

# Rise of Extremism in Pakistan: Role of Islam

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**Abstract – “Sectarian terrorism has been going on for years...The day of reckoning has come. Do we want Pakistan to become a theocratic state? Do we believe that religious education alone is enough for governance or do we want Pakistan to emerge as a progressive and dynamic Islamic Welfare State?” (South Asian Terrorism Portal, 12 January 2002)[1] – were the words of former President of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf on January 12, 2002 in his address to the nation, after deciding to support United States in its campaign of ‘war against terror’. The same question resonates even after a decade when eminent figures such as Salman Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti are murdered for being critical of the blasphemy laws. In 2011, Salman Taseer, the Governor of Pakistan’s Punjab province was assassinated by his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri for defending Asia Bibi[2]. When Qadri was produced in court for trial, he was showered with rose petals by lawyers. After Qadri was tried and hanged in 2016, his funeral procession attracted a huge crowd. Also, Shahbaz Bhatti, a Pakistani Christian who was the Minister for Religious minorities in Pakistan was murdered for his support to Asia Bibi. Both the ministers had openly campaigned to reform Pakistan’s blasphemy law. (The Hindu, 15 November 2018)[3] This reflects the intolerance and extremism in the twentieth century society of Pakistan which poses grave threat to the country.**

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## 1.1 ROLE OF RELIGION IN CREATION OF PAKISTAN

Pakistan was created in the name of Islam in 1947. Religion was used by the leaders of Muslim League in order to give wings to its aspiration to create a separate land out of British India for the Muslims where their rights could be protected against the - Hindu majority in the independent India. “Islam was strictly of instrumental value to them. It was used to mobilize Muslim opinion in British India to serve the political goals of League leadership, first parity with the Congress, and when that failed, partition of the country.” (The Hindu, 17 January 2019)[4] After the successful creation of Pakistan out of British India, the leadership needed an ideology to unify the newly created country which consisted of multiple ethno-linguistic identities that posed threat to the integrity of the newly created state. In words of Mohammed Ayoob, “..Islam became useful to them (the Muslim League, especially Muhammad Ali Jinnah) as a unifying myth that could hold the country together and act as the principal antidote to ethnic nationalism, especially in East Bengal and the North-West Frontier Province”. (ibid.) Islam and hostility to India emerged as the cornerstones of the new national ideology that was shaping during the initial years of nation building. Islam in Pakistan, besides its utility to unify the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual Pakistan was also used “to reinforce Pakistani identity in opposition to India’s predominantly Hindu population” (Haqqani 2005: vii). Thus, the use of Islam against the perceived domestic and external

threats of Pakistan became part of national policy and evolved a partnership between the religious leaders and the military. This nexus between the Islamists and the military is perfectly explained in words of H. Haqqani, to quote:

“Pakistan’s state institutions, especially its national security institutions such as the military and the intelligence services, have played a leading role in building Pakistani national identity on the basis of religion since Pakistan’s emergence as an independent country in August 1947. This political commitment to an ideological state gradually evolved into a strategic commitment to jihadi ideology -ideology of holy war-especially during and after the Bangladesh war of 1971, when the Pakistani military used Islamist idiom and the help of Islamist groups to keep secular leaders who were supported by and elected by the majority Bengali speaking population out of power...In the 1971 war, Pakistan was split apart with the birth of an independent Bangladesh...After the 1971 war, in the original country’s western wing, the effort to create national cohesion between Pakistan’s disparate ethnic and linguistic groups through religion took on greater significance, and its manifestations became more militant...Radical and violent manifestations of Islamist ideology...are in some ways a state project gone wrong”. (Haqqani 2005: 03)

## 1.2 ISLAMISATION PROCESS IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan is officially called the *Islamic Republic of Pakistan* and the state religion is Islam. It has the second largest Muslim population in the world (after Indonesia) with religious minorities such as Hindus, Christianity, Sikhism and others.

**TABLE 1: RELIGIOUS DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION IN PAKISTAN (2017)**

RELIGION	PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION
Islam	96.03%
Hinduism	1.85%
Christianity	1.59%
Ahmadi	0.22%
Others	0.07%

\*Source: Government of Pakistan (2017), *Population by Religion*, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.

Under the Constitution of Pakistan every citizen is granted equal rights irrespective of the religion they practice. Despite the equal rights conferred by the constitution of Pakistan to its citizens (irrespective of the religion they profess) the constitution limits the political rights of non-Muslims in Pakistan. Such as only the Pakistani citizen who is Muslim can become the President or the Prime Minister in the country. The Muslims in Pakistan are divided into sects such as Shias, Sunnis and Ahmadiyahs (though under the Second Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan of 1973 the Ahmadiya were declared non-Muslims). The Ahmadiya community came under attack in 1954 by Sunni Islamists groups including Jamaat-e-Islami which led to anti-Ahmadiya riots.

The country suffers from acute domestic problem of sectarian violence which can be viewed as a natural consequence of the Islamisation process in the course of time. The Islamisation process in Pakistan can be said to have found legal establishment in the *Objectives Resolution of 1949*, the twelve guiding principles for its future constitution from where “there was no turning back from Pakistan’s status as an Islamic ideological state”. (Haqqani 2005: 20) However, in the view of Husain Haqqani and Ayesha Jalal the process began much before Pakistan was created. (*ibid.*: vii) They point to the period when the demand for Pakistan was propounded on basis of the two-nation theory by the Muslim League as the genesis of Islamisation process. The Muslims of British India wanted to carve out a state for themselves, separate from an independent India that would be dominated by Hindus. The leadership of Muslim League used religion to garner support for its demand of Pakistan but they did not view Pakistan as a theocratic state or an Islamic country. As Leonard Binder points out, “Islamic government, Islamic state and Islamic constitution were the slogans of the last years of

empire and the first of independence, but no one was quite sure what they meant”. (Binder 1968: 04)[5] Mohammad Ali Jinnah was a secular man who believed in liberalism and democracy. In his famous *Fourteen Points* enumerated on proposed constitutional changes, he mentioned “full religious liberty, i.e., liberty of belief, worship and observance, propaganda, association and education shall be guaranteed to all communities”. (*The Express Tribune*, 04 August 2017)[6] Also, his egalitarian view on religion is well-reflected in his famous speech at the inaugural address to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947 where he said: “In course of time all these angularities of the majority and the minority community - will vanish...you are free, you are free to go to your temples, and you are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in the 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 should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslim would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense a citizen of the state”. (Ahmad 1964: 401-04)[7] The leaders of Pakistan were secular in their outlook but their demand for creation of a state along religious lines laid the foundation of ideological debate which ensued immediately after the creation of the state and continues till date. During the early years, the secular elites used religious nationalism to strengthen its national identity and unify the country that was faced with the multi-ethnic problem. (Alavi 1983: 57)[8] The language riots by Bengalis in East Pakistan highlighted this problem, of integration of ethnic identities into new Pakistani identity. The secular elites of Pakistan assumed that “they would continue to lead the country while they rallied the people on the basis of Islamic ideology.” (Haqqani 2005: 21)

The place given to Islam in the constitution of 1956, 1962 and 1973 reflects the importance given by the leadership to religion. The constitution of 1956 declared that the country would be based on “Islamic Principles of Social Justice” though Islam was not declared as the state religion. In the constitution of 1962, there was no major change with regard to Islamic provisions. The constitution of 1973 was framed in the circumstance where the country had come out defeated in the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 and lost half of its territory (which led to creation of a separate nation, viz. Bangladesh). Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was elected the Prime Minister in 1972 after a long spell of military rule. He needed to govern taking all forces together, and used Islam as the unifying force. The constitution of 1973 for the first time declared Islam as the state religion of Pakistan. In view of Riaz Hassan, Islamization emerged as a state policy under Zulfikar Bhutto’s government in order to appease certain section of people. (Hassan 1983:

265)[9] Islam was also used by General Zia to legitimise his rule. The leaders of Pakistan, whether civilian or military, have used Islam and the theologians to garner support and legitimize their rule. General Zia lacked the support of politicians and bureaucracy and he used Islam in his attempt to build a support structure. (Gustafson and Richter 1981: 168)[10] With the introduction of pre-medieval Islamic laws such as death sentence for adultery, exemplary public punishment for petty crimes and other punitive measures, General Zia gained the support of the fundamentalists. Though General Zia intensified the Islamisation process through Pakistan's legal and educational system Haqqani sees his policy of Islamization as the "extension of a consistent state ideology". (Haqqani 2005: 03)

### **1.3 ROLE OF RELIGIOUS POLITICAL PARTIES IN PAKISTAN**

The recent events such as the street demonstration by a number of religious parties identifying with Barelvi sect[11] in Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Karachi and Lahore in 2016 and the violent protests led by Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan party (TLP) in Asia Bibi case in 2018 highlight the need to review the role of religious political parties in Pakistan.

The religious political parties in Pakistan have been an important feature of country's political landscape. They have tried to capture the popular spaces through electoral politics though they have lacked a strong electoral standing. According to H.A. Rizvi, a Pakistani political analyst, "No religious party has ever been able to secure more than a few seats in the provincial and national elections. Their performance is better when they build a nationwide or regional partnership or when they enjoy the blessings of a military government. If they create a coalition of their own, their electoral performance improves". (*The Express Tribune*, 03 April 2016)[12] In the general elections of 2002, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) which was a political alliance of Islamists parties of Pakistan emerged at the national level. The popularity of MMA can be credited to its formation in direct opposition to Musharraf's decision to support United States in the 'war on terror' campaign which was widely criticized. Also, the leaders of popular political parties such as Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q) were rendered incapable of running for office on charges of corruption. A professor from a Pakistan university points that the popularity of MMA was majorly confined to the Pashtun-dominated areas. (*The Express Tribune*, 27 June 2018)[13]

The religious political parties had strengthened under General Zia during the period of creation of Jihadi forces to fight the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan. During Zia's rule, the Jamaat-i-Islami and other religious parties which were involved in the first Afghan jihad enjoyed the support of military, and

grew in power with the money that flowed into selected religious parties and militant groups during the Soviet-Afghan war. These religious groups provided volunteers for the war. Some of these parties continued to maintain relations with militant groups and extended support to al-Qaeda and Taliban. What concerns India is the 'mainstreaming' of these religious groups (such as Jamaat-i-Islami) that have been involved in *Jihadi* endeavours in Afghanistan and in India especially Kashmir) and also the military support and protection that they enjoy. Recently, the supporters of Tehreek-i-Labaik Ya Rasool Ullah (TLYP), a newly-formed religious party blocked the main route between Islamabad and Rawalpindi in a protest to the remove the country's Law Minister over committing "blasphemy". Blasphemy is a serious charge in Pakistan that can carry death penalty. During the Zia rule, Sections 295B and 295C were added to the Pakistan Penal Code which criminalized blasphemy against Islam and made it punishable with death. The army chief of Pakistan, General Bajwa refused to deploy the military to disperse the protesters because "they are our people". Ultimately the violent protest was put to end after a deal was brokered by Pakistan military between the government and the protesters in favour of the demands of the Islamists. Unlike the various Deobandi religious groups that antagonized the military after Musharraf decided to support United States in post 9/11 scenario, TLYP which is critical of the civilian government, is pro-military while the military on the hand seems to be "relying on Barelvi groups because the previous assets have now become a liability. Pakistan faces continuous pressure from the international community for not acting against terror groups like Hafiz Saeed's Jamaat-ud-Dawa, or its previous incarnation, the Lashkar-e-Taiba. By using the Barelvi groups, over an issue as sensitive as blasphemy, the military establishment might be preparing alternative assets to be deployed against their political rivals in Pakistan". (*The Indian Express*, 01 December 2017)[14]

The "mullah-military" nexus in Pakistan share a long history. The incidence of Barelvis is not the first time that the Pakistan military has used Islam and the religious groups to forward their agenda in return of which, the religious groups have enjoyed the military support in order to gain access to national influence. Recently (in September 2018), recall of its decision by the government to appoint an Ahmadi as an economic advisor due to backlash from Islamists groups only underscores the clout of the hardline Islamists and the pressure the state faces from them. (*The Indian Express*, 08 September 2018)[15] The historic alliance between the Islamists and the military has also made Pakistan a breeding ground for radical Islam giving rise to militant Jihadism. The alliance "has the potential to frustrate antiterrorist operations, radicalize key segments of the Islamic world, and

bring India and Pakistan to the brink of war yet again,” caveats Husain Haqqani. (Haqqani 2005: 06)[16] The military of Pakistan needs to abandon its political role in order to allow the elected civilian government to make the policy decisions and let national interests overpower religious sentiments.

The use of religion to acquire political power in countries of South Asia is not a new phenomenon. The alarm bell rings with the radicalized religious groups participation in the electoral arena in Pakistan. But with each successive election especially in past two decades, the share of religious parties in the electoral seats is on a decline. According to Farzana Shaikh, a Pakistani historian and scholar, the religious parties don't win many seats in elections because “mainstream parties are now appropriating the discourse of the religious right. The manifesto and campaign of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and also the Pakistan Muslim League (N) and to a lesser degree the Pakistan People's Party on issues like blasphemy and women...their instance is indistinguishable from extremists. On issues like blasphemy which are seen as the index of the good Muslim against the bad Muslim, we mainstream political parties using the language of political Islam. So instead of religious parties entering the electoral fray, we must look at so-called moderate mainstream parties radicalizing their discourse.” (*The Hindu*, 14 November 2018)[17]

The religious parties might not win many seats in elections but they have the clout to set national agendas. This was well-exemplified when the radicals held the democratically elected government and the highest court in the country hostage after the Pakistan Supreme Court acquitted Asia Bibi, a Christian woman, in the blasphemy case[18] (in October 2018). The decision by SC invited wrath of religious parties such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) party whose members not only called for violent protests but issued death threats against Asia Bibi, her lawyer and the SC judges. The Pakistan government ultimately submitted to the clout of radicals and signed an agreement with the leaders of TLP. Under the deal, the government agreed to prevent Asia Bibi from leaving the country and not contest the review petition filed against the verdict along with release of the arrested protesters. The Supreme Court also came on knees. The Chief Justice of Pakistan, Saqib Nisar was found defending himself saying, “No one should have the doubt that the Supreme Court judges are not lovers of Prophet Muhammad...How can we punish someone in the absence of evidence”. (*ibid.*) The TLP had failed to win even a single seat in the National Assembly elections of 2018 despite fielding more than 170 candidates. (*The Hindu*, 22 November 2018)[19] This reflects the clout of the radical groups that remains and overpowers state institutions such as the military, the executive and the judiciary. (*The Hindu*, 15 November 2018)[20] They are expected, at least in the near future, to continue to exercise clout in social institutions, laws and policies of the country.

We can just hope that with each successive election in Pakistan, the sphere of influence of religion eventually shrinks to the personal spaces of people because as Farzana Shaikh admonishes, “religion is the source of division in Pakistan”. (*The Hindu*, 14 November 2018)[21]

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