THE HISTORY AND POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Issues like religious extremism and fanaticism have taken even more threatening form in the 21st century. Characterized by high-tech global social milieu, today's world is more prone and jeopardized by the destructive impacts of religious extremism, than it was before. The problem of religious extremism has unfortunately been a historical legacy being inherited by Pakistan since its inception. It has not only eroded the very socio-economic and ideological foundations of the country with unprecedented rates, but also created a very negative image of Pakistan throughout the globe. The roots of religious extremism dated back to the pre-independence colonial era where British rulers brought Blasphemy laws to the Indian subcontinent. Although, the case for the creation of Pakistan was based on religious freedom for all Muslim’s sects and for the minorities as well; however, the post-independence period shows a continuation and acceleration of religious and sectarian intolerance, thus making the situation even worse than before. Moved by the lethality of the problem of religious extremism, this paper intends to seek insights deeper into it, by unveiling its historical, political, social and ethnic underpinnings.

Key Words: Extremism, Religious intolerance, Poverty, Political Instability, Militancy, Sectarianism

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Introduction:

Theoretically stating, ‘extremism’, per se is a mental state characterized by an acquired penchant for withholding either of available alternatives in their extremes (Waqar, 2012:2). In practice, it refers to the individual or collective behavior that manifest in the course of the materialization of such extremist ideals.

Today’s world faces multiplicity of extremist perspectives and movements, of which religious extremism is thought to have posed a survival threat to the whole of the humanity. Plenty of research on various dimensions of religious extremism has been conducted hitherto; nonetheless, any satisfying conclusion is yet to be arrived at. This limitation may further be due to a number of reasons, i.e. increasing diversity, changing role and interpretation of religious ideals and political use of religion by various sections of society.

Religious extremism both in theoretical as well as in practical terms, refers to the behavior of people purely based on religious practice without properly understanding the real teachings. Although strong adherents to religion but necessarily misguided; such followers in manifesting their religious adherence tend to mistreat the non-believers or others who they think are alien to their religious stances. This mistreatment sometime may even go to the limits which are themselves forbidden by the religion i.e. for example killing of human being in normal circumstances without any reason.

In order to see their perceived religious ideals prevailed across the society, religious extremists use violence particularly against the non-believers and those who voice against their opinion. This overt and offensive behavior generates an intolerant atmosphere where further long –running conflicts like ethnic, cultural, sectarian etc. find favorable conditions to grow out. Religious extremism is however, not a result of any single factor. It is in fact a by product of the interplay among multiplicity of factors, such as social injustice, poverty, illiteracy and international scheming of course.

The US Christian leaders, Reverend Pat Robertson, for instance claimed in 1985, that ‘No one is fit to govern other people unless something governs him first. And there is only one governor, who is suitable to be the judge of the entire universe – that God Almighty’. Such a radicalized situation as the case of religious extremism, finds its way out first from an individual state of mind and then a collective mindset, which most often leads to violent collective turmoil as pointed out by (James and Mason, 2011:6) that the ‘potential for violent conflict…exists when our
beliefs command us to do something aggressive to another group….like take their land because we believe our deity (god) promised it to us’.

Notably, religious extremism can be found in almost all religions and societies of the world. It doesn’t, however, mean that religion invokes its followers to withhold it. All religions advocate peace, harmony, tolerance and brotherhood. The problem of extremism commences, when followers begin to comprehend, interpret and practice religion in its extreme, out-fashioned and radical form, without the consideration of the present day needs, requirements, religious duties and responsibilities.

Religious Extremism in Pakistan – A Historical Legacy

The term religious extremism is not new for Pakistani people. This evil remained present in the area even before the existence of Pakistan and still continues in all its vigor. The debate of religion has been brought to the sub-continent by Christian missionaries in 19th century. The first book published in the Punjab Press was Bible. In response to the Christian Missionaries the Ariasim, Himayat Islam and Jamat Ahmedia re-defined their religious ideology. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad introduced the Ahmedia Sect in 1889 in the subcontinent. In response to this in Ludhiana and Jalandhr a huge demonstration, which was due to the presence of Deobandi scholars was observed. In response to the western modality in 1867 Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband and Dar Nadwa were established. We also found that in 1860’s, the British rulers brought Blasphemy law along in the subcontinent which is the first evidence of the concept of religious extremism. In 1927 Ghazi Alam din Shaheed was punished for the first time by this law. (Kamran, 2011)

In 1949, Tehrik-e-Khatma-Nabovit was the first official organization, which started its struggle in Pakistan based on religious grounds. Not only this but also the emergence of Majlis-e-Ahrar-ul-Islam, which was political party and diverted its activities on 7th January 1947 for religious cause. The struggle and purpose of these religious movements was to counter and perish the existence of Qadyani Sect individuals from the key positions of Pakistani establishment and political venue due to which it is believed that the very first military dictatorship in Pakistan was enforced. The struggle started from Wazir Khan Mosque and that was the very first time when Muslim worship place (Mosque) was used for the purpose other than religious determination. Justice Munir wrote in his report of the court of inquiry constituted under Punjab Act II of 1954 to enquire into the Punjab disturbances of 1953 regarding social, political and religious factors of that situation emerged, especially
regarding the massacre on religious grounds played on Pakistani territory and remained the base of religious extremism in Pakistan. It was considered that with the help of Pak Army and Police, Tehrik-e-Khatm-e-Nabovat was perished, but in reality it went behind the scene to reorganization (Ibid).

The initial movement in terms of religious extremism in Pakistan was against Qadiyani sect. It started against the Foreign Ministers Zafarullah Khan who was Qadyani; not only against him but the movement also demanded the removal of other Qadiyani religious believers from the key positions of the then government, which was refused by the Prime Minister Khawaja Nizamuddin in 1953; when religious extremism was evident openly demonstrating on Pakistani territory. However, the movement continued silently till 1974. The movement again started against Qadiyani sect that was the time when the government did not intervene and Mr. Zulfiqar Ali Bhotto took no strong action. This rebirth of Tehrik-e-Khatm-e-Nabovit led this country to be the main gate for religious extremism and to strengthen the roots of Islamic extremism in Pakistan, was also strong message to the other religious believers that they had very limited rights. This can also be evident in the constitution of Pakistan, where some of the clauses reveal that the name of the country will be (is) Islamic Republic of Pakistan, President and Prime Minster will only be the Muslim, Ministry of Religious Affairs and Islami Nazryati Council was introduced, non-Muslims declared as minority groups. (Javaid, 2011a)

There are several other important factors involved in the extension of religious extremism in Pakistan. Among them one is the Iranian revolution in 1979 where the Pakistani and some Gulf countries leadership felt that Shea sect in their countries is mobilizing. The second perception in this connection is the Islamization of General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq who tried to find the base of establishment of Pakistan in Islamic Ideology and made several amendments in the constitution. The third and fourth main factor in this religious extremism in Pakistan is Afghan war parallel to the factors of Pakistani immigrants, who went to the Gulf and Saudi Arabia in 1967-68.On their return they brought not only funding with them but also brought new religious ideology. Especially to effect, change, and displace the Punjabi culture, which is (was) considered based on Saint and Shrine culture and also to counter influence of Shea sect. In Punjab (Muridkay) the establishment of Lashkar-e-Toibaand Jamat-u-Dawawas sponsored by Madina University and huge amount of donation was provided to Hafiz Saeed and establishment of Sipah-e-Sahaba in 1985 in the leadership of Haq
Nawaz Jhengvi. General Zia implemented the deduction of Zakat and Ushr compulsory from all the Pakistani citizens. In response Shea sect believers demonstrated and protested against the law for continuous six days in Islamabad. The government was compelled to amend the law, Shea were excluded from the deduction of Zakat and Ushr while the law remained the same for other Muslim sects. The strong unity of Shea in this protest against the government provided a new thinking to the Shea sect believers who organized themselves in the form of Tehrik-Fiqha-Jaffria in Punjab (Bhakkar) in 1979 (Oakley and Gady, 2009).

It is considered and proven by the history that the era of military dictator General Mohammad Zia Ul Haq, especially since 1980’s, conflicts with non-Muslim countries played important role in extremism in Pakistan. The example given in this respect is the Soviet-Afghan war, in which Pakistan played a major role in alliance with CIA to defeat the Soviet forces, which raided in Afghanistan. The objective of defeating and destroying the Soviet Union was achieved with lots of slipsups, which is considered the main reason for the recent extremism not only in this region but also in other parts of world. Muslims in general, especially Muslims of Pakistan are considered major actors for this. If we talk about the blunders made during the time, an influx of ideologically driven Arabs and Afghan were allowed to enter the tribal area of Pakistan, not only this the guns and ammos such as Kalashnikov (AK 47) culture were adopted (Ali, 2011).

The defeat of Soviet Union was made possible with the help of Mujahedeen who were fully supported and trained by the US and Pakistani military agencies. After the end of proxy war the Mujahedeen were not disarmed. In result of this blunder, Mujahedeen fragmented into different groups i.e. Harkatul Mujahedeen, Lashkar e Toiba and most popular group of Taliban and Al-Qaeda along with some most recent sub groups like Punjabi Taliban, Tehrek-e-Tabliban Pakistan, Harkat-ul-Ansr, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Harkat-ul_Jihad, Muttahada Jihad Council, Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan, Muslim United Army, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi etc. It is considered that all these groups are supported by Pakistan to achieve its agenda in Indian occupied Kashmir and Afghanistan. Some of these groups are now strong enough to challenge the existence of not only Pakistan but also US military forces in Afghanistan. During the last decade it is specially and repeatedly reported by the world media that these are misguided holy warriors groups (especially Muslim) are motivated for mass killing of civilians, politicians, military and police officials (Macdonald, 2011).

It is very sad to mention that Pakistan is considered a safe haven for
Islamic military groups. Taking this viewpoint the US and its allies are regularly pressurizing for military action against these groups within Pakistan. Considering threat in some part of the country, Pakistani military forces advanced in some parts to counter these groups and succeeded in Swat (Malakand Agency), Bajaur Agency and South Waziristan Agency. Not only this, US drone attacks are made on regular basis on these militants and some top leaders are reported killed in these attacks. In result of these military actions and US drone attacks, Pakistani civilians suffered a lot, and these militants planned and executed several attacks on Pakistani citizens in religious places (Muslim Masjids, Qadyanı sect worship places, Imam Barghas of Shea sect etc.), markets, public places, parks, police stations, embassies, bus terminals, foreign guests, international players (Sri Lanka cricket team) etc. It is reported that more than 35,000 Pakistani’s including civilians and security agencies personnel have lost their lives in these attacks (Martin, 2012).

It is a fact that there are several Muslim terrorist organizations operating especially in Pakistan and in some other parts of the world. But, reality is that good and bad people exist in every community. It is also true that there is some Muslim involvement in terrorist activities, but blaming all Muslims for the doings of same is injustice. While on the other hand, we forget to mention the existence of hundreds of Non-Muslim religious terrorist organization in all parts of the World, which are found and proved to be involved in killing of millions of people. In these Non-Muslim terrorist organizations some are: IRA, Ulfa Tamil Tigers, Bajraj Dal, Shiv Sena, RSS, Basque Fatherland and Liberty, Kahane Chai, PKK,ELN Colombia, RIRA, Alex Bongcayao Brigade, Lord’s Resistance Army, Maoists India and, Japanese Red Army (Ali, 2011).

The Argument:

Pakistani people as a whole or some segments of it, on the one hand, generally misperceive religion, as argued by Murphy and Malik (2009). Pakistan was created as a majority Muslim State for the Muslims of the Indian Sub-continent, while on the other hand they tend to be convinced by the shallow promises of implementing the Islamic Sharia in the land by certain political forces that compete for securing political power in the country. The non-fulfillment of this fallacy until now cannot be overlooked as a contributing factor to the already existing aggression in the society. Moreover, the clash between various sub-groups i.e. Sunni-Shia within the main religious domain further stir up the existing
aggression and violence. In this connection, Hashmi (2009) expressed that politicization of Islam encouraged a forceful conflict in terms of patronage Sunni and Shia Muslims, between the clerical elites of major sects and sub-sects. Resultantly, Pakistan has experienced multidimensional effects in terms of its ideological and military well-being.

In discussing the problem of religious extremism especially with reference to Pakistan, the role of Deeni Madaris (religious seminaries) cannot be ignored. A number of Deeni Madarasas are found to be involved in teaching and promoting religious extremism in Pakistan. However, it is important to mention that the argument advanced here should not be generalized to all religious Madaris (Seminaries) in Pakistan. There are of course such Madaris like Jamia Naeemi and many others which disseminate a very tolerant, progressive, peaceful and balanced version of Islam (Sethna, 2011). Several scientific investigations, one of the notable among which is done by Fair (2004), have been made to explore the specific role of religious madaris in militancy. Findings of such studies however predicted no or less correlation between militancy and madrassas. Nevertheless, the link between the two if any, traces back to 1980s Afghan’s Jihad against Soviet where local religious leaders, or mullahs, translated an influx of financial support into a massive expansion of extremist minded personnel by training a blend of militant group. In this regard, the period after 9/11 witnessed an opposing generation that predominantly upset the traditional structure of politics and governance (Daniel, 2008).

As for as the situation in Pakistan in general and KPK in particular is concerned, such a narrow and extremist outlook of religion and Jihad has historically been developed as argued by Abbas (2004). A madrassa (seminary) network also popped up quite quickly to cater to the education and religious needs of approximately three million Afghan refugees that poured into FATA and KPK between 1979 and 1989. The elements in the region benefited from this jihad bonanza and in the process the Saudi brand of religion (generally known as Salafism and Wahhabism) gained strength – as Saudis ensured that their sponsored madrassas followed the curriculum that they proposed, and in some cases the U.S. Agency for International Development financed the production of school textbooks that glorified a narrow interpretation of jihad.

Critically, Madaris along with mosques and public proselytizing events (tabligh) likely are important gathering places where Tanzeems, current militants, religious ideologies, and potential recruits can interact. Some Madaris may be important because their religious leaders issue edicts or
rulings (fatwas) that justify the use of violence. Equally important, some religious leaders issue fatwas against specific kinds of violence. Indeed, some Madaris have also known locations for militant training. Limited data also support the contention that Madrasa students have a some what greater interest in jihad than those of public schools. Yet public school students — who comprise 70% of Pakistan’s enrolled students — also show comparable levels of support for violence (Fair, 2004). In this manner, militants create collective interpretations of world events, interpretations that are informed by their understanding of jihad and their identity as righteous soldiers engaged in a heroic struggle against the enemies of Islam. Islamic mosques have come under greater scrutiny in recent years as alleged sites of group radicalization. While some militants take advantage of large mosques to build social networks and furtively recruit new supporters, they are often obliged to shield their activities from mosque administrators that seek to protect their centers from Militancy (Kenney, 2008).

Politico-Economic Discontent and Extremism

The deteriorating economic conditions, unemployment and lack of freedom of expression in society are all pertinent factors responsible for growing numbers of the radicals despite the withdrawal of state patronage. As mentioned above, since the religious groups have become so independent and all powerful financially that the monetary tool that was once controlled by the state and which had made such groups dependent, now after the withdrawal of state patronage, has become ineffective as they have found other means to sustain. Unless the state comes up with some financial attraction to the young and the frustrated they would continue to fill in the ranks of the jihadi organizations independent of the state. Political deprivation is yet another factor for political rights in addition to redressal of economic discontent. Similarly, 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, hence no dearth of people joining them and challenging the state (Hashmi, 2009). In addition to Dr. Fehmida Mirza Speaker National Assembly notes that terrorism and extremism are the biggest threats to peace and stability in the region and poverty, illiteracy and unemployment are the main causes (Mirza, 2009).

Poverty as a Cause of Extremism

A recent survey on, ‘Poverty and Support for Militant Politics – Evidence from Pakistan’, conducted by senior US researchers, concludes
that poverty in Pakistan does not feed religious extremism and terrorism. The survey, conducted on 6,000 people sampled from all four provinces of Pakistan, finds that poor people in Pakistan are much less likely to support militant groups than richer Pakistanis. The survey also finds that out of all the four federating units of Pakistan, people in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa dislike militant organizations the most. The reason, according to the survey, is that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has suffered many more terror acts than the other provinces of Pakistan. This survey provides a better and clearer picture of the ground reality in Pakistan, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The Pakhtun tribal leaders and political activists in FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been arguing for years that poverty does not drive terrorism and extremism. This survey vindicates their point of view. Besides the survey’s finding — that poor Pakistanis dislike militant groups because the poor often become the target of terror acts. The other reason why poor people dislike militant groups is that the militants force the poor families to become a part of their terror plans. There is enough empirical evidence of this happening, as produced in the media. Most would-be suicide bombers, arrested by the authorities, narrate to the media that the militants kidnapped them for training in suicide bombing and their poor parents could do nothing out of fear of the militants or remained unaware regarding the whereabouts of the missing children. Upon interaction with the people of FATA, one often comes across narratives about the gruesome acts of terrorism committed against the people of FATA by the FATA-based multi-ethnic terrorists (Taj, 2011).

Contradicting to the analysis of poverty as cause of extremism, a former Pakistani finance minister and World Bank economist recently told a roundtable on Pakistan in Washington DC that in most countries 6-8 per cent economic growth should translate into reduction in poverty by 10 per cent. He said that trickle down does not seem to be working in Pakistan as 6-8 per cent growth rates have not reduced poverty at the rate of the global average. Pakistan’s growth is not creating jobs and is not helping alleviate poverty at a rapid pace. He estimated that 65 million Pakistanis live in absolute poverty while another 65 million live in poverty. Only 30 million Pakistanis are well-to-do. The well-to-do often ignore the rage and anger brewing among the poor, who will be particularly vulnerable to extremist ideologies if political inclusion does not replace the current system of oligarchic rule (Haqqani, 2007). In addition to a sense of deprivation and poverty are responsible for extremism and radicalization in the tribal areas (The Express Tribune, July 18, 2012).
Besides the World Bank estimates reveals that, almost 40 percent population of all 107 developing countries are highly exposed to the poverty. Pakistan is ranked among the 43 countries most exposed to poverty risks. Poverty is widespread in Pakistan and is predominantly a rural phenomenon. Nearly two third populations in Pakistan live in rural areas. According to Pakistan’s Planning Commission, poverty rate has jumped from 23.9 to 37.5 percent in the last three years. The commission has estimated that in 2005 there were 35.5 million people living below the poverty line but in 2008 their number increased to over 64 million. Consequently, unemployment has also increased (Ali, 2011).

**Political Instability and Extremism**

Pakistan’s political leadership has shown far too little courage to face the radical extremism, often choosing appeasement over principles (Cordesman and Vira, 2011:14), while Javaid (2011b:235) concludes that political polarization and instability often gives space to extremist groups to further their agendas because it deteriorates governance and weakens main stream political parties. In such a situation smaller groups with some specific agendas find space to operate. Frequent martial laws and interruption in democratic process coupled with geo-political situation of the region provided conducive environment to religious groups and parties to create more fragmentation and polarization in the society helping the extremist groups to flourish. Continuing with the causes of religious extremism, Aziz (2001) writes about the political trends in Pakistan that the political history of Pakistan and the way the game of politics has been played so far have ensured a weakening of the democratic spirit and a corresponding strengthening of the dictatorial ghost. The political instability, corruption of the top leadership, and rising violence in society had in turn had a worsening impact on the economy, and accelerated extremism (Nasir, 2004).

**Conclusions**

Religious extremism is a growing threat to the internal security and stability of the country. Since its inception a debate started that whether or not Pakistan will be a theocratic state? Religious extremism can be found in all the religions of the world. This problems arise when some people interprets the religious teachings in their own way for achieving their objectives. In Pakistan religion has been used by the rulers for their political objectives and the religious leaders are also no exception to
that. General Ziaul Haq used religion in the name of Islamization and he also established Madaris to produce Taliban for fighting the Russian forces in Afghanistan. There are so many internal and external factors responsible for growing extremism in Pakistan like, Iranian Revolution of 1979, Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, war in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Russian forces, US invasion of Afghanistan, foreign funding to madrassas and intervention of foreign intelligence agencies like RAW, KHAD, MOSAD etc, while the internal factors are political instability, poverty and misinterpretation of religion and sectarianism.

Recommendations

- The Government should initiate poverty reduction programs as it is the mother of all social evils.
- The civil society organizations should come forward and work for the elimination of social injustice, inequality and should continue to work for peace and security.
- Religion should not be used for achieving personal objectives neither by religious leaders nor politicians and army generals.
- Infiltration from across the borders and LOC should be stopped by manning the borders.
- The madrassas should be brought into the main stream by revising their curriculum and introducing modern subjects.
- Laws should be framed for discouraging state institutions to use religion for fulfilling their agendas.
- Worship places (Mosque, Imam Barghas, Churches) should be used for building interfaith harmony among the different sects.
- The intelligence agencies should play an effective role for stopping the flow of money to the religious organizations from abroad.
- Education should be made free and compulsory for all, books and uniforms should be provided to the students.
- All the angry Baluch leaders and Taliban should be invited for dialogue on all issues so that the problems are resolved by mutual consultation instead of military operation.
- The people of Baluchistan should be given their due rights and an emergency program should be launched for the development of Baluchistan.
- Military operations in North Waziristan should be avoided as it is not solutions to stop militancy, rather dialogue and negotiation should be started by the political forces.
• Political stability is the need of the hour as economic development is impossible without political stability.
• Last but not the least; our foreign policy should be dynamic instead of static. Foreign policy should be reflective of the wished and aspirations of the people of Pakistan.

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