Thriving Fundamentalism and Militancy in Pakistan: An Analytical Overview of their Impact on the Society

Umbreen Javaid

University of the Punjab, Lahore

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, Pakistan is passing through a very critical phase of its history where it is facing a number of problems amongst which the most crucial and devastating is fundamentalism which has led to militancy and violence in the society. Fundamentalism has further brought radicalization, divisions and cracks in an already fragmented society. If the present situation is left unchecked, it has the potential to completely destabilize the country. This paper attempts to analyze how fundamentalism has taken roots and also how it has continuously been growing in the recent history of Pakistan. The paper further looks into the affects of fundamentalism on the society as a whole. Needless to say that this situation has put the security of this country at stake.

KEY WORDS: Fundamentalism, Militancy, Religion, Pakistan, Terrorism, Violence.

Introduction

Fundamentalism in the context of religion is not a recent phenomenon or only specific to Islam; it has diverse manifestations through the history and in contemporary world. Various Christian denominations, Zionist organizations, orthodox Buddhist groups, Hindu extremists in India and radical pressure group in Muslim world demonstrate a common trait cutting across all religions and spanning all the periods. All these manifestations share some commonalities like rejection of modern concepts, claim of purity, aversion to reason, intermingling of state and religion for gaining and preserving political power, maltreatment of weaker segments, and discrimination against other creeds and breeds.

'Religion has played, and perhaps will continue to play a major role in moulding human consciousness' (Chopra, 1994: 1). 'Religious fundamentalists conceive the world in a hierarchical manner in which wisdom and decision are seen as emanating from source of perceived authority - particularly sacred texts, traditions, and selected leaders. These sources, not to be challenged' (Domke,

2004: 119). The term fundamentalism connotes going back to the basic tenants and reproducing as closely as possible the laws and institutions founding them. Fundamentalism is characterized by a rigid adherence to the most basic and traditional principles and beliefs of that religion as perceived commonly. Fundamentalism now is just not confined to religion, it sprawls over socio-political dimensions occurring during a rapid social change emanating out of different crises. The common denominator of all forms of fundamentalism old, or new religion or mundane is the preservation of original social order.

Background

The South Asian societies in contemporary environment are confronted with religion based violence, sectarianism, extremism, communalism and even regionalism. This had made them vulnerable societies, specifically due to their closed nature and illiterate and down trodden masses that are an easy prey to exploitation at the hands of politically motivated religious leaders. The divisive characteristic of fundamentalism seriously impairs cohesiveness and unity in the society and makes it vulnerable and fragile. All of this confuses up in the emergence of extremist religious movements particularly formulated in the wake of identity threat to various groups. Further contributing to radicalization are failure of intellectual and political elites dwindling influence of tradition, lack of ideological or political synthesis, economic disparity demographic and spatial imbalances, political suppression, and self seeking big power involvement in the region.

The overriding militant characteristic of the extremist religious movements ultimately created unbridgeable gulf between governments of South Asian states and religious groups. The common greed of power between the weakened conservatives in politics and the ambitious religious radicals led to the formation of an unholy alliance against modernization, social emancipation   and sharing of economic opportunities. In Pakistan the mess was further compounded as this alliance was fortified with the backing of the establishment.

Pakistan has particularly been prone to religious extremism, Pakistan's policy makers have been blamed since the day of its inception, by religious groups to be allied with anti Islamic forces internally and extremely as well.

The religious fundamentalism in South Asian states joined hands, with politicians who eventually tempted to use religion as a tool to attain their political ends.   However, the fundamentalism succeeding and enhancing from these limitations forced politicians either to compromise with fundamental religious leaders or to get involved in effort to eliminate fundamentalism.

No doubt, Pakistani society is inherently a liberal and moderate society, with majority of people following a liberal, Sufi-oriented and non-violent vision of Islam. The well documented history of Pakistan movement reveals that quite a few

religious factions and Muslim politicians literally opposed Pakistan, but right after its emergence, all of them tried hard to give severe blow to modern or secular forces by stressing upon the orthodox Islamic version of society and on that ground demanding Pakistan to be an orthodox Islamic polity.

The extremist face of Pakistan can be best understood in the backdrop of its different phases of political history, the heterogeneous composition of Pakistani society, its sub nationalities, ethno-cultural communities, diversified sub cultures in its variety of sub groups, and political interests. 'The Islamic narrative in Pakistan has been hijacked by an array of groups who use religion as a means to diverse ends: to secure political and territorial power, exorcise corrosive Western influence, engage in class warfare, and redress perceived injustices' (Lodhi, 2011: 130). Besides these factors, the trends of international politics, the internal political fermentation of neighboring states have also contributed towards the nourishment of religious extremism in Pakistan. Pakistani society has virtually served as sparing partner to all sectarian conflicts and debates in the neighboring Muslim States settling the historic scores amongst inter and intra a regional populace.

'Although religious parties are not in a position to gain political dominance, they threaten the stability of the state in several ways' (Paris, 2010: 29). 'The religious parties and fundamentalists managed to build in the "Objectives Resolution of Islam" in the 1956 constitution and also managed to make the same resolution as an operative part of 1973 constitution' (Ali, 2010: 370).

Before, the 1970's religion was not generally a controversial issue in Pakistan as largely it was not political before that. The general elections of 1970 in which the establishment patronized the religious political parties, the massive anti religious government movement of 1977 again alleged to be backed by the establishment and getting slots in the government of the day gave them the first taste of power which they relisted and ever after always strived the harshest to attain it rather in fuller doses.

Political cum religious disturbance in the region specially in the neighboring Iran and Afghanistan in the eventful year of 1979 gave an altogether different hue to religious political elements in Pakistan.

The root causes of religious extremism can be traced back to mass 1979 revolution in Iran, the Sunni dominated Iraq's war upon Iran which virtually involved a race to get more and more support amongst the Pakistani populace. For this purpose Mullas of respective sects with extremist ideas applied all kinds of tactics. This made Pakistan a secondary battle field of Iran-Iraq war and unleashing of unbridled wave of sectarian violence in Pakistan society. The situation further deteriorated when US initiated a proxy war against Soviet Union in Afghanistan with the help of Mujahideen who were motivated for battle through religious propaganda urging them to wage a holy war expeled the infidels from Muslim Afghanistan.

During 1979 to 1988 the Zia government, under cross current of its political agenda, gave free hand to religious extremists organizations having Jihadi motivations and orientations which they used to their utmost to strengthen them within the Pakistan policy. 'To win the fundamentalists' sympathy, Zia Ul-Haq's reactionary bourgeois military dictatorship took over their projects for Islamic reforms and used them to its own advantage' (Achar, 2004: 56). 'Zia's military dictatorship, once again fully backed by the United States, was the worst period in the country's history. The new regime had decided to use Islam as its battering ram, and its bearded supporters, often incredibly dull, were opportunities to the marrow of their bones. They combined religion with profanities of the vilest kind. The political culture of Pakistan was brutalized. It has still to recover' (Ali, 2002: 189). Under the dictatorship of General Zia ul Haq, Pakistan imported hard Islam from Saudi Arabia in response to the rising challenge of Imam Khomeini in Iran (Ahmed, 2010: 328). In fact Zia ul Haq was seeing them as long run partners in his political end game. The success in expulsion of soviet troops from Afghanistan proved to be a source of inspiration for Kashmir liberation movement. This provided Jihadi movements another battle field to test their muscles against India's imperialism. A necessary corollary of this matrix was deep rooted sectarian violence in Pakistan.

These religious Jihadi movements not just carried massive appeal on ideological grounds but wide spread economic disparity provided them a good opportunity to swell their ranks. The madressah became the safe heaven for deserted children and for children of poor families as well. Inter religion and intera religion minorities   suffered a lot through this onslaught of the extremist culture. 'The narrower and much more radical Islamist groups have assumed more uncompromising lines on Kashmir, sectarianism and social issues. The badly deteriorating situation in Pakistan contributes to the rise of more extreme Islamist groups' (Volpi, 2011: 415).

'Despair and frustration arising from political instability and dictatorial regimes, is directly linked to the unfair socio-economic order and foreign policy issues' (Niaz, 2011: 171). This all has resulted in extremism, fundamentalism, intolerance, and socio-political annihilation of minorities. The madrassas have become the home for deserted children and for children of poor families as well. 'The rural poor have no gateway to modern education. They are driven to madrassas, which are located all over Pakistan, where education is free with free hostel, food and clothing. They naturally act as magnets to draw *talibs* (students)' (Datta and Sharma, 2002: 216). 'Consequences on deep determinants of terrorism eludes us even as Islamic religious schools are widely cited as important contributors to extremism. Nowhere have these statements been more strongly applied than to Pakistan, where religious schools - commonly known as madrassas-were responsible for educating the leadership of the *Taliban* during the 1980s' (Khan, 2010: 430).

'The problem of militancy is embedded in the extended society; the way in which the state is being governed and the kinds of relief a citizen is denied, through normal economic, legal and administrative or political processes. This accompanied by the feeling of deprivation among a large majority of the people. This practice has severely compromised merit, excellence, and professionalism which have been replaced by the mediocre. All these trends promote militancy, as citizens have no customary channels to redress their grievances. Moreover, Talibanization is growing amidst political instability and ethnic tensions' (Niaz, 2011: 171).

The latest and most horrendous fact of this non tolerant culture is the suicide bomber where for the sake of indoctrinated ends the raw minds are prepared to take their own lives besides butchering   as many innocent people as possible. Thus a small beginning   in the name of sectarian superiority nourished with bigotry, dis information and hatred culminate in macabre display of complete annihilation of the poor body and the soul that has been fed with it in its tender years.

By joining sectarian based movements and organizations, the unemployed youth found an occupation to earn livelihood an ideology to live with and a new family in which they found security and feeling of belongingness. The net outcome of the journey of extremism in Pakistan is an intolerant culture being imposed on any inhere ably progressive society which is otherwise keen to live a modern, productive and normal life.

Talibanization of Society

It is noteworthy that during 1999, 'by the time General Pervez Musharraf, a moderate and progressive Muslim, came to the scene, the very scale of religious extremism had reached its climax. When he halfheartedly tried to halt its trend before the tragedy of 9/11, the army found that it was faced with a potential adversary that it was not willing or able to bring to heel. Many of these groups had developed   independent   channels   of   financing,   giving   them   increased maneuverability' (Abbas, 2005: 12).

A number of religious and sectarian groups in Pakistan have joined hands with Al-Qaeda, Taliban and many of them claim themselves to be Pakistani Taliban. All these militant groups want transformation of the society according to their own particular fundamentalist view point which seems to be very close to the views of Taliban.

'Opposition to Musharraf and what was perceived to be his pro-US stance deepened in 2007 after a bloody confrontation between government security forces and radical Muslim clerics and students at Islamabad's Red Mosque. The leading cleric at the mosque, Abdul Rashid Ghazi, had openly announced his support of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden, and many of the students in the schools and

seminars located in the mosque compound came from Taliban-influenced Pashtun tribal areas' (Juergensmeyer, 2008: 90).

It was in 2007, when Musharraf had to face a very critical situation when since nearly six months Islamabad was viewing a situation which had never been anticipated and was looked upon with anxiety and concern the activities of militant fundamentalist students of Red Mosque which was located in the centre of Islamabad. These were led and guided by two brothers Maulana Abdul Aziz and Maulana Abdul Rasheed Ghazi who were the clerics of the mosque. This red colored pro Taliban mosque provided living to a large number of male and female youngsters from various areas of Pakistan especially the frontier region. During their stay in the mosque they came out as radicalized and fundamentalists, all ready to join various militant extremist groups. 'The long standing links between the Pakistani military establishment and Lal Masjid had turned hostile after President Musharraf allied himself with the United States following the 9/11 attacks' (Hussain, 2010: 113).

The law breaking activities and forceful imposition of their extremist version of laws began in protest to the demolition of two mosques in Islamabad which had been illegally constructed. Taking law in their hands the male and female students were seen on the main roads of Islamabad carrying out activities which openly challenged the writ of the state. These scenes were shown live by the national and international media along with the diplomats in Islamabad with questions being raised as to why the government was not taking any action against these militants and law breakers who had created fear and horror not only in Islamabad but all over Pakistan. The situation became extremely critical when the students of the Mosque made hostage Chinese workers of a massage Parlor on the pretext that their activities were anti Islamic. On this incident the Chinese government also had to put pressure on Musharraf government to take a stern action against these radicals. This also projected a bad image of Pakistan internationally. Islamabad became a battlefield when in July 2007 the government eventually decided to initiate a militant commando operation called 'operation silence' at Lal Mosque. This operation resulted in large number of casualties of hard core militant students, arrest of one and death of other cleric brothers (Amir Mir, 2008). As a reaction to this operation, a very large number of series of suicide attacks began in Pakistan which still continues. This also became a glaring case showing how militant religious fundamentalism was infiltrating even in the settled cities of Pakistan, which was very worrying and shocking for many within and outside of Pakistan.

Two events in recent years show how Talibanization is entering into the society. The dreadful alarming situation arose was an eye opener for all when in 2009 a local hard core Islamic cleric Maulana Fazlulla took over Swat, an area of Khyber Pakhtunkhwah, famous for its natural beauty and tourism. Establishing his so called Islamic rule over there, his style of occupation was similar to that of hard core Taliban. All video and CD shops were destroyed or closed. Women were not allowed to go out. A large number of girls' schools were also destroyed. The

situation became so worse that the Pakistan government had to take a military operation against these elements and to do so a very large number of internally displaced persons were moved from Swat to other areas. The operation ended with Maulana being removed and with most of beautiful Swat destroyed due to the fighting between security forces and militants.

The most tragic and saddening of all incidents was the killing of Ms Benazir Bhutto who was an educated, liberal and moderate leader. After being threatened by fundamentalist elements she was eventually killed by them leaving political vacuum and instability of Pakistan, which has lost a very popular national leader. 'The tendency of intolerance has invaded all level of state institutions, and is not simply restricted only to the non-state actors. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this trend in Pakistan has become more prominent and is reflected at all levels of societal contacts' (Niaz, 2011: 171).

Two more recent tragic and painful incidents in 2010 show how radicalization and intolerance are spreading in Pakistan. Due to flourishing of radical views, the Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer was shot down by his own extremist bodyguard after he had raised certain concerns regarding interpretation of blasphemy law (Dawn, January 23, 2011). Few months later, on the same issue the Minister for Minorities; Shahbaz Bhatti was killed by the militant extremists in Islamabad. These incidents have become not only a matter of grave concern for the moderates and civil society but also for the government.

Fundamentalism and Terrorism

'Extremism is a state of mind while terrorism is a tool for violent manifestation of extremism – the reasons for both vary from ideological to socio-economic disparities to quest for rights and justice to plain psychological. The nature, extent and footprint of extremism and terrorism in Pakistan, too spans the entire spectrum' (NDU, 2010: 128).

At this time Pakistan is the worst hit country due to terrorism. No city or area is beyond the reach of the militant extremists in carrying out terrorist activities that include suicide attacks, bomb blasts, target killings and kidnappings. No place is safe from them even markets, mosques, shrines, educational institutions, hotels, government offices and offices of security agencies are not spared by them. They no more discriminate between civilians, children, women or security forces while carrying out their terrorist activities. This has led to a fearful society with masses losing faith in government in controlling the menace of terrorism and in providing them adequate security.

The militants are no more limited to tribal areas as earlier; they have moved and based themselves in other settled cities where they have found protection, hospitality and support of local religious or sectarian groups who have joined hands with them.

**Fidayeen (Suicide Squad) Attacks in Pakistan
2002 – 2011**

Year	Incidents	Killed	Injured
2011*	10	131	273
2010	49	1167	2199
2009	76	949	2356
2008	59	893	1846
2007	54	765	1677
2006	07	161	352
2005	04	84	219
2004	07	89	321
2003	02	69	103
2002	01	15	34
Total	524	4323	9380

*Till March 2011

Source: http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/Fidayeenattack.htm

Looking at the above data it can clearly be noted that prior to 2002, suicide attacks were unknown in Pakistan, but since the decision of joining the war on terror, there have been large scale terrorist attacks specially suicide attacks in Pakistan. The terrorist activities of the militant fundamentalists are on the rise every year which have threatened the security of Pakistan. These attacks have created panic and fear amongst the masses.

Conclusion

'The recent increase of violence by jihadi groups, including suicide bombing of innocent bystanders as well attacks on the police and military, has perhaps brought more Pakistanis to consider how to strike a new balance between Islam and politics' (Oldenburg, 2010: 158). 'The Pakistani people also need to change their attitude, especially their outlook on religion. Suffered with anti-Americanism and religious fervor, Pakistanis are filtering their worldview through the prism of religion and the tensions between Islam and the West, making them to the radical propaganda and paralyzing their will to act against forces of extremism' (Hussain, 2009: 11).

It is not only the task of the government to control this growing fundamentalism but the whole society needs to completely shun off these extremists. The political parties, intellectuals, sectarian and religious parties and the masses all have to openly condemn the extremists, so that they do not find any space to flourish. 'Much still needs to be done on the home front curb religious zealotry and sectarianism, policies towards minorities, revision of school curricula, reconstructing 'official' history, promotion of universal education, and overhauling of the madrassah system' (Niaz, 2011: 181).

The best way to curtail the thriving fundamentalism in Pakistan is to look deeply into its causes. The whole society and especially the government needs to put in serious efforts in controlling on checking the causes if not diminishing them. It should also be understand that the issue of fundamentalism is very complex which entails number of factors which are playing their part. These include economic disparity, lack of education, religious ignorance, unemployment, extremism, judicial system, poor governance, ethnicity and sectarianism, corruption and alignment with United States, each of these have played their role separately and also a combined mix of all in flourishing militant fundamentalism in Pakistan. To control fundamentalism is not an easy task especially when it is now combined with militancy. Another major challenge for the government is that earlier the various militant extremist groups were operating separately and had divergent aims and objectives from each other but lately various local groups, Al-Qaeda and Taliban have all joined hands and helping each other irrespective of their particular objectives. These alignments have made these militant groups more lethal, thus making things more difficult for the government.

Militant fundamentalism not only has the ability to destabilize Pakistan but it can, if not controlled, bring about serious security concerns for the region and also towards the global security and peace.

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Biographical Note

Dr. Umbreen Javaid is Director Centre for South Asian Studies & Chairperson Department of Political Science, University of the Punjab, Lahore.

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