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EXTREMISM IN PAKISTAN: ASSESSING THE DRIFT AND TRENDS

SHALINI CHAWLA

The last seven decades have witnessed Pakistan's drift into extremism and its inclination to support extremist ideology and terrorism as a state policy. Although the intensity of the drift and the nation's reliance on extremism has varied under different regimes, the journey has been consistent. Today, Pakistan is witnessing an alarming security challenge, with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) conducting relentless attacks targeting the security personnel. According to the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, in 2023, Pakistan faced a 65 percent increase in terrorism related fatalities; and 306 terrorist attacks took place in 2023 which killed 693 people, including 330 security personnel. The TTP, which has targeted primarily the defence and security personnel, is the most active and lethal militant group, posing a formidable challenge to Pakistan's civilian leadership and the all-powerful military. The reports on killings on account of blasphemy have been more frequent in Pakistan in recent times. There has been a surge in the youth wanting to migrate from the country due to lack of opportunities and, to an extent, the fact that the Pakistani passport today is ranked as one of the worst in the

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world.¹ Given these dynamics, it would be useful to look into Pakistan's drift into extremism, the developments in the last five years and, very importantly, to seek answers to the critical question of whether Pakistan is equipped to handle these developments.

DEMAND FOR A SEPARATE HOMELAND FOR MUSLIMS

Pakistan was born as a demand for a separate homeland for Muslims as the All India Muslim League, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, strongly argued that Muslims had a special identity which would not be able to survive in a Hindu dominated society, thus, a separate homeland for Muslims was the only solution.

In his famous speech before the Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947, Jinnah outlined his vision:

You are free; you are free to go your temples, you are free to go your mosques or to any other place of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the state....We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state...²

Jinnah's dream was of a modern state where Muslim culture and social norms could be promoted freely. The Muslim League was looking for a Muslim homeland and the thought at the time of the conceptualisation of Pakistan (if at all considered!) was of liberal Islam. For Jinnah the *two-nation theory* was the justification for the creation of Pakistan. But, Pakistan, over the decades, completely drifted away from Jinnah's spirit. It never inherited a uniformed vision, and there were contesting ideas. Many of Pakistan's political elites were uncertain about the role of Islam in defining the nation's constitutional foundations.³ It took the policy-makers close to a

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1. Henley & Partners, Henley Passport Index 2024 September Global Ranking.pdf, <https://cdn.henleyglobal.com/storage/app/media/HPI/Henley%20Passport%20Index%202024%20September%20Global%20Ranking.pdf>. Accessed on September 20, 2024.
 2. *Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah's Speeches as Governor-General of Pakistan 1947-48*, (Karachi: Government of Pakistan, 1964).
 3. Farzana Shaikh, *Making Sense of Pakistan* (London: Foundation Books, 2009), p. 5.

decade to formalise the Constitution of Pakistan which dissolved Jinnah's spirit of secular Islam. There was clear lack of consensus on the meaning of Islam. Farzana Shaikh puts it very aptly:

While Jinnah's political successors, plagued by uncertainty about the public role of religion, were content to acknowledge Islam as a fundamental component of the country's identity, the religious parties pressed for Islam to be embodied in an Islamic state, although they were too notoriously vague about what that entailed.⁴

Lack of consensus on the issue gave the political and military leadership enough space to exploit the factor of religion to serve their own interests. While it was looking to define its identity, the country also struggled with multiple insecurities and threat perceptions. Internally, Pakistan faced rebel and separatist voices within from the time of its creation from Balochistan and the erstwhile North-West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—KPK). The two wings, West Pakistan and East Pakistan, differed ethnically, culturally and economically, and were separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory.

On the external front, Pakistan's major fear was that India could establish its military forces anywhere within a few miles of the 200-km-long vital road and rail route between Lahore and Rawalpindi. On its western front, Pakistan faced constant threats due to the lingering issue of the Durand Line. No Afghan regime, including the Rabbani government, has ever accepted the legitimacy of the border drawn up by the British in 1893. Pakistan faced constant challenges and has remained under pressure due to demands to incorporate the Pashtun areas east of the Durand Line into Afghanistan. Insurgency in Pakistan's tribal frontiers bordering Afghanistan, and the Soviet invasion of Kabul in 1979, added significantly to Pakistan's fears.

PAKISTAN'S WARS FOR KASHMIR: THE BEGINNING OF THE IDEOLOGICAL DRIFT

Pakistan launched the first war for Kashmir in 1947-48 in the name of a 'tribal revolt'. The Pakistan Army, with the consent of the political

4. Ibid., p. 5.

leadership, invoked the tribesmen and the retired and serving army officers in the name of *jihad*, to raid and seize Kashmir. Islam was leveraged in the very beginning of the state itself to respond to the Indian threat. The government in Pakistan called on religious scholars to issue supportive *fatwas* (religious decrees).⁵ The 1947-48 aggression laid the basic guidelines for future aggressions by Pakistan. Pakistan used *religion* to support the state policies and *covert tactics* of the leadership. At the domestic level, Jinnah's dream of a pluralistic society was being challenged and, in the early 1950s, there were street protests calling for a declaration that the Ahmadis were non-Muslims.⁶

On the external front, a close study of the covert activities indicates that the factor of religion started to gain momentum in the 1960s. Pakistan's covert activities in Kashmir were now gradually moving towards using religion as a driving force to garner support for the disintegration of India. Also, Pakistan entered into a military alliance with the US in the 1950s and 1960s, and started to receive the much desired military assistance. The inflow of the Western military assistance boosted Pakistan's capability and confidence to intensify its actions to acquire Kashmir. Pakistan's defeat in the 1965 India-Pakistan War reinforced its reliance on religion to attain its objectives in Kashmir. In the late 1960s, a new set of *jihadis* emerged, deriving their inspiration from left wing anti-imperialist struggles.

1971: DISINTEGRATION OF PAKISTAN AND THE IDEOLOGICAL SHIFT

Pakistan's grand strategy after the 1971 War incorporated two important objectives which decided the future course of actions for the Pakistani leadership.

First, to expand territory eastward (take Kashmir). This implied a rise in covert activities in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and added emphasis on radical Islam in the name of *jihad*. Thus, terrorism was to be adopted as a foreign policy tool.

5. Zaid Haider, "Ideological Adrift", in Maleeha Lodhi, ed., *Pakistan Beyond the Crisis State* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2011), p. 116.

6. Ahmedis are followers of an alleged 19th century messiah called Mirza Ghulam Ahmed.

Second, to expand control westward (to gain leverage in Kabul). This implied creating strategic depth in Afghanistan and also facilitating a Pakistan friendly government.

The loss of East Pakistan not only altered the political and ethnic scenario in Pakistan but also the ideological dynamics. This division of Pakistan created the fear of further segmentation, and the ruling elites increasingly believed that religious ideology would be the best option to unite people.

The loss of East Pakistan and the rise of insurgency in Balochistan convinced the leadership in Pakistan to adopt religious ideology as a counter to the perceived threat of 'division of Pakistan' and to motivate the nation for an aggressive anti-India posture (in the name of religion). These developments coincided with the global rise of Islamic ideology which facilitated Pakistan's journey into radical ideology, pronounced by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and taken forward by General Zia-ul-Haq.

General Zia systematically reinforced the *Islamisation of Pakistan* which was propagated by his predecessor, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. The general introduced mandatory 'Islamic Reforms' impacting the economy and the Pakistani society.⁷ The Pakistan Army, in this period, developed close links with the various Islamists groups, and religion was now ingrained deeply in the strategic thinking. Zia, in the process of reinforcing the Islamisation of Pakistan and introducing Islamic reforms, allowed the Tablighi Jamaat (an Islamic missionary society) to operate freely within the army.⁸

It was during Zia's period that "*jihad*" was included as the motto for the Pakistan Army apart from "*Iman*" and "*Taqwa*". Adherence to the Islamic practices emerged as a major criterion for selection in the army. Perhaps the most critical part of this Islamisation was the impact on the education system of Pakistan, which shaped the young minds of the future generations. Islamic training and thought, including lectures by Qayyum, were introduced into the curriculum at the Command and Staff College.⁹

7. Stephen Cohen, *The Pakistan Army* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 91.

8. Stephen Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.113.

9. See, *On Striving to be a Muslim* (Lahore: Islamic Book Centre, 1978) as cited by Cohen, n. 7, pp. 95-96.

Although the students at the Staff College study Western strategy and doctrine, they are instructed to intensify their core Islamic principles and values. Zia, in the process of reinforcing the Islamisation of Pakistan, encouraged the Tablighi Jamaat to operate freely within the army. It was during this process of Islamisation that the major strategic development—the Afghan War (1980s)—started and altered the dynamics of Pakistan’s political, military and strategic policies.

THE QURANIC CONCEPT OF WAR

The Holy Quran has been interpreted (to facilitate the strategic objectives) to develop Pakistan’s doctrine and strategy of war. The most comprehensive and precise study on war doctrine and strategy in the context of the Holy Quran has been by Brigadier S.K Malik in his book, *The Quranic Concept of War*. According to Brigadier Malik’s interpretation, the Holy Quran regards war doctrine, its theory, and practice very differently from the Western thinking on the subject. Brigadier Malik interprets, “The Holy Quran has given a comprehensive treatment to its concept of war” and “determines all aspects of the use of ‘force’ in inter-state relations.”¹⁰ He regards the Quranic philosophy of war as supreme, providing for the initiation, planning and control of war.

Terror, according to the author and a majority of Pakistani military officers, is central to the war strategy. Use of terror as an instrument to impose one’s will and decisions on the enemy has been legitimised, citing examples from the Holy Quran, “When God wishes to impose His will upon his enemies, He chooses to do so by casting terror in their hearts”.¹¹

The Quranic ‘misinterpretation’ of the conduct of modern war legitimises *jihad* and the use of terror. One of the most effective modes of generating terror is through the projection of maintaining a *low nuclear threshold* and *covert warfare* and, thus, creating physical and mental unrest and fear in the enemy territory. Pakistan’s strategic

10. Brigadier S.K. Malik, *The Quranic Concept of War* (New Delhi: Himalayan Books, 1986), p. 1.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

thinking and posture reflect its belief in using terror as an effective instrument of war.

THE AFGHAN WAR IN THE 1980s AND RISE IN TERRORISM

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan became the US' frontline state in the fight against Communism in the 1980s. With the US alliance, Pakistan became a recipient of significant US military aid and sophisticated military equipment, including the F-16s. In addition to the US aid, Pakistan also received enormous amounts of funds from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries to finance the US weaponry. These funds were also used for the build-up of the Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme and, to aid the *madrassas* preaching Wahhabi Islam on the Balochistan-Iran border.

The military regime under General Zia undertook the responsibility of training the Mujahideen to carry out covert operations to fight the Soviets. The operations directed by the US CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) were some of the largest operations planned by the US and shaped a relationship between the CIA and the Pakistani intelligence agency ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), as the two worked in coordination for about a decade.

The US' war in Afghanistan led to structural and organisational development of the factor of *religion in war*. The soldiers for war were being trained to fight in a "holy war" in the name of God. Since the US assistance to the Mujahideen started as a covert affair, the ISI Directorate became the channel for not only ensuring the secrecy of the operation but also to provide expert advice and training to the Mujahideen on guerrilla tactics. In this process, Zia cultivated a venomous strain of Islamic ideology in Pakistan. The ISI, in partnership with the right wing Islamic parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam, recruited thousands of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and students from the *madrassas* to join the fight in Afghanistan as holy fighters. In this process, these Islamic parties developed an extensive network in Pakistan and also became much more influential.¹²

Along with this *jihadi* culture, what now found support in Pakistan was *sectarianism*, resulting in the killing of thousands. On the external

12. Haider, n. 5, p. 122.

front, the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 played a crucial role, and without getting into details, it would not be incorrect to say that Pakistan, invariably, became a battle ground for the transplanted war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which worked towards restricting the spread of Iranian Shia influence.¹³ Balochistan became the hub of hundreds of *madrassas* which were basically established to limit the Shia influence in Pakistan.

Another important factor during the 1980s was that the US provided funds for enormous amounts of arms and ammunition for the Afghan Mujahideen, with the pipeline controlled by the ISI. Reportedly, the ISI retained the majority of the weapons and equipment (reportedly 60 per cent) for its own covert war against India. Reportedly, the US provided \$2 billion worth of covert assistance to the Afghan War between 1980 and 1989.¹⁴ Apart from the US, Saudi Arabia and Iran also formed channels of funding for the Afghan Mujahideen.

Another important development during this period was the flourishing of the narcotics trade, with the CIA's assistance to fund the covert operations. The opium production went up from 200 metric tonnes in 1980 to 1,200 metric tonnes in 1989.¹⁵ The military in Pakistan developed significant financial interests in the drugs trade and this assisted in the development of the drugs economy in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The drugs money was used lavishly to fund Pakistan's nuclear weapon programme in the 1980s.

In the 1980s, the religious resurgence, coupled with the increasing alienation of the youth for diverse reasons, started to grow in Kashmir, and Pakistan's strategy of covert war through terrorism began to concretise. What was happening in Afghanistan and simultaneously in Punjab (with Pakistan's active assistance), had a direct impact in the Kashmir Valley. In the mid-1980s, disturbances in Kashmir were growing, with an unusual amount of Jamaat activity, and processions and resentment against the Hindus. In the late 1980s and

13. Ibid., p. 123.

14. Hussain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 2005), p. 193.

15. T. Raghvan, "The Narcotics Trade in South West Asia: Geography and Production", *Security Research Review*, <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/archives/SRR/Volume14/raghavan.html#s2>. Accessed on September 20, 2024.

1990s, Pakistan became much more active in sponsoring terrorism in J&K. The ISI encouraged young Kashmiris to come to Pakistan for training. The ISI initially trained the secular groups in Kashmir and eventually shifted to training the groups linked to Pakistan's own Islamic parties.¹⁶

NUCLEAR WEAPONS: PAKISTAN'S SHIELD AGAINST TERRORISM

One of the critical factors contributing to escalation in Pakistan's covert war in Kashmir in the 1990s was its acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1987. After the defeat in the 1971 War, the leadership in Pakistan was clear that nuclear weapons comprised the answer to India's conventional superiority. Former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was always inclined to have the nuclear capability as a deterrent. After the 1971 War, systematic efforts commenced for building nuclear weapons: domestically, with a strong justification for nukes at any cost, and externally, with active appeals for funds from the Muslim world. Pakistan, thus, managed to raise a significant amount of money to support Bhutto's appeal for an "Islamic bomb".

Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons capability in 1987, although the overt nuclearisation happened much later in 1998. Till today, Pakistan does not have an officially announced doctrine and believes in maintaining ambiguity. There is an unofficial code adopted by the Pakistani leadership, based on *Indo-centricity*, *credible minimum deterrence*, *strategic restraint* and *first use*. Very interestingly, and rather ironically, the code asserts the principles of a peaceful programme revolving more around maintaining a balance against the Indian force build-up, but it includes making a first strike in response to not only a conventional attack by India but also a posed threat from India. The thought process being that India cannot inflict a conventional attack on Pakistan (in response to Pakistan's act of terror) leave alone achieve a decisive victory, without the risk of catastrophic consequences of a Pakistani nuclear attack.

Nuclear weapons remain integral to Pakistan's overall strategic positioning against India. While New Delhi's nuclear objectives have been primarily political for deterrence, Islamabad acquired

16. Ahmed Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos* (London: Penguin Group, 2008), p. 111.

the nuclear weapons for *war prevention* and to conduct the policy of sub-conventional warfare through terrorism, without fear of Indian military retaliation.¹⁷

1990s: STRATEGIC DEPTH IN AFGHANISTAN AND BLEEDING INDIA THROUGH THOUSAND CUTS

The democratic regimes between 1988 and 1999 were unstable and changed frequently, especially, if the agenda of the elected governments challenged the power and functioning of the army. The ISI became an important centre of power on account of its role in the Afghan War and its involvement with the Americans. Although the fundamentalists and Islamists appeared to have lost in the elections, their influence continued to grow, especially, among the intelligence agencies, military officers and emerging middle class in Pakistan.

On the external front, there were important developments during this decade. The leadership in Pakistan intensified its terrorist activities on the Indian soil through their proxies, and anti-India terrorist organisations became much more active in the Valley and other parts of India. The ISI was now a fully trained and equipped organisation, with a ready infrastructure for *jihād*, and was diverted towards India to continue Pakistan's strategy of *bleeding India through a thousand cuts*. By 2002, Pakistan became home for more than two dozen militant groups operating in the neighbourhood and pursuing their agenda which was looked at by the state as being in its favour. The largest among them were the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Muhammed (JeM), Harkat-ul-Mujahidden (HuM) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI). The organisations enjoyed state patronage, and flow of funds was never a challenge despite Pakistan's economic struggles. The *jihadi* organisations managed to raise funds from the masses overtly in the name of freedom for Kashmir.

On the western front, Pakistan was keen to create and sustain its strategic depth in Kabul with a pro-Pakistan regime to facilitate its strategic ambitions. The army and the ISI, along with the political leadership, came together to support a new class of warriors: the Taliban. The Pakistani leadership extended full-fledged support to

17. For details, see Shalini Chawla, "Pakistan's Nuclear Brinkmanship", in Tilak Devasher, ed., *Pakistan Insights 2020* (New Delhi: Pentagon, 2021), pp. 103-111.

the Taliban and added to their strength from Pakistani *madrassas*. The Taliban began to take over one province after another in Afghanistan, and brought the whole of Afghanistan under their control in less than five years, in 1996.¹⁸

THE US ALLIANCE, WAR ON TERROR AND EXTREMISM

Post 9/11, Pakistan entered into a third alliance with the US and once again arrived at a critical strategic crossroads. Ideologically, Pakistan felt the need to position itself as a balanced nation and General Musharraf attempted to project a path of moderation. On January 12, 2002, he publicly said that Pakistani territory will not be used for (*jihadi*) terrorism. In 2004, he announced his plea for *Enlightened Moderation*:

The strategy of enlightened moderation ...is a two-pronged strategy. One prong is to be delivered by the Muslim world itself by shunning militancy and extremism, and adopting the path of socioeconomic uplift to achieve its own emancipation. The other prong is meant to be delivered by the West, and the United States in particular, to determinedly resolve with justice all political disputes in which Muslims are engaged and also assist in the socioeconomic betterment of the deprived Muslim world.¹⁹

Musharraf's attempt was to project Pakistan as a moderate Islamic nation focussing on socio-economic development. The projection was intended to attract Western goodwill, and aid and assistance for Pakistan. The military regime came under immense pressure by the Bush Administration to act against the terrorist organisations and Musharraf did issue orders to ban some of the key militant outfits as well as the registering of the *madrassas*. The state got the opportunity to counter and target the militant outfits which had turned against it, specifically the domestic sectarian groups like the Sunni Sipah-e-Sahaba and its offshoot, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and the Shia-

18. Hassan Abbas, *Pakistan's Drift Into Extremism: Allah, the Army and America's War on Terror* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), p.155.

19. Speech by General Musharraf, "OIC Challenge and Response: Enlightened Moderation", June 1, 2004, <http://presidentmusharraf.wordpress.com/2005/01/18/musharraf-oic-enlightened-moderation>. Accessed on September 1, 2024.

Tehrik-e-Jafaria and its offshoot, the Sipah-e-Muhammad. The state leadership was selective in suppressing the organisations and the target groups were the ones whose objectives fell out of sync with the military's perception of the national interests.²⁰ The top leadership of the Taliban and Al Qaeda was sheltered by the military. A significant number of the Taliban leadership, along with the Pakistani Pashtuns, being the prime targets in the global war on terror, took refuge in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA). Needless to say, the anti-India militant groups—the LeT, JeM and HuM—continued to garner the support from the state.

THE PAKISTAN TALIBAN, RISE IN EXTREMISM, AND THE BLOWBACK

Towards the end of 2005, there were some signs of a group trying to replicate the Taliban ideology. In 2007, the TTP emerged as an entity in the context of a series of military operations in the FATA as well as US Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) strikes in the FATA. The TTP adopted a strictly anti-state and specifically anti-military agenda and conveyed its message by attacking government/military offices. The TTP shares (till date) a symbolic relationship with Al Qaeda and drew its ideological guidance from it while Al Qaeda relied on the TTP for safe havens in the FATA during the late 2000s. The TTP launched deadly attacks against the US, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Pakistan state targets, it adopted an anti-state posture and has claimed responsibility for most of the terrorist attacks, including the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in 2007.

Pakistan witnessed a rising phase of extremism and intolerance in the society during this period. Perhaps the most glaring incident reflecting the rising extremism in the society was on January 4, 2011, when the Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer, was assassinated by one of his security guards, Mumtaz Qadri. The governor was supporting Asia Bibi, a Christian woman, who had been sentenced to death on charges of blasphemy. Qadri was hailed as a hero and welcomed with rose petals when he arrived at the court after the killing. Five years later, his execution in 2016 on

20. Ashley J. Tellis, *Pakistan and the War on Terror: Conflicted Goals, Compromised Performance* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2008), p. 4.

the orders of the Pakistan Supreme Court led to massive protests in Pakistan. Tahir Iqbal Chistie, the president of the Sunni Tehreek, Rawalpindi chapter, said during the protests,

At this time, the sentiments of all Muslims have been injured, and our feelings have been badly hurt. For any Muslim believer – no matter what school of thought he belongs to – Ghazi Mumtaz Qadri is a hero of Islam.²¹

In May 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed in an operation carried out by the US Navy SEALs from the US Special Operations Command. Bin Laden had been living for over five years in a compound in the garrison town of Abbottabad. Post the killing there was a noticeable shift in the US thinking on its position towards Islamabad.. The transition in the US' stance has been gradual and the terms of engagement have been altered in the last decade. On the counter-terrorism front, the Pakistan military launched two important operations, Zarb-e-Azb, in North Waziristan (2014) and Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017) to support the law enforcement agencies and target the terrorists' sleeper cells across Pakistan.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: IS PAKISTAN EQUIPPED TO HANDLE EXTREMISM

While it is impossible to track and discuss every incident and development, some trends are critical to understand the state of extremism within Pakistan.

Extremist Parties and Political Space

The 2018 elections in Pakistan provided political space to the candidates representing *jihadi* and extremist groups despite ample controversy and apprehensions raised over the future implications of the development. The US and UN designated global terrorist Hafiz Saeed's party, the Milli Muslim League (MML) was turned down by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) after a prolong

21. "Pakistan Hangs Mumtaz Qadri for Murder of Salman Taseer", Al Jazeera, February 29, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/2/29/pakistan-hangs-mumtaz-qadri-for-murder-of-salman-taseer>. Accessed on August 10, 2024.

debate. The Jamaat-ud-Dawa chief collaborated with a little known Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek (AAT) to contest the elections. What was surprising was that despite the pressure from the US and Financial Action Task Force (FATF), Pakistan accommodated Saeed's political debut. However, the AAT party did not manage to win even a single seat.

The old religious parties like the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), Ulema-i-Islam Nazryati-Pakistan and Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Pakistan (National) did not perform well as compared to the 2013 elections, but new splinter groups established their presence.²² The Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a newly formed party and the aggressive face of Bareilvi politics, emerged as the fifth largest party.²³ It had started as a protest movement, and was registered as a political party by one of the founders, Khadim Hussain Rizvi, in the summer of 2017.²⁴ The TLP managed to gather the maximum number of votes in Lahore. The number of seats that the TLP won was not so significant, but what was relevant was the radical party's entry and performance on the political stage.

The 2018 election results did project religious parties gaining some level of support and the electoral mandate. However, the 2024 elections presented an interesting dynamics and the religious parties could manage only around 12 percent of the nationwide votes. Approximately 20 religious parties were registered out of 166 (around) political parties with the Election Commission of Pakistan. The TLP managed to swing 2.8 million votes, the Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Islam—Fazal-ur-Rehman (JUI-F) 2.1 million, the Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan (JI-P) 1.3 million and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement—Pakistan (MQM-P) 1.1 million votes.²⁵ The religious parties faced a setback as compared to the last two elections. While multiple assessments can be made regarding the lack of success of the religious parties, two crucial reasons are: first, the agenda of Imran Khan's

22. Ramsha Jahangir, "Religious Parties Clinch Over 9pc Share in National Assembly", *DAWN*, May 19, 2018, www.dawn.com/news/1424235. Accessed on January 12, 2019.

23. *Ibid*.

24. Mosa Kaleem, "The Emergence of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan on Karachi's Political Map", *Herald*, September 20, 2018, <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1398669>. Accessed on September 1, 2024.

25. Gallop Pakistan Dashboard, <https://www.gallupakistanandigitalanalytics.com/general-elections-2024-pakistan-dashboard/>. Accessed on August 19, 2024.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party that was anti-military, anti-West, anti-corruption and, also anti-dynasty politics. All these issues resonated well with the masses, while these have traditionally not been part of the mandate of the extremist/religious parties. Second, the 2024 elections were more driven by personalities—Imran Khan, the Sharif brothers and Bilawal Bhutto—and the religious parties did not have leadership capable of appealing to, and driving, the youth.

Resurgence of the TTP, The Islamic State and Rising Religious Intolerance

In 2017, there was a series of attacks claimed by the TTP and the Islamic State (IS). The attacks drew significant attention and represented a higher intensity of radicalisation within Pakistan. Perhaps one of the most glaring attacks was the one on Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's *dargah* in Sehwan, while the devotees were in the middle of *dhamaal* (a Sufi ritual), and at least 90 people died. The attack was claimed by the IS and the victims included women and children, with a hundred injured. The attack represented the intolerance of Sufi Islam in Pakistan. Another attack on liberalism was the assassination of Pakistan's most famous *qawwali* singer, Amjad Sabri. The TTP claimed responsibility for the attack citing that the assassination was on account of blasphemy.

In 2020, the TTP announced the merger (again!) of its two major splinter groups, the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar and Hizbul Ahrar. The development was important as the militant group had been on the run for some time and had found sanctuary in Afghanistan. The TTP gained strength with the merger which was reflected in the series of attacks that it conducted subsequently. Post the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021, the TTP reunited and gathered its strength, and accelerated the terror attacks, specifically targeting the Pakistan security forces. The defeat of the democratically elected forces in Afghanistan has been seen as a major ideological victory by the group. The TTP was the first organisation to send a congratulatory message to the Taliban in Afghanistan after the group took control of Kabul in August 2021.

The group is ideologically aligned with the Taliban in Afghanistan and managed to gain deeper tactical experience while fighting against the Afghan security forces alongside the Taliban during the US'

withdrawal phase. Various reports suggest that the group also had access to the military equipment left behind by the Western forces in Afghanistan. Needless to say, the TTP draws its inspiration from the Afghan Taliban and has expanded with mergers with splinter terror groups, and adoption of an aggressive social media strategy to influence the minds of the disgruntled youth in the tribal areas. The TTP has remained firm on the implementation of the *Shariah* in Pakistan and the separation of the tribal areas from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. According to the US Department of State Report on Terrorism (2022), the “TTP draws ideological guidance” from Al Qaeda and some factions of Al Qaeda “rely in part on the TTP for safe havens in the Pashtun areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistani border”. The report highlights that this arrangement has facilitated dividends for the TTP from the operational expertise of Al Qaeda’s global terrorist network, adding to its tactical and operational capabilities.

Pakistan’s prolonged political uncertainty after the exit of Imran Khan from the prime minister’s office and the economic crisis have constrained its ability to act militarily against the TTP. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan’s unsuccessful efforts to negotiate with the terror group were also seen as a critical factor contributing to the TTP’s strength and inflexible position. The group has shown no inclination for negotiation or settlement after the breakdown of the ceasefire with the government in November 2022. The Pakistan military also launched a military offensive, Azm-e-Istekham, but with no success against the TTP.

Pakistan holds the Afghan Taliban responsible for patronising the TTP and not exercising its leverage over the militant outfit to prevent terror attacks on Pakistani territory. The Taliban, on the other hand, have repeatedly denied their role in supporting the TTP. Even though Islamabad hailed and welcomed the victory of the Taliban in 2021, its relationship with the Afghan Taliban has not gone down the expected path.

Pakistan has adopted harsh measures with Afghanistan in order to pressurise the Taliban to refrain from support to the TTP. However, repeated warnings, pressure, and punitive measures taken by Pakistan have not shown results (till now) in terms of containment

of the TTP's attacks. On the contrary, other militant groups and insurgent movements have tried to leverage the volatile security situation and launched attacks in Pakistan. The regional branches of the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS), Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Islamic State Pakistan Province (ISPP), have been active in their operations in Pakistan

The ISKP has focussed on Pakistan in its online propaganda campaigns. In the last two years, Pakistan has faced attacks by the ISKP, including the June 2023 suicide attack at a political rally of the JUI-F, and the September 2023 suicide bombing in the Mastung town in Balochistan.

Pakistan has also seen a surge of attacks on blasphemy suspects in recent years. What is interesting to note here is that while it not unusual to hear of killings by mobs on blasphemy, it is rare to hear of such killings by the police.²⁶ There have been many repeated such incidents and the trend seems to be intensifying.

CONCLUSION

Pakistan is facing challenges of increasing extremism and the emerging trends are worrisome. However, it is not clear whether the state essentially feels threatened by the rising extremism or seeks to draw support from the extremist narratives and trends. Pakistan's reliance on religion started mainly to assert that its identity is different from that of India. Eventually, the widening gap between the two countries, and Pakistan's inability to match India's growth trajectory, led to intensified use of religion and the narrative of threat perceptions vis-a-vis India. The perceived threat perceptions from India, the dominant military lobby and the identity crisis have been critical factors shaping Pakistan's strategic posturing and its policy options, domestically and internationally. The dominant Punjabi-Pathan military lobby leveraged the threat perceptions and strategically exaggerated these to facilitate favourable power dynamics. Religion became an essential part of the overall anti-India narrative for Pakistan. Post 1971, critical developments took place:

26. Nick Marsh and Riaz Sohail, "Pakistan Police Shoot Dead Blasphemy Suspect", BBC, September 20, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz9pg8d4245o>. Accessed on September 22, 2024.

using religion in a more structured and organised form in policy-making as part of the India strategy, development of nuclear weapon capability to conduct and intensify the proxy war, drawing support from the Muslim world, building up of the military capability (despite economic woes), expanding westwards and controlling Afghanistan and, very importantly, sustaining engagement with, and the interest of, the West in Pakistan.

After 75 years of independence, at the national level, there are strong signs of extremist factions gaining ground, increasing intolerance in the name of religion, and a rise in terror attacks. Violent religious groups have challenged the writ of the state. The freedom of expression stands suffocated with multiple media groups and journalists being frequent targets for giving the military a reality check and pursuing true national security objectives. Peaceful civil rights movement by the Pashtuns – the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)—has been responded to with brutal tactics by the state.

At the time of the creation of Pakistan, modern values and protection of Muslim culture and rights were being discussed by the Pakistani policy-makers, but the fact is that over the decades, Pakistan's insecurity as a state, its lack of identity and inability to decide which interpretation of Islam to embrace, and the military's expanding powers in all domains, have led to the radical interpretation of Islam as a strategic policy option. Pakistan tried to unsuccessfully use religion as a binding force and pursue the Kashmir cause. Pakistan's narrative on Kashmir has seen critical shifts after India abrogated Article 370 in 2019:

- Pakistan has taken the position that the Indian government is being run on a Nazi ideology. India is a threat to not only Muslims in Pakistan but Muslims across the globe.
- Kashmir and Kashmiri Muslims are a global responsibility and the world needs to act on Kashmir against India.
- Islamophobia has been highlighted (off and on) by the leaders of Pakistan at international levels.

Extremism is posing a serious challenge to the state, and according to Hasan Askari Rizvi:

Islamic orthodoxy and radicalism have seeped not only into society at large, but also into the lower echelons of state institutions, including the police and the military. A very large number of people, including those with modern western-style education, are supportive of variations and aspects of orthodox Islam in national and international issues, viewing everything as a function of religion.²⁷

Pakistan has opted for some counter-terror measures, including the much discussed National Action Plan (NAP), a twenty-point list issued after the gruesome Peshawar Army Public School attack in December 2014. The NAP was followed by an elaborate National Security Policy (NSP) which was focussed more as a security policy. Pakistan has tried legal options and military operations to control extremism and terrorism but the bigger questions here are: is the state ready to stop its reliance on religion as a foreign policy tool in dealing with India? Is it ready for the alteration in its strategic calculus? The answer is NO. The thinking and actions of the Pakistani leadership do not show a change in the (decades old) mind set and conviction in extremism and terrorism as the most potent weapon to deal with India (and Afghanistan) despite the blowback which the state continues to struggle with.

Disclaimer: Some parts of the article have been previously published in Dr. Shalini Chawla, "Extremism Trends in Pakistan", in Tilak Devasher, ed., *Pakistan Insights 2021-22: A Granular Look at Key Issues in Pakistan* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2022), pp. 55-82.

27. Hasan Askari Rizvi, "Reversing Pakistan's Drift Toward Radicalism", The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Asia Program, February 23, 2011, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep18868?seq=1>. Accessed on August 10, 2024.

