Genesis and Effects of Religious Extremism in Pakistan

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Abstract

The religious notion of the fore-fathers of Pakistan and their vision for the role of religion in the national politics of this country was entirely different from the present day's radical views. Although, this country 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. In this situation, the whole society is terrorized and fear prevails all around. Furthermore, earlier on the militants' activities were limited to tribal areas but now they have reached to settled cities and towns. Even more disconcerting is the fact that in some cases these elements are winning popularity in the weaker segments of society. 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.

Key Words: extremism, Pakistan, security, religion, terrorism.

Introduction

It will not be wrong to say that in the present circumstance, the most potent threat that Pakistan faces for its internal security emanates from religious extremism. It is a pervasive, comprehensive, and over bearing threat that calls for a deeper look, examination, and treatment. Extremism in Pakistan has brought it a bad name and poor image in the community of nations. 'Islamabad's obvious strategic importance in the US-led war on terror and the extent of religious radicalization in the country have made Pakistan a special focus of discourses on religious extremism and fundamentalism' (Basit and Rathore, 2010, 11). Therefore, due to militant extremism the future of Pakistan's security is threatened.

What does this religious extremism stand for? It can be simply defined as an out right opposition to rational thinking in the field of religious teaching and learning. Its hall marks are:

- Subjugation of women with a relegated permanent secondary position.
- Absence or curtailment of female education.
- Confinement of women to the four walls of their homes.
- Total rejection of enquiry and research in the field of religion.
- Intolerance of difference of opinion and capitulation and elimination of dissent.
- Rejection of aesthetics and fine arts in daily life.
- Curbs on cultural activities.
- Creation and promotion of propagandist literature.
- Gross violation of human rights of the dissidents and opposing camps.
- Complete black out of modern knowledge.
- Disdain and scorn for modern technology.
- Maintenance of social and economic status quo.
- Endorsement of political exploitation.
- Regressive journey in the time tunnel.
- Ascendancy of human thought over their own interpretation of divine words.

'Extremism is defined in Pakistan in a number of ways, mainly in political, religious and social contexts. A lack of consensus even on definitions make it difficult to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, further complicating efforts aimed at countering extremism' (Basit and Rathore, 2010, 13). Unfortunately, 'religious extremism is the common prevalent factor in all the visible trends and patterns of radicalization in Pakistan' (Basit and Rathore, 2010, 11).

Genesis

If one were to find the root cause for religious extremism, the most important factor that catches the eye is the failure of orthodoxy to come to grip to the challenges of the modern world. Now-a-days, most of the conservatives are confused and stuck in the interpretations made of the religion Islam more than a thousand years ago by the founders of the four major schools of Sharia. There is no doubt about the professional competence, depth of knowledge, personal integrity and real life orientation of the leading lights of those four schools. They indeed were men of great eminence but it has to be clearly noted that their effort is only human and not divine. Secondly, their interpretation of Sharia was made in accordance with the requirements of that that age and it may not necessarily fit in each and every case of the contemporary globalised and technologically oriented modern world. In fact, Islam provides a comprehensive package of rule and regulations which is not rigid and it particularly encourages original thinking (Ahsan, 2002, 8).

It needs to be re-emphasized that the medieval great men of letter were fully conversant and had a command over all branches of prevailing knowledge. The general level of knowledge was fairly advanced in that era in the Muslim society as the scholars, researchers and scientist, in line with the momentum generated for the acquisition of knowledge by the Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) himself, were fairly up to date and innovative. And these founders of major schools had complete ascendancy over all types of available knowledge in the whole world. Scholastically, in any respect, they were not less than the Socrates and Aristotle and their work was of immense value. The trouble, however, started with two things, one, they were not followed by disciples of equal stature and secondly their lesser successors, for their own survival and dominance made their teachers sacrosanct. It is interesting to note the chain of founder of separate schools. The founders of the later schools were all associated with Imam Abu Hanifa who in turn was a pupil of Imam Jafar Sadiq. From this situation, it is evident that it was permissible to differ at that time and the difference of opinion based on principles was appreciated and used to give due regard.

This process of innovation and improvement could have and should have continued as elsewhere in the world, but the pigmies that followed these great names, saw their security in closing the doors to innovative research, knowledge based difference, and improved practices. The worst happened later on, it was customary to be competent in all branches of knowledge to be a member of elite club of scholarship previously but many of the bigoted followers severed their connection with the modern and improving knowledge and kept embedded in the centuries' old interpretations and teachings. After the shift of centers of advanced human learning to Europe from the Muslim world and with the renaissance and industrial revolution, the distance between the contemporary knowledge and the old stock of the knowledge possessed by the orthodox Muslims increased by miles every year and the failure of the orthodoxy to come to terms with the modern day life enhanced manifold causing ever increasing frustration among their ranks.

Situation in the South Asian Subcontinent

The miseries of the old schools of thoughts multiplied with the introduction of English language amongst the Muslims of the South Asian Subcontinent. The speed of growth of human knowledge and its spread especially through the English language had been so fast that most of the syllabi in the traditional madrassas soon became irrelevant for the functions of the modern state and the production and distribution process of the modern economy. This redundancy bred further frustrations and old guards chose to take up the path of armed struggle albeit with devastating effects for the general well being of the Muslims. In fact, the well being and welfare of the Muslims has never been their target, their sole aims in life has been the preservation of and enforcement of their old fashioned and redundant doctrines which they preached in the name of Islam but were diametrically apposed to the true spirit of Islam.

These elements stepped aside the Pakistan movement in United India. The movement had been started, pioneered, and led by Muslims with modern thinking that spread the celebrated ideals of equal opportunity of progress provided in Islam irrespective of the cast, creed, color and region.

These elements opposed the Pakistan movement as the promise of prosperity and equality for the common man may seriously challenge their yoke on their lives. Their brand of Islam was based on a set of rituals which could be easily sustained in United India and if a structure of Qazi courts was provided the whole gamut of Islamic life was achieved for them. They laughed at, scorned, ridiculed and castigated the leaders of the Pakistan movement who were promising a re-start of a Muslim state some what on the pattern of the city state of Madina established by the Prophet Mohammad (pbuh).

Post-partition Situation

Soon after the creation of Pakistan these elements realized their mistake and apprehended the enormity of the challenge to their theological hold if the new state would succeed in developing and flourishing into a modern Muslim welfare state. They planned a phased capture of the polity of the young state and succeeded in just a position of orthodoxy and conservancy through the adoption of the Objective Resolution soon after the death of Liaquat Ali Khan in 1951. This airy wish list was innocuously taken into as a set of guiding principles for the making of the constitution of the new state. It was first retained as a preamble to the constitution of 1956 and then gained its ultimate when made an enforceable part of the constitution by Zia ul Haq. 'Frequent disruption of the democratic political process in the formative phase of the country (1947-58) and inconsistencies in the constitution making process equally provided opportunity to the Islamist forces to raise slogans for introducing *shariah* law and Islamic system in the country as an alternate solution' (Sultana Razia (2008).

The orthodoxy made inroads into the state structure during the General Ayub's era (i.e., 1950s-60s). The orthodoxy was promoted as an undeclared state policy under the dictation of international force as an effective tool to fight against the onslaught of Communism. This policy got its justification and re-enforcement from the attitude of pseudo liberal intellectual of the new state whose half baked nationalism failed to appreciate the raison deter for the creation of the new state of Pakistan and who, with a comparable dogmatic approach, wanted to enforce a socialist set up in Pakistan as compared to enforcement of ill-defined conservative version of sharia propagated by the orthodoxy. Interestingly this opposing ideology wanted to use state as a tool for the enforcement of their doctrine. The support of state for the orthodoxy waned and waxed exactly with proportion to the intensity of the on going cold war through out the world between the capitalist and the communist blocs. The support had truly started in Pakistan after the start of Korean War and attained its first peak during the days of the Vietnam War. Internally, the reflection came with an open state patronage for the politics of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and the clear collusion between the military generals of the day and the JI. With the defeat in Viet Nam for American and with the formation of government by a leftist party, PPP in Pakistan there was a brief break in the state patronage, coincidently, this was also a healing phase for the Pak Army from the wounds of the tragic defeat at the hand of India and dismemberment of Pakistan. The state support re-emerged with the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) movement under international signals and through the so called permanent institution of the state. The hard core religious extremists played with the nerves of Z.A. Bhutto through out his stint in the office. He was conscious of his moral weaknesses and kept on conceding to the demands of the orthodoxy making them stronger and stronger along the way.

The Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 heralded a win-win era for religious extremism in Pakistan. The extremist elements were eulogized and fortified through mass media campaign and excessive funding by national and international agencies. A clandestine international net work was established to promote religious frenzy. The production frontiers were extended upward by broadening the cadre and inducting the Deo Bandi. Hitherto, the executing agency of extremist agenda was mainly the JI, who in their own right were a literate, futuristic and urban people. The opening up of cadres to the Deo bandi madrassas opened a flood gate for illiteracy, utter backwardness, rigidity and mediocrity, and their response was very enthusiastic to financial allurements. Salafi school followers had a very thin representation in Pakistan and were not very popular because of their aversion even to innocent pleasures of modern life. Their code of life did not suit or match the aspirations and moorings of an average Muslim of this country. They saw a golden opportunity to expand and swell their ranks with the help of the astronomical money provided by the foreign monarchy.

In 1979, the revolution in neighboring Iran also fanned extremism in the Shia segment. Ironically, the Shia scholars (Ulama) in Pakistan missed out completely on the true spirit of the revolution, its egalitarian message and its call for Islamic brotherhood. They took this as their personal triumph and wanted and worked for its export to Pakistan to settle their old scores.

'Having seized power illegally on the pretext of establishing an Islamic system, General Zia harnessed a conservative and fundamentalist notion of Islam to provide legitimacy to his unconstitutional regime. He relied on the Deobandi and Jamaat-e-Islami's interpretation of religion to impose his will on the country' (Saigol Rubina, n.d.). The ruler of the day, who was deeply steepened into orthodox Islam because of his descent and upbringing, opted to face this additional challenge yet again through extended cadres of the extremists. The results were devastating. The country took a blood bath of sectarianism but that was a temporary damage as the sectarian conflicts did not attract the common Muslims who by tradition, nature and temperament are peaceful, tolerant and strong believers in coexistence. The more lasting damage came in the shape of forceful entry of extremist organization in the political life of Pakistan. Through the newly gained wealth, luxurious transport and emboldened ranks and file, they started influencing the political life and called for a share in all walks of the life including the sensitive organization. Their demands were eagerly met.

'Jinnah's vision of Pakistan as a tolerant, modern, Islamic democratic state was later hijacked by religious elements who found in the new state an opportunity to advance their causes along conservative religious lines. From within and outside the State, religion was thus being used as a tool in advancing the political motives of religious parties and groups' (Murphy Eamon and Malik Ahmad Rashid, 2009). 'The state-led Islamization of society and politics resulted in Islamist organizations and clerics becoming greatly empowered. The main goal of such organizations is the complete Islamization of the state, so as to assert themselves strongly in the political affairs of the state. Most, if not all, of these organizations think that this objective cannot be achieved unless they control the state apparatus' (Ali Wajahat, 2010). The military-Mulla alliance which had erupted in late 1950s under the Martial law of General Ayub Khan reached its zenith under Zia ul Haq and the religious extremists became an integral part of the state apparatus. They were used to destabilize political governments in 1990s, the invisible hands played their role and they were taken as a medium of propagation of lofty state ideals and objectives. The religious extremists cherished this new found role and made best use of it, equipping themselves with the where withal for reshaping of state and polity their own way.

'Ideological extremism, along with its vicious by product, terrorism, is the primary national security threat facing most counties, including Pakistan' (Gunaratna Rohan and Iqbal Khurram, 2011, p.7). 'Radicalization is one of the major issues faced by the state and society in Pakistan' (Rana Muhamamd Amir, 2010, p. 17). Paradoxically the military-mullah alliance gained further heights during the era of enlightened moderation proclaimed by General Musharraf. The religious extremist were played and used as a medium both for expression and suppression of anti imperialist feelings pulsating in the country.

'The infusion of radical Islamic ideology into the civil and military institutions has also been a major constraint on the fight against extremist militancy' (Hussain Zahid, 2010). Pakistan lately has been a victim of terrorism due to the increasing religious extremism – 2007 turned out to be the worst year. Suicide attacks and bomb blasts have been a routine in the lives of Pakistanis; every other day these blasts leading to killings of hundreds of innocent peoples sending waves of terror amongst the masses. Since the actions by the government against militant, the main target now has become the security personnel. The alarming aspect is that these attacks are now not only limited to tribal areas but are being carried out in cities including its capital – Islamabad. 'Five to six years of experience of tackling terrorism gives a dismal hope of government's ability to eradicate violence and militancy. Rather it has come down from the tribal areas to the settled territories. The number and strength of the stock holders of terror have also increased' (Sultana Razia, 2008).

'Militancy seems to be gaining ground in Pakistan, judging by the perceptible increase in the frequency of terrorist attacks. The nature of the attacks is also changing, and reflects a new found confidence amongst militant groups who are graduating from ambushes to suicide bombings' (Azam Muhammad and Aftab Safiya, 2009). This situation reflects that the 'proliferation of militant sectarianism and the suicide terrorism have created important fault lines in the country's politics' (Musa Khan Jalalzai, 2008).

'In 1990s, the net work and capabilities of Al Qaeda expanded that led to its close links with different religious groups including those in Pakistan' (Haynes Jeffrey, 2006). 'At this time of growing religious influence in Pakistan, the geopolitical situation of the country provided another opportunity that put the religious groups in the driving seat' (Sohail Abbas, 2007). 'While these extremist elements might represent a minority view, their threat is real' (Mir Amir, 2009).

Role of Madrassas

'During Afghanistan's anti Soviet jihad of the 1980s, local religious leaders, or mullahs, translated an influx of financial support into a massive expansion of extremist minded seminaries, or madrasas, which trained a generation of students in Islamist militancy, In the post 9/11 period, a younger, even more radical generation has often prevailed over – and in some cases eliminated – tribal elders, thereby upsetting traditional political and social structures' (Markey Daniel, 2008).

Madrasas have a long history in Pakistan and in Muslim societies generally. They serve socially important purposes, and it is reasonable for a government to seek to modernize and adapt rather than eliminate them. International assistance to Pakistani education, especially from Western donors, however, should focus heavily on rebuilding a secular system that has been allowed to decay for three decades. Any international assistance for the government's madrasa reform project should be closely tired to proof that it represents a genuine commitment to promote moderate, modern education. 'The establishment, which had earlier remained neutral in this context, started promoting madrasa culture some 30-40 years back, in the 1980s to be precise. The same culture has given a boost to militancy in this society' ('Role of madrasas in promoting militancy discussed', 2011). Most to the 'Pakistani madrasas are seen as a catalyst promoting extreme views. Their role in shaping the views of their students and the masses and their affiliation with political, sectarian and militant organizations is viewed as a serious concern' (Rana Muhammad Amir, 2009).

Musharraf government did make efforts like many earlier governments of Pakistan to reform madrasas and also to make them a part of formal educational system of Pakistan, also the government made efforts to register the madrasas and decided to send back the foreign students studying there. A number of madrasas are taken as being indulged in training and producing militant extremists. Looking at the emergence of extremism in Pakistan, its origins are mostly traced to these seminaries and as to check extremist, trends there is a dire need to reform the religious educational institutions.

An Overview of Prevailing Situation and the Future Vision

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. In fact, it was first time in the history of Pakistan that the religious parties showed a strong dominance in 2002's election. The reasons for which are related fully a reaction to the invasion of Afghanistan by US troops in 2001 and secondly as to oust main secular political opposition parties, Musharraf brought the religious parties into mainstream of politics as to justify his rule to alarm the world of the increasing religious extremism in Pakistan.

'The results of elections of 2008 have brought a relief as comparing the results of 2002. In fact, during the election of 2008, the hard liner religious parties have generally been rejected. The MMA (Mutahida Majlis-e-Amal), which is a foundation of six religious parties, had attained fifty seats in the 2002's elected parliament, although, it also showed some presence in the assemblies of NWFP (present Khayber Pakhtoonkhaw) and Balochistan provinces' (Bajpaee Chietigj, 2008). This situation indicates that the people of Pakistan have greatly rejected the intrusions of extremists in the politics of Pakistan. It is now to be seen whether they are further prepared and ready to throw away their claims and control from the societal affairs also.

In comparative terms, the situation although abysmally bad is not yet hopeless when we compare it to the recurrent manifestation of religious extremism in Europe in the past millennium. The number of places of worship burnt and destroyed, the people, families groups and whole associations killed and annihilated the barbaric execution, and wars fought over a distressingly long period of nearly 900 years witnessed in Europe is many times more what we have seen in Pakistan. In fact, we compare a mole with a mountain when we talk of that. The realization of the ailment has been quicker in this country. Certainly the European experience has guided us in comparative terms and possibly we have to take a clue from their experience to overcome this problem.

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 out fits 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 out fits 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 any more, 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 critical 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. Suicide attacks have become as a routine in the lives of the people of Pakistan. There is immense insecurity and terror in the society. In the early phase, the terrorists targeted the security personnel, or foreigner or installation only, but now there is no discrimination as their targets now includes civilians, women, children and students. The hotels, market places, mosques even hospitals are no more safe. The activates 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. In the circumstances, one may ask that what is the possible way out of this quagmire? No doubt, this is an important question and for a better future, the country needs to focus on the following:

1. Moderation in society.
2. No extremist religious speech shall be allowed on loud speaker in any case.
3. Use of loud speakers be confined only to azan (call for prayer) every day and to Arabic sermon during the Fridays' congregations.
4. Minimum standards be set and enforced for religious authorship and orator ship.
5. The controversial literature of all schools causing hurt, desecration and fuelling fire is banned once for all.
6. Religious dictums be issued under a license from the government and not by any private board or wafaq (charity).
7. New mosques shall be built with the approval of the government and the local populace.
8. Education in Madrassas be mainstreamed.
9. Technical and vocational training for Imam, Muazzan and Khudam of the mosque and Imambargahs.
10. Gradual affiliation of the madrassa with government universities and colleges.
11. Community councils for religious madrassas.
12. Ban on inheritance in the stewardship of mosques and madrassas.
13. Emphasis on essence of principles of Islam in daily life rather than lip service without substances.
14. General spread of customary education by making it more productive relevant and result oriented.
15. Provisions of speedy justice to deny allurement to private courts established by the extremists.
16. Promotion of cultural activities and fine arts.
17. Encouragement of female education and female participation in all walks of life.
18. Re-opening of mosques to the female.
19. Government control of all new mosques.
20. Promotion of consensus based finding of the council of Islamic Ideology.
21. Immediate closure of all madrasas associated with banned militant organizations.
22. Media has to take a very responsible position and assume a very enlightened role.

'Islamabad needs to form both short and long term strategies to deal with the threat of radicalization that has so often led to terrorism' (Rana Muhamamd Amir, 2010). It is thus clear that the resolution lies in long term education and re-orientation of the people and the rulers. The process will be long and painstaking slow but there are not short cuts and better if the country makes a start on a long but a straight road rather than traveling swiftly but always in circles. True democracy also offers great hope and it may be possible to the debate on controversial religious issues in the parliament rather than decided in the streets. Serious efforts are requirement to lessen Pakistan's international image as fundamentalist, terrorist or extremist state.

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