

Internal instability in Pakistan - ideological and socioeconomic perspectives

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Terrorism has taken deep roots in Pakistani society because of a number of factors that include bad governance, marginalization of rural areas, unavailability of justice, and easy access to arms and ammunition. Moreover, a volatile geopolitical situation makes it vulnerable to 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. Issues such as poverty, unemployment, health and illiteracy are important contributing factors, and while they are acknowledged, they are not analyzed sufficiently.² Socio-economic problems lead to the growth and sustenance of extremism in the region but ideological religious extremism, when combined with the social problems, make the ground more fertile ground for terrorism.

The Pakistani society is being governed in such a way that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the common man to earn basic livelihoods through acceptable economic, legal and administrative means. People feel deprived of their rights – a situation that can be seen in both civilian and military regimes – and thus look for short cuts to wealth. This phenomenon of the level and kinds of frustrations prevalent in Pakistan today needs to be understood to put the current situation into context.

In the 1970s and 1980s Islamization became a main tool of Pakistan's internal and foreign policy. It became an ally of the U.S. against the Soviets in 1979, when the western powers were supporting right-wing political groups against those having leftist tendencies. For instance, they secretly supported right-wing elements to curtail the growing influence of leftists and their cooperation with China, the Soviet Union, and socialist Islamic countries.³ This national vision, embraced by years of authoritarian rule and a deformed democracy, led to a weak institutional architecture that collided with the crosscurrents of sectarian, ethno-linguistic, and other domestic tensions, opening up Pakistan to further instability.

According to U.S. homeland Security Department of Intelligence and Analysis, the militancy dynamic varies across ideological and religious spectrums, geographical regions and socioeconomic conditions.⁴ In

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Pakistan, the state repeatedly used Islam as an instrument to maintain the privileges of the privileged, bolstering a patently unjust socioeconomic order and denouncing and proscribing any attempts at social change and threat to rule by branding it un-Islamic.⁵

In the current highly competitive and polarized world, there is far greater awareness of economic and social injustices amongst the people. Social and economic inequalities, limited access to education and other basic facilities, unemployment and growing poverty have combined to produce an atmosphere of despair, giving rise to frustrations and ultimately to mass outrage. Therefore, socioeconomic problems are important motivating factors for recruits at the lower levels of radical organizations. Moreover, a jihadi culture and mindset provides further inspiration and in Pakistan, these factors are often used as part of a political rhetoric employed by Islamists. It is unlikely that an exclusive focus on them will significantly reduce the attractiveness of terrorism veiled as a religious duty.

This paper thus, is an attempt to explore internal instability with ideological and socio-economic perspectives. It highlights the process of Islamization in Pakistan and also examines the possible links between poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, health and radicalization that translates into terrorism.

The ideological factors - Islamization

The processes of Islamization follow different routes depending on the context and the country since they adapt religion according to political, social and economic characteristics. Unlike other Islamic countries, Pakistan originated with the premise of a single religious identity. However, while Arabs recognize their Arabian identity as a pre-Islam construct, Iranians embrace their ancient history, as do the Turks and Malays, Pakistan by being defined as a state for Muslims, denies Pakistanis any identity that supersedes their religious identity.⁶ Therefore, with religion becoming a matter of belief and faith, the powerful elite can, and have exploited it for their social and political goals, thus remaining unchallenged in their control over Pakistani society.⁷

Whatever point of view one adopts, the history of religious ideology in Pakistan is as old as the country's existence. The religious extremism of today was also observed during the late 1970s and early 1980s because of internal domestic political changes and external factors such as the Iranian revolution and Soviets' arrival in Afghanistan in 1979. Since then, religion

has been used as a tool for advancing political motives from within and outside the country.

Although Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971–1977) had come into power with a socialist manifesto, it was during his regime that the process of Islamization initiated.⁸ Pakistan's emphasis on an Islamic identity increased in this time as Bhutto channeled Islamic aspirations towards foreign policy goals. For instance, in meeting these ends, Pakistan played a key role in developing the Organization of Islamic Conference and began special relations with Islamic groups and countries.⁹

Thus, the policies of Bhutto provided space to Zia-ul-Haq's military regime (1977–1988) when further steps were taken towards Islamization. Under this process, Pakistan's legal and educational system based on Islamic law, formalized the pre-existing state ideology into an official policy of Islamization.¹⁰ Five thousand madrasas (religious school) were approved and the syllabus of the public schools was rewritten with an emphasis on jihad and Islam. Moreover, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) paid the University of Nebraska, Omaha \$5.1 million between 1984-1994 to develop and design a curriculum to encourage jihad and about \$13 million worth of textbooks based on such a syllabus were distributed in refugee camps, schools and madrasas both in Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹¹

Therefore, madrasas mushroomed due to official government support and international funding. There were only 900 madrasas in Pakistan at the beginning of Zia-ul-Haq's rule, but the number had reached about 8000 registered and 25000 unregistered madrasas at the end.¹² At the same time, these madrasas linked with jihadi groups rapidly expanded as breeders of a violent jihad and a minority even became training camps. The narrow Islamic preaching created an environment conducive to sectarian violence and religious extremism,¹³ and thus with the orientation of militarization into madrasas, Pakistan also served as the key channel for the transmission of resources to the Mujahidin resistance to the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Additionally, Islamic education was included into the curriculum for army recruits as the military was also Islamized. Increasingly more religiously conservative officers were promoted to higher ranks and conservative mullahs (religious scholars) belonging to Deobandi and Jamaat-e-Islami groups were appointed to work with the troops. The close alliance that eventually emerged between the mullahs and the military became a persistent factor in Pakistani politics.¹⁴ Moreover, Pakistan's re-

gional policy began to be influenced by jihad, turning into a religion-dominated national security doctrine.¹⁵ Through the Islamization efforts, Pakistan became an important ideological and organizational center for a fundamental global Islamist movement, including its leading role against the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan, under the U.S. umbrella.

During this period, the West had to organize strong military support for the mujahideen to fight the 140,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Pakistan conveniently became the epicentre for jihad with finances coming from the U.S., Western Europe, Japan and Arab countries.¹⁶ Thus, the Soviet arrival of Afghanistan in 1979 gave a different taste of strength to both Pakistan and the region as religion was utilized against the Soviet forces, laying the foundation for an extremist religious infrastructure that served U.S. strategic interests. The pro-jihadi elements were gathered from around the world and as a result, first Afghanistan and then Pakistan became the home of a radicalism that began searching for new targets within and beyond the region.¹⁷

In addition, during the 1990s, Pakistan's leading politicians played along by outbidding each other in their commitment to Islam and support for the army's ambitions. Thus Pakistan also supported the Taliban regime in Afghanistan during the period between 1996 and 2001.¹⁸ As a result, Pakistan became the champion of a holy war with a readymade fighting force that could be useful for its Kashmir cause, either through a militant struggle or a UN-led plebiscite.¹⁹

But the strategic consequences of this policy were disastrous. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan paid a heavy price on many fronts, becoming tributaries and confluences of extremist influences.²⁰ Religious groups, armed or unarmed, gradually became more powerful due to the jihadi-military alliance, resulting in the radical and violent manifestations of an Islamist ideology that now threatens Pakistan's stability.²¹

Moreover, the U.S. invasion in 2001 in Afghanistan has played a part in the further radicalization of Pakistan. A strong anti-Americanism can easily be exploited by groups such as the Taliban – an explicit example of this very real threat being the ongoing Taliban insurgency in Pakistan's northwestern areas.²² In the post-2001 era Pakistan has banned a number of militant groups, and arrested and killed key al-Qaeda members and other militants, following pressure from the international community and also from a domestic realization that the very survival of the country was at risk.²³

In the current circumstances, the Islamists are not content with having a secondary role in national affairs and have acquired a political momentum of their own. In 2007, most of the militant groups emerged under the umbrella known as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and have targeted government agencies and organization, particularly the army, and have continually challenged the writ of State.²⁴

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What has also emerged since is a recognition from the highest authorities that the current situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan owes much to the U.S. role in the region's not too distant past. The U.S. left behind a broken Afghanistan and a restive jihad after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. In May 2009, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged the weaknesses of that strategy, apologizing for its role and admitting that Pakistanis have been bearing the brunt of incoherent U.S. policies for the past thirty years.²⁵

In nutshell, the present instability in the country finds its roots in the policies and alliances since 1979 as the war in Afghanistan gave rise to religious extremism and militancy inside Pakistan and the past has come back to haunt the country. Since January 2007, Pakistan has been rocked by 238 suicide bombings conducted by various groups and have taken close to 3,774 lives.²⁶ By April 2009, such events had become so commonplace that the international community even began talking about Pakistan's disintegration and it was apparent that strong was needed. Since early May 2009, military operations began in border regions against established militant groups at a massive scale, resulting in the displacement of nearly 2.5 million people.²⁷

Ideological factors through the process of Islamization are considered to be the root causes of religious terrorism in Pakistan. However, socio-economic problems cannot be ignored since they create an environment that is favorable insurgencies to succeed. The country is reeling under abject poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and lack of livelihood opportunities and a worsening law and order situation further acts as a

driver of extremism, pushing disgruntled and frustrated youth towards militant camps.²⁸ Thus socioeconomic conditions need to be given equal, if not dominant space in any national security policy.

Socioeconomic conditions in Pakistan

In Pakistan, while backwardness is common, it is more endemic in the rural areas. With few livelihood opportunities, even in this modern age there parts of the country that present a gloomy picture reminiscent of medieval ages. It ranks 125 out of 169 countries in the Human Development Index for the year 2010 due to its poor social indicators.²⁹ In addition, socioeconomic polarization presents the greatest threat to stability. The urban elite are modernized and privileged while the poorer classes are marginalized as a dysfunctional public education system serves only students from the lower classes, thus widening social gaps further.

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The prevailing conditions present an environment favorable for extremism. A quick statistical survey reveals obvious deprivations in this case. The net enrollment rate - the overall school attendance - is 57 per cent and about 40 million of the population lives in poverty; 400,000 infants die annually because of diarrhea³⁰ and only 37 per cent of the population is part of the employed labour force.³¹ Dr. Fehmida Mirza, Speaker National Assembly for instance, notes that that terrorism and extremism are the biggest threats to peace and stability in the region and poverty, illiteracy and unemployment are the main causes.³²

Poverty

Poverty is the biggest social problem in any society, giving rise to various other social problems, creating a bond between large segments that share despair, hopelessness, apathy, and timidity.³³ The distinction between urban and rural poverty is important. Nearly two thirds of the population and 80 per cent of the country's poor people live in rural areas and most do not have adequate access to basic needs of life,³⁴ thus compelling many to turn to illegal channels for financial security.

Poverty in Pakistan is on rise; the Economic Survey of 2008-09 shows that headcount ratio (HCR) is estimated to have increased from 33.8 per cent in financial year 2008 to 36.1 per cent in 2009, with the ratio much higher in rural areas. Moreover, the rise in food prices is particularly worrisome because food price inflation hits the poor hardest. Inflation has an immediate impact on poverty and has been in double digits since 2007, increasing to 23.7 per cent in 2008-09, which is an alarmingly high figure.³⁵ Rural poverty can further be linked to inadequate infrastructure and lack of economic opportunities and resources, while urban poverty remains lower than both overall and rural poverty because of relatively easier access.

Pakistan is one of 43 developing countries that have been seen poverty rising as a result of the recent global financial crisis. About two-thirds of all Pakistanis live on less than two dollars a day and the average total family income amounts to \$429. Thus, 64 million people were living below the poverty line in 2008, compared to 35.5 million in 2005, a shocking statistic out of line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). About 50 per cent of the rural population - some 65 per cent of the total population - is defined as poor. Even urban poverty is significantly higher than that in other regional countries.³⁶

According to a former Finance Minister, while Pakistan had a 6-8 per cent growth rate in the first seven years of the last decade, a trickle-down did not actualize as it did nothing to alleviate poverty.³⁷ People living in such extreme poverty are thus likely to be frustrated, if not outraged, at the positive effects of national growth among the richer segments, thus becoming vulnerable to extremist ideologies if political inclusion does not replace the current system of oligarchic rule.

The tribal areas in the country are a prominent case in point. They have historically suffered from basic development gaps and some of the poorest social and economic conditions in the country and weakest government institutions are present there. FATA is the most backward region in Pakistan with 60 per cent of the population living below the poverty line and per capita public expenditure a dismal one-third of the average for Pakistan. Clearly, this has played a leading role in the growing militancy in the region.³⁸

Illiteracy

If one considers illiteracy and content of education as a driver of conflict and extremism, then the situation for Pakistan seems bleak. The literacy rate was recorded at 57 per cent in financial year 2009-10, showing slight improvement from 56 per cent in 2008-09 - a 1.8 per cent annual growth.³⁹ Net enrolment rate improved as well but is still far away from the ambitious 100 per cent target to be achieved by 2015. In Pakistan, 45 per cent primary school children drop out of school and a World Bank report asserts that nearly half the adult population of Pakistan can't read, with net primary enrollment rates the lowest in South Asia.⁴⁰ According to the Economic Survey of 2009-10, 42 per cent of the population has no formal education, only 4 per cent has degree level education, while many having degrees without attending any university. Between the two extremes, 38 per cent of the population is below matriculation level, with 11 per cent having education up to matriculation and only 5 per cent up to higher secondary level.⁴¹

Pakistan spends 2.6 per cent of its GDP on education but a lot more needs to be done. About 45 per cent children drop out of school without completing their elementary education, while one-fourth of the elementary school teachers are untrained.⁴² Moreover, basic infrastructure in many schools is missing - 37.7 per cent schools up to elementary level are without boundary walls, 33.9 per cent without drinking water facility, 37 per cent without latrines and around 60 per cent without electricity.⁴³

There are also differences among districts in the provinces. Although in Punjab the average literacy rate is more than 56 per cent, underdeveloped districts like Rajanpur (28 per cent), Muzaffargarh (33 per cent), Dera Ghazi Khan (37 per cent) and Rahimyar Khan (38 per cent) suffer from low educational standards and high unemployment and illiteracy rates.⁴⁴ Similarly, in other provinces, literacy rate is high in urban areas as compared to rural areas.

Unsurprisingly, there are remarkable differences too between the provinces. In Balochistan there is an overall 62.82 per cent illiteracy rate and 90 per cent of the rural women are illiterate.⁴⁵ According to official data, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), male literacy is 29.5 per cent and female literacy only 3 per cent.⁴⁶ This educational divide has created a deeply polarized society and a result, a vast majority is misguided by radical ideologues, with little understanding of the true principles of Islam. And this is not a marginal matter. In a survey of 1,050

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FATA residents, nearly 45 per cent of the respondents thought illiteracy was the main factor responsible for the current religious extremism.⁴⁷

Education institutions are also characterized by poor-quality of teaching and learning. Decent education is available to those who can afford it while poor standards in government schools mean that their students are ill-prepared for the job market. This is a much larger threat

than that posed by minority of extremist madrasa cadres that can perpetrate violence, but have no potential to infuse the society.⁴⁸

Therefore, Pakistan's poor education system, which in turn limits economic opportunities, makes young generation targets of militant groups. The educational system suffers from inadequate government investment, corruption, lack of institutional capacity, and a poor curriculum that often incites intolerance. Militant groups thus have exploited this weakness for their own ends,⁴⁹ and it is only the State neglecting its social responsibilities that should be blamed for the abysmal state of affairs.

Unemployment

Currently, the official rate of unemployment is 7.4 per cent but private estimates also rate it as high as 12 per cent.⁵⁰ There are many reasons for unemployment, including machinery replacing manpower and lack of new industrial development, and the impact can be serious and dangerous. Emigration, both legal and illegal, becomes commonplace and effects of militancy are also undeniable. The Taliban for instance, give a monthly salary of rupees Rs. 15,000, which is significantly higher than what many earn – including the tribal levies who earn a monthly salary of Rs. 3,500 per month.⁵¹ Clearly, the economic attraction of extremism would overpower other considerations for a large number of dissatisfied, frustrated and marginalized individuals.

With a median age of around 20 years, Pakistan is a young country and it is estimated that there are currently approximately 104 million Pakistanis below the age of 30. The total working age population is 121.01 million, with the size of the employed labour force estimated at 52.71

million as of 2008 - 09.⁵² Therefore, high levels of unemployment enable militant organizations to recruit even the more educated youngster. However, the desire for legal and honorable employment among the younger segment of the population ought not to be ignored as these are not people fighting against the State due to religious dogmas, but rather reacting against State failure.

While fertility rates in the country have decreased modestly, 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 while there will be a large labour force, if the government is not able to give proper education and livelihood opportunities, there will be a new demographic trajectory towards radicalization and allow non-state actors to gain support for their militant agendas.

The ratio of youth is a significant and ironically troubling demographic feature of Pakistan's population. About 63 per cent of the population is less than 25 years old and often lacks access to basic education and employment. Rising militancy and deteriorating socio-economic conditions have caused frustration, particularly among the youth in conflict-hit areas.⁵³ Most insurgencies are an outcome of a deep dissatisfaction and disappointment with political, social and economic realities, where people citizens feel helpless due to current arrangement.⁵⁴ This frustration ultimately changes into violence – a situation we see in Pakistan today.

Healthcare

Healthcare facilities in Pakistan are also miserable. About 270,000 out of 53 million babies born in the country die before they are one month old. Each year an estimated 17,000 mothers die from pregnancy-related diseases. Ten per cent of these die on their way to a healthcare facility because of inadequate modes of transportation. Pakistan is one of only four countries, together with India, Afghanistan and Nigeria, where polio has not been eliminated, and in the FATA, 135 out of every 1,000 children under the age of five die from curable diseases.⁵⁵

In addition, water and sanitation related diseases are responsible for 60 per cent of child deaths. There is one doctor for every 1,300, one specialist for every 15,000, and one nurse for every 30,000 people. There has not been a shortage of doctors in the country but more than 45 per cent of

Pakistani medical graduates have left the country for better opportunities.⁵⁶ Their emigration results in the wastage of millions of dollars spent by the government on their training, while buttressing the already strong healthcare systems of many Western countries.

Corruption

Corruption has been a major problem in Pakistan and remains a primary obstacle to large-scale economic development. Corruption in government departments is deep-rooted and systematic, preventing honest people from entering the fold and there is a lack of accountability, due to which public offices suffer a bad name.

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The Global Competitiveness Report (2007-2008) shows corruption as the third major issue preventing companies from doing business in Pakistan, after government bureaucracy and poor infrastructure.⁵⁷ According to a latest report by Transparency International, Pakistan has been ranked 42 among the most corrupt nations of the world. From clerical staff to higher offices and bureaucrats, corruption of one kind or the other is widespread.

Conclusion

Pakistan today is the product of its past policies. Particularly, it is the Islamization policies of Zia's period that still impinge upon the country's stability. They have in fact exerted an incredibly negative influence on the stability of the entire region. International donors have utilized their money to spread a radical Islamic mindset- the Wahhabi teachings for instance, which are behind the current instability in the country. On the other hand, socioeconomic problems are constantly rising and essentially the real drivers of most inconsistencies in Pakistan. Poor education standards, lack of economic opportunities and unequal access to avenues for social and economic mobilization are usually present in any country that undergoes radicalization among the youth. In Pakistan, they reign supreme. The inability of the government to deliver basic services, education, justice, and economic opportunities, even in those areas not

directly threatened by an insurgency, fuels frustrations, and creates apprehensions that violence may soon spread far and wide.

The Pakistani society displays virtually all the symptoms of instability. This is due to faulty internal policies, lack of livelihood opportunities, employing top-down patterns of development instead of economic empowerment of the masses through participation, incentives, training and education. There are many regions where people are living miserable lives. However, most of these regions, such as rural areas in Sindh and Balochistan, remain peaceful and non militant. Yet it provides an environment that is favorable for Taliban recruitment, and that is a realistic possible eventuality that needs to be avoided through social, political and economic incentives and integration.

The need of the hour is to make internal policies based on tolerance and moderation to counter extremism and drastic reforms need to be initiated. Economic and educational reforms can bring about positive changes and madrasas need to be under severe scrutiny so that radical preaching is tackled since it is no more limited to tribal or frontier areas but has spread to other settled areas as well. The government needs to eliminate madrasas that are used for training and recruiting militants, but the solution is really in creating alternatives through public or private schools that deliver better quality education based on both religious and formal basis.

However, positive attributes such as the 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, and this provides space for effective policies to work. There remains the need to create livelihood opportunities and for improving socioeconomic indicators – this should indeed be the top priority of the government. Cottage industry and self-business should be promoted. Agriculture is the backbone of Pakistan's economy and needs to be strengthened by providing technology and loans to farmers while free education should be provided to rural children. Any solutions aimed at stabilizing Pakistan should focus not just on the internal security but address long-standing socioeconomic issues as well in order to counter non-state actors and their recruitment agendas.

In addition, the government has not yet cashed in on the geo-strategic importance of troubled areas, particularly Malakand and FATA, by utilizing a potential trade route between Central Asia and China. Pakistan can get maximum profit in the shape of transit fee because the energy-rich

Central Asian countries can easily access to this trade route, while on the other hand common people will get multiple livelihood opportunities – this, therefore, becoming a strategy to not only bring prosperity in the regions but also bridging Pakistan’s fiscal and trust deficits.

Commentators argue that Pakistan’s entire education system needs reform in order to address increasing class inequalities, the polarization of society, and divisions along sectarian and ethnic lines. Furthermore, the government should immediately start infrastructural development and industrialization in the underdeveloped regions by utilizing their natural resources. The U.S., Western Europe, Japan and Arab countries have spent millions of dollars in spreading a jihadi mindset that now plagues Pakistani society; now it is also the responsibility of international community to help Pakistan in removing this problem. Therefore, it should provide help not just in the form of loans, grants and financial assistance, but also in building and investing in economic zones in areas that have been rehabilitated.

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