

Militant Religious Extremism in Pakistan: Reasons and Security Threats

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Abstract

This paper studies the reasons and security threats of militant religious extremism in Pakistan. It finds that reasons of militant religious extremism are complex and usually a combination of factors, rather than a single factor. The use of ideology and religion is very common in the politics of Pakistan. The ideological and political factors charted the course of extremism whereas the psychological and social factors expedite it. Many professors, scholars and intellectuals, who were interviewed for that purpose, observed that the main reasons of the phenomenon were political and some others were of the view that politico-religious motives, causes and objectives are connected to each other. Some religious scholars, traders and merchants have the opinion that foreign intervention, like USA, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Indian factor, is responsible. The self-interpretation of the religious teachings by religious elite is radicalized under the

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influence of various militant groups. These groups are putting the severe threats on the internal and external security of the Pakistan.

Key Words: Religious extremism, security threats, power politics

Introduction

This paper aims at presenting the reasons and security threats of militant religious extremism in Pakistan. The methodology of this research is based on mixed method of research. For this research interviews and surveys were to be conducted. Many professors, scholars and intellectuals were interviewed for the purpose. Paper has been divided into number of sub sections exploring the reasons and security threats of militant religious extremism in Pakistan.

Sectarian Environment in the religious Institutions of learning

Environment of sectarianism and fanaticism is prevailing in the religious institutions. There are four major sects in our country.² Every sect has its own separate religious institutions, syllabus and understanding about the historical events of the religion. The preachers are very specific about the teachings of the sect not the universal values of the Islam. They have very narrow and selected interpretation of the *Qur' ānic* Verses, mainly which support their particular school of thought. The misuse of computer and internet is very common in the sectarian religious institutions. The animated videos of hatred and violence provide the solid ground for the religious scholars of the one institution to preach hatred against the other sects. These videos are easily available in YouTube, Facebook and the websites. That has caused many sectarian conflicts and even the killing of

² Syed Akhtar Alī Shah, "The Role of Madrassas (Islamic Seminaries) in the Politics of Pakistan." *Pakistan Journal of Criminology* 3, no. 1 (2011).

many religious scholars.

Political use and misuse of religion

Religion is used and misused in the politics to gain the political objectives and this practice is very common in the country. Religious and political elite never miss the opportunity to exploit the masses in the name of religion. "Politically motivated interpretations of Islam" are made for "opportunistic reasons".³ Sectarian violence, intolerance and militant religious extremism are seen by many as the direct result of indoctrination pursued according to political agendas. For the political reason religious groups have been armed time and again to achieve the political interest. The politicisation of the religion has drastic effects in the society. Religious leaders are involved in instigating and recruiting the common people in the name of 'jihad'. The worst thing is the state's involvement to some extent in instigating people to go for Jihad either in Kashmir or in Afghanistan. When the state supplies arms to the non-state actors, this is the worst way to infuse the seed of militant religious extremism. In FATA region the clergies are still involved and playing a decisive role in the promotion of militant religious extremism. Islamic teachings highlighting the universal principles of Islam are deliberately negated by religious scholars. They only preach the ethnic and violent mystical stories without some solid serious references. Defiantly, this will restrict the freedom of the religion and the universal aspect of the religion and individual liberties also. This aspect of ethnic and sectarian religious scholars restricts the modernity and development in the country. Sometimes they are against to the use of new technology.

³Muhammad 'Azam, "Radicalization in Pakistan: Socio-cultural Realities.

" *Conflict and Peace Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009): 1-17.

There is a general practice to grasp the property or belongings of the minorities by force. The religious groups always threaten the minorities. A large number of religious scholars and religious community is responsible for promoting the culture of militant religious extremism in the state of Pakistan. They preach the selective Islamic teachings to create a certain type of hype against the other sects of the religion. In the process of socialization, religion is frequently used to boost the emotions and sentiments of the people. The leaders of rival sects always try to inculcate the feelings of hatred for other different religious sects. When learning and grooming of people is based on hatred and violence then the environment of militant religious extremism automatically takes momentum and feeling of violence becomes part of the religious community. This is the major cause of violent religious extremism. The radicals see the world in terms of "us" versus "them". There is the enemy even if he shares the same faith. *Liāquat Alī khān, Mahatma Gāndhī, Anwar Sādāt and Banzīr Bhutto* were killed by people of their own nation and faith, who did not share their views. Islam has been used in Pakistan politically and also as a means to create a specific social order.⁴ In the name of Islamization of society and culture, certain cultural and social values, activities and norms have been discouraged or suppressed. Islamization has been a 'national cause' pursued by the state as well as some groups and organizations.⁵ The religious and socio-cultural values,

⁴ White, Joshua T. "Beyond moderation: dynamics of political Islam in Pakistan." *Contemporary South Asia* 20, no. 2 (2012): 179-194.

⁵ Tankel, Stephen. *Storming the world stage: The story of Lashkar-e-Taiba*. Oxford University Press (UK), 2013.

traditions, norms and activities that promoted harmony, peace and love in the society were also beleaguered in the process. The reason why the islamization efforts led to such consequences is best explained by Sabeeha: Islamization presupposes certain operating realities, e.g., the existing [sic] laws, norms, customs and rituals are not functioning in accordance with the *Qur'ānic* prescriptions.⁶ If these are repugnant to Islam, they would need to be corrected in order to bring them in conformity with it. This would necessitate raising and investigating research questions such as "Which of the ingredients of the Pakistani norms, values, rituals and customs are un-Islamic?" Though often raised, this question does not seem to have been investigated so far".⁷

Militant religious extremism has grown in the country in parallel with the islamization process. In 1980's, sectarian conflicts were evolved in a greater number and targeted killings on the sectarian basis were justified by the religious groups. In 1990's these groups had the power to challenge even the writ of the state. By the end of the Zia era, Pakistan had become a cultural wasteland both in social and intellectual terms. Militant religious groups use religion in the recruitment of the people and they give the receipt of Jannah before going to the mission. Hoodbhoy says, "Clerics 'propaganda in mosques and madrassas and indoctrination in public schools as major factors of radicalization in Pakistan".⁸ Most of the

⁶ 'Azam, "Radicalization in Pakistan: Socio-cultural Realities." *Conflict and Peace Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009): 1-17.

⁷ 'Azam, "Radicalization in Pakistan: Socio-cultural Realities." *Conflict and Peace Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009): 1-17.

⁸ <https://newint.org/features/2018/05/01/pervez-hoodbhoy>

people use religion in the public sphere for vested interests. Religious circles support, directly or indirectly, maintenance of unjust socioeconomic structures, social attitude and behaviour.⁹

Militant and terrorist organisations and groups use religion to legitimise their acts of violence. Eric Robert Rudolph, architect of the 1996 Centennial Olympic Park bombing in USA, used the language of the Bible to justify his actions. In UK, the 7/7 bombers also justified their action in religious terms.¹⁰ In Pakistan the sectarian groups and militant organisations also use religion to justify their violence.

Ayesha Jalal in her book *Partisans of Allah* discusses that "although the jihad in Kashmir that had started in 1947—and the Soviet-Afghan war in 1979 made ground for radical and militant groups currently operating in Pakistan, but the impact of the jihad movement initiated by Syed Ahmed Shahīd (1786-1831) in the early 19th century was already there when Pakistan emerged on the map of the world in 1947, as jihadi organization *Tehrīkul Mujāhidīn* was active in parts of the tribal areas at that time. This organization was led by followers of the *Ahl-e-Hadīth* school of thought who traced the organization's origin to Syed Ahmed's movement, which was against Sikh rule in Punjab and aimed to establish an Islamic state according to the principles enunciated by Sheikh Abdul *Wahāb Najdī*, the founder of the Wahābī movement. It had gained remarkable momentum in the region presently

⁹Hakeem Arshad Qureshī, *The 1971 Indo-Pak War: A Soldier's Narrative*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2002.

¹⁰ Stephen Tankel, *Storming the world stage: The story of Lashkar-e-Taiba*. Oxford University Press (UK), 2013.

known as the tribal areas. The straggle later became a movement against the British rule and remained active until Pakistan gained independence in 1947. Bājaur, Khyber and Mohmand tribal agencies were the strongholds of Syed Ahmed's movement at that time".¹¹

Any narrative that militants want to popularize immediately penetrate into this class, examples are dubbing *Malālah* as an American agent, calling Osama Bin Laden's a drama launched by USA , or heronising Mumtāz Qādrī etc. But this is the fact that the state intellectuals and modern religious scholars have failed to give the alternative narrative to counter the militant religious extremism in the country.

The researcher conducted a survey of ninety madrassas across the Punjab and FATA region, over a period of five months. (November 2013 - March 2014) The survey based results by the researcher indicates that almost seventy Madrassas are directly and indirectly affiliated with the sectarian religious parties of the country. The syllabus of forty Madrassas comprises the teachings of *Syed Abū-ul- 'Ālā Mawdūdī*. Ten Madrassas have Jihadi and sectarian syllabus. While collecting the data, the researcher was quite astonished to know that ninety per-cent of the madrassa administration has the strong opinion that participation of the Madrassas students in politics is the religious duty.

Political Reasons

Military has ruled the country almost half of the total years of its inception. The military dictators also need political parties to execute the

¹¹Ayesha Jalal, *The State of martial Rule*. Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1990.

system of government. The undemocratic forces are an essential factor in the promotion of militant religious extremism in the country. Because they need an ideology to prolong their dictatorial rule and the slogan of Islamisation of the country is the best strategy to achieve their goals. The constitution of Pakistan gives equal rights and equal opportunities to all the citizens of the state but the reality is quite different. The poor strata of the society think that they have no political rights in the country. They are like dummies and this sense of political deprivation and exclusion in politics entrenched some individuals and groups to adopt the violent method to get rid of their political deprivation. This asymmetric political culture is a direct cause of militant religious extremism among the deprived people and groups. The tribal areas and Baluchistan are the two examples of that. "Various factors have promoted a political culture of conflict and dissension in Pakistan. As a consequence, our political culture is in a state of flux where violence, intolerance and authoritarianism prevail. Pakistan's political culture essentially believes in buy, cheat or muscle your way into public office and then simply relax".¹²

This disdainful culture makes the space for the non-state actors, including the militant religious groups, to operate the parallel system of governance, service of delivery and speedy justice in some part of the country. The militant groups exploit people's unsatisfied desires to their political gain and get public support and recruit people. The state-led efforts of Islamization, or politics of Islam, have also confused people's

¹² Qureshī, *The 1971 Indo-Pak War: A Soldier's Narrative*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2002.

priorities between Shari'ah and the national Constitution. Religious extremists and radicals, whose political ideology prioritizes Islam and Sharia, hover Pakistan and its Constitution, respectively, have strong appeal for many in the country.

Pakistani politics is the politics of crisis since its inception. The people less believe in their leaders and think that most of our leaders are corrupt. In this situation, no leader has the power to give any counter narrative against the militant ideology. Some leaders feel threatened to talk about any militant religious groups activities. Such a scenario provides fertile ground for militant religious extremism to flourish.

Illiteracy, poverty, oppression, lack of religious knowledge, lack of justice, unavailability of the national leader and political economic inequalities are strong contributing factors towards radicalization and militancy to the country. The state and Pakistani society have miserably failed to address various forms of inequality which have fuelled Alienation and resentment among those on the margins of society. Repeated demands of the people for expeditious justice and widespread complaints about the decay in the judicial system had contributed to the circumstances where the government capitulated to the local Taliban's demand for Nizam-i-Adl Regulation in Swat, amid an armed campaign by the militants. Victims of chronic inequality whether economic, social, political, legal or in any other form eventually start viewing the socio-political, economic and legal systems as flawed and favouring one section of society at the expense of others. It makes them think about revolting against the system, at times in the form of militancy. Peaceful

societies are peaceful largely because they have achieved political, legal and civic equality.

A sense of deprivation, humiliation, political grievances and breakdown of the existing cultural, norms and traditions or ethnic and sectarian political structures are behind the development of the militant religious extremism. In developing countries including Pakistan, militant religious extremism and terrorism are strategic choices by the militants groups and terrorists to correct the perceived grievance or injustice. Militant religious extremism means use of religious force for political ends and is a way to compensate for deprivation, exclusion, Alienation and despair. It improves the status of the militant religious groups. The contributing factors of such a status are power, prestige privilege and honour.

By default, design or misplaced intentions, the ruling political leadership in Pakistan has led the nation on Islamist trajectories. Politics of Islamization has also supported the larger religious discourse that demands enforcement of *Sharī'ah*, which is advocated by militant groups as an ideological tactic to get support for their political goals. With regard to their concern in promoting Islamic nationalism, the first success of the religious circles, including leaders of the Deobandī, Majlis-e-Ahrār, and Khāksārs, came in the form of the 1949 Objectives Resolution, which became an important document in the history of constitution-making in Pakistan and promoted the role of religion in politics in the country. The Objectives Resolution formed the preamble of the national Constitutions framed in 1956, 1962 and 1973. In 1985, military ruler Gen Zīā-ul-Ḥaq made it a substantive part of the

Constitution of 1973 through the Eighth Amendment. The religious circles then openly started asserting that Pakistan was made in the name of Islam and should be governed under the Islamic ideology. The anti-Ahmadī movement of 1953 was another turning point in this regard".¹³

The orthodox religious clergy started campaign against the Gen Ayūb Khān's Muslim personal law reform which culminated in Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (MFLO) in 1961. The MFLO was aimed to regulate some family issues, like inheritance, divorce, registration of marriage, polygamy and minimum age of marriage etc. Orthodox 'Ulamās consider it against the teaching of Quran and Sunnah. This was the time when the Ulamās of East and West Pakistan considered that the ultimate fate of the Pakistan is to establish a true Islamic State. All the three constitutions has had the same preamble based on objective resolution, proclaiming that sovereignty belongs to Allah Almighty and the people of Pakistan exercise it within the limits as Allah prescribed in His Holy Book Quran and His Messenger practice through Sunnah. But there are the huge differences among the orthodox and modern religious communities and groups in the interpretation of the preamble of the constitution.

The Constitution of 1973 contains more Islamic provisions as compared to the previous constitutions of the country. Bhutto himself was very much impressed by socialism and he wanted to implement the Islamic socialism in the country. But the religious forces rejected it and considered it closer to secularism which has no place in the state of Pakistan. Bhutto government was toppled by the religious forces in the

¹³ Hamid Yusuf, *Pakistan in Search of Democracy, 1947-77*. Afrasia Publications, 1980.

name of Islam. "To counter this agitation, Bhutto fell back on such ritualistic aspects of Islam as inviting the Imam (prayer leader) of Ka'abain Makah to lead Friday prayers, enforcing prohibition, and declaring Friday instead of Sunday as the weekly holiday. These measures did not appease the agitators, giving further impetus to the politics of islamization in Pakistan. In July 1977, Bhutto's government was overthrown by General Ziā-ul-Ḥaq in the wake of a rising Islamic movement led by the Jamāt-e-Islāmī and Jamiat Ulamā'-e-Islām, the main politico-religious parties in the country".¹⁴

The politics of agitation between democratic forces and religious groups helped Gen. Zia for military dictatorship and he introduced many religious reforms to islamise the already Islamic state of Pakistan. Gen. Zia ruled the country almost eleven years in the name of Islam and he was the man who misused Islam in his politics in a greater quantity as compared to the other leaders of the country. As a result the society is disintegrated and many religious slogans became the part of politics. Although the use of religion in politics' history is very old but the sectarian element in his full zest came out in politics during the period of Ziā-ul-Ḥaq.

This political shift from modern democratic to theocracy has the numerous effects in the society. The activities of violence increased in manifolds and the process of strict interpretation of the religion as practiced by the particular sect is in full swing in the state of Pakistan. The drastic effect is that all types of violence is going too justified in the name of religion. The political leaders are failed to deliver the good

¹⁴ Yusuf, *Pakistan in Search of Democracy, 1947-77*. Afrasia Publications, 1980.

governance in the country and they conceal their poor governance through the use of religion in politics.

Security threats and Challenges due to militants and sectarian groups

The sectarian and militant groups are posing a serious threat to Pakistan's internal security, particularly at twelve levels.

- I. They are corroding the society.
- II. They are challenging the writ of the state
- III. They are imposing a threat to the national security of the country
- IV. They are promoting the culture of violence in the name of religion
- V. They are promoting the sectarian violence
- VI. They are destroying the schools and national asset of the country
- VII. They are waging the war against the Pakistani army
- VIII. They are dividing the nation in the name of religion
- IX. They are putting the threat to the democracy
- X. They are weakening the state institutions
- XI. They are promoting the culture of militancy
- XII. They are destroying the peace and harmony of the society

Militant and sectarian groups have the external implications also which are more drastic towards its external security. The sectarian and militant groups are posing a serious threat to Pakistan's external security, particularly at nine levels.

- I. They are damaging the strategical interest of the country
- II. They are creating the regional hostility
- III. They are destroying the status and prestige of the country
- IV. They are creating a bad name for the country
- V. They are restricting the role of foreign investment

- VI. They are closing the doors of development
- VII. They are destroying the international message of the Islam
- VIII. They are destroying the tourist industry
- IX. They are making the state vulnerable for foreign attacks

Internal and external security threats make the country in a vulnerable situation. The state has the power and resources to root out these militant and sectarian groups. Need of the time is to adopt the consistent policy and the following steps.

- I. Careful strategic planning
- II. Cut short the supply of funding's
- III. Severe punishments mainly death penalties to the culprits
- IV. Comprehensive and consistent polices
- V. Public support
- VI. Complete ban on sectarian religious literature
- VII. No use of sectarian religious ethos in politics
- VIII. Stoppage of arm supply
- IX. Stoppage of foreign interventions

Dozens of local Ṭālibān groups have emerged in FATA and Khyber Pakhtūnkhwā. Haqqani Madrassa, the base camp of Jalāluddīn Haqqānī, in Mirānshāh, North Waziristan, was sealed in November 2001 soon after the US-led forces invaded Afghanistan, but the Haqqani Network is still operational and has remained a prime target of US drone attacks for providing human resources to the Afghan Ṭālibān. Two of Jalāluddīn's sons, Nāsiruddīn and Badruddīn, currently head the 'military' wing of the Haqqānī Network, whereas another son,

Sirajuddīn Haqqānī, leads the overall network.¹⁵ Established in December 2007, the Tehrīk-e-Ṭālibān Pakistan (TTP) pursues the agenda of liberating Afghanistan from foreign forces, targeting Pakistani security forces and pursuing Talibanization in Pakistan, particularly in FATA and Khyber Pakhtūnkhwā. Having close links with Al Qaeda, the TTP has been exceptionally brutal towards the local tribesmen, political leaders and Pakistani security forces personnel. The TTP has even been targeting those Pakistani Taliban and militant groups that did not join its fight against the Pakistani security forces.¹⁶

Several other religiously motivated organizations are also operating in FATA and Khyber Pakhtūnkhwā with agendas ranging from militant and sectarian to enforcement of Sharī'ah. Clear categorization of these groups has become difficult, especially after the emergence of Pakistani Taliban groups across FATA and the Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA) of the Khyber Pakhtūnkhwā province as well as their spread into the settled areas of the province. Groups affiliated with religious-political parties and militant organizations originating from mainland Pakistan—such as the H, JUI, Jaish-e-Muhammad, Sipāh-e-Sahāba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvī—are easier to identify and work alongside Pakistani Taliban groups. There is a thin line of distinction between Taliban and other militant groups in FATA who seek imposition of Sharī'ah. Besides the Taliban Pakistan, who associate with their

¹⁵ Vahid Brown and Don Ressler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012*. (Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Muhammad Amir Rana, "The Militant: Development of a Jihadi Character in Pakistan." *Islamabad: Narratives Publishers* (2015).

namesakes in Afghanistan, some militant groups in FATA and PATA are also fighting government and allied forces in Afghanistan but do not call themselves Ṭālibān. These include the Jamā't-ud-Da'awa Quran wa Sunnat – the oldest militant group in FATA's Bājaur tribal region and Afghanistan's Kunar province – and groups affiliated with Hizb-e-Islāmī, such as Al-Badar Mujāhidīn. There are some groups, which focus on enforcement of Shari'ah, such as the Tehrīk-e-Nifāz-e-Shari'at-e-Muhammadī (TNSM), Lashkar-e-Islām and Ansār-ul-Islām. Although Pakistani TALĭban groups are also divided along tribal, ethnic, ideological and sectarian lines, they share the common agenda of militancy in Afghanistan. Some have exclusively focused on targeting Pakistan institutions, security forces personnel and Pakistanis in general.¹⁷ However, despite the government's repeated bans on jihadi and sectarian groups, they are becoming more active and defiant in other regions as well, particularly in Punjab, and in Quetta and Karachi. For instance, after two consecutive bans Maslānā Masood Azhar's Jaish-e-Muhammad (JM) still operates after changing its name to Al-Raḥmat Trust. After the first ban in January 2002, Jaish-e-Muhammad continued its activities as Tehrīk Khuddām-ul-Islām. The government banned the new outfit in November 2003 and it started to operate as Al-Raḥmat Trust, a charity organization headed by Mufti Rauf Asghar. The group also stands proscribed by the government of Azad Kashmir, the Pakistan-administered part of Kashmir. Its breakaway faction Jamat-ul-Furqān or Al-Furqān Trust is active in Rawalpindi district and its peripheries.

¹⁷ Rana, "The Militant: Development of a Jihadi Character in Pakistan." *Islamabad: Narratives Publishers* (2015).

Another Kashmir-centric jihadi welfare organization Jamā't-ud-Da'awa, led by Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, was banned by the Pakistani government following the November 2008 Mumbai attacks. The network of Jamā't-ud-Da'awa and its militant wing Lashkar-e-Taiba are intact and operational in Pakistan. Similarly, Lashkar-e-Jhangvī, the new face of a Deobandī sectarian militant group Sipah-e-Sahaba, founded by Mawlānā 'Azam Tāriq in Jhang district of Punjab, had become increasingly active in terrorist activities inside Pakistan; factions of the group are active in Punjab, Karachi, and Quetta. It has actually been transformed into a violent militant group from a sectarian outfit after it Aligned itself with Al Qaeda and Ṭālibān groups in Afghanistan and FATA. Lashkar-e-Jhangvī is one of seven militant groups who have become active in FATA after being banned by the Pakistani government. It has links with Ṭālibān groups such as Tehrik-e- Ṭālibān Pakistan and the Haqqānī Network. A media report in 2010 quoting intelligence sources claimed that around 17 banned terrorist organizations were active in the Punjab province but independent sources count more than 37 groups operating as Punjabi Ṭālibān. Fourteen new terrorist cells have emerged apparently in reaction to Pakistan joining the war against terror, military operations in FATA and the 2007 security forces' Operation at Red Mosque in Islamabad. Most of these groups do not have any link with the existing militant or sectarian organizations and Have between five and 12 members each.¹⁸ These groups typically contacted the Pakistani Ṭālibān in the tribal areas and offered their services as volunteers for jihad.

¹⁸ Brown, Vahid, and Don Rassler. *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

Conclusion

The reasons of militant religious extremism are complex and usually a combination of factors, rather than a single factor, pushes especially young people into the circle of militant religious extremism. The use of ideology and religion is very common in the politics of Pakistan. The ideological and political factors charted the course of extremism in Pakistan, whereas the psychological and social factors expedite it. Many professors, scholars and intellectuals, who were interviewed for that purposes, observed that the main reasons of the phenomenon were political and some others were of the view that politico-religious motives, causes and objectives are connected to each other. Some religious scholars, traders and merchants have the opinion that foreign intervention is responsible.