

# DAWN

## [Three Islamic republics](#)

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**AFGHANISTAN, Iran and Pakistan are among the few states that formally identify themselves as Islamic republics or emirates. This article examines the extent to which they have adhered to the Islamic principles of efficiency, equity and social justice and how successfully they have promoted inclusive growth, human welfare and shared prosperity in keeping with Islam's ethical foundations.**

Afghanistan: Afghanistan has undergone political transitions — from monarchy to communist rule, from the mujahideen to Taliban control, then to Western-backed governments, and finally back to the Taliban. Ironically, the regimes claiming to establish an Islamic emirate and enforce Islamic governance have inflicted greater damage on Afghanistan's socioeconomic development than many previous governments. Large-scale migration of educated professionals, managers, academics and entrepreneurs has deprived Afghanistan of the human capital needed to run a modern economy. Equally harmful is the ban on girls' education and restrictions on women's labour participation, entrenching deep inequities and undermining long-term development prospects. Such policies project a distorted image of Islam to the world and reinforce Islamophobic narratives that contradict Islam's stress on knowledge, justice and human dignity.

Afghanistan's per capita income is around \$420, placing it among the world's poorest countries. Poverty and food insecurity are widespread. Gains achieved between 2002 and 2021 in literacy, school enrolment and health indicators have stagnated or been reversed. The literacy rate is only 37 per cent — female literacy is around 27pc. Fertility remains high — nearly five children per woman. The economy depends heavily on imports financed through humanitarian aid and donor support. Although there's better security, this hasn't translated into sustained economic activity or investment. Pakistan was

once Afghanistan's principal trading partner for transit trade and bilateral commerce. However, tensions and border closures have disrupted trade and damaged livelihoods for thousands of Afghans in transport, retail and cross-border business. Safe havens allegedly provided to the TTP despite talks and mediation efforts have weakened Islamic solidarity and regional cooperation.

Iran: The 1979 Revolution overthrew the monarchy and established a revolutionary Islamic state. The subsequent hostage crisis and US-Iran tensions led to extensive sanctions that have persisted for decades. Iran endured an eight-year war with Iraq and more recently military confrontations with both Israel and the US. Despite these pressures, it has shown remarkable resilience in economic and social development. Though all this has imposed hardship on its people, Iran has invested heavily in human capital, scientific research and technological innovation. Adult literacy has risen to around 93pc; youth literacy is nearly universal. The gender gap in basic education has effectively disappeared. Women constitute nearly 60pc of university entrants and dominate enrolment in medical, health and STEM disciplines.

Iran's capabilities in nanotechnology, aerospace, biotechnology, AI and stem cell research are now globally recognised and Iran is among the leading developing states in scientific publications and research output. Sustained investment in research, development and higher education has led to the development of indigenous capabilities in reverse-engineering and manufacturing of advanced industrial and defence technologies. Iran produces far more scientists and PhDs per capita than Pakistan and has a diversified industrial base.

*The experiences of three Islamic republics – Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan – diverge sharply.*

Iran's per capita income has risen from around \$2,500 in 1980 to nearly \$5,000. Poverty has declined, while non-oil sectors account for almost 90pc of GDP. Industry contributes strongly to national income. Iran exports pharmaceuticals, steel, cement and agricultural products. Social indicators have improved considerably. Fertility rates have fallen from over six children per woman in the 1980s to below replacement level, while life expectancy has increased from around 50 to nearly 78 years due to improved healthcare, electrification and access to potable water. Iran's experience shows that a country can build indigenous technological capability and improve human development through sustained investment in education, science and

industrialisation. But inflation, currency depreciation and political restrictions still generate public dissatisfaction and protests.

Pakistan: Despite inheriting a weak economic base in 1947, Pakistan had emerged by 1990 as one of the more successful developing economies, achieving an average annual GDP growth of about 6pc for four decades, significantly outperforming India. Since the 1990s, however, the momentum has weakened; the growth rate has fallen to around 3-4pc, while India's has accelerated to 6-7pc. Pakistan's reversal is due to weak governance, policy inconsistency, institutional decay and an elitist growth model that benefits narrow segments of society. With an economy of some \$400 billion and per capita income near \$1,600, future prospects are uncertain unless reforms are undertaken to promote inclusion and broad-based opportunity. Structural challenges impede progress. Population growth remains high at about 2.5pc, fertility rates are still around 3.5 births per woman, and poverty has risen, affecting nearly 30pc of the people. Pakistan also ranks among countries most vulnerable to climate change, especially in water, food and energy security.

Adult literacy is around 60pc; female literacy is slightly above 50pc. Graduate unemployment is high, reflecting the disconnect between education and labour market needs. Rural-urban, regional and gender disparities continue to widen. Pakistan's HDI ranking has declined, and its position on the Global Gender Gap Index remains among the world's lowest. Without adequate investment in research, higher education and scientific capability, it performs poorly on innovation and technological adoption.

Divergent outcomes: The experiences of the three Islamic republics reveal striking contrasts. Iran, despite sanctions and international isolation, has invested heavily in human development, science and industrial capability, creating a foundation for self-reliance and technological advancement. Its successes in female education and scientific progress contradict the ideological assumptions underlying Taliban policies in Afghanistan. Pakistan's earlier history shows that substantial progress is possible when governance and economic management are sound. Yet a persisting elitist growth structure has prevented it from realising its potential. Afghanistan, meanwhile, has moved into reverse gear. Excessive dependence on foreign aid, suppression of women's education and employment, and economic isolation have undermined efficiency and social justice — the very principles Islam seeks to promote.

Ultimately, an Islamic republic's legitimacy doesn't rest merely on constitutional titles or religious slogans. It must be judged by its ability to

deliver justice, reduce poverty, expand opportunities and ensure dignity and inclusion for all citizens.

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