

Militancy and socioeconomic problems: a case study of Pakistan

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Terrorism has taken deep roots in Pakistani society due to a number of reasons including easy access to arms and ammunition, bad governance, marginalization of the rural areas and non-availability of justice. Moreover, a volatile geopolitical situation makes it vulnerable to all kinds of terrorist threats.¹ However, research into the causes of extremism is only restricted to the roots of problems and there is little understanding of the drivers of extremism among researchers, analysts and policy makers alike. Issues such as poverty, unemployment, poor health and illiteracy are important contributing factors.²

In the current highly competitive and polarized world, there is far greater awareness of economic and social injustices amongst the people. Social and economic inequities, limited access to education and other basic facilities, unemployment and growing poverty have combined to produce an atmosphere of despair which gives rise to frustrations and sense of deprivation and ultimately to outrage. This leads to the first phase of protests.

A survey of the current socioeconomic landscape of Pakistan reveals obvious deprivations. The gross enrolment in elementary education is less than 24 per cent, and 36 per cent of the population lives in poverty; about 400,000 infants die annually because of diarrhea; only 35 per cent of the population is part of the labour force.³

This paper is an attempt to explore this possible linkage between militancy and the socioeconomic situation prevailing in Pakistan. It examines the possible links between the incidence of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, health and radicalization or the growth of militancy.

Assessment of socioeconomic problems in Pakistan

Poverty is the biggest social problem in any society. The distinction between urban and rural poverty is important in Pakistan. Nearly two-thirds of the population and 80 per cent of the country's poor people live in rural parts of the country. Most of them do not have access to adequate basic needs of life.⁴ Moreover, poverty gives rise to various other social

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problems. Poverty allows members of that community to believe in and share despair, hopelessness, apathy, and timidity.⁵ It deprives children access to education and healthcare. A sense of deprivation leads to violence. That is why some people adopt illegal channels to get financial prosperity which they cannot achieve otherwise. Thus, it creates mistrust, chaos and depravity among the people. As a result, any extremist group can exploit them.

In Pakistan, poverty is on the rise. The *Economic Survey 2008-09* shows that headcount ratio in Pakistan is estimated to have increased from 33.8 per cent in financial year 2008 to 36.1 per cent in financial year 2009. However, this ratio is much higher in rural as compared to urban areas of the country. Moreover, inflation in Pakistan has remained in double digits since 2007. High incidence of poverty in rural regions can be linked to inadequate infrastructure, lack of opportunities and resources. Urban poverty remains lower than both overall and rural poverty because of the relatively easier accessibility to resources and opportunities in these areas.

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is the most backward region in Pakistan with 60 per cent of the population living below the poverty line. Per capita public expenditure in the region is one-third of the average for Pakistan. Poverty and lack of opportunities is a major contributing factor to the growing militancy in FATA.⁶ The fact is that poverty may assist in the recruitment of terrorists and will be one of the drivers of militancy.

Illiteracy is yet another problem of Pakistan. The literacy rate in the country was recorded at 56 per cent in financial year 2008; an improvement from 55 per cent in financial year 2007, showing a 1.8 per cent annual growth. Net enrolment rate has improved in the country during financial year 2008. However, it is still far from the target of 100 per cent to be achieved by 2015. Moreover, 45 per cent of children do not complete their primary education. Literacy and primary school enrolment rates in Pakistan are low as compared to the other regional countries.

According to the *Economic Survey*, 42 per cent of the population remains without any formal education; while only four per cent has degree-level education, with a major part of this four per cent having degrees without attending any university. Between the two extremes, 38 per cent of the population is below the secondary level of education (ten years of schooling), with 11 per cent having education up to the secondary level and only five per cent up to higher secondary level (twelve years of schooling).

There are only a few schools that offer decent education where only the children of the rich can enrol. The educational divide in Pakistan has created a deeply polarized society. The most prominent cause of terrorism is illiteracy. Many people can be misguided by some radical groups as they do not know even the basics of Islam. They exploit the illiterate people through the so-called Islam.

Healthcare facilities are even more dismal. About 400,000 infants die annually because of diarrhoea, which occurs when a majority of women do not breastfeed due to malnutrition or death during childbirth. Pakistan is one of only four countries where polio has not been eliminated along with India, Afghanistan and Nigeria. In the FATA, 135 out of every 1,000 children under the age of five die from curable diseases.

Currently, the rate of unemployment as per official sources is 7.4 per cent, but according to some private estimates, the rate of unemployment is 12 per cent. There are many reasons of unemployment like influx of machinery that has replaced manpower, lack of new industries and defective education system. But the impact of unemployment is serious and can even be dangerous.

A major portion of Pakistan's population consists of youth and a large number of young people who have the ability and are willing to work, are unemployed. Therefore, high levels of unemployment enable militant organisations to recruit also the better educated, mature and experienced young people of the society. However, the high desire for employment among the younger segment of the population ought not to be ignored. This desire represents a good sign.

Moreover, fertility rates in the country have decreased modestly. However, even the current rate of 3.8 births per female is still alarmingly high and will carry Pakistan's youth bulge well beyond 2025. Even in 2030, Pakistan's population under the age of 24 is projected to be 51.4 per cent of the total. This shows that in future Pakistan would be fortunate to have such a labour force. Nevertheless, if the government is not able to give proper education and livelihood opportunities to the future generation, it could facilitate a move by young Pakistanis towards radicalisation. It could allow non-State actors gain support for their militant agenda.

Corruption in government departments is deep-rooted. There is a lack of accountability due to which wealthy people are sure that they cannot be held responsible for their deeds. They keep on looting the national exchequer and find ways to legalize their black money. According to the

latest report of Transparency International, Pakistan has been ranked at 42 among the most corrupt nations of the world.

Conclusion

Poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, poor healthcare and corruption are on a constant rise and the real problems in Pakistan. Poor education standards, lack of economic opportunities, and unequal access to avenues for social and economic mobilization are usually present in a country like Pakistan that undergoes radicalisation among the young. Unfortunately, Pakistani society displays virtually all these symptoms. This is due to faulty domestic economic policy, employing top-down pattern of development, instead of economic empowerment of general masses through participation, incentives, training and education. Pakistan exhibits the above mentioned indicators which are warning signals that are known to increase the likelihood of youth radicalisation.⁷

However, positive attributes such as the high desire for education and employment among the younger segment of the population and the largely anti-extremist outlook of mainstream society ought not to be ignored; the situation represents a positive sign.⁸ There still remains the need of livelihood opportunities available for the younger lot. Improving the socioeconomic situation should be the top priority of the government. Cottage industry and self-business should be promoted. Agriculture is the backbone of Pakistan's economy. It should be strengthened by providing high technology and loans to farmers. Free of cost educations should be provided to children in villages. The overall standard of living needs to be improved so that militant non-State actors cannot exploit the volatile situation of the country.

Notes & References

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² Ibid.

³ *Pakistan Economic Survey 2009*.

⁴ "Rural poverty in Pakistan", IFAD, <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/web/guest/country/home/tags/pakistan>

⁵ Phil Bartle, "Factors of Poverty", Workshop Notes, <http://www.scn.org/cmp/modules/emp-pov.htm>

⁶ Shinwari, Nadeem, "Understanding FATA 2008", CAMP, October-December, 2008, www.understandingfata.org.

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- ⁸ Moeed Yusuf, "Prospects of Youth Radicalization in Pakistan: Implication for US policy", *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, Analysis Paper, Number 14, October 2008.