdu (China) on the issue of cooperation within and beyond South Asia.

South Asia is the biggest region in the World concentrating also the biggest global challenges and opportunities. We think it is vital for the progress of the region that the existing Association for Regional Co-operation will be able to go forward, and we think a positive influence by outside partners may enhance this aim.

We are also working on the challenges of terrorism that are bringing together our regions. The issue of terrorism needs a fresh comprehensive political and academic thinking, and we aim at producing major contributions to this end.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) has prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I think the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1978-1979 as well as the crumbling of the Soviet Union changed dramatically some realities in our World whereas reviving some old ghosts from the past.

Whereas my generation perceived religious fanaticism as an odd archaic feature from the past, reality has proved that this ideology resurfaced as the biggest challenger for the progress of humanity and motor for big human disasters.

Communism as an alternative vision of the World had apparently crumbled with the fall of the Berlin Wall but reality also proved this perception to be distorted. Whereas some of the former communist countries became fully fledged democracies, many others either dissolved, under ethnic or religious tensions, or developed into fully autocratic regimes (sometimes new sorts of unconstitutional monarchies).

China, and to a lesser extent some other countries like Vietnam, were able to start a transition made of significant liberalisation of their societies, focussing on the economic sphere, while keeping the grip of the party. Implicitly and partially explicitly China is aiming at following a model like the one of Singapore where major democratic features

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coexist with an autocratic rule by the hegemonic party, nevertheless producing outstanding socio-economic results.

If this vision will be vindicated or if otherwise China will fall back into a fully authoritarian framework or into a standard democracy, this is a daunting question challenging all of us.

These developments in the last few decades prove reality to be far more complex than the one I first imagined when I started my professional life in 1980.

Can you please speak a little about the existing tension between Pakistan's military and political establishments?

Pakistan was dominated by its military structures almost since its foundation. Following the coup of General Zia ul-Haq the military establishment blended with the Islamic fanatic movement in a mix that is sulphurous and difficult to fully understand.

The first democratic elections in the country were held in December 1970. The refusal to accept the democratic results of these elections led to a civil war that ultimately dismembered the country and weakened dramatically and structurally the civil political establishment.

In most of its past the country has been under formal military rule. Even when it has been under a civil government, the military establishment has held the key powers in issues such as foreign affairs. In the last few years this military grip on the country's rule has systematically increased. Through Constitutional amendments the military establishment acquired new judicial powers. It also assumed the leadership of projects such as the economic corridors, whereas tolerating or fomenting civil challenges that curtail the ability of the political establishment to function.

Whenever Pakistan's political establishment has tried to give some positive steps towards peace, the military establishment has immediately responded curtailing it. The most recent example occurred after Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif received India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi visit. The prospective dialogue was immediately followed by major terrorist attacks in India and Afghanistan, which were directly promoted by the Pakistani military establishment with the clear goal of destroying this initiative.

Pakistan's government is currently under severe pressure from religious hard-liners, particularly since the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, a policeman who assassinated Punjab's governor, Salman Taseer in 2011, due to his pursuit of reforming Pakistan's blasphemy laws. What are your thoughts on this and how do you see this issue progressing?

These events show how we need to update our perception of what is going on in the country. Mumtaz Qadri was a Barelvi, which has been perceived as a moderate sect of Islam in opposition to the more fanatic Deobandi sect. He was a member of the same elite police force which is also supposedly safeguarding the country's nuclear arsenal from falling in the hands of religious fanatics.

Religious fanaticism is a pervasive ideology which Pakistan's rulers thought they could use to their benefit but which is clearly out of their full control.

Sectarian rivalry – be it Sunni-Shia, be it Barelvi-Deobandi or any other – translate in a sort of emulation in a fanaticism championship with each sectarian group trying to show it can be more radical than the other.

What are your thoughts on the increasing ferocity of sectarianism in Pakistan?

It is part of the Islamic fundamentalist escalation. It threatens the very survival of the country as well as the peace and stability in the region. The military establishment belief that it can combat the bad fanaticism – the one which it does not control – while still benefiting from the Islamic extremism under its patronage is nothing but an illusion.

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How do you think sectarianism is impacting the country economically and socio-politically?

In a very negative way!

Can you please speak about Jamaat-ur-Ahrar's Easter terrorist attack in Pakistan and its pledge of allegiance to ISIL?

As former Ambassador Husain Haqqani clarified in a recent interview: "They issued a statement saying that 'We agree with ISIS objectives,' but they didn't go so far as to disassociate with al-Qaida and affiliate themselves with ISIS."

The whole issue of the affiliation of different individuals and groups to different fanatic organisations and networks has been very much misunderstood by most of us. It is common for single individuals to work interchangeably with several terror outfits. These outfits also mutate often in unpredictable ways.

Instead of focusing our attention on the most important issues such as the fundamentalist mind-set, the nature of the ideology and its manipulation, we have been often distracted by the profusion of labels and brands.

What are your thoughts on Pakistan's relatively close relationship with Iran as it attempts to balance it with its relationship with Saudi Arabia?

The ideological impact of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in the growth of fanaticism in Pakistan is undeniable, but otherwise the relations of the two countries are complex and they do not always come together.

Iran's Islamic Republic was devised by its main founder Ruhollah Khomeini to be what it is, a pure theocracy; whereas Pakistan was idealised by its main founder Mohammed Ali Jinnah (who had Iranian ancestors) as well as by Ahmadiyya's or Ismaili supporters as a religiously tolerant country, quite differently from what it evolved to be.

Pakistan is a nominal ally of Saudi Arabia but it refused to help militarily the containment of the Ansar Allah surge (a variation to the common name of Iranian outfits, Hezbollah, that the international press has presented as a rebel group called Houthis) which took over most of Yemen and is fighting in Shia regions within the borders of Saudi Arabia. Otherwise, Saudi Arabia announced Pakistan's presence in a multinational Muslim force which could potentially intervene in Syria, a multinational force that otherwise gave no sign of life yet.

Saudi Arabia's relations with Pakistan seem to be more strained than what is assumed; as US diplomatic cables leaked some years ago shown. Saudi Arabia is naturally alarmed by the growth and lack of control of fundamentalist groups in Pakistan as well as the possible collusion of the two Islamic states (Iran and Pakistan).

Whereas Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are both countries with Muslim Sunni majorities, they are evolving in quite different directions. Pakistan and Iran are finding common ground on the Islamic fundamentalist ideology on the one hand, but are clashing on the other hand on the divided sectarian front of this ideology.

Iranian and Pakistani leaders have pledged to enhance bilateral trade, as well as security and energy cooperation. What impact do you think this will have on each country and the region?

Following the JCPA July deal, Iran has produced several of these joint statements with third parties. We shall see if this particular one will materialise in closer relationships between the two countries.

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This interview was conducted by Satgin Hamrah. Satgin is an Editor-at-large with E-IR