

NOREF Policy Brief

Prospects for youth-led movements for political change in Pakistan

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Executive summary

This policy brief assesses the potential for two types of youth-led political change movements in Pakistan. One is an Arab Spring-like campaign, fuelled by demands for better governance and new leadership. The other is a religious movement akin to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which seeks to transform Pakistan into a rigid Islamic state. The brief discusses the presence in Pakistan of several factors that suggest the possibility of the emergence of an Arab Spring-type movement. These include economic problems; corruption; a young, rapidly urbanising and disillusioned population; youth-galvanising incidents; and, in Imran Khan, a charismatic political figure capable of channelling mass sentiment into political change.

Pakistan is too fractured, unstable and invested in the status quo to launch a mass change movement, and talk of an Arab Spring is misguided in a nation that already experienced mass protests in 2007. Moreover, religion is too

divided and polarised, and religious leadership too lacking in charisma and appeal to produce such a movement. Notwithstanding, there are several reasons why Pakistan could witness a religiously rooted revolution. These include Pakistanis' intense religiosity and the growing influence in Pakistan of an Islamist political party that seeks to install caliphates in Muslim countries.

Even without youth-led mass change movements, urbanisation and political devolution ensure that Pakistan will undergo major transformations. While emphasising that Pakistan must take ultimate responsibility over issues of youth engagement, the brief offers several recommendations for how Europe can help Pakistani young people engage peacefully in the country's inevitable process of change. These include funding vocational skills certification programmes, financing incentives to keep children in school, supporting civic education courses and sponsoring interfaith dialogue conferences.

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Background

On October 24th 2011, 23-year-old Raja Khan set himself on fire in front of Pakistan's parliament building in Islamabad. He succumbed to his burns several hours later. A letter left behind by the impoverished and unemployed young father explained that he could no longer bear to live in poverty.

Two-thirds of Pakistan's 180 million people are less than 30 years old, and most of them struggle as Khan did in his short life. Only about 15% of 15- to 29-year-old Pakistanis have completed secondary school, and fewer than 6% have participated in technical and vocational education and training. Predictably, about 30% of them are illiterate and more than half are not members of the labour force.¹ While Islamabad generally speaks of an unemployment rate in the single digits, non-government sources estimate it as high as 34% – a figure encompassing 18 million Pakistanis, most of them young.² Pakistan's young masses are further marginalised by a state and society plagued by rampant corruption and beholden to vested and elite interests.

Not surprisingly, surveys find that Pakistani youth are deeply unhappy about their lives and the state of their country, and the government receives the lion's share of blame.³ In 2010, widespread anger about Islamabad's lacklustre response to catastrophic flooding kindled debate about the possibility of an anti-government revolt. Such debate intensified through 2011, when mass uprisings helped topple several long-ruling strongmen in the Middle East and North Africa – the events collectively known as the Arab Spring.

Many observers note how the circumstances of Raja Khan's death are eerily similar to those of the man identified as the spark for the Arab Spring: Mohamed Bouazizi, another poor, young and jobless father who committed suicide by self-immolation in front of a government building in Tunisia in December 2010. However, given Pakistan's volatile mix of popular discontent, economic distress and Islamic ideology, some invoke a different parallel: Iran in 1979.

This brief assesses the potential for two possible types of youth-led movements for political change in Pakistan. One is an Arab Spring-like campaign propelled by mass demands for new leadership and better governance. The other is a religious movement akin to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which seeks to give political control to mullahs and transform Pakistan into a rigid Islamic state.

The brief argues that, despite the presence of factors suggesting such movements could materialise, both possibilities are highly unlikely today. It contends, however, that neither scenario can be ruled out in the decades ahead. It offers recommendations for how Europe can help ensure that any future youth-driven change movements are peaceful.

Prospects for a youth-led, Arab Spring-style movement

Supporting factors

Pakistan features many of the conditions driving revolt in the Middle East: economic problems, unemployment, corruption and a young, rapidly urbanising population. Disillusionment is also rife. Many young Pakistanis experience what one analyst describes as an "expectation–reality disconnect": those fortunate enough to receive the education or skills that qualify them for desirable jobs are frequently passed over in favour of the children of elites and obliged to take menial jobs or left with none at all. The result is alienation and resentment towards the governing elite.⁴

1 Planning Commission, Government of Pakistan, "Youth and community engagement", *Pakistan: Framework for Economic Growth*, Islamabad, 2011, http://www.pc.gov.pk/growth_documents.htm.

2 Jane Perlez, "Many in Pakistan fear unrest at home", *New York Times*, February 3rd 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/04/world/asia/04pakistan.html?pagewanted=all>.

3 Youth polling data mentioned in this brief are drawn from the British Council, *Pakistan: The Next Generation*, Islamabad, 2009, <http://www.britishcouncil.pk/pakistan-Next-Generation-Report.pdf>; "Youth speak", *Herald*, vol 41, no. 1, January 2010, pp 52–105; Center for Civic Education, *Civic Health of Pakistani Youth*, Islamabad, 2009; Ayesha Siddiqi, *Red Hot Chili Pepper Islam – Is the Youth in Elite Universities in Pakistan Radical?*, Lahore, Heinrich Böll Stiftung Pakistan, 2010, <http://bit.ly/vmY6H2>; and Center for Poverty Reduction and Strengthening Social Policy Development, "Youth survey", produced for *Pakistan: Framework for Economic Growth*, May 2011.

4 Moeed Yusuf, "Youth and the future", Stephen P. Cohen and others, *The Future of Pakistan*, Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2011, pp 272–73.

Additionally, Pakistan regularly experiences youth-galvanising incidents, many of them emblematic of the country's rampant injustice and lawlessness that so anger young Pakistanis. In June 2011, a heavily armed paramilitary soldier confronted a 25-year-old unarmed man in a Karachi park. As the young man begged for his life, the soldier dragged him by the hair and then shot him to death at close range. Paramilitary forces later claimed that the man had been trying to rob someone. His family rejected this explanation, noting that he was simply taking a walk in the park to escape the discomfort of his electricity-deprived home.

The incident, which was caught on film and quickly went viral on the Internet, sparked an immense outcry. Similarly, in August 2010, Pakistanis nationwide reacted with horror after hundreds of people lynched two young brothers in the city of Sialkot while police officers simply looked on. Incidents such as these could provide the spark that unleashes the pent-up anger of legions of young Pakistanis. (To understand why these two specific events did not trigger mass protests, one must acknowledge certain realities about Pakistan – such as its highly fractured society – that constrain such responses.)

Furthermore, Pakistan's military – the nation's most powerful institution and self-declared protector – suffered several blows to its credibility in 2011. These include the U.S. commando raid to kill Osama bin Laden and a militant attack on a naval base. In the second half of 2011, numerous journalists were highly critical of the armed forces – a rare occurrence in Pakistan. Some observers contend that the military's shattered veneer of invincibility could undermine "old patterns of control" and hasten the emergence of a popular movement in favour of cleaner and more transparent governance.⁵

Critically, Pakistanis have in their favour something lacking in the Arab Spring nations: a single charismatic political figure capable of channelling mass anti-government sentiment into actual political change. Imran Khan, a former cricket star, is consistently depicted in polls as

Pakistan's most popular politician. His ability to tap into widely nurtured grievances about corruption and injustice – all while embodying the clean, honest and non-dynastic qualities that elude most Pakistani politicians – has endeared him to soaring numbers of Pakistani youth. In the autumn of 2011, he staged a rally in Lahore that attracted 100,000 supporters, most of them young. This turnout, in the stronghold of Pakistan's chief opposition party, the Pakistan Muslim League (N), stunned Pakistani analysts, who had long refused to take him seriously. Later in the year, a rally in Karachi attracted a similar number of supporters. With several high-profile political figures, including a former foreign minister, now defecting to his party, some experts concede Khan could one day become prime minister.

Mitigating factors

Nonetheless, for a variety of reasons, immediate prospects for an Arab Spring-style revolt are remote. Pakistan is a fractured country that lacks the united, inclusive front necessary for mass movements. Its cleavages are provincial (the country's four provinces, particularly Punjab and Sindh, are often at odds), ethnic (Karachi is periodically convulsed by deadly ethnic violence) and sectarian (Muslim and non-Muslim minorities are frequent targets of discrimination and violence). In polls, most Pakistani youth attach greater importance to their ethnic and sectarian identities than to their shared nationality. "Collective action is necessarily inclusive", argues one Pakistani commentator, yet "the rhetoric of our politics, education, and sermonizing is primed for exclusion."⁶

Additionally, because the nation's political culture is built around patronage, Pakistanis are heavily invested in the status quo. Society's "real bonds", notes an experienced foreign correspondent in Pakistan, "are forged around clans, tribes, personal contacts." One must often depend on "the reference of an influential friend."⁷ The masses – young and old – will hesitate to push

5 See, for example, Shirin R. Tahir-Kheli, "Is Pakistan's Arab Spring coming?", *Daily Beast*, May 11th 2011, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/05/11/is-pakistans-arab-spring-coming.html>.

6 Huma Yusuf, "Will there be mass protests?", *Dawn*, February 7th 2011, <http://www.dawn.com/2011/02/07/will-there-be-mass-protests.html>.

7 Declan Walsh, "Bombs, spies, and wild parties", *The Guardian*, December 15th 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/15/pakistan-bombs-spies-wild-parties>.

for drastic changes in the political order that could jeopardise the future influence of those they depend on for favours and services.

Furthermore, Pakistan's poor security situation makes the prospect of peaceful, sustained mass movements unlikely. In a nation as gun-saturated as Pakistan, unarmed protest can only go so far. And the sheer ferocity of the country's violence will scare many off the streets. According to Pakistan's Human Rights Commission, 12,000 people were murdered in 2010, with more than 2,500 perishing in terrorist attacks. Tellingly, a June 2011 event in Lahore featuring Arab Spring leaders from Libya, Egypt and Tunisia was abruptly cancelled – on account of a security threat.

Finally, Pakistan has already experienced its own form of Arab Spring. Back in 2007, demonstrators – including thousands of youth – took to the streets to peacefully protest against President Pervez Musharraf's decision to suspend the Supreme Court's chief justice. His subsequent decision to declare a state of emergency spawned more protests, this time calling for him to step down. The embattled leader did so in August 2008, ushering in a period of (imperfect) democratic rule.

Given this recent past, many Pakistanis argue that "Arab Spring" – which refers to efforts to overthrow ossified despots in politically repressive societies – is a misnomer in Pakistan. Why, they ask, revolt against a democratic system? Or agitate for rights – such as the freedom to protest – that are already enjoyed? Many argue that, instead of launching another Arab Spring, Pakistanis should effect change through the ballot box. Imran Khan himself has vowed that Pakistan's next election will produce the nation's "biggest revolution" by sweeping "the entire old, degenerate, corrupt ruling elite" from power. Again, while far from an ideal democracy, Pakistan does enjoy the trappings of democracy – hence distinguishing it politically from most Arab countries.

Prospects for a youth-led, religion-based movement

Supporting factors

Pakistani youth sentiment is marked by conservatism, anti-Americanism and anti-government fervour, yet also by intense religiosity. Polling in recent years finds that nearly two-thirds of young Pakistanis favour an Islamic state; more than 80% are at least moderately religious; and a full third support Sharia-style punishments such as floggings and the severing of limbs. Overwhelming numbers identify themselves as Muslims rather than as Pakistanis.

Such sentiments are not restricted to the poorer, less educated classes. A survey of students conducted at several prestigious and expensive universities in Pakistan's three largest cities reveals that 88% consider Islam to be their prime identity; 70% believe Islam can be an appropriate form of governance; and 56% oppose the idea of Pakistan as a secular state. While it is difficult to compare such figures with Muslim nations elsewhere in the world – to the extent that polling data exist on global Muslim sentiment, most tend to focus on perceptions of the West – it is incontrovertible that religiosity runs particularly deep in Pakistan. This is the consequence of a nation founded on the principle of Islam, and whose leaders (particularly Zia ul-Haq, who ruled in the 1980s) have sought to make Pakistan more Islamic by rendering school curriculums more Muslim-focused and by intensifying ties with Muslim organisations domestically and internationally – some of them, such as the Afghan Taliban, unquestioningly extremist.

Indeed, ominously, Pakistan's religious ideology frequently manifests itself violently. While the assassination of former Punjab Province governor Salman Taseer is an oft-cited example (Taseer was shot to death by his bodyguard in January 2011 because of his outspoken support for religious minorities), more recent examples include the 60 men who stormed a girls' school in Rawalpindi in October 2011 and thrashed students with iron rods for not wearing the *hijab*. That police did not intervene – one law-enforcement official said "we were under strict instructions to do nothing" – underlines how such incidents occur with free rein in Pakistan.

The prospect of a youth-driven religious revolution is enhanced by the growing influence in Pakistan of an Islamist political party known as Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT). HuT is a global organisation that aims to establish caliphates throughout the Muslim world, and Pakistan is one of the prime targets. While HuT – a banned organisation in Pakistan – does not openly promote violence, former members contend that it does not rule out its use in order to remove apostate governments.

In June 2011, Pakistan arrested an army brigadier and several other senior officers for their alleged ties to HuT. Then, in July, Pakistani media outlets revealed that, several weeks before the arrests, the country's intelligence services had warned government and law enforcement officials that HuT planned to stage "an Arab Spring in Pakistan".⁸ According to the warning, this would be done by leveraging support from the military to overthrow the government.

Historically, HuT has sought to recruit academics, military personnel and the elite. Yet young people are also a major target. Soon after Tunisia's unrest sparked the Arab Spring, HuT supporters fanned out across affluent neighbourhoods in Pakistani cities, imploring young people to rise up against their government. Additionally, according to recent studies on religious politics at Pakistani higher education institutions, HuT operatives are seeking to win over students at private colleges and universities by teaching them how to become better Muslims. The organisation often disseminates its message through mobile phone texts and social media, communication tools regularly exploited by Pakistan's urban youth.

Mitigating factors

Ultimately, however, Pakistan's potential for an Iran-style revolution is blunted by the same divisiveness that limits the chances of an Arab Spring. Pakistan is as divided religiously as it is ethnically and provincially. A Sunni Muslim majority nation, it contains a Shia minority of about 20%, and sectarian tensions flare often. Some of Pakistan's most vicious militant groups

– including the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi – are sectarian, anti-Shia outfits. Additionally, Barelvis – the sect to which three-quarters of Pakistan's Sunni Muslims belong – are frequently targeted by the Pakistani Taliban, which adheres to hardline interpretations of the Deobandi sect of Sunni Islam. Relations between Barelvi and Deobandi clerics have been contentious ever since Pakistan's independence.

Piety is so polarising in Pakistan that many wholly reject the notion of religious diversity. For example, an overwhelming majority of Pakistanis believe Muslims should say their prayers the same way. Such sentiments help explain why Pakistan's religious minorities are brutally persecuted (in 2011, Pakistan's minority affairs minister, a Christian, was shot to death) and why non-majority sects are effectively denied legitimacy. (One youth poll reveals that 20% of respondents do not believe Shias are Muslims.) Given these fissures, mustering a united front for revolt makes for a herculean task – and suggests civil war, not a caliphate, may be a more likely outcome of efforts to trigger political change along religious lines.

Finally, Pakistan's Islamists lack two significant qualities: charismatic leadership and broad-based appeal. Munawar Hassan, head of the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) party, has promised to unleash an Islamic Revolution. Yet the JI, like all of Pakistan's religious political parties, garners few votes in elections, betraying a relative lack of public support. Similarly, Maulvi Fazlullah, who ruled Swat when that region was under Taliban control and subjected to Sharia law, has vowed from his base in Afghanistan to wage a new war against Pakistan's government until Sharia is instituted across the nation. Yet Fazlullah's brutality against civilians has robbed him of public support. Young people show relatively little love for the Pakistani Taliban and other domestic extremist organisations.

Facilitating peaceful change: Europe's role

Though youth-led change movements may not be in the immediate offing, Pakistan is undoubtedly

⁸ Irfan Ghauri and Zia Khan, "Intelligence warning: Hizb-ut-Tahrir planned 'Arab Spring' in Pakistan", *Express Tribune*, July 25th 2011, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/216828/intelligence-warning-hizb-ut-tahrir-planned-arab-spring-in-pakistan/>.

undergoing major political and social shifts. The 18th Amendment, which was signed into law in 2010, devolves considerable political authority and resources from the capital to the provinces, with the functions of many federal ministries transferred out of Islamabad. Additionally, rapid urbanisation is simultaneously generating new economic opportunities and placing greater burdens on Pakistan's cities. Urbanisation has added implications for Pakistan's two top political parties, whose power centres are rural. With Pakistan experiencing a long-term youth bulge – as late as 2050, the median age is expected to be 33 – young people will be disproportionately affected by these transformations.

Pakistan and the international community have a strong interest in ensuring that young Pakistanis are engaged in this change, and peacefully so. While most Pakistani youth are not radicalised and abjure militancy, young Pakistanis do carry out violence. Nearly every terrorist attack in Pakistan since September 11th has been instigated by people under 30. These militants represent not a mass movement of angry and radicalised youth, but rather a minority of the population driven to embrace violent manifestations of anti-government fervour and sectarianism. Many of these militants (particularly the more affluent ones), impelled by ideology more than privation, will be difficult to reach. Yet for some of them – such as those who become Taliban foot soldiers simply to earn a regular wage – social and economic interventions from the international community can serve a useful role. Most importantly, however, the international community, and particularly Europe, can focus more intently on Pakistani youth in order to help pre-empt future descents into extremism.

Recommendations

With the functions of Pakistan's Youth Ministry devolved to the provinces, youth policies are in flux. The only government entity actively focused on youth issues is the Planning Commission, but this body has no implementation powers. Now is therefore an ideal time for Europe to help engage and empower the country's youth. This can be done in several ways.

Vocational training support

According to the Planning Commission, only 1% of the country's labour force has acquired technical or vocational skills. Additionally, masses of Pakistanis never complete secondary education. With such little training and education, young Pakistanis' prospects for a steady livelihood are grim, raising concerns about disillusionment and susceptibility to radicalisation. Such radicalisation could conceivably manifest itself not through angry mass movements for change, but rather through less organised – yet highly consequential – acts of violence and terror.

Europe can do its part by funding vocational skills certification programmes for machinists, mechanics, electricians, plumbers and other occupations served by Pakistan's small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The SME sector generates 85% of the country's non-agricultural jobs, which are critical in a rapidly urbanising country. In surveys, young people express overwhelming support for such occupational training.

Small-scale educational assistance

Europe can make a modest contribution towards reversing Pakistan's dreadful educational enrolment (only 30 million of Pakistan's 70 million 5- to 19-year-olds are in school). This can occur through the funding of incentives to poor families – such as subsidised transport costs – to help ensure children are sent to school. Separately, donors can support civic education classes that promote non-violent political engagement and political leadership. They can also build on efforts launched by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency and the British Council to convene youth parliaments and place interns in the National Assembly, and on U.S.-funded leadership development classes offered by Pakistan's Centre for Civil Education.

Interfaith dialogue conference sponsorship

Pakistan's widespread polarisation is often a trigger for violence. Donors can fund youth conferences that bring together different ethnicities and sects to promote peaceful debate. Norway can serve a

useful role by sending moderate clerics to these events to share stories of tolerance and diversity with a Pakistani audience. Greater harmony among sects and ethnicities not only reduces prospects for violence, but can also increase, even if modestly, the potential for inclusive and peaceful movements for change.

Pakistan's vital role

Pakistan must take ultimate ownership over its youth issue – a tall order for a country often chastised for giving short shrift to its largest demographic cohort. It is tempting to wonder if it is too late. Consider the prize-winning essay in a contest, sponsored by a Pakistani youth organisation, asking participants to propose the ideal youth policy. The winner, a teenager from Lahore, advocated that 100,000 Pakistani youth be “exported” each year to ageing Western nations in need of young labour.⁹ Indeed, polls find that three-quarters of Pakistani youth would welcome the opportunity to move abroad.

This is not to say that young Pakistanis are giving up on their country; a great majority are proud to be from Pakistan. Additionally, Pakistan enjoys a rich legacy of peaceful youth civic engagement. Over its history, it has witnessed the establishment of numerous activist student unions with ideologies ranging from Islamism to ethnic nationalism and (most recently) constitutionalism. Youth activism has undoubtedly weakened since President Zia ul-Haq outlawed student unions in the 1980s (the ban was lifted in 2008). However, youth involvement in the 2007 anti-Musharraf uprising demonstrates that it is by no means dead. Today, college campuses remain centres of activism – manifested as much by student unions at state-owned institutions as by the growing appeal

of Imran Khan and HuT at prestigious private colleges.

Furthermore, Pakistan-patented youth success stories do exist. One shining example is a small school in Swat known as Sabaoon (a Pashto term roughly translating as the morning's first ray of light). It houses teenage boys who once trained as suicide bombers at Taliban camps, and offers a combination of secular and religious instruction, vocational training, and general rehabilitation. The institution has remained in operation since 2009, even after the Taliban assassinated one of its religion teachers.

Conclusion

Broad-based youth-led change movements in Pakistan are unlikely today, yet not unfathomable tomorrow. Urbanisation is intensifying poverty, joblessness, access to information and other conditions that could one day fuel mass unrest. The country's rapidly deepening economic malaise and increasingly dominant religious ideologies could, in time, become so pronounced that they shatter the country's religious fissures and give rise to a new generation of popular, charismatic Islamic leaders – suggesting that the parallel with Iran in 1979 could well prove relevant in the years ahead.

Raja Khan did not spark a revolution when he doused himself in kerosene. However, on the day he was buried, his widow gave birth to their third son. Several decades from now, this young man may well find himself caught up in a movement for change. It is incumbent on Pakistan, with help from Europe, to ensure that such a movement is peaceful, and allows Khan's son to enjoy a life that is longer and more prosperous than his father's.

⁹ Afifa Shamim, “Youth development in Pakistan”, Iqbal Haider Butt, ed., *Youth Voices: Innovative Ideas on Youth in Pakistan*, Lahore, BARGAD, 2010, <http://www.bargad.org.pk/downloads/Youth%20Voices.pdf>.