



## Terrorism, Religious Radicalism and Violence Perspectives from Pakistan

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In Pakistan, the political use of Islam by the state promoted an aggressive competition for official patronage between and within the many variations of Sunni and Shia Islam, between the clerical elites of major sects and sub-sects. The focus on building an ideological state has undoubtedly affected Pakistan negatively in all areas that define a functional modern state. Pakistan's government, its society and the military, are at ideological crossroads.

How do address the questions of terrorism, radicalism and violence? What are the major challenges?

### II MAJOR ISSUES IN ADDRESSING RELIGIOUS RADICALISM AND TERRORISM

The following issues/problems are major issues in addressing the challenges from terrorism, radicalism and violence.

#### Inept Political and Social Approach

There is no permanent social or political approach in place in Pakistan to deal with the root causes of extremism and militancy and to assess how the political vacuum is often filled by extremist ideology.



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People, especially in the North West and Tribal belt in Pakistan, are looking for the 'right solutions' for it is not that they support extremism and militancy; most of the time, they do not have any option. None of what has been offered to the people by their leaders has convinced them that if they do not support extremist/religious groups, their problems would be solved by the state. Speeches alone cannot solve the problem.

#### Fragile Governance: Fear of Repercussions, Fear of Legitimacy

In Pakistan, military governments depended on religious parties for gaining legitimacy from the masses. Unfortunately, the transition to democracy in Pakistan after long periods of military rule brought to power religious parties with a confrontational agenda against the West. Most of these religious groups strengthened their political base by criticizing the west as anti-Islam, responsible for the exploitation in the Muslim world. Successive governments in Pakistan relied on religious groups to ensure their success in the parliament. While the military government got readily available groups to become part of the setup and provide legitimacy, weak political governments were unable to initiate any policy measures against the radicals, for fear of retaliation from them and fear that the religious parties would exploit the situation against them. This led to a policy of turning a blind eye to the issue, which resulted in a massive problem, which the military is presently dealing with through the use of force; while the civilian government took a while to decide if going against the Taliban would be politically safe or would undermine their political legitimacy. On the other hand, the leadership was also apprehensive of the repercussions of military action against the Taliban, fearing direct physical threat from the Taliban.

#### Religious Mobilization: Strong Non-state Actors

There are specific sectarian/majoritarian brands of religious groups espousing, for instance, the Shia-Sunni conflict, Deobandi-Bralevi conflict in Pakistan; the other set of religious extremists comprises those who believe in a grand agenda, the movement or network of the residue of the Afghan war. Way beyond the Shia-Sunni conflict, this group believes in a constant war between the forces of evil (the US and other states of the West and all those who support these

states, including Muslim states friendly to them) and the forces of virtue, i.e. al Qaeda under Osama Bin Laden. The residue of the Afghan Jihad movement leads this group. Pakistan went through many phases in the process where individual motivation transformed into group dynamics resulting in militancy in the society.

Religious mobilization in Pakistan was of course impossible without outside support. Saudi Arabia erected a number of large global charities in the 1960s and 1970s whose original purpose may have been to spread Wahhabi Islam, but which became penetrated by prominent individuals from al-Qaeda's global jihadi network. Thus, we find emergence of strong non-state actors in the body politics of Pakistan challenging the government in Islamabad. According to the 2005 International Crisis Group report, the political disenfranchisement and total neglect of regions like the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in the northwest and the Federally Administered Northern Areas in the northeast have turned these areas into sanctuaries for sectarian and international terrorists or non-state actors and centers of arms and drug trade.

### **International Proxy Wars Still Continuing – Role of US and Saudi Arabia**

With the intensification of regional politics after the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the beginning of the Afghan war in 1980, Pakistan failed to prevent the influence of these forces on its domestic politics. While the Americans were concerned only with winning the war in Afghanistan and defeating the Soviet Union, the Saudis had ideological and sectarian aims. Jihad in Pakistan responded to the financial stimulus of Saudi Arabia, it became mercenary and cannot be regarded as a manifestation of Islam.

It is possible that the jihadi youth believed in the spilling of blood in the name of Islam and martyrdom. The same is true of sectarianism. Madrassas under government patronage were all Sunni religious seminaries that indoctrinated their students with a brand of extremist Islam and thus, laid the foundation for sectarian violence in the country. Gen. Zia needed the support for his decision to involve Pakistan in the war against the Soviet Union; he managed to do it with an army of young Pakistani students from religious seminaries.

The Saudi and Iraqi involvement in effect, imported

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the Iran-Iraq war into Pakistan as the SSP and its allies on one hand and the TJP (Tehrik-e-Jaferia Pakistan, Shi'ite extremist group) and its allies on the other, fought with each other. While Saudi and Iranian involvement slowed down after 9/11, it did not stop completely. The affiliation, both financial and ideological, of Pakistani Deobandi religious parties and madrassas with Saudi Arabia, continues till date.

### **Economic Instability: Unskilled, Unemployed Youth**

The deteriorating economic conditions, unemployment and lack of freedom of expression in society are all pertinent factors responsible for the growing number of radicals, despite the withdrawal of state patronage. As mentioned above, since religious groups have become financially independent and all powerful, the monetary tool that was once controlled by the state and which had made such groups dependent, has now become ineffective as these groups have found other means to sustain themselves. Unless the state comes up with some financial attraction for the young and discontented, they will continue to fill the ranks of the jihadi organizations, independent of the state. Political deprivation is yet another factor. Lack of political infrastructure in the tribal areas paved the way for different religious groups to establish their "emirates". These "emirates" are well-resourced and well-equipped with modern weapons and hence, there is no dearth of people joining them and challenging the state.

### **The India Factor**

According to Vali Nasr, "Indophobia" in Pakistan increased with the ascendancy of the militant Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami under Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi. Nasr further says that the first victims of Indophobia in Pakistan were not Indian nationals, but the Muhajir Urdu speaking immigrants who were accused of dual loyalty to India by the Jamaat and their cohorts, providing them the ammunition needed to justify discrimination and physical attacks on the Muhajirs. This led to the radicalization of the youth in urban areas - a battle of rightist Islamist ideology under Jamat-e-Islami against ethnic mobilization.

Since Pakistan was supporting and pampering the "Mujahedins", radical Islamist leaders advocated violence against India for decades. The Sustainable Development Policy Institute came up with a study on ideologically driven school textbooks. According to the report, since the 1970s, Pakistani school textbooks have systematically inculcated hatred towards India and Hindus. According to this report, the insistence on the ideology of Pakistan has been an essential component of generating hatred against India and the Hindus. For the upholders of the ideology of Pakistan, the existence of Pakistan is defined only in relation to Hindus, and hence, the Hindus have to be painted in as negative a light as possible. Regular state-owned educational institutions have de-emphasized the notions of Pakistan as a nation-state, citizenship of a territory-based state, and religious and cultural pluralism. Instead, the emphasis was on Islamic universalism, militancy, and Islam versus the 'other'.

Grassroots support for the Taliban can be traced back to the re-orientation of Pakistani society towards Islamic orthodoxy and militancy from the days of General Zia-ul Haq's military rule. Deliberate efforts to dissociate Pakistan from its South Asian Indo- Persian civilization and link it with the Arab civilization based on religion, have created a lot of confusion in society.

Pakistani leadership is still confused if India should be considered a partner in the war against terrorism or if it would be possible to develop a joint mechanism with India. "Enemy India" is important to reconfirm Pakistan's status as an independent state. The time now is to deal with real threats along its western border.

## II

### GRASSROOT RELIGIOUS RADICALISM: A MYTH?

Pakistan's decision to become an ally of the US in the war on terror was enough to irritate the "children of Jihad" who were not convinced that Pakistan needed to deal with extremism because it was hurting itself by not paying attention to the menace. Lal Mosque radicalization is not just a black spot in Pakistan's history, but also shows the characteristic of a section of Pakistani society at a micro-level. The unmistakable strain of extremism in this culture is evident within the country. Pakistan has lost over a generation to Islamic orthodoxy and militancy, as aptly stated by Dr. Hasan Askari. By now this generation has reached middle-level positions in the government, security services and private sector. The typical Pakistani mindset developed after the state imposed purification policies that resulted in religious conservatism and militancy finds it hard to accept that once the glorified "Mujahideen" are now threatening the state of Pakistan. Ironically, Taliban violence has been justified by the sympathizers of Jihad as a reaction against US policies in the tribal areas and Afghanistan, and all the terrorist activities as a conspiracy against Pakistan by its enemies.

Thus, a generation and a half has been socialized into religious orthodoxy and militancy, and has internalized the hard-line Islamist discourse on national and international affairs to the exclusion of other perspectives. How far the Islamists can go to achieve their ultimate objective depends on how well they do in retaining and expanding their political power in the unfolding dynamics of Pakistan's internal and geo-political situation. There is thus, the paradox that while many people in Pakistan want religious leaders to play a larger role in politics, and even more believe schools should put more emphasis on Islam, they do not vote for them during elections. The religious parties are nevertheless positioned to maintain their street power as measured by their ability to organize demonstrations.

## III

### POLICY CHALLENGES TO COUNTER TERRORISM

Pakistan at present faces the challenge of reinventing itself both at state level as well as societal level. But more so, it needs to have a top-down approach to reform, and reconstruct the

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conceptual and ideological orientation to undo the official enforcement of Islam of a particular sect. If the society appears indifferent about the nature of religiosity, it is not because people want it the way it is today, but because there is a great deal of confusion and it can only be removed if steps are taken officially to de-radicalize society through education syllabus, media programs and free intellectual discourse on religion and the cultural fabric of Pakistani society. The real clash is not between Islam and the west, as projected, but between the orthodox and the moderates. The key question is how far the new generation will be different from the one lost to orthodoxy and militancy. Pakistan's inability to control radicalization limits its capacity to engage in a sustained struggle to control extremism and terrorism and revive the pluralist and tolerant spirit of Pakistan.

Nonetheless, there are substantial signs that society is now slowly breaking free of the Islamist spell of the Zia era. This trend is likely to take a decade to crystallize. Meanwhile, the government will have to contend with divided societal orientations, polarization on counter-terrorism and the American role in the region.

It is also noteworthy that the orthodoxy of the Islamist political establishment in Pakistan, particularly the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) brand of Wahabi-Deobandi Islam, does not have its roots in Pakistani soil. This brand of Islam is doctrinaire, virulently intolerant of diversity, and obsessed with jihad as opposed to the faith and spirituality of the ordinary people of Pakistan, which is tolerant, devotional and has blended within it the mystical spirituality of the Indus Valley and its languages. This populist tradition was suppressed to establish the supremacy of the orthodox, normative Islam in Pakistan.

The way forward is to realize the fact that given the nature of our geography, the South Asian states need to let go of their trust deficit and devise a comprehensive strategy by identifying the enemy as the one who in the guise of different religions is creating havoc in the region. Separating the enemy as a Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan terrorist will not work. The basic ingredient of the "regional approach" is to look beyond the national boundaries. If we do not recognize this, we will continue to engage in declaring, exposing and trying the "terrorists" in each other's countries just to teach a lesson to the other. The time, resources and energy and media attention wasted on such an exercise will only benefit the terrorists and help them

achieve their objectives.

#### IV RECOMMENDATIONS

Pakistan needs to emphasize the synthesis of culture and religion rather than be influenced by "Arabization" to prove its true Islamic credentials. De-Arabization can help Pakistan be at ease with its immediate South Asian neighbours with whom its relations have been severely affected due to deliberate attempts to associate itself with the Middle East. Interestingly, the more Pakistan tries to associate itself with the Arab world, the more it is reminded of its non-Arab credentials and its South Asian roots.

In the short-term, military action against the militants is a must and the government should continue to stand by the decision it took against the militants in Swat. With a firm resolve to eliminate all those who are challenging the writ of the state, Pakistan will successfully deal with the policy shift that is required for the survival of the state.

Pakistan can only pay attention to its internal problems when its borders are at ease. The western border with Afghanistan is the main battle field and in such a situation tensions along the eastern border will only multiply the problems. India-Pakistan relations, based on trust, will benefit both countries. India will have to be more accommodative of the friendly gestures from Pakistan because an aggressive posture adopted by India will only encourage a hostile environment between the two countries and become a reason for Pakistan to continue maintaining its links with extremists, which in turn will allow the militant enclave to continue operating and recruiting young men from Pakistani society.

Given Pakistan's strategic importance and its potential to disrupt South Asian peace, the international community has high stakes in ensuring a positive turnaround. Investing in youth development and education is the immediate solution to prevent the indoctrination process by the extremists through certain religious seminaries.

The long-term solution to religious extremism and militancy would require massive changes in the fundamental agents of socialization of the polity. While some changes have been made in state education since 2004-05, madrassa education needs to be regulated and courses should be in line with an arrangement of theology as well as modern education, not only in natural sciences, but social sciences as well, which will expose the youth to multiple political and social discourses. Also, modern colleges and universities should have theology as a subject to produce experts in Islamic theology that would help prevent extremist interpretation due to their political or ideological association.

The government of Pakistan and outside nations must work together to support the most vulnerable in society. The "real war" must be the control of

"education and welfare services." At the same time, all moderate Sunni religious leaders must work alongside the government to stop the next generation from being brainwashed by the strict wahabi/salafi doctrine.

Finally, the international community needs to be sensitive to the conservative nature of Pakistani society and their diplomatic jargon needs to be tailored accordingly. The language of western liberalism must not be used to communicate with Pakistanis. For example, by conflating the notions of conservatism and extremism (which carry entirely different connotations for Pakistanis) and dismissing both, the international community inadvertently supports 'secular' ideals in a country where an overwhelming majority interpret it as the equivalent of atheism. This leads to further resentment against the west in particular, which facilitates the acceptance of radicalism in the society.

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