RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM: THE CASE OF PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

In Pakistan, even today, there is an overt acceptance of extremist interpretations of Islam reflecting the bigoted mindset that inspires radical tendencies. By confusing religiosity with religion, religious extremists are easily tempted towards posturing and have threatened to take over both the state and the secular faith. To further complicate the situation in Pakistan, the military-intelligence complex has deliberately encouraged extremism and manipulated it for regime survival, extort more international support, manage domestic crises and to expand influence in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Socio-political complexities and the internal contradictions make it difficult for combating religious extremism in Pakistan. In the present circumstances, promoting and strengthening secular democracy is an appropriate answer to the problem.

The term extremist is used to describe groups and individuals who have become radicalized. Some religious groups have relied upon the use of extremist methods to indoctrinate others into their faith, putting the emphasis on fundamentals only. The phrases 'Islamic extremist' and 'Islamic terrorist' is used to describe those who follow a path of violence, favouring extreme religious interpretations of the Quran and its tenets. Unfortunately, there is a complex set of circumstances contributing to the growth of religious extremism in Pakistan. Sociologically and psychologically, this is a problem of alienation which is played upon by fundamentalist forces, may be creating a distorted desire for some kind of revenge. Since the majority of the Muslims in Pakistan are afflicted with poverty, unemployment, and lack of education, they are more susceptible to calls by fundamentalists and their appeals of extremism. The failure of political Islam, rise of pan-Islamic tendencies, military-mosque nexus, the cult of jihad, politics of Islamization, rise of sectarianism, fragile democratic order and failure of secularism have all contributed to the growth of religious extremism in Pakistan.

These ideologically motivated extremists are averse to liberal and democratic values and a secular social order. They are committed to the establishment of an altered world order, based on their exclusionary religious beliefs, which not only destabilizes the country itself but also put the South Asian region at grievous risk. Terrorism is the strategy of the perverted Islamist extremists in Pakistan to propagate their ideology all over the world. The religious extremism in Pakistan is driven by the ideology of jihad. 'As happened in the case of the Nazis and Japanese militarists there is an assumption of racial and ideological superiority by Islamist extremists'[1]. Ideology and methodology often become inextricably interlinked under the single term extremism. Extremism is a type of mindset which emanates from fear. Of course, in case of Muslims, it is the fear of US and the West which breeds extremism.

ISLAMIZATION PROCESS AND BIGOTED RELIGIOSITY

Pakistan's open and official association with Islamist politics during Zia-ul-Haq revived religious symbolism and lent legitimacy to religious groups. Religious schools got new social status. On

the domestic front Zia sought the political support of the mullahs to legitimize his despotic rule. Islam was politicized and militarized which indirectly gave certain terror gangs the advantage of religious conviction to motivate their members. Politicization of Islam has produced fundamentalism in Pakistan and fundamentalism is popularly equated with extremism. Islamization process brought Islamist policies to a high point and Islam was made the basis of ruling ideology. Military-madrasa-mullah complex developed around the concept of jihad and was brought into play. Zia had the backing of the fundamentalists because their goal was to reunite the Muslims in the subcontinent and regain the lost glory of Islam and the Mughal Empire. This was bound to revive the idea of pan-Islamism that lay buried under the debris of the Khilafat movement (1919-24). Zia patronized the idea of pan-Islamism as he increasingly relied on obscurantist elements for political support.

The proliferation of madrasas was another important dimension of Islamization process. During that period Deobandi madrasas were responsible for narrow and intolerant interpretation of Islam which inspired religious extremism. The madrasa based clergy, by its teachings creates a mindset that can easily be used by agents of terror. The madrasa system, churned out hordes of religious graduates to serve the cause of jihad in Afghanistan and Kashmir. The Pakistani religious parties with the help of the CIA and ISI produced thousands of religious fighters by imparting them both religious and military training, during the 1980s. These forces were highly motivated, and militarily trained to serve the cause of jihad. Proliferation of madrasa culture during Zia's period bred radical Islamism which converted Islam into a 'fundamentalist creed'.[2] By the 1980s, Islam had come on the centre stage as a powerful religious force, affecting all elements of the population. The religious education and training for jihad became complementary, portraying jihad as a tool to achieve foreign policy goals and fight the infidels (non- believers).

IMPACT OF SECTARIANISM

Gen. Zia's regime systematically promoted sectarianism in order to counter what it saw as a growing Iranian influence in Pakistan. Unfortunately, subsequent regimes did not do any better. Political parties have routinely compromised with sectarian groups, and have used sectarian conflicts for short-term political gains. The greater prominence of sectarianism in Pakistan's politics can be seen as a new phase in Islamist ideology and politics specially among the Sunnis, one which is more militant[3]. The Deobandis constitute the largest Islamic sects with the greatest control over religious schools, about 65 percent of Pakistani madrsas and are among the most militant in their demands for the Pakistani state to become truly Islamic[4]. During Islamization process Zia-ul-Haq encouraged sectarianism by promoting Deobandi madrasas which were potential centers of Islamic militancy. These madrasas which subscribed to the hardline Wahhabi ideology, promoted religious hatred against infidels.

The state used these madrasas to strengthen Sunnisim and much of the effort was undertaken by the Pakistani military and its intelligence wing (ISI). The military's involvement in sectarianism grew over time and Sunni militancy could develop organizational ties to the Islamist resistance groups in the Afghan war during the 1980s.[5]Sunni Islamism, in fact, promoted the growth and spread of jihadist outlook, which combines both religiosity and extremism. The Pakistani military saw the large number of madrasa-trained jihadis as an asset for its covert support of Taliban in Afghanistan, as well as its proxy war in Indian Kashmir. Shia-Sunni sectarian conflict has indeed been a feature of Pakistani politics and a source of instability.

IMPACT OF ISLAMIST POLITICS

Military rule in Pakistan is believed to be the root cause that promoted religious fanaticism that has culminated into religious extremism. Religious extremism got a scope to take a firm grip on the Pakistani society due to the role played by the military and its intelligence agency. By the

1980s, a sophisticated, well-equipped infrastructure to train militant Islamists was available to the Zia regime[6]. With the assumption of power by Zia, the military and Islam got interlinked. This brought the relationship between the Pakistani state and the Islamic groups to a new level. The nexus between the military and mullahs took shape during Zia's tenure. The mullahs and the religious groups have been an inseparable part of Pakistan's Afghan and Kashmir policies. The Islamic parties have provided an Islamic rational for fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan and Indians in Kashmir. The Afghan war during the 1980s brought together militants from all over the Muslim world and Afghanistan was turned into a training ground for these religiously indoctrinated fighters who were fighting the infidel Soviet forces. Pakistan assumed a supervisory role in training these Afghan mujaheedins, fighting the Soviets. Even after the Soviet withdrawal this link continued, which adversely affected the delicate balance between the Pakistani Army maintained traditionally vis-à-vis Islam.

Even Musharraf can be described as a new and improved Zia adopting ambitious agenda to changing circumstances. Though he advocated moderation, he could not completely abandon the religious extremists. His priority has never been eradicating Islamic extremism, rather he tried to legitimize his rule through his flirtations with radical
Islamist groups. The military's flirtations with radical Islam give evidence to the fact that how the country has sunk deeper into the abyss of fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism since Musharraf's coup in 1999. It was Zia who made full use of the religious extremists to whip up the jihadi passions. Later, Musharraf, too, emulated Zia in supping with the Islamic elements and encouraging the ISI to use the jihadi policy[7].The relationship between the religious extremists and the ISI which, in fact, led to the evolution of a culture of intolerant extremism in Pakistan.

Mismanaged 'war on terror' has also stirred extremism in Pakistan. Extremism in Pakistan was initially directed towards Afghanistan and Kashmir, but after Pakistan joined America's war against terror, the state turned against the extremists, consequently inviting their wrath. Pakistan was forced to join the war and it meant that it had to fight those very forces which it had nurtured in the early eighties to fight against communism. All through the eighties and nineties, these extremist groups have served as instruments of Pakistan's regional policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan and India. However, Musharraf's close alliance with the US after 9/11 is another factor which has generated support for Islamic radicals in Pakistan.The fallout of Pakistani military establishment's policy of nursing, promoting and sponsoring Islamic militancy is evident when we see Islamabad struggling hard to rein in the jihadi elements it has created during the 1980s.

CLIENT STATE-SUPERPOWER NEXUS

Religious extremism in Pakistan gained ground during the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, when Taliban was born. Convergence of strategic interests of both Pakistan and the US at that time facilitated this development. Pakistan became a centre for Islamic militants while serving the cause of jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan. These two countries (US and Pakistan) had, no doubt, common interests in fighting the Soviets out of Afghanistan. This led to the apocalyptic confrontation between Islam and communism[8]. The client state-superpower nexus that was put in place after the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan only strengthened Islamic tendencies across Pakistan. After the Afghan war was over, both Afghanistan and Pakistan were abandoned by the US, to the forces of extremism and fanaticism.

It was the victory of fundamental Islam over communism. It encouraged the Islamic zealots in Pakistan and they were made aware of the potential of jihad. The 1990s saw ascendancy of ultra-fundamentalist Taliban, created and groomed by the Pakistan Army and the ISI. These Talibans

are Sunni fundamentalists to the core. Now these Talibani extremists are a real threat to the Pakistani state. The Pakistani establishment acting as a friend, philosopher and guide of Taliban, fomented religious extremism. But it was a risk which they took in the hope that the damage which Pakistani civil society might suffer would be compensated by the wresting of Kashmir from India.

LINKING JIHADI IDEOLOGY WITH MILITANT ISLAM

The jihadi cult in Pakistan has been on the rise since the 1980s. It is meant for the expansion of Islam and to wrest political power from the infidels. The jihadis are against
the existential enemies of Islam, namely the US ,Israel and India. The political use of religion in terms of jihad to fight the Soviets was a primary factor in helping the extremist groups gain political space at the expense of mainstream political parties. Religious extremists believe in jihad because through jihad they are destined to win as a civilization.There is no secret that jihadi violence has emanated from radical and backward looking strains of Islam such as Wahhabisim and Salafism[9]. The expanding network of Deobandi madrasas across Pakistan preaches this ideology of hate against the non-believers. The fundamentalists take advantage of this situation and seek to impose their will through coercion, violence and terror. Their intention is to enforce fear-based obedience to Islamic doctrines.

Thus, Islam is interpreted violently and aggressively under the Wahhabi influence, leading to religious extremism. Wahhabi ideology subscribes to hardline, rigid and puritanical version of Islam. The extremism we see in Pakistan is ideologically motivated. But this ideological motivation emanates from religion and for the sake of religion, to take Islam back to its pristine glory.

Religious extremists get strength from the violent interpretation jihad, leading to the rise of militant Islam. Militant Islam only satisfies the religious ego of the extremists and injures the ego of the enemy. Pakistan has been using militant Islam as a strategic option. Militant Islam thrives on religious indoctrination and this prepares the militants to fight a religious war against the infidels. The ongoing indoctrination as a part of the jihadi cult, has led to a massive brainwash of the Pakistani public.

Pakistani state has compromised with these jihadis fighting in the name of Islam, thereby surrendering of internal sovereignty to these non-state actors. Pan-Islamism is the creed of the jihadis. Even their jihadi ideology runs counter to the policy of 'Pakistan-first'[10]. These militants have taken advantage of Pakistan's sympathetic attitude towards pan-Islamic militancy and the strategic decision of the Pakistani rulers to use jihad as an instrument of influence in Afghanistan and Kashmir[11]. No doubt, from the beginning of the 1990s, the struggle in Kashmir has been given a distinctly Islamic flavour and fervour by Pakistan. Pakistan has sought to use Wahhabi-oriented radical Islamic groups to wage low-intensity conflict to bleed India in Jammu and Kashmir[12].What Sunni fundamentalists tried here, has been to destroy the syncretic nature of Kashmiri Islam.

SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPULSIONS

Psychic compulsions also motivate the religious extremists in Pakistan. They are psychologically committed to excessiveness. They have a very high level of commitment to the cause of Islam. In fact, they are victims of indoctrination which makes them committed to religion, not to the society. This excessive commitment overburdens them. They are not simply content with only limiting themselves to the categorical obligations
required of them in the name of religion but seek Allah's pleasure through supererogatory performances. This prompts the Islamists to resort to extremism, encourage and force fear-based obedience to religious doctrines. The high level of commitments to their religion make these Islamists feel emotionally strong. They are always in a denial mode, having no intention either to enter into any

dialogue with the majority group or the state. Sometimes, they force the state to sympathize their cause.

Indoctrination, which we find in closed societies, squelches the permission to use our mind critically. Once indoctrinated, we choose dogma, not faith. With indoctrination, these zealots develop an abnormal psychology, responding most favourably to the symbolic and ideological appeals of extremism. In Pakistan, these religious extremists have also suffered socio-economic distress.Many believe that fundamentalism's basis is poverty, while others relate it issues of identity. These groups are socially alienated, uprooted frustrated and disappointed in life. They have little confidence in a stable social order and are ordinarily least politicized. They become intolerant of the social order. By generating extremist tendencies, they challenge the existing social order supported by the majority and force the political system or the state to work for them. 'These extremists are considered as forces of reaction who feed on disillusionment, poverty and despair. The remedy lies in spreading prosperity and providing social security to all.'[13]

In a situation of poverty and socio-economic distress these radical groups have one alternative, to live on a religious diet and fight for the cause of religion. Psychologically, when frustration reaches its climax, it explodes in the form of extremism. This is manifested through obstinacy, rigidity and bigotry of the extremists, which deprives them of clarity of vision of the social whole. They overburden people with their religious excessiveness and treat people with harshness. This has been the case in Pakistan. They are always in a class of their own. They do not reconcile with the society. In the absence of reconciliation, disaffection starts striking deep roots. These disaffected elements are psychologically brainwashed to become jihadis.

Failure of political Islam has further deteriorated the situation in Pakistan. Political Islam aims at establishment of political rule of Islam in the world and is an innovation of real Islam which stands for peace, tolerance, compassion and love. Failure of political Islam has led to the transformation of the rhetoric of jihad into actual violence. Islamists feel the threat to their religion from (non-Muslims). Extremism is a type of mindset that emanates from fear. It is the fear of the failure of political Islam linked to the perceived threat from the US towards Islam. As an ardent Islamist, Zia-ul-Haq projected himself as a champion of Islam and his country as the citadel of Islam. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, provided him an opportunity to declare that Islam was in danger and jihad should be waged to fight out this danger. In Pakistan, religious extremism is on the rise because of this typical psychology that Islam is in danger. These religious fighters who call for an Islamic Caliphate profess a belief in a monolithic Islamic civilization. Connections between Islamic extremism and terrorist organizations in Pakistan appear to be more extensive and this stems from close interaction with the Middle East, strengthened recently by the presence of Al Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS MARKET PLACE

In Pakistan, within the religious marketplace, these militant religious groups flourish as they have a much stronger communal orientation; maintain rigorous systems of shared beliefs and morality. These extremist groups may be victims of ignorance, coercion, deception or psychopathology, but when we look into their organizational behaviour, we find something different. Their activity is often collective and the structure of religious organizations is congregational. Fellow members are more trustworthy than strangers. This congregational structure and collective activities provide the basis of assurance to the fellow members of religious groups, making religion more compelling and attractive. Membership of the

group demands high levels of sacrifice in the name of God. Simply put, these jihadi groups are high-cost groups. Social stigmas make these groups costly and even make it impossible for them to engage in activities outside the group. Thus, these high-cost religious groups have a high level of religious participation and tend to be exclusive, strict, small, suspicious of other groups, critical of secular society. This 'high-cost and high-commitment strategy' is adopted by different religious extremist groups[14].

Pakistani radical Islamic groups have enjoyed broad support especially among the poorer segments of society, because they are major suppliers of mutual aid and social services. The social, economic and political role of sectarian organizations is especially great in contemporary Islamic countries like Pakistan, where external resources and internal conflict have combined to enhance the power of the religious leaders (mullahs), mosques and madrasas. The madrasa education system demands that Islam be understood as a complete code of life and creates in the minds of the school children a sense of siege and constant embattlement by stressing that Islam is under threat everywhere. Fearful of taking on powerful religious forces, every incumbent government refuses to take a position on the curriculum and thus quietly allowed young minds to be moulded by fanatics.[15] Thus, the near collapse of public education in Pakistan and the corresponding rise in influence of the madrasas are critical legacies of more than two decades of cold war proxy battles.[16]The origin of the present wave of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan can be traced back to the skullduggery of the cold war.

FRAGILE DEMOCRACY AND FAILURE OF SECULARIZATION

Extremists believe that Islam and democracy are incompatible. In Pakistan, denial of democracy by military rulers has created a 'pressure cooker society'[17] which has fueled the fire of extremism. Genuinely, violent sects/groups tend to grow when civil society is deprived of its right to dissent. The military dictators have pushed the civil society resistance to the premises of the mosque where it got radicalized. Civil society resistance emerges from the mosque, thereby, radicalizing the resisting groups. During the repressive regime of Zia, places of worship became the safest places for open political discourse and the religious teachers got enough state support. This state support enhanced the religious zeal of the mullahs and they felt no need to learn moderation. Secularism does not exist in the vocabulary of mullahs. Intellectually, these mullahs bargain from a position of strength because of their intellectual superiority and their religious zeal brings trouble for the society. These mullahs have created cults around themselves and seized control over the minds of worshippers.

Absence of competing ideologies also creates the atmosphere where religious extremism grows. In Pakistan, absence of competing theologies and religious groups has created a situation when only Islamists thrive. Lack of competition in the religious market gives extremism a free growth. This means secularism has failed in Pakistan. Secularism thrives only when the society is multi-religious and multi-cultural. But in case of Pakistan, Islam has taken precedence over other faiths. Since, the religious market is not truly competitive, it fails to encourage religious tolerance and mutual respect for other religions. A secular religious market discourages religious militancy and enhances the spirit of tolerance and moderation. Poor functioning of the government and the civil society adds to the problem. Religious radicals are most effectively neutralized by competing theologies, produced by competing religious groups.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

. An open religious market encourages religious moderation and discourages religious militancy. A truly competitive religious market encourages religious tolerance, moderation and mutual respect for other religions. But in Pakistan such things are absent, on the contrary, the religious teachers are supported by the military making their religious zeal a threat to the civil society. These mullahs indirectly promote religious extremism. Hence, real Islam has been replaced with political Islam. Conflict and religious militancy have become common in Pakistan, where the state favours one religious sect over another. In well-functioning societies, religious organizations/groups benefit little from violence and get little chance to excite religious violence. In Pakistan, in the absence of a constitutional commitment to the separation of state and religion, religious militancy is encouraged by the military, madrasas and mullahs. Secularism has spectacularly failed in Pakistan, making the religious market more aggressive and intolerance. From the religious point of view, secularism and fundamentalism are two sides of the same coin. In Pakistani context, it is observed that the overwhelmingly religious minded fundamentalists consider secularism as a negation of religion. In the absence of a secular polity, these fundamentalists have entrenched themselves in greater dogmatism for protection of their faith. This faith-based revival of Islam has transformed the ideology of jihad into actual violence. They have reduced their religion to the status of an ideology. Once this happens, it provides fertile ground for forces of fundamentalism and revivalism, which breeds militancy in the name of religion, using violence as an external show of their religious conviction. Inside Pakistan, jihadi ideology holds the key to the rise of religious extremism.

In Pakistan, it is necessary that the Army and its intelligence wing (ISI) must stay away from the politics of extremism. The military has even looked upon militant Islam as a strategic option by supporting militancy in Afghanistan and Kashmir in pursuit of the desired foreign policy goals. The military leadership should be convinced of the fact that their support to extremists do not serve Pakistan's national security interests. In fact, foreign funding/aid has led to the deviant behaviour of the Pakistani Army and the Islamists. A resurgent Islam is riding on the strength of petro-dollars and the backing of the military. The Pakistani military, therefore, must be disciplined and reformed. Its professionalism can be restored by reining back the Islam-oriented activism of the Army officers and weeding out politicized Islamic elements from within the system. It is the Army which has been responsible for providing these militants, the required environment and motivation to be psychologically prepared for fighting a religious war for making Pakistan a global centre of political Islam.

A resurgent, increasingly militant wave of Islamism in Pakistan has severely affected the internal law and order situation. The fundamentalists are instinctively anti-Western and Pakistan's closeness to the US reinforces their conviction that their culture and civilization is in danger. Pakistan is gradually drifting towards a failed state and needs to be stabilized at the earliest. These extremists not only pose a challenge to the democratic order, but also a threat to internal security. Division in the democratic forces will give them a boost, and in such a situation, promoting democracy is an appropriate answer to contain religious extremism. With the failure of political Islam, the need of the hour is to elevate the status of real Islam which stands for peace, tolerance and compassion. 'Real Islam prescribes jihad only for defensive use and as an internal struggle for inner purification.'[18] It is the moderate Islam which has the potential to check the radical

tendencies in Pakistan and thereby putting a tight rein on the rise of extremism. The Islamists must remember that the battle for the soul of Islam cannot be own through violent and irrational means.

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