

# The Upsurge of Religious Extremism in Pakistan

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Pakistan was acquired in the name of religion; it was not the objective to make it a theocratic state. Unfortunately, the current security threats to the very existence of this nation are inevitable upshots of religious extremism. This extremism has distorted the global image of the country and as a matter of fact the militants have put the future security of this country at stake. Religion has been misused rather than used in state construct of nation-building in Pakistan. Mixing religion with politics has not only induced a sense of insecurity among the minorities but very often has limited their freedom of expression. Religious cleavages in a state founded on religion have a limited role to play in the context of mass mobilization but slogans like “threat to the religion” are often exploited by the elites to mobilize the masses. This is true in the case of Pakistan. At various points of time in its political history, religion has been exploited to gain cheap popularity and fight political opponents. In Pakistan, religion has not only provided a political foundation to country but has provided legitimacy to military rulers.

Massive reformation in the government structures, education system and societal taboos would be needed to regain the confidence of the masses and the perpetuity in democratic processes and elimination of despotic tendencies in the political system of Pakistan. This paper attempts to analyze the genesis of religious extremism in Pakistan. At the end it also presents various measures for improvement.

The irony of Pakistan's history is that Islam, not only failed to embrace the country together, but also become the major source of identity crisis. It is in the name of Islam that the country has suffered some of its most terrible internal conflicts in the last few years. Pakistan has created an image of being the most potent source of religious terrorism, which poses a danger to peace and stability in large parts of the world.

The question is to how the Islamic state of Pakistan should be structured, or what the role of Islam should be in Pakistan, goes back to the date of its birth, while the Ulema and the religious society in general were always keen that Islam should play a key role in Pakistan. Islamisation can generally be identified as a holistic process of religious socialization flowing from Islamic norms, precepts and rituals. In other words, it underlines a process of religious orientation, indoctrination and enforcement of Islamic way of life, traditions and thought processes.

Pakistan has used Islam as a conjunct of its foreign policy ever since its existence. Pakistan first employed this strategy against the soviet forces in Afghanistan from 1979 onwards. Pakistan should have been able to wage its war against the Soviet Union without invoking Islam. But by making it an Islamic cause, Pakistan found it easier to receive financial support from Saudi Arabia and volunteers from various Muslim countries. Countries like United States and China which supported Pakistan's 'Islamic' strategy merely because it was directed against the Soviet Union, are now reaping its bitter consequences. However, Pakistan thought that anti-Soviet jihad had served it well, and after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989, started adapting the same strategy to suit its necessities against India, in Jammu & Kashmir. Over the years, Pakistan and Afghanistan have become breeding grounds of jihadi forces which are being exported with full backing of resource rich Muslim countries to conflict zones like Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, and to undertake specific terrorist missions against countries like the United States and India.

Pakistan throw its lot with the Taliban, a force which grew out of Afghan refugee students who got their religious and military training in Pakistani madrassas and started making their impact on battle-field from 1994 onwards. Various accounts would tend to suggest that Pakistan was directly responsible not only for the creation of the Taliban as a force, but also for their ideological and political motivation and their military training. Pakistan's objective could be to bring Afghanistan under the control of a friendly push-tun - dominated regime so that it could attain strategic depth against India, have a safe passage for Central Asia oil and gas pipelines, and get direct access to Central Asian Muslim republics for its long term political, economic and cultural goals. Pakistan's interior minister Moinuddin Haider, for once, recognizes these problems, **“The brand of Islam they are teaching is not good for Pakistan,”** he says, **“some in the grab of religious training is busy in spreading sectarian violence, poisoning people's mind.”**

Over the years, the western region of Pakistan and the southern region of Afghanistan became a vast network of training camps for highly motivated military youth to perform assigned tasks in Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the world.

Giving example of an impact of this co-operation between Afghanistan and Pakistan in the field of militancy and terrorism, Behroz Khan, a highly respected Pakistani journalist, points out in his report that the number of registered religious institutions in the NWFP, according to official statics, are above 1000. There are no official estimates of other madrassas run by individuals in various parts of the producing frontier and tribal areas (FATA), and the northern areas. According to conventional estimates 20000 Afghan students are enrolled in various religious institutions in the NWFP and the overall strength of students at these

seminaries is likely to be above 100,000. Officials in the country's security agencies believe that 15 to 20 of these religious institutions pose a potentially serious threat to law and order.

According to the national education census, which the ministry of education released in 2006, Punjab has 5,459 madrassas followed by NWFP with 5000; Sindh, 5,500; Federally Administrated Northern Areas (FANA), 1,193; Balochistan 769; AJK 586; Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (Fata), 135, and Islamabad capital territory, 77. The ministry estimates that 1.5 million students are getting religious education in the 13,000 madrassas. There were 150 madrassas in the Islamabad city alone. These figures could be quite off the mark. Commonly quoted figures range between 18,000 and 22,000 madrassas. The number of students could be correspondingly larger. The free room, board and supplies to students, is a key part of their appeal. But the desire of parents across the country is for children to be "closely controlled" and to be given a thorough Islamic education. Each madrassa has been supplied with pro-jihad literature, books on jihad as well as newspapers reporting from war fronts inside Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia and Kashmir. Most madrassas offer only religious instructions ignoring math, science and other secular subjects important for functioning in modern society. In many madrassas there are students from various Islamic countries.

The present day Pakistan shows an explosive situation, where there are suicide bomb - blasts every other day carried out by the militant extremists. These terrorist outfits are out there in terrorizing the whole nation leaving no place or nobody safe from being their target. The worrying some part of this whole prevalent situation is the complication regarding the character of the onslaught carried out by the extremists. Unfortunately, there are two main factors which have led to this sorry state of affairs.

Firstly, the terrorist outfits are no more just the Al-Qaeda or Taliban but now comprise of alliances and support local Pakistani Taliban, religio-political parties and various sectarian groups. These have all become part of the terrorist network in Pakistan, making the whole complicated and tough to handle. Secondly, the militant extremists have mostly been based in the tribal belt and their activities were linked to FATA region. But not anymore, they have now, especially after the army operations have now spread out to settled cities of Pakistan. Keeping in view the above factors, the current security situation is highly hostile and explosive. Pakistan nowadays is passing through a very serious phase. Along with terrorism there are number of other serious concerns in the form of poor economy, bad governance, sectarianism, fragmented and intolerant society, coupled with corruption and weak democratic trends. But, the threat posed by militant extremists is the gravest of all.

Pakistan can blame no one else for the backlash of its Afghanistan policy in terms of increased militancy and terrorism at home. Thousands of volunteers affiliated with the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Islam (Fazalul Rehman) or JUI (F), Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Islam (Samiul Haq) or JUI (S), Tehrik Nifaj Shariat-i-Muhammadi, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Kashmiri fighters from the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, AlBadr Mujahideen and Arab nationals from different countries have been trained in guerrilla and defence warfare in Afghanistan during the last two decades, and hundreds more to continue to report at the militancy camps in the Taliban-controlled areas of the country every month.

The activities of the insurgents have become a challenge to the state machinery especially the intelligence security agencies, as now the terrorists have spread out to all areas of the Pakistan and they seem to be changing their targets and strategy every time. The cumulative result of past blunders is that the whole country is in the grip of violence. The country has been isolated internationally as foreign countries are blaming Pakistan for not making sincere efforts to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorist and extremist outfits in Pakistan.

To understand the participation of Pakistani Islamic Parties in these training activities and the deep links between them, the following investigative report of a Pakistani journalist, Zaigham Khan -

**Among the Pakistani and Kashmiri groups receiving training in Afghanistan to fight Indian troops in held Kashmir, are volunteers from the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, an organization which was carved out of the Harkat-ul-Ansar, a militant outfit declared a terrorist organization by the United States. Harkat-ul-Ansar took over charge of the Salman farsi training camp in the Jawar area after volunteers of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, a military wing of the Jamat-e-Islami, Pakistani, were evicted from Khost by the Taliban in 1996.**

The common belief in Pakistan is that Islamic radicalism is a problem only in FATA, and that madrassas are the only jihad factories around. This is seriously wrong. Extremism is breeding at a ferocious rate in public and private schools within Pakistan's towns and cities. Left unchallenged, this education will produce a generation incapable of living together with any except strictly their own kind. The mindset it produces may eventually lead to Pakistan's demise as a nation state. A full-scale war is being fought in FATA, Swat, and other remote areas of Pakistan with thousands of deaths. It is only a matter of time before this fighting migrates to the Peshawar and Islamabad (which has already seen Lal Masjid), and then onwards to Lahore and Karachi.

India is a major victim of "Islamic terrorists" who not only want to liberate Jammu & Kashmir from India's "occupation" but have already enlarged their nefarious activities in different parts of the country. They even have an evil design to establish an independent "Islamic State" in the North-East region of India. They have been trained mainly in Pakistan and many of them belong to other foreign countries apart from Pakistan.

An interview with the Amir of the Lashkar-e-Taiba reveals the specific motivation and goals of this organization. An extract of the interview conducted by Pakistani journalist, Zaigham Khan, with Hafiz Mohammad Khan, Amir, Lashkar-e-Taiba, runs as follows :

**“There are Muslim organizations that preach and work on the missionary level inside and outside Pakistan, but they usually steer clear of jihad. However, not only has the need for jihad always existed, the present conditions demand it more than ever. Our jihad is confined strictly to non-Muslims, and particularly Hindus and Jews, the two main enemies of the Muslims. The Quran too has declared these two groups to be enemies of Islam. These two powers are creating problems for Muslims and for Pakistan. To my mind, Hindus are what the Quran terms as Mushriks (Polytheists). This Hinduism is the worst forms of Shrik (Polytheism) in which 30 million gods are worshiped. And from here Shrik has been smuggled to other nations of the world. Hindus are creating problems for us directly. If god gives us the power, we will enlarge the scope of jihad to include the Jews and Hindus who are the worst danger for the Muslims”.**

It all began not so very long ago. In July 1977 General Zia-ul-Haq overthrew Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, but he was confronted with some domestic resistance against his regime. He found it politically expedient to use Islam to legitimize his unpopular regime in Pakistan. In this Endeavour he found a willing ally in jamat-i-islami, an extremist Sunni religious party. Following the Saur revolution in Afghanistan, Zia encouraged Afghan Islamist groups based in Pakistan, such as the jamat-i-islami of Burhanuddin Rabbani and the Hezb-i-Islami of Gulbaddin Hekmatyar to launch the opposition movement against the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).

It is wildly believed in the Islamist groups that because of their strong resistance to the PDPA, the Soviet moved into Afghanistan to protect and strengthen their Afghan allies. Knowing the Americans strong opposition to the expansion of the Soviet empire during the cold war period, Zia intelligently maneuvered to entice the US to join his efforts to dislodge the socialist regime in Kabul. Subsequently the US extended political, economic and military assistance to Pakistani and Afghan Islamic groups to launch a holy war against the Soviet military which had intervened in Afghanistan. In other words, Pakistan emerged as the ‘Frontline state’ in the American supported military operations against the Soviet military in Afghanistan. Consequently Pakistan declared the Islam was in danger in Afghanistan and clearly gave a religiously emotional call for jihad to throw the infidel Soviet army out of Afghanistan, a Muslim country. Soon the Afghan refugees, who were mostly settled in camps along the Pak-Afghan borders, were motivated to join, along with other Muslim brethren, the holy war against the Soviet military in Afghanistan.

Pakistan situated in a region where fundamentalism has been posted, of late, as one of the most threatening questions. The process initiated by the Islamic revolution in Iran has even been internationalized by the Taliban’s victory in Afghanistan. At the same time, the rise of Hindu radicalism in India has further complicated the situation in Pakistan. Recently Islamic fundamentalism has risen as an alternative political phenomenon not only in Pakistan but also in the entire Muslim world. Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan is partly a link of this international phenomenon and partly caused by specific local regions. When analyzing Islamic fundamentalism, one must understand that the religion of Islam and Islamic fundamentalism are not one and the same thing. Islamic fundamentalism is a reactionary, non-scientific movement aimed at returning society to a centuries-old social set-up, defying all material and historical factors.

The upsurge in the fundamentalist support was witnessed on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2002. When over 70000 turned up for funeral of Aimal Kanshi in Quetta Baluchistan, Aimal body was brought from US where he was awarded the death sentence after found guilty of killing two CIA officers in 1993. Till his last breath he was very much proud of what he has done on the American imperialism. He has become another hero of the fundamentalists after Osama Bin Laden. Another sign of the growth of religious fundamentalism was seen on 24<sup>th</sup> November when activists of Lashkar-e-Taiba took over two temples for six hours in Jammu.

Al-Qaida spokesman, Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, said in June, 2002:

**“....We have the right to kill four million Americans, including one million children, displace double that figure and injure and cripple hundreds of thousands. We have the right to fight them by chemical and biological weapons....”**

Two countries, Pakistan and India, came into existence in the modern world on the basis of religion. The creation of Pakistan on august 14, 1947 represented the outcome of a campaign on the part of a section of Muslims community for a Muslim homeland. The primary objective was to have a separate country where Muslims in the subcontinent could establish a social welfare state for economic and identity purposes. But in later years we have seen a gradual transformation towards a more radical and orthodox Islamic state.

Religion has been misused rather than used in state construct of nation-building in Pakistan. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan is an important issue of international concern.

In Pakistan, as in many developing countries, education is not mandatory. The World Bank estimates that 40% of Pakistanis are literate and many rural areas lack public schools. Islamic religious schools, madrassas on the other hand, are located all over the country and provide not only free education, but also free food, housing and clothing. In the poor areas of Southern Punjab, madrassas funded by the Sunni sectarian political party Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP) reportedly even pay parents for sending them their children. In the 1980s Pakistani dictator General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq promoted the madrassas as a way to garner the religious parties support for his rule and to recruit troops for the anti Soviet war in Afghanistan. At the time many madrassas were financed

by the Zakat (the Islamic tithe collected by the state), giving the government at least a modicum of control. But, now, more and more religious schools are funded privately by wealthy Pakistani industrialists at home or abroad, by private and government funded non-governmental organizations in the Persian Gulf states and Saudi Arabia and by Iran. Without state supervision, these madrassas are free to preach a narrow and violent version of Islam. Pakistan, the country with the second largest Muslim population in the world, has seen serious bloody Shia-Sunni sectarian violence in recent times.

The immediate future is not hopeful: increasing numbers of mullahs are creating cults around themselves and seizing control over the minds of worshippers. In the tribal areas a string of new Islamist leaders have suddenly emerged: Baitullah Mehsud, Fazlullah, Mangal Bagh. An enabling environment of poverty, deprivation, lack of justice, and extreme differences of wealth is perfect for these demagogues. Their gruesome acts of terror are still being perceived by large numbers of Pakistanis as fighting imperialist America.

Pakistan needs to come down hard on these groups. It should also monitor the religious madrassas and expunge all hate related material from their curricula. The Pakistani government should also restore full rights of the minorities and make sure they are enforced. It is high time for Pakistan to remove blaspheming laws on the books which are designed to work against dissent and religious minorities.

Massive reformation in the government structures, education system and societal taboos would be needed to regain the confidence of the masses and the perpetuity in democratic processes and elimination of despotic tendencies in the political system of Pakistan.

There is a dire need to root out extremism and fundamentalism that pose a threat to the sustainability and stability of Pakistan. At this stage of economic turnaround, the country needs to focus on its socio-economic development activities. The Government should take serious and immediate steps to encounter the terrorism and insurgency in the country especially in Quetta and FATA. Firstly it is the only possible way to extend and provides education and install the development schemes because education and awareness is only hope which could to end Terrorism and extremism from the root level and stable economy of the common the people can stop their exploitation through these banned terrorists groups. Secondly the government should treat all the banned terrorist organization equally and also should treat Taliban's without discrimination of bad and good Taliban. The Government should carry out result oriented operation and should provide the security to people. Therefore these concepts can guarantee the prosperous and peaceful Pakistan. These above mentioned suggestions can ensure the development and prosperity of Pakistan. Pakistan can amend this worst situation through proper legitimate legislation and policies.

Short of any serious effort to reign in and de-radicalize the killers, Pakistan's existence will be in jeopardy. The terrorism and instability which has already engulfed the region will spread further. The menace will become global if any of these radical groups get its hands on Pakistani nuclear weapons or fissionable material.

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