



**State honour
By
Chris Cork**



In recent years, as honour killings have occurred in western cultures there has begun to be an exploration of the psychology behind them, and herein may lie some clues as to the sense of national honour, the honour of the nation state. Honour killings appear to be linked to a form of 'status anxiety'; the fear of losing status in the eyes of the family and the wider community. There is a pathological sense of insecurity coupled with an incessant pressure on family members to conform to social conventions as encapsulated by the honour codes. The fear is that 'face' will be lost and losing face triggers ostracism by the community. There is also a linkage to the perception of social identity, the need to feel that one 'belongs' in some way and that loss of that sense is socially disabling.

Male domination coupled with a low perception of female status also has a close correlation to the incidence of honour killing. Cultures where females are less valued are more likely to sanction their killing. Cultures with a high incidence of honour killing such as India and Pakistan also have high incidences of female foeticide and infanticide. Currently this is reaching epidemic levels in India and there are anecdotal but increasing reports of a sharp rise of female foeticide in Pakistan as the gender of unborns is increasingly made known to parents.

There is also a clear correlation between cultures that are sexually repressive and honour killing. It appears that the majority of honour killings are the result of and a punishment for a completely natural human instinct – the desire to interact with the opposite gender, to fall in love. The 'crime' may be to fall in love with a member of a different caste or with somebody outside the selection-circle of arranged marriage. Honour killings have their greatest incidence in patriarchal societies that have high levels of sexual repression coupled with a neurotically anathemous set of attitudes towards the human body and human sexuality. Culture overrides instinct, is negatively reinforced as an acceptable indeed desirable normative value, and lives are forfeit.

Humans are not necessarily rational, fair, decent, honest or good. Few are wholly good and equally few are wholly bad. Honour killing is a pathological behavior which has prehistoric origins and is closely linked to a sense of vulnerability, of threat from 'the other' and a need for belonging and status that overrides rational behavior and sanctions a gross aberration. The only way in which cultures can right themselves from this deviant position is by developing a greater sense of stability, losing the intense sense of paranoia that feeds into the 'victimhood' which is ostracism and a mature sense of self both as an individual and as a member of the wider population – the state. Can we 'read across' the psychopathology of honour killing at the individual and family level as outlined above to an understanding of honour in the context of the state? A cautious 'possibly' would be the response of the author.

Firstly there is a disjunction between the honour of the state and the honour of the individual who kills another by reason of honour. The honour of the state is virtually by definition a political expression in the context of international relations, whereas the murder of a relative is intensely personal, a micro-event. It is preposterous to suggest that the honour of Pakistan is so besmirched by America failing to apologise for an incident about which little is clear-cut, and much is disputed even after exhaustive investigation – that it would 'kill' America. It is less preposterous to imagine that the state is so slighted by the failure to apologise that it harbours the instinctive desires and thoughts that go with a wish to kill that which has done the dishonouring – but coupled at a state level with the intense frustration of being unable to follow-through on the culturally desirable option.

At an even more abstract level there is the question of whether the state is itself gendered – a motherland – and if feminine then the state carries the honour of the nation-family which has in this instance been believed besmirched.

Again within the context of familial perception coupled to statehood has Pakistan lost face in the eyes of the wider family of, in this case, Muslim nations? Once again a cautious 'possibly', if only because Pakistan is still far from having a developed sense of a singular identity, has a powerful sense of victimhood stretching back almost to

Partition and is assailed on all sides by ‘the other’ which finds expression in the paranoia of ultranationalism and extremism.

As a Muslim state emerging in the 20th century Pakistan might imagine itself as having a kind of primacy, or at least some seniority, in the family of Muslim nations. To be seen to have been treated not once but many times over decades in a way that is dishonouring by a powerful hegemon, America, adds layer upon layer to the sense of humiliation that eventually accretes to an internalised anger that has no outlet and the state begins to feed on its own frustrations. There is thus a sense of weakness, of an inability to uphold the values of honour and discharge the responsibilities that go with the honour of the state, and that perception again feeds into the internal conflicts of the ‘family’ that is a forever-fractious Pakistan.

Other factors – the profound patriarchy and the sexually repressed nature of Pakistani culture – have little relevance in the paradigm of state dishonour but it is possible to at least get a hazy grasp of how and why Pakistan at the macro, the state level, perceives and feels dishonour. It would be unwise to try and make an exact fit between the factors that underlie honour killing and the honour of the state, but it is apparent that there is at least some congruity. In particular it is the acute experience of being disrespected, of not being valued in a way that is perceived as sincere and most specifically the frustration at not being able to make a response that satisfies cultural imperatives. The sense that the only way of righting the wrong is to kill that which has brought dishonour to your house.

An understanding of the complex psychosocial make-up of the honour construct is an essential part of doing business with Pakistan – or indeed any other state where ‘honour’ is a quality in the ascendant as much as it is on the wane in the west. This is not to say that the west is inherently dishonourable, merely that it has a differential understanding of honour and a set of social and societal values and constructs that are a poor fit towards the east. Honour, like democracy, is not a one-size-fits-all garment, and the honour and dignity of Pakistan when viewed through an analytical prism has indeed been besmirched within the context of a national value-construct. An apology for Salala may ease the unease, but time invested in a closer understanding of how Pakistan experiences itself would yield even greater benefits.

Concluded

The writer is a British social worker settled in Pakistan. Email: [manticore73@ gmail.com](mailto:manticore73@gmail.com).

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