

review

the week

the big idea



Zaid Hamid, pictured in Rawalpindi, standing in front of photographs of his own mujahideen past. Katherine Kiviat for The National

Down to Brasstacks

The hardline philosophies of the charismatic TV host Zaid Hamid have permeated the grassroots political life of Pakistan, writes Manan Ahmed

A new narrative is ascendant in Pakistan. It is in the writings of major Urdu-language newspaper columnists, who purport to marshal anecdotal or textual evidence on its behalf. It is on television, where the hosts of religious and political talk shows polish it with slick production values. The basic elements of the story – which has often, and erroneously, been called a conspiracy theory – are simple. Local agents (or terrorists, or soldiers, or Blackwater employees) representing a foreign power (India, or the United States, or Israel) are intent on destroying Pakistan because they fear that it will otherwise emerge as the powerful leader of the Muslim world, just as the country's past leaders had predicted. The ascendant narrative is prophetic and self-pitying, nationalist and martial; it is a way to interpret current events and a call for activism to restore the country's interrupted rise to glory.

The consumers of this narrative represent the largest demographic slice of Pakistan – young, urban men and women under the age of 30. They came of age under a military dictatorship with a war on their borders, and, more recently, almost daily terrorist attacks in their major cities. The twin poles of their civic identity – Pakistan and Islam – are under immense stress. They love Pakistan; they want to take Islam back from the jihadists. But there is no national dialogue, and no vision for the state: no place, in other words, where the young can make sense of their own country. Pakistan is ideologically adrift and headed toward incoherence, unable to articulate its own meaning as either a state or a nation. To the anguished question “Whither Pakistan?” the country's leaders provide no response.

A man named Zaid Hamid, who has perhaps done more than anyone else to promote the new narrative of national victimhood, says that he has a clear answer. We are, he argues, living in the apocalyptic end-times – and Pakistan must emerge as the leader of the last struggle. Clad in his trademark red hat, he is leading rallies on campuses and in auditoriums across the country. His words – and the excited reactions of his audiences – are captured by camera crews, and the footage posted on YouTube and Facebook.

In his ceremonial Urdu, laced with Quranic verses and English idioms, he tells the gathered that they represent a generation hand-picked by God to lead Pakistan. He warns them of the sinister forces arrayed against the blessed nation of Pakistan. He assures them that prophecies predict their victory – all they have to do is mobilise. They have to

leave their seats and take back their country. Only then can they conquer India and Israel. Only then can they rebuke the United States. Only then can they fulfill the dreams of Pakistan's founding fathers. But the first step has already been taken – they came to his rally, they heard his call to action.

Zaid Hamid is the leading voice of this new Pakistani revivalism. His mysterious rise to prominence demonstrates the power of the new televised media – and the new social networks – in Pakistan, even as it provokes questions about his financial and political backers. In 2006, Hamid was a one-man think-tank in Islamabad, issuing defence and security analysis for his own company, Brasstacks. In 2007 the country, led by the Lawyers' Movement, rallied against the military regime of Pervez Musharraf and upended the established order across the nation. After the national elections of 2008, as well as the military operations in the north-west, Hamid emerged as the host of his own programme on the independent channel TV One. Within the year, he became one of the biggest stars of the Pakistani punditocracy – spreading his message in columns and op-eds, on YouTube channels and in solidly produced television documentaries.

Through each new phase in his explosive ascent to the pinnacle of Pakistan's media landscape, Hamid remained a staunchly patriotic booster of the Pakistani military, and a vicious critic of “foreign” meddling in Pakistan's affairs – usually carried out, in his account, by the American CIA or the Indian Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). He promoted a martial understanding of the Pakistani past, resplendent in the glory of jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan. The country's army and air force, he explained, had bravely faced down threats from India, America and Israel – but they were often undermined by their own politicians.

On his television programme, which began in 2008, he turned his attention toward the more distant past, presenting hour-long documentaries on the “great heroes” of the Muslim world, the military commanders who conquered Spain or Sindh or fought the British Empire. Hamid's documentaries have a reverential – almost sacred – tone, highlighting historical documents and stressing the “authenticity” of his re-enactments. Each show ends with a solemn promise that Pakistan could one day regain its pride and fulfil its destiny.

To those unfortunate enough to have lived in General Zia ul Haq's militarised Pakistan, all of this is

eerily familiar, and hence laden with dire portents. In the 1980s the national television channel, PTV, ritually alternated between footage of “captured” Indian agents and serial dramas glorifying the Arab warriors of the Islamic past. Zia ul Haq's Sunnification policies depended entirely on a turn towards the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – from whence came both the ideology of strict sectarianism and the largesse to create madrasas and jihadist training camps. The sordid history of the US proxy war in Afghanistan does not need to be told anew. What remains important is that particularly narrow definitions of history, religious practice and national purpose were hoisted upon millions of young men.

From these millions, General Zia nourished the mujahideen for the battle in Afghanistan, for Kashmir, Bosnia and Palestine. The local and the global injustices were thus intricately intertwined for those young, hungry minds across Pakistan. The chief vehicle of dispensing such narratives was the religious history of Muslims across the world. By combining elements of Pan-Islamism with reactionary Wahhabism and layering the whole lot with a strong sense of victimhood, Zia sought to create a specific psychological profile for the Pakistani Muslim: militant and nationalist above all, angry at perceived injustices against his faith, convinced of a vast conspiratorial “other” against which one must be willing to sacrifice oneself. It was a

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smouldering cauldron from which both funds and personnel could always be extracted. Though these processes slowed down after Zia and though Musharraf made some gestures at changing the national dialogue – via his “Enlightened Moderation” – these are the conservative forces which continue to compel Pakistani middle class.

The genius of Zaid Hamid has been to deftly shift the role of Islam from Zia's strictly performative one to a more flexible mould. His acolytes, who call themselves *lal topis* (red hats), see a pious man who is less interested in their actual religiosity – whether they pray or not, give alms or not, wear hijab or not – and more concerned with their devotion to the idea of a resurgent, “independent” Pakistan. He calls on Islam mostly to play the role of history. He produces sayings from the Prophet Muhammad declaring victory for the Muslim armies against “al Hind” (India) and Jerusalem. He distributes the “prophecies” of Shah Nimatullah, a Sufi poet from the 12th century. Such claims to religiously based “evidence” allow him to sidestep any direct criticisms. There are no such prophecies, of course. The traditions Hamid claims predict the conquest of al Hind are spurious and were collected late in the 10th century in a book of eschatological accounts circulating along the Byzantine frontier of the Abbasid dynasty. The “quatrains” of Shah Nimatullah are another case of popular mythology.

What remains real, and gravely troubling, is that a quiet transformation is occurring in the cultural landscape of Pakistan. Hamid is only at the forefront of a movement that includes others like the hyper-nationalist columnist Ahmed Qureshi, always eager to blame India or Blackwater for each bomb blast; the televangelist Aamir Li-aqat, who provides a treacly veneer of religious learning for the “Foreign Hand” theorists; the reformed rocker Ali Azmat and the fashion designer Maria B, who act as emcees at Hamid's rallies.

Like Glenn Beck, the paranoid American TV sensation, with whom he shares many traits, Hamid is channelling the deep misgivings of the middle class and offering them visions of a glorious future – one whose realisation requires nothing more than blind fidelity to the supposed foundational truths of the nation. For millions of young Pakistanis, it is proving to be a heady brew. But the hangover, when it comes, will be staggering.

Manan Ahmed is a historian of Pakistan at Freie Universität Berlin, and blogs at *Chapati Mystery*.

the tangled web

Starbucks' guns and lattes policy

Of the good reasons to avoid Starbucks – the overpriced, burnt coffee or the crushing of independent competitors – here, in the US, is another: the danger of getting hit by bullets from customers' guns.

The state of Virginia has allowed “open carry” of guns for many years, and reinforced by law since 2004, allowing the carrying or wearing of guns in public other than assault rifles. Individual stores and businesses retain the right to exclude guns from their premises – but Starbucks has decided not to exercise that right. The result is scenes such as this, as reported by the Associated Press:

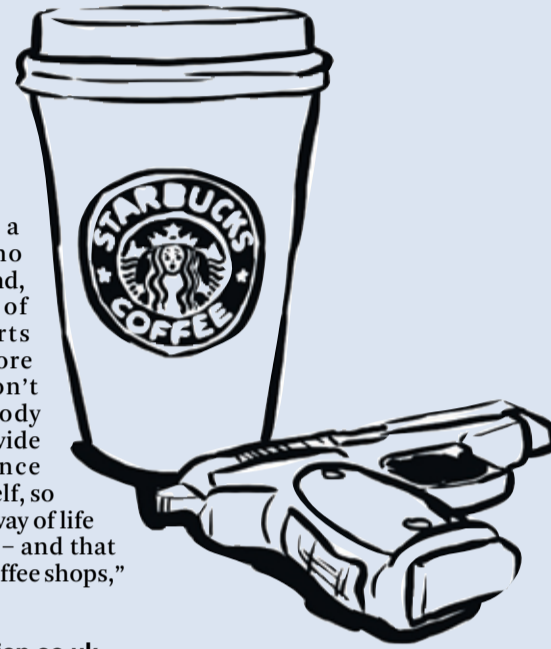
Dale Welch recently walked into a Starbucks in Virginia, handgun strapped to his waist, and ordered a banana Frappuccino with a cinnamon bun. He says the firearm drew a double-take from at least one customer, but not a peep from the baristas.

Gun-rights activists have been targeting Starbucks' branches around the country, holding meetings in which dozens carrying guns turn up and buy lattes. Starbucks itself won't comment, other than making a statement that the company follows state and local laws and has its

own “safety measures” in place in its stores.

Dale Welch, the gun-toting, Frappuccino-buyer above, is a 71-year-old who lives in Richmond, Virginia, one of the safer parts of America more generally. “I don't know of anybody who would provide me with defence other than myself, so I routinely as a way of life carry a weapon – and that extends to my coffee shops,” Welch said.

The Guardian
www.theguardian.co.uk



RI woman charged with tossing hot coffee on Brookline meter maid

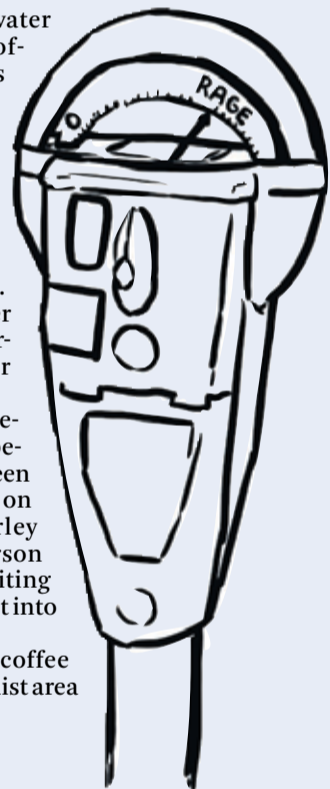
A Rhode Island woman is in hot water after she allegedly threw her coffee onto a meter maid who was ticketing her car in Brookline on Tuesday.

Krystle Charley, 23, of North Smithfield, RI, was arraigned today in Brookline District Court on charges of assault and battery with a dangerous weapon and assault and battery on a public employee. A not-guilty plea was entered on her behalf. Charley was released on personal recognizance and a further hearing was scheduled for April 5.

According to the police report, meter maid Claire MacPherson, 64, began writing a ticket for Charley's green Jeep at around 12.30pm, Tuesday on Washington Street. When Charley approached the vehicle, MacPherson told her that she couldn't stop writing the ticket because she had entered it into a computer system.

Charley then threw a cup of hot coffee onto MacPherson, covering “her waist area and pants,” the report said.

Travis Anderson
The Boston Globe
www.boston.com



Coffee Party wakes up the US radicals

Just when the conservative Tea Party movement appeared to be spreading across the United States, a radically different vision of America has emerged, courtesy of Facebook.

Its title might not be imaginative, but the Coffee Party USA is making waves. In just one month, its Facebook page has more than 50,000 fans; and supporters of this left-of-centre alternative were logging their interest at a rate of a thousand an hour as of Tuesday.

Ms Annabel Park, a documentary filmmaker, started up the Facebook page in response to the growing number of “Tea Party” coalitions, made up largely of Republican voters who have been speaking out against President Barack Obama and the Democratic-controlled Congress.

Now, the Coffee Party is calling for its supporters to “Wake Up and Stand Up”. Its mission statement declares that the federal government is “not the enemy of the people, but the expression of our collective will, and that we must participate in the democratic process”.

The party is planning nationwide coffee houses for March 13, where people can gather to decide which issues they want to take on and even which candidates they want to support.

Like the Tea Party groups, it is using Facebook and Twitter to spread the word and to encourage individuals to form local outposts. Already some 45 Coffee Party chapters in at least 30 states have been set up.

The coffee metaphor helps: “It's unfortunate that Tea is no longer soothing,” posts one supporter on Twitter.

“It now makes me tense.”
Today newspaper of Singapore
www.todayonline.com



Illustrations by Sarah Lazarovic for The National