RISE OF EXTREMISM IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Extremism is a global phenomenon and no society is free from it. But the nature and degree of extremism vary from country to country in relation to the state of their socio-economic development. If the society is educated, enlightened and economically prosperous, the prospects of extremism transforming into militancy, radicalization, violence and terrorism become proportionally dim. But, if the society is backward, under-developed and illiterate, the challenge of extremism becomes serious. Pakistan, like many countries in the Muslim world, is passing through a critical phase of instability. A fundamental reason which seems to have destabilized state and societal structures is the spread of extremism and militancy at different levels. The Deepening of ethnic, sectarian and religious intolerance has caused much violence and eroded the rule of law. The hardening of extremism, intolerance, militancy and radicalization which triggered violence and terrorism in Pakistan took place over a period of several decades. Pakistan's short history as a country has been very turbulent. The creation of Pakistan was the catalyst to the largest demographic movement in recorded history. Nearly seventeen million people-Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs-are reported to have moved in both directions between India and the two wings of Pakistan. Even after so many decades of independence, it is still struggling for a national identity. Pakistan has almost since its foundation been characterized by extremism and violence. Also, that it is inherently unstable as a state, and in danger of collapse. Pakistan is tagged as a country 'producing terrorism' and/or of 'safe havens for terrorists', and the presence of Osama bin Laden in Abbotabad (Pakistan's Garrison town) has appeared to support this argument. Scholars associated with the American Intelligence community such as Stephen P Cohen and Bruce Riedle believe that the country is likely to disintegrate in the near future due to its chaos and complexity.

It is widely seen that Pakistan, once a part of India and which had announced its birth on the basis of religion, has failed to transform into a reality under various governments. The country was hijacked by those with no contribution to the struggle for a new state. Unfortunately, after the death of Jinnah, political polarization and strife led to delay in the framing of the constitution. Governor-General Ghulam Muhammad (1951-1955) and military adventurists like Ayyub Khan (1958-1969), Yahya Khan (1969-1971) and Zia-ul Haq (1977-1988) sneaked into the corridors of power through unconstitutional means and justified the impositions of military rule on various pretexts of economic growth and political stability. Out of more than 60 years of Pakistan's history, more than 30 years are plagued by marshal law i.e., military rule. Thus, the quality of democracy suffered immeasurable losses.[i]

Pakistan is regarded widely today as a country in continuing turmoil, in which multiple centers of political and armed power compete with each other, using violence as much as due democratic processes to settle their differences.

Pakistan has been portrayed as a failed state between Allah, Army and Terrorism, or a corrupt mediaeval empire ruled by mansabdars.[ii]

Despite the shared religion of its overwhelmingly Muslim population, Pakistan has been engaged in a precarious struggle to define a national identity and evolve a political system for its linguistically diverse population. It is known to have over twenty languages and over 300 distinct dialects, Urdu and English are the official languages but Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Baluchi and Seraiki are considered main languages. This diversity has caused chronic regional tensions and successive failures in forming a constitution. All of Pakistan's struggles underpin the dilemma they face in reconciling the goal of national integration with the imperatives of national security. Pakistan emerged as a security state where the priority was not on social and human development but on projecting external threat perception, primarily those emanating from India. As a result, 20 million children in Pakistan are out of school and the country ranks 144th on the human security index.

The failure of successive governments in Pakistan to understand the adverse implications of allowing religion to be used for political purposes deepened intolerance and militancy in society. Unfortunately, issues which caused extremism and frustration in various segments of population were neither properly understood nor any serious effort was made by state authorities to address those issues. Consequently, Pakistan which was a new state and had enormous potential to emerge as a progressive, modern and democratic country in the Muslim world missed the opportunity and allowed itself to become a haven of extremist and violent groups.[iii]

Khaled Ahmed, a noted political analyst, traces the rise of extremism in Pakistan in the following words: - Pakistan was Islamized gradually but when it reached a peak in this process in the 1980s, the country became vaguely aware of an extremism that the West called fundamentalism. When the international media began using the word there was an immediate reaction against it. The cleric and the intellectual both thought it an attack on Islam and began defending Islam instead of worrying about the growing extremism at home. Religious extremism began in earnest during the second jihad which was the extension of the Afghan jihad against the Soviets to Kashmir as a low-intensity conflict with India after 1989.[iv]

Moonis Ahmar writes, "Pakistan, since its inception as a nation-state has faced the challenge of extremism and militancy. Created on the basis of religion, the new state of Pakistan faced not only a crisis of leadership but the task of national integration also remained unfulfilled resulting in the disintegration of the country on December 16, 1971.The post-1971 Pakistan however missed opportunities to ensure social justice, cohesion and promote moderation which gave rise to the resurgence of ethnic nationalism in its provinces of Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (formerly known as North-Western Frontier Province). Ethnic and lingual forces asserted themselves and religious militancy gained ground during the 1980s."[v]

Pakistan has been groping for national moorings somewhere in the twilight between myth and history. This is not a novel occurrence in a newly independent state. But declining educational standards and a media oscillating between official control and rampant commercialization have facilitated the dissemination of remarkable distortions and mistruths. Extended periods of military and quasi-military rule witnessed strict curbs on the freedom of expression.[vi]

Zafar Hilaly, a former ambassador, writing in The News International believes that extremists are unable to take over the Pakistani state. He argues that, "although extremists are determined to force their ideology on the country, they cannot succeed on their own strength or on their political appeal, while their long-term prospects are poor. Their ideology has nothing to do with tackling issues that really matter to most people, such as governance, economic and financial problems, generating jobs, making the country attractive to investors, managing foreign relations, providing

security and managing external defence without plunging the country into self-destructive war with other countries." vii

Second, Jinnah's life — which was a role model in terms of integrity, rule of law, adherence to merit, enlightenment, austerity — failed to have any mark on people at the helm of affairs. Corruption, nepotism, bad governance, lack of accountability, absence of rule of law, lust for power, political opportunism and adherence to VVIP culture emerged as a dominant norm particularly in the Western wing of Pakistan. As years passed, Jinnah's vision of a welfare state dwindled because Pakistan focused on state building instead of nation-building.

Pakistan can successfully cope with the challenge of extremism if it follows a three-pronged approach. First, purge the society of elements who propagate hate and intolerance. This would require the silent majority to wake up and play a proactive role in neutralizing groups who use religion or ethnicity for their vested interests. Second, state institutions, particularly military and security agencies, should also be purged of extremist elements among them whose tacit support of extremism and militancy grows. Third, social and economic issues which cause extremism must be seriously addressed by the state and society because an indifferent approach would only deepen frustration and anger. The sooner the challenge of extremism is understood and dealt with in a serious manner, the better it will be for the future generations of Pakistan. viii It is possible only when the leadership of Pakistan along with the civil society come forward and make a sincere effort to focus on the genuine issues of the masses like health, education, infrastructure, public safety, transport, etc. rather than misleading the people and instigating their religious sentiments. The role of the politicians is very important in this regard.

According to Ayesha Jalal, "Politicians in Pakistan will have to strengthen institutions instead of simply asserting their constitutional rights to shape the destiny of the country. This can only happen when they start to deliver on their promises to the electorate and create the space to assert themselves vis-à-vis the Army in substance rather than form."

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[ii] *Hassan Abbas, Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army and The America's War on Terror (New York: Routledge, 2004); Hussain Haqqani, Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005); Ahmed Rashid, Descent Into Chaos: The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia (New York: Penguin Books, 2009); Ayesha Jalal, Partisan of Allah: Jihad in South Asia (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2010) traces the history of jihad in the region to Syed Ahmed Rai of Bareilly's declaration to this effect against British colonial rule.*

[iii] *The Challenge of Extremism in Pakistan: Are there Lessons to be Learnt from the Experience of Singapore?, Moonis Ahmar∗, IPRI Journal XI, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 44-63*

[iv] *, Islamic Extremism in Pakistan, Khaled Ahmed Journal of South Asia (Lahore) (October-December 2003).*

[v] *The Challenge of Extremism in Pakistan: Are there Lessons to be Learnt from the Experience of Singapore?, Moonis Ahmar∗, IPRI Journal XI, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 44-63*

[vi] *Ayesha Jalal, The Struggle for Pakistan,*

[vii] *Zafar Hilaly, "Extremism- Not the Only Problem," News International (Karachi), February 10, 2011.*

[viii] *The Challenge of Extremism in Pakistan: Are there Lessons to be Learnt from the Experience of Singapore?, Moonis Ahmar∗, IPRI Journal XI, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 44-63*