

## **The Upsurge of Religious Extremism: A Challenge to Democracy, Governance and National Unity in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

*Pakistan today is confronted with a volatile extremist campaign in the entire country. In particular, the upsurge of religious militancy which began from the FATA (KPK) is now becoming the most challenging phenomenon Pakistan has faced in the recent past and even today. The emergence of religious militias is neither new nor alien to this strategic frontier area bounded by Afghanistan in the North and the West. However, the religious phenomenon built up momentum during the Soviet-Afghan war in 80's and attracted international publicity. Since then, the radicalization of religious revivalism in Pakistan has been sporadically in the news. The popular reassertion of religious militias or Pakistani Taliban was seen in the aftermath of events of 9/11 and the American-led Western coalition's occupation of Afghanistan. During 2003-04, the re-emergence of Taliban in Southern Afghanistan forced the Government of Pakistan to mount maximum pressure on the Federally Administered Tribal Area's Tribesmen to discontinue reinforcement of Afghan Taliban. That produced shock waves for the ruling elite and military establishment of Pakistan who were the beneficiaries of "Global war against terrorism." With the advent of military operations, religious militias or ex-mujahideens increasingly became violent and their particular identity manifested itself in the emergence of numerous "theaters" of militant resistance to the successive federal governments. At present, since all the liberal, a few regional and "democratic" political parties, by and large, associated with the military establishment, are facing the wrath of Pakistani Taliban outfits. Undoubtedly, the current campaign of religious extremism which threatens the democracy, governance and national unity in Pakistan has deep roots in the history and underlines socio-economic, cultural, strategic and political factors. The study of a case like "Religious extremism" in Pakistan requires an in-depth scholarly treatment in a fresh perspective. Therefore, this paper will analyze the objective conditions from several dimensions to bring out an insight of the problem. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to provide a thumbnail sketch of religious revivalist tendency in the Pakistani society for a broad assessment of the whole issue.*

**Key words:** Upsurge; Revivalism; Mujahideens; Democracy;

## **I. Introduction**

The present climate of stressful uncertainty with respect to security issues is an awful load on the nerves of the Pakistani nation. The severity of terrorist events leads to an impression as if the chaotic situation will continue, to the detriment of the country. These circumstances are now merging into an almost perfect storm of mutually reinforcing crises, sectarian, ethnic, interventionist and above all trans-national Islamic extremism. The upsurge of religious extremism is the direct consequence of past policies of Islamisation and marginalization of democratic political process and has become the worst challenge to governance, National unity and democracy in Pakistan. The co-option and patronage of religious activism by successive military as well as civilian governments have brought Pakistan to a point where the menace of revivalism of religious extremism threatens to erode the foundations of the state and society. It is pertinent to point out that administrative and legal actions against militant outfits have failed to dismantle a well-entrenched and widely spread terror infrastructure, even in civil democratic regime.

Questions, such as what statement of creed does a Muslim make? Or which Muslim sect represents the true perception of Islam? were not central to Muslim politics in the British India. Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Sir Agha Khan III were from Muslim minority Sects. However, they proved to be the undisputed leaders of the Muslims of India<sup>1</sup>. Undoubtedly, the Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh was the only town in British Raj where Sunni-Shia tensions were known to turn violent, but, that too was a rare occurrence. Allama Shabir Ahmad Usmani, a Deobandi and the only religious scholar in the constituent assembly tasked to frame Pakistan's first constitution, had joined the All India Muslim League under the leadership of an Ismaili Shia, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah<sup>2</sup>. However, the elite that had represented Muslims in the military and civil intuitions of British India sought the new state to consolidate and expand their power on the grounds of religion. On the other hand, the Muslim League's leadership, after the sad demise of the Founder of the nation, continued to use Islam to legitimise their power. That act created much space for ulema, mystics and politico-religious factions, who earlier opposed the Pakistan project and Mr. Jinnah, and who had no representation in the new power structure, with an opportunity to make their political presence felt.

The clerics and their religious parties were aware of the fact that an Islamic Constitution would give them access to public policy making. In their quest for such a constitution, they drew their political methodology on four major currents of extremist thinking and activities in the early years of Pakistan i.e. mass agitations, such as "Kahatme-Nabuwat" movement; creation of institutions of Islamic learning, such as construction of seminaries or Madrassas in rural, tribal and urban areas; participation in electoral process; and attachment with global Islamic revivalist movements<sup>3</sup>. Pakistani radical Islam encompassed all the four strands, taking the shape of street agitation, anti-western intellectual discourse, religious scholarship of madrassas and the potential for a xenophobic tribal rebellion in the former NWFP. The Islamic resurgence demonstrated itself rapidly, but took the shape of sectarian violence. It is pertinent to mention that during the 50's and 60's, Ulemas of all Sunni Sects as well as prominent Shia leaders joined hands against Ahmadis, played an important role in getting their demand accepted

by declaring the country an Islamic Republic and confronted General Ayub Khan's secular reforms, but turned out to be sworn enemies in the decade of 70's. During the East-Pakistan crisis, the military developed its institutional links with the clergy to counter the Bengali nationalists by conducting a campaign of "cleanup" against the Mujeeb-ur-Rahman's loyalists. With the all out support of General Yahya Khan, the religio-political parties entered the main stream politics, obtaining eighteen out of three hundred National Assembly Seats, all in the West Pakistan, during the 1970 elections<sup>4</sup>. Later on, the Deobandi JUI formed coalition governments in Balochistan and NWFP provinces. Although, religious parties failed to stop the dismemberment of Pakistan, they kept on chanting the slogans of "Bangladesh Namanzoor." During the Bhutto era, perceiving his populist politics as a direct challenge to its power and ambitions, the interventionist military high command once again forged an alliance of convenience with the revivalist extremists, which was ultimately used to oust the elected government in 1977. It is interesting to note that Mr. Bhutto accepted the demands of clerics, such as the approval of constitutional amendment that officially excommunicated the Ahmadis, induction of a separate Islamic Studies syllabus for Shais's in school, ban on drugs and a few other measures. But these steps were taken only as token gestures to the religious right. With the imposition of third Martial Law, General Zia-ul-Haq attempted to appease the clergy, his main stalwarts, by giving a free hand to flourish their brand of Islam. The kind of politicians that Zia liked were religious personalities as they were amenable to the military's blueprints and did not raise the issues of people's rights and socio-economic development. Religion was thus, used as a means of political distraction.

## **II. The Political Islamisation**

General Zia-ul-Haq's era witnessed a dramatic shift towards extremist Sunni political discourse, orthodoxy and a heightening of anti-shia militancy, early signs of the bloody sectarian strife that was to follow. The militant Sunni backlash, given vent through the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) set into motion a seemingly unending cycle of bloodbath<sup>5</sup>. Shia's on the other hand, who were a politically isolated community in the early Zia era, began reflecting a revolutionary idealism by launching Sipah-e-Muhammad with the support of Iran. Therefore, Zia's "Islamization" or promotion of Deobandi radicalization and the Shia activism inspired by Iranian Shia Islamic Revolution, spurred them into political chasos and turmoil. In the Zia period, Iran and Saudi Arabia's proxy war in Pakistan was further fuelled by the U.S, the patron of anti-soviet Afghan Jihad and Sunni militants. Pakistan's military government was the most active player in that Jihadi business. A parallel non-governmental sector of Islamic charities complemented the Jihad, with the volume of direct donations from Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern tycoons, western countries, far-eastern Muslim states and people from parallel economy forces or under-world syndicates, also contributed against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The aid aimed at recruiting Jihadis (Holy warriors, once declared by Washington Post), arranging training camps with guerrilla operational tactics, constructing Seminaries or Madrassas and running Afghan refugee shelters. It is believed that only Saudi Arabia gave 5.5 billion to government of Pakistan for strengthening and arming Sunni Pashtun groups on either sides of the Durand Line<sup>6</sup>. Resultantly Pakistan began playing host to Afghan Jihad as well as Saudi-Iranian tussle.

General Zia's death in a midair explosion in 1998 brought back the civilian rule after more than a decade. By that time, extremist network had become very relevant to the military's domestic political necessities and it had constituted to figure prominently in

its Afghan and Kashmir policy. Transfer of power to civilians during the 1990's did not deprive the military establishment of its control over foreign policy, defense policy nuclear program and even domestic policies. The successive governments of PPP and PML (N) failed to keep a check on the establishment and were overthrown one after another on one pretext or the other, with the active but silent support of "behind the scene power brokers". During the so-called democratic civilian regimes, jihad in Kashmir gained momentum, giving the military an opportunity to conduct a proxy war against India<sup>7</sup>. Within Pakistan, a generation of sectarian, Jihadi and pan-Islamic Zealots expanded their influence to all rural, tribal and urban areas. With the end of Jihad against the Soviet Union, the Arab-influenced veterans of the Afghan Jihad, turned to Kashmir front and the formation of Islamic Imarrat, creating an entirely new global phenomenon. Gradually the trans-national networks of Muslim militias Al-Qaida, appeared on the global scene as the sole spokesman of the Muslim Victims<sup>8</sup>. Local militant outfits and movements in Pakistan and Afghanistan sought to replicate the new extremist agenda. In 1994, during Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto's Second term, Afghanistan's domestic ethno-religious strife produced "Taliban" with the patronage of Pakistani agencies, CIA and oil rich Gulf states.

The Taliban not only captured 80 percent of the whole of Afghanistan but also helped reinforce the Jihadi ties between Pakistani sectarian groups and smuggling cartels of Afghanistan<sup>9</sup>. That mutually beneficial relationship resulted in the Islamisation of criminal activity and criminalization of segments of extremism in Pakistan. Hundreds of Pashtun and Punjabi youth entered Afghanistan and Joined Taliban-operated terrorist training camps, inspired by a Sunni revolution and anti-Shia Jihad. Sipah-e-Sahaba and Sipah-e-Muhammad took part in countless massacres against one another. Till 1999 each elected government in Pakistan had to bear the burnt of sectarian violence and the resultant insecurity and alienation it generated. The civil-military establishment denied the civil regimes their control of Pakistan's Kashmir or Afghan policies, rather it also made monitoring its strategic allies, the "right wingers" difficult by the successive governments. Tension between civil regime and military high-ups brought another dictatorial rule. With the induction of General Musharraf, the nature of extremist violence changed. The initial pattern of targeting leaders, diplomats and other high-profile figures widened to include mosques, churches, public places, graveyards, funeral ceremonies, religious processions, hotels, Government functionaries and cultural gatherings.

### **III. The Aftermath of Afghan Jihad**

The Musharraf government took a u-turn on Afghan policy in the aftermath of 9/11 by changing its' preferences. A decisive action against homegrown terrorist outfits feared more bloodshed in the coming days. General Musharraf pledged to undo General Zia's legacy by transforming Pakistan into a moderate Muslim state. However, his performance in the early five years was not dissimilar to that of General Zia, who empowered the clergy to counter his secular and civilian opposition. Under Musharraf, religious extremism continued to thrive because of his dual approach<sup>10</sup>. He wanted to engage the U.S in Afghanistan for a long time for his political mileage and, therefore, his reliance on the religious right of his choice was not difficult to understand. However, justifying his decision to retain the dual offices of the president and the Army chief, he took a few cosmetic steps, such as registration of Madrassas, exclusion of foreigner students from religious schools, banning sectarian outfits, crackdown on terrorist hideouts

and military operations in the tribal areas<sup>11</sup>. During the course of his reform agenda, he himself suffered two severe attacks and had a narrow escape.

It was an irony that General Musharraf was trying to raise enlightened moderation by sidelining moderate parties in the political process. In particular, the establishment of MMA government in the former NWFP and its alliance with (Q) League in Balochistan paved a way for extremist expansionism<sup>12</sup>. Although it was expected that the sectarian animosity would diminish somewhat because the alliance contained all major Shia and Sunni politico-religious organizations, yet the hope was misplaced since the alliance was based at best on political expediency, with each faction hoping to reap political gains and preferences. The MMA governments deliberately ignored the radicalization of extremist outfits in the outskirts of urban centres, in particular the valley of Swat.

In 2008, however, the political scenario changed following the martyrdom of Mohtarma Benazir Shaheed in a sabotage activity, carried out by terrorist network<sup>13</sup>. The new election brought moderate, secular and populist parties but the transfer of authority from military to civil government could not stop the wave of extremist challenge. In Afghanistan the Taliban resistance against NATO and ISAF forces gained unprecedented momentum, putting much pressure on Pakistan Army to conduct massive operations in the terrorist hub, the FATA, and other safe havens<sup>14</sup>. Every mainstream religio-political party opposed the military operations and demanded a pullout of Pakistani troops from Tribal Areas, in spite of the fact, that almost all urban centers of Pakistan were suffering rude shocks by terrorist operations. The office bearers, leaders and workers of liberal parties who were counterbalancing the religious right, were targeted in suicide bombing, indiscriminate firing and with planted explosives. The failure of coalition forces in Afghanistan had a spill-over effect on Pakistan and the country witnessed sporadic violence. In the remote valleys of Khyber Pakhtun Khaw, rival Sunni groups conducted a violent sectarian war. Armed clashes over differences in religious rituals became a routine matter. Furthermore, Sunni-Shia Strife in FATA'S Kurram Agency resulted in unprecedented devastation as the rival factions used sophisticated heavy weaponry, often reducing the paramilitary forces to mere spectators<sup>15</sup>.

Presently militancy has traveled from Durand Line (The Western Border) to Karachi (The Arabian Sea), a part of the forces of anti-Pakistan policy to take the fight to urbanite centers. The terrorist outfits have gained ground because of the local support, in particular Madrassas and religious splinter groups. Since 11 September 2001, Karachi has remained a refuge for trans-national network of Muslim extremist on the run and has harboured their natural allies, including sectarian groups<sup>16</sup>. Interestingly the terrorist of a certain organization slides into another group when their original organization comes under pressure.

The rising graph of terrorist violence and the upsurge of religious extremism is also linked to the "war on terror". The India-American common-cause to destabilize Pakistan by mounting pressure from the western border is no longer a hidden secret now. Though the U.S officials remain worried about the state of law-lessness, religious violence and the abuse of human rights, however, they have been found directly involved in conspiracies. Even the media reports invariably accuse the U.S intelligence agencies of aiding the perpetrators to advance what they regard as their agenda of global dominations<sup>17</sup>. There is no denying the fact that Pakistan is showing tremendous

resilience in braving the Indo-U.S Siege and the attendant calamities, but one regretfully finds that the world community has failed to determine Pakistani problems. There has been a deliberate attempt on the part of our strategic partners to create dissension in Pakistan in order to achieve their strategic long-term interest<sup>18</sup>. But coercive policies will target and erode the governance, democracy and national unity in Pakistan. Extremist violence is endemic in Pakistan, presenting an abysmal spectacle of a fractured society as the prolonged extremist bloodbath and the internecine war does not seem to be coming to an end, so far.

There is no denying the fact that religious extremist menace in Pakistan is the direct consequence of a global standoff, competing strategies of regional power-brokers and our state's policies of so-called "Islamization", in other words, the marginalization of secular democratic forces. The tentacles of extremism in Pakistan are spread far and wide, and the conflict can be viewed in its most pernicious expression. Given the intrinsic links between Pakistan-based homegrown outfits and trans-national terrorist networks, and the unjust pressure mounted by our "strategic partners", both cannot be effectively handled without devising fresh approaches in our policies. The fight against upsurge of religious extremism cannot be won by military might only; rather it needs certain other vital steps to be taken.

#### **IV. Recommendations**

Religious bias in our society is built into official procedures. Employment rules and regulations of government departments require affidavits of religious identities. A national identity card cannot be obtained without a sworn statement of sect credentials. Same is the case with new machine-readable Pakistani passport. The Pakistani state continues to identify its citizens by their faith. Moreover, minorities and women are the victims of discriminatory legislation. The state is yet to repeal such laws despite repeated pledges doing more harm than good. Therefore, there is an urgent need to recognize the diversity of Islam in the country, reaffirming the constitutional principle of equality for all citizens regardless of religion or sect, and giving much space to inter-faith harmony. The government has to disband all private-run sharia courts and panchayats and take strict actions against the so-called "Muazazins" and religious outfits operating them. Arrangements should be made to purge textbooks of sectarian material that promotes or undermines specific sects.

As mentioned earlier, the capacity of the state to prevent and resolve religious extremist threat in the North-Western areas is hampered by the absence of a constitutional status for that territory. In Federally Administered Areas (FATA) which are run under a federally-appointed political agent rather than an elected representative government, the writ of courts and normal Pakistani laws do not apply<sup>19</sup>. However, customary tribal law is applied through the Jirga system, allowing the government to justify rival tribal groups settling their differences through arms. It has been witnessed off and on that in its dealing with local anti-Taliban lashkars, the government has offered substantial financial rewards for fighting Taliban and cross-border terrorists, which are misused and then are rather encouraged to form their independent militias. Therefore, the government needs to provide complete constitutional and political rights to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas by doing away with their special status and granting decision-making powers and local administrative and legislative authority to their elected

representatives. The setting up and linking courts in these area's to Pakistan's main stream Judicial institutions will help government to establish its writ.

There cannot be two opinions on the fact that terrorism in Pakistan emerges out of a profound sense of national grievances and religious mortifications, supported by both, internal and external sources of conflict. Hence, it cannot be eliminated through military means only, legal and political means are equally important. Therefore, it is essential to make and enforce new anti-terrorism laws such as the laws against incitement of violence or sectarian hatred. The present anti-terrorism legislation defines terrorism too sweepingly, covering even political strikes, political opposition and freedom of expression<sup>20</sup>. It is therefore opened to abuse and has been used to target political dissidents, religious minorities and marginalized groups. It should be understood that no country in the world has been able to fight terrorism with flawed legal instruments. Laws are not a substitute for political will because any inadequacies in the existing laws due to political mileage cannot be helpful to curb the menace of terrorism. The policy of enhancing maximum punishments for terrorism can change the situation.

Although, officials insist that most leaders of extremist groups, banned after they were designated as terrorist organizations, have been either captured or killed and their workers are on the run, yet these claims are at best partially true as the offices of sealed banned outfits have reopened or have relocated themselves. In fact, the banned outfits reposes their position by working with another name, but the identity or agenda remains the same. The rising graph of terrorist violence is also associated to police inability to pre-empt and investigate extremist outfits and their plans. The police on the other hand justify their negligence by saying that there is not enough force to protect all potential targets. Furthermore, weak prosecution cases filed by the police often fall to hold in the court. This inability of the police to curb extremist threat effectively underscores the need for urgent measures to enhance the force's organisational, technical and human capacities. The fact that the penetration in law enforcement organs by terrorist outfits is particularly troubling. In this regard Judges of the Courts have become the target of terrorist threat and are hesitant to hear cases involving religious militants. Many dreaded terrorists have been released due to weak prosecution and political interference. The verification process by low-ranking police personnel does not seem to be effective. Assigning this task to intelligence agencies will definitely result in combating terrorism more effectively.

Another important aspect of the uprising of religious extremism is the sectarian religio-political parties. These parties frequently use their political clout and official contacts to influence the cases against terrorists. It has been seen on a number of occasions that a high-profile arrest is made and the police spell a detailed indictment to the media but end up filing a toothless challan in the Court on the pressure of religious parties. Then in avoiding criticism, the police and intelligence organs either kill the suspects in "encounters" or give an opportunity to a particular outfit to eliminate their rivals. This only encourages the formation of another splinter group and promotes factional fighting. Furthermore, police crackdown on extremist's hideouts is also ineffective because often action cannot be taken effectively against them due to their links to mainstream religious parties. On many occasions, law enforcement agencies have traced that a few terrorists carried out anti-state operations from the headquarters of prominent religious parties, nevertheless the leadership of such parties kept on denying

from any association with such elements. It is an irony of fate that religious parties are not playing their role in furtherance of our national interests.

While discussing the role of madrassas in promoting sectarian strife, hatred to other religions and encouraging terrorism, it is a known fact that the ranks of extremists continue to operate their missions countrywide as madrassas host them with boarding, lodging and information. The unregulated seminaries are booming and the number of students is likely to grow even further. Instead of enforcing the proposed Madrassa Registration and Regulation Ordinance of 2001, the government has withdrawn the ban on madrassa registration. It is pertinent to mention that a madrassa can be registered under the Societies Registration Act of 1860 or other existing laws. The lack of meaningful madrassa reforms is matched by an equally inadequate effort to improve the deteriorating education system, which has radicalized many young people while failing to equip them with the skills necessary for a modern economy. Until adequate resources are provided and the public education sector is reformed and filterized, madrassas will continue to flourish the extremist mindset.

Time and again, whenever terrorists or extremists strike, the government gathers a group of Ulema and directs them to declare these terrorists acts as “Haram” and give a lip service for promoting harmony among the people. Law enforcement authorities on their part begin harping on the same old strings such as; the fugitives will be brought to justice soon. Television anchors in their talk shows “expose” conspiracy theories abound in Pakistan. Politicians stress on the need to invoke strict laws, but hesitate to play their role in the containment of extremist bloodbath by legislating in the assemblies. Therefore, until the government and the society changes their preference with a clear vision of our future, Pakistan is likely remain a center stage of the extremist conflict.

## **V. Conclusion**

Religious extremism in Pakistan is thriving in an atmosphere of intolerance and uncertainty for which policies and preferences of the successive military and civil regimes are largely to blame. The present democratically elected government has repeatedly pledged that it would eradicate religious extremism and the resulted terrorist campaign and transform Pakistan into a model progressive Muslim state. But unfortunately, in the interest of retaining authority or averting threats to the government, it has just done the opposite. Instead of empowering the liberal, democratic voices, the government has co-opted such allies who countered the progressive moderates and civil society organizations in the past. The governments’ co-option of extremist politicians and parties has intensified the conflict, as a particular religious bias in remote areas and western provinces continues to fuel the extremist bloodbath, yet claiming to be the bearer of true Islam. Indeed, it is very difficult to draw clear lines in a theological debate, in the present context, that which sect represents the true perception of Islam. But the most notable point is our society can devise ways and means to create an inter-faith harmony, despite government’s inaction.

An unequivocal strategic doctrine, giving out the broad parameters will do a lot to allay our partner’s undue pressure and apprehensions vis-à-vis Pakistan’s attitude. On the other hand, there is an urgent need to initiate a discourse on the present and future of the “war on terror” and its aftermath on global forums. In particular, the U.N.O has to play an important role in this regard to help member weak nations combat the threat of extremism



instead of giving a free hand to power brokers of the globe to make such areas their sphere of interest and influence. The U.N.O has to ensure that no major country will intervene into the political disputes within another country for strategic depth. The global community must not forget that religious extremism is not only a severe threat to governance, democracy and national unity in Pakistan, it has also all the classical elements and potential to insecure the sustainable security environment of the technologically advanced countries. Pakistan has assumed the role of a front line warrior in the global war against terrorism. The global partners should evaluate its crisis correctly by generating a fair and reasonable response, as any arm-twisting will be counter-productive.

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