Religious Militant Extremism: Repercussions for Pakistan

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Abstract

The gravest challenge Pakistan today faces is militant extremism which has left the society terrorized, fear prevails amongst the masses due to the ongoing suicide attacks leading to the killings of innocent people. Earlier Taliban, Al-Qaeda and local militant groups since 2001 were mostly based in the tribal belt but now have spread to the settled areas of Pakistan. Various sectarian groups and religious organizations have now also become a part of their network; together they have led to acts of violence and terrorism. Jihadi madrassas are also playing a crucial role in fueling extremism in the society. No doubt the prevalent situation is very complicated with so many groups, organizations joining hands in militant terrorist activities. Before it is too late, effective counter terrorism strategies need to be developed and adopted by both the provincial and the federal governments as to curtail the ongoing carnage of violence by the militant extremists. Various political parties, religious groups, sectarian groups, media and civil society need to develop consensus on the complete rejection to militarism in society. There is need to shun off petty differences on religious and sectarian basis. A unified society rather than a fragmented one will be the best resistance to the ever growing trend of militant extremism in Pakistan. Religious tolerance and moderation are the key words towards de-radicalization in Pakistani society.

Introduction

At present the most challenging threat to security of Pakistan comes from religious militancy and immense terrorism. The extremists and terrorists are posing a strong challenge to the writ of government. The economic, social and political conditions of Pakistan have further fueled extremism and terrorism. Pakistan a developing country has a weak economy, there is high inflation, unemployment, socially there is division amongst the moderates/liberals and extremists. Politically, there is instability, the role of military in politics and for most of the time the absence of democracy has deteriorated already poor and unstable political system in Pakistan.

The whole society is terrorized and captioned by these militants who have shown no discrimination towards civilian, women, children or students. No place is safe from these elements who carry out suicide attacks on government security
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agencies, public places, educational institutions and even mosques are no longer safe from them. Masses seem to be loosing faith in government in providing them security. This has bought about a poor image of the government in the eyes of the people. The credibility of the government is at stake.

Role of Taliban and Al-Qaeda
It was after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan that the role of Taliban and Al-Qaeda came to limelight in Afghanistan. Since then Al-Qaeda and Taliban have formed alliances with local militants in Pakistan leading to terrorist activities and a serious threat to Pakistan’s security. There have been large number of limited and full scale operations against Al-Qaeda and Taliban in Pakistan which have been to some extent successful and the government’s desperate attempts to control jihadi groups have been limited.

Various theories have emerged about the Taliban movement but the most common and wide spread is that, this movement was initiated by the young religious students who were studying in the madrassas in the surroundings of Peshawar and Quetta and there is evidence that their leadership came from the Pakistan based madrassas.1

It is believed that these students were educated in the Pakistani madrassas and were also supported by Pakistan. These students (known as Talib) were given their trainings of jihad against those who were not living according to the teachings of Islamic injunctions.2 The Taliban were a Sunni expansionist movement capable of creating sectarian problems in Pakistan. The Taliban have also been involved in sectarian riots in Pakistan.3 “In 1996, the Taliban trained in the deeni madaris belonging to the Jaliat-ul-Ulema-e-Islam,, and provided with military training and equipment by the ISI, capture Kabul and unleashed the worst reign of terror seen in this part of the world”. 4

The US accused Afghanistan for harboring terrorist networks including Al-Qaeda which was responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Afghanistan’s Taliban government was providing shelter to their leader; Osama-bin-Laden and top leadership of Al-Qaeda. After the military attack on Afghanistan, the US forces became successful in throwing the Taliban government within two weeks, but this act created many other problems. After 9/11 Pakistan became the frontline state in war against terrorism. Pakistan fully provided all kinds of assistance and support for the war against terrorism. As the Pashtun people of Pakistan opposed the Pakistan government’s support to US in throwing the Taliban government in Afghanistan, they held Pakistani government responsible for the killing of thousands of innocent Pushtuns on the other side of the border. After the departure of the Taliban government new security problems emerged in the region. “The military campaign directed against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan took on a different character. The organization was able to pull back its splintered forces in order to avoid conquest by a stronger attacking adversary, and to smuggle its
people into neighboring countries without having this appear as defeat, but rather as a desirable tactical withdrawal”.5

The Northern Alliance came into power in Afghanistan, which did not have good relations with Pakistan. Pakistan during the Taliban regime had been the strongest supporter of the Taliban against the Northern Alliance and Pakistan was one of the three countries that established diplomatic relations with the Taliban.6 “In the aftermath of the Northern Alliance victory in Kabul, large number of Taliban foot soldiers made their way into the FATA area were largely ignored by Pakistani counterterrorism operations so long as they did not engage in any untoward activities that either called attention to their presence or magnified the troubles confronting the Pakistani state. Non-native fighters have lived in and became amalgamated into the social structures of Afghan-Pakistani frontier since at least the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s”.7 As a result in the sensitive areas of Frontier Province, Talibanization has intensified, which has left deep impacts, that include growing tensions with and also between the various tribes and major attacks on security forces.8 After the fall of the Taliban government high level visits by the Northern Alliance leadership to India raised concerns in Pakistan regarding the relations with the new Afghan government. India opened its consulates in Jalalabad and Kandhar near the Pakistani border, announced aid packages and showed interest in investing in Afghanistan, thereby very successfully consolidating its position in Afghanistan.

“The Al-Qaeda or Taliban’s interpretation of Islamic fundamentalism, political power and socio-cultural transformation characterized an integral concern of moral consciousness for purely political resolution. It was a radical consciousness which arose out of deep qualms of religious and political awakening, which justified coercive methods for political ends. It took no account of human suffering and found its ultimate expression in the attainment of specific cultural and political goals”.9 It is mainly believed that the various Islamist jihadi groups are the products of unjust political, social and economic situations, and for this both Arabs and the West are responsible.10

Role of Madrassas
Traditionally madrassas were established as institutions of higher studies, where law, Islamic studies and philosophy were taught. There are large numbers of madrassas in Pakistan which provide free education, shelter and food to its students. As there is immense poverty and along with it there are large families, people send their children to madrasas. “It is assumed that there may be 40,000 registered and unregistered madrassas in Pakistan.”11 These madrasas have positively contributed towards the socio-economic uplift of the society, until 1970s, when many madrasas were involved in the production of jihadis for Afghan war; this also led to the induction of militarization into madrassas.
Lately, Madrassas and Islamic militancy have become identical. Pakistan’s active role in the post-Soviet Afghan politics and later in making and breaking of various Afghan regimes have institutionalized the role of the madrassas as well. President Zia-ul-Haq’s domestic policy of sectarian fragmentation of society and its militarization developed these traditional schools on violent lines rather than for educating the masses. Madrassas provide a traditional system of education in the Muslim world. While the welfare states assumed responsibility for providing the basic necessities of life to the people, the Islamic states deprived their masses of the right to education. Hence their societies got two or more education systems; one, where students were taught and trained in religious schools traditionally known as madrassas, and the other teaching both religious and secular subjects to befit their students for market oriented societies.12 “The institutional roots of “Islamic Fundamentalism” were laid when government funds were provided for establishing mosque schools (madrasas) in small towns and rural areas, which led to the rapid growth of militant religious organization. This social process was catalyzed by the Afghan war. As General Zia moved toward the construction of a theocratic State and brutalized civil society.”13

The general perception especially in the West is that these religious schools have jihadi literature in their syllabus and they teach and preach jihad with the main objective of producing holy warriors. This may be true with some but the majority of the religious schools are not involved in this act. The madrassas, that have jihadi culture, once the course is over, send the students to other places to get training in the use of weapons and guerilla warfare.

Indeed, the Taliban movement began with students who attended the religious schools in Pakistan. However, the supporters of madrassa system argue that most are charitable religious schools that have helped raise the literacy rate in Pakistan. Millions of poor Pakistanis and refugees from Afghanistan never would have had access to education if the madrassas did not exist.14

“The government wants to move against the madrassas because it is commonly believed that these institutions have been primary recruiting grounds for extremists in Pakistan”.15 “Musharraf vowed to crack down on madrassas, the religious schools where many Pakistani children receive their education and which have often been a wellspring of extremism. Pakistan has failed to deliver on those pledges; most madrassas remain unregistered, their finances unregulated, and the government has yet to remove the jihadist and sectarian content in their curricula.16

**Reasons of Religious fundamentalism in Pakistan**

The root causes of religious fundamentalism are a complex mix of national as well as international. However, a complicated scenario has emerged as a result of the merge of these two dimensions. On one side, the extremists have gained by better organization, and on the other hand, due to the “relative inaction of
governments to counter them, as well as the apathy of the masses towards their activities”.17 Muslim extremism at international level has different root causes than the rest. As ex-President Musharraf said: “The Afghan war of the 80s supported and facilitated by the West as a proxy war against the Soviet Union, saw the emergence and nurturing of pan-Islamic militancy. Islam as a religion was used to harness mass, worldwide Muslim support”.18

Since Pakistan’s establishment as a separate state in 1947, Pakistanis have struggled with the meaning of their identity. During the latter half of the 1970s Islam reemerged dramatically in Pakistani politics used by General Zia who toppled the government of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in 1977, and then to legitimate his rule.19 Under Gen. Zia’s rule, Islamization of the society and polity took deep roots. Though, the Islamization drive tried to project a universal Islamic vision, in fact it was based on Sunni interpretations of Islamic theology and law. This notion of Islamization was not acceptable to Shias. Shias viewed Zia’s Islamization as a threat to their social position in Pakistan. The cleavages brought out between Shias and Sunnis through the Islamization process led to a large scale sectarian violence. The different schools of thought within Sunni Islam like Deobandi, Barelvi, and Ahle Hadith, fought the American war against USSR in Afghanistan with the support of Saudi Arabia.20 As one commentator puts it that “For Zia, these measures worked as a bulwark against the democratic process and freedom of the common man; and for religious groups it was a clean sweep against all liberal groups and thoughts, be those democratic or socialist. The changes strengthened the forces of religious fundamentalism to such an extent that none of the later governments elected or otherwise could reduce their influence.”21

The Americans were concerned only with winning the war in Afghanistan and defeating the Soviet Union, but the Saudis had ideological and sectarian aims because of the fear of Islamic Revolution in Iran and its effects in the neighboring countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan seemed to be an ideological battleground for Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi backed Deobandi seminaries became powerful on receiving their share of Zakat from the government of General Zia. Thousands of Pakistani Mujahideen had also participated in the jihad and returned to Pakistan after the defeat of the Soviet Union. These trained fighters joined various radical Islamic organizations, some of which became involved in Kashmir struggle.22 After 1989, the empowerment of the Deobandis took up momentum as the jihad in Kashmir was restricted to Deobandis and Ahle Hadith. The surrender of internal sovereignty to these militias happened first in the NWFP and the Tribal Areas; it later extended to a number of cities in Punjab and, in particular Karachi. Increasingly the youth joining the jihad were made conscious of the fact that somehow Pakistan had not enforced true Islam and that Pakistanis were living like infidels. More enmity was shown towards the Shia community. It is quite certain that at the level of jihadi leadership, the jihad was motivated by financial gains. Almost all the religious leaders possessed a considerable amount of wealth, which they shared with the
state machinery in Pakistan and not in sufficient measure with the young recruits who fought the war. The same is true for the sectarianism that is an offshoot of fundamentalism in Pakistan. The leader who plans the killings and motivates the youth is working for money but the man who actually kills is being motivated on religious passion. Jihad and the consequent militarization of Islam have inflicted permanent damage on civil society and state institutions in Pakistan. As to finance their militancy since the Afghan jihad several religious groups in Pakistan are involved in the business of drug trafficking. The proliferation of sectarian organizations and their interpretations of the concept of Jihad actively supported by the establishment crippled the civil society in Pakistan. Many times both Benazir and Nawaz Sharif succumbed to religious rights but the democratic era (1988-1999) could not curb this menace effectively. Under Nawaz Sharif, extremist Sunni parties gained more power.

Apart from the Islamization and its production of Ulemas in our society, there is another root cause of extremism. Former President Musharraf explains this root cause. “We need to understand that the root cause of extremism and militancy lies in political injustice, denial and deprivation. Political injustice to a nation or a people when combined with stark poverty and illiteracy makes the explosive mix leading towards an acute sense of deprivation, hopelessness and powerlessness. A people suffering from a combination of all these lethal ills are easily available cannon fodder for the propagation of militancy and the perpetration of extremist and terrorist acts.”

FATA today is devastated due to the ongoing militancy; this area is Pakistan’s most under developed and poor region. As there have been no major developments, the feelings of political alienation and economic deprivation have led to discontentment towards the government in this region. This has led to the growth of militant extremism in FATA. The same religious extremism is threatening the northern part of Pakistan.

Dr. Riffat Hussain gives further explanation and solution to the root cause. “The only hope of saving Pakistan from the religious extremists, the feudal tribal mafias, the corrupt bureaucrats, and the various types of opportunists and fortune-hunters is the emergence of an educated group of persons who understand Islam to be a religion of justice and compassion, of knowledge and reason, of openness and peace.”

There is a dire need to root out the extremism and fundamentalism that pose a threat for the sustainability and stability of Pakistan’s development. At this stage of economic turnaround, we need to keep up the thrust of socio-economic development by effectively countering “the forces of obscurantism and by extending support to enlightened and moderate leadership”.

Reflections
No doubt Pakistan is now a days concerned more about its internal security rather than external aggressions. Whatever is happening in Tribal areas, NWFP, Punjab and Karachi is the cruel reality, is the result of Islamization that has produced extremists and fundamentalists which has shaken the entire nation. Pakistan is fighting an internal war of extremism, sectarianism, corruption, economic deterioration, poverty and illiteracy. The repercussions of extremism for Pakistan are very crucial to its security. The government needs to show serious commitment towards lessening of trends of extremism and should also adopt serious efforts to bring about moderation in society, as the founders of Pakistan were moderates.

The main political parties and also the major religious parties need to sit down together and condemn religious militancy with consensus. There is a dire need to chalk out a strategy to completely shun off the ongoing militant activities of the extremists. All physical and moral support to these elements must be immediately stopped by any political and religious group. Any one found having links with extremists need to be tackled in a very tough manner. No concessions on the existence of such groups should be allowed. Various political, religious, sectarian and ethnic groups need to show tolerance and respect towards each others views.

The state apparatus and the security forces need full determination to fight over the extremists who are carrying out large number of suicide attacks and killing innocent people leading to waves of terror in the society and damaging the security and image of Pakistan.

The need of the hour is moderation and tolerance in society so that the growing extremism is curbed, as to do so drastic reforms by the government for the betterment of its masses needs to be initiated. Economic and educational reforms can bring about positive changes in the prevalent weak society.

The madrassas all over Pakistan need to be under sever scrutiny, so that the madrassas preaching and producing militancy need to be cracked down, as this menace of militant extremism is no more limited to tribal or frontier region but now has spread out to other settled areas of Pakistan. Although madrassas have traditionally been playing a positive and noble role in our society but the religious leaders should not let the issue of madrassa reforms be politicized. Pakistan needs courageous and determined leaders and people to overcome all obstacles and difficulties in the way of eliminating extremism.

The time for discussions and debates is over, strict and stern action by the government to counter extremist forces is the need of the time. Before it is too late, the civil society, media, political parties, religious and sectarian parties and the government have to in a true spirit condemn and shun off any sympathies, support and links with extremists. Tolerance in society is required especially
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when it comes to the various religious, sectarian and ethnic groups prevailing in the society. A more tolerant society will definitely bring about more cohesiveness and unity in Pakistani’s fragmented society, which has on its part played a very crucial role in militarization in society.

The intelligence agencies of both provincial and federal governments and concerned departments need to have co-ordination with each other and should pass on the relevant information to each other in an effective manner.

To counter militant extremism in Pakistan, is not an easy task, it is an uphill task which requires strong dedication and commitment to the cause of eliminating the evil of religious militant extremism from the soil of Pakistan. More result oriented steps are required to curtail this fast growing menace.
References

6. The other two governments were the Saudi Arabia and U.A.E.
8. Dr. R.N. Trivedi. Ibid. p.251.
10. Dr. Iqbal S. Hussain. Ibid. p.261.
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