

Extremism and violence in Pakistan: durability and instability

By Riazat Butt

■ Executive summary

Religiously motivated extremism and violence have destabilised Pakistan since its inception. The state neither prevents assassinations and massacres nor acts to defuse their impact. In public, the conversations about religion and violence veer towards the extreme. Much of the present landscape has its roots in the past. The state-sanctioned use of several militant groups to fight proxy wars, the continuous framing of threats against Islam as threats against Pakistan, and the media reinforcing divisions along sectarian lines go some way to explaining attitudes towards religiously motivated violence and its enduring grip on Pakistan. In recent years foreign interventions, in the form of U.S. drone strikes, have exacerbated the situation and politicians find themselves addressing militants as if they were equals. Resolving religiously motivated extremism and violence is a priority for Pakistan, yet the state is unable to act. Ultimately the onus lies on citizens to reject religiously motivated extremism and violence and prioritise domestic security. Given the failure of Pakistan to act in the interests of the people, the people must act in the interests of Pakistan.

Militants as proxies

Pakistan has had a fruitful, if increasingly fatal attraction to religiously motivated militancy in its 67-year history. Spurred on by material deficiencies after independence, the state engaged militants to do its bidding in Kashmir as a way to shore up its ideologically shaky foundations. Acquiring this territory – or at the very least contesting it – was a way to reinforce the country's Islamic identity and support the notion that its statehood was predicated on religion. In time the routine use of militants permitted Pakistan to square up to its better resourced neighbour, India, without entering into conventional warfare. In Afghanistan, Pakistan deployed militants to promote its interests without incurring the human or material costs associated with direct conflict. Among the groups nurtured by the state to achieve its aims were Lashkar-e-Jangvi, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Harkut-ul-Mujahideen and Jaish-e-Mohammad. This strategy, far from being a failure, became an important part of the country's security policy, with militants receiving financial, logistical and military support to perpetuate a campaign of asymmetric warfare. It also allowed governments, especially those led by military figures, to boost the legitimacy of their regimes. An Islamic

Pakistan – and therefore the pursuit of Islamic causes – was a useful way to differentiate the country from a Hindu India. It also permitted Pakistan to build and retain links to the rest of the Muslim world, especially the oil-rich Middle East.

But the use of militants as proxies has had consequences. Militant groups challenge the government for political and territorial supremacy, and in some cases enforce a harsh interpretation of sharia law on an unwilling populace, thus forcing the government to embark on bloody, expensive and unpopular military operations in an effort to drive them out. Militants publicly and repeatedly refuse to align their activities and interests with those of Pakistan's, damaging the economy, undermining bilateral relations and destabilising security on the subcontinent. Indeed, militant groups have raised their sights beyond the Pakistani government, with some viewing their mission as part of a larger jihad. These groups have outgrown their sponsors, are out of control and are exacting a heavy toll on Pakistan and its citizens. The appeal to and use of violence goes beyond militant groups, however. It has become the norm for individuals to apply threats of force – or its actual use – to

crush dissent and deter other individuals and institutions from intervening in their activities or opposing their agenda. Punjab governor Salman Taseer, Federal Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti and schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai are some of the casualties of this reality. Minority rights and female education were perceived as Western concepts, and the fact that these high-profile incidents received widespread attention and sympathy outside Pakistan only confirmed this suspicion.

Sectarianism and social exclusion

Although the Sunni-Shia divide spans more than a thousand years, the conflict in Pakistan has less to do with succession and more to do with exclusion and power. Sectarianism is connected to broader issues about the place of Islam in public life. The Ahmadiyya, a controversial religious group, has been a catalyst for some of the most dramatic political and social changes in the country. The anti-Ahmadi movement has a bearing on contemporary sectarian violence in two significant ways: activists from Sipah-e-Sahaba, such as Haqq Nawaz Jhangawi, began their careers fomenting unrest against Ahmadis, and the 60-year controversy around the group has driven the debate about who is a Muslim and what the position of the individual is in Pakistan. Part of this debate stems from the ambiguity of Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah's idealism about a Muslim homeland. His passionate speeches never clarified whether the country was meant to be an Islamic country run according to sharia law or a refuge for Muslims fleeing Hindu India. As a result the space left by Jinnah's death has been overwhelmed with competing visions of Islam. Indeed, legislative measures introduced in 1974 and then 1984 only served to widen the gap between Jinnah's aspirations for Pakistan to be a secular state, one that upheld freedom of worship and kept religious diktats at bay, and the exclusionary, religious measures in the country's body of law. Castillejo (2012) estimates that around 40% of the population experience economic, political or social disadvantage because of their identity. This institutionalised inequality weakens social cohesion and reinforces divisions. Those who are different – because of their ethnicity, language or religion – remain marginalised and vulnerable to abuse and further social exclusion. Pakistanis who do not conform to a narrow Sunni-dominated vision of Islam are routinely persecuted and punished, with state instruments complicit in this harassment and isolation.

Islamisation

Popular wisdom says that the Islamisation of Pakistan began under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then continued under Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq. An alternative view is that since 1947 the state has encouraged a narrative that is anti-Hindu, anti-India, pro-Islam and pro-jihad. This process has been facilitated through the military, the education system, the media, state policy and public events. One of the reasons that Pakistan has been able to forge and sustain a relationship with extremist discourse and militant activity is that jihad is presented as an acceptable means of scoring

points against its old enemy, India. Some of the overarching narratives handed down by governments over the decades are that Pakistan was created as a service to Islam so that its adherents did not have to live among Hindus, that the country is under siege by non-Muslim enemies and that a Pakistan free of corrupting non-Islamic influences is the answer (Khan, 2013). It was initially the case that the primary corrupting influence was perceived as Hindu India, but there has been a new enemy for more than a decade: the West, specifically the U.S. What is considered anti-Islam – and therefore anti-Pakistan – is therefore vast. Taseer, Bhatti and Yousafzai were presented as inimical to the religion. The blasphemy laws carry the punishment of death or life imprisonment for those who insult Islam. These laws are subject to abuse and are exploited by individuals wanting to settle scores or target people they believe to be a threat to the religion. The laws also create an atmosphere of fear, intimidation and self-censorship among the judiciary, the media and officials, who adopt stances that avoid direct confrontation with or criticism of extremist rhetoric and militant activity. Social institutions that could otherwise challenge or punish extremism are thus cowed.

Mixed messages

Days after the death of Hakimullah Mehsud, Imran Khan expressed his disappointment over public reaction to the demise of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader. He hoped for outrage, but was met with division. The issue for Khan was not so much the killing of a man whose avowed intention was to overthrow the state, but the violation of Pakistani sovereignty by a U.S. drone. While watching military exercises in Bahawalpur, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif described members of the TTP as misguided and confused elements of society. The country's interior minister, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, accused the U.S. of sabotaging peace talks that could have led to a negotiated settlement and a possible end to the violence. But the TTP is not a political party, although it has political aims, wanting to overthrow the government and replace it with an Islamic caliphate. Under this envisioned regime there is no place for elections, transparency, accountability or equality. Khan, Sharif and other figures in the Pakistani establishment therefore court an entity that seeks to destroy them. Not only that, but politicians position the TTP as if it were a state actor, an equal. This approach legitimises the group and emboldens its rhetoric, depicting it as the only solution to the problem of religiously motivated violence. Statements from politicians paint the TTP as a reasonable, almost benign organisation, even though it has executed both soldiers and civilians. In spite of – or rather because of – its application of violence, fuelled by a quest for a purer form of Islam than the one available in Pakistan, the TTP occupies a larger place in the political and public arena than it would otherwise be afforded. Its presence in Pakistan's strategic imagination is a combination of complicity, fear and history. The group is not merely tolerated; it is promoted, thereby conveying the message that militancy and violence carry their own rewards.

Military action and inaction

Given that the armed forces are one of the better organised and better resourced institutions in Pakistan, it might be expected that they could drive out militants or at the very least disarm them. But military interventions are counter-productive, alienating civilian populations and bolstering militant rhetoric. There have been at least five major operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (previously known as the North-West Frontier Province) since 2001. The armed forces used heavy ground and air weapons to drive out militants and disrupt their activity, but by doing so they devastated these areas, killing civilians, damaging infrastructure, destroying livelihoods and causing the internal displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. Another adverse effect of military operations is alienation. Tribal people resent the army and the government, perceiving official interventions as an attack on their authority and values. The failure of the government to help people in these areas has added to the sense of estrangement, resulting in a disaffection that is exploited by militants to create unrest, operate with impunity and embed themselves further. The unpopularity of military activity makes it difficult to pursue fresh interventions.

The role of the media

Many of the country's newspapers were founded shortly before or after partition by journalists who had a political or nationalist agenda. *Dawn*, founded by Jinnah, promoted the idea of an independent Pakistan. *Nawa-i-Waqt* was another strong supporter of a separate country for the subcontinent's Muslims. The newspaper's Islamabad editor, Javed Siddique, has said it has three policy or editorial aims: to consolidate and promote the ideology of Pakistan, which is based on Islam and the two nations theory; to promote the idea of Pakistan as an Islamic, democratic and welfare state; and, thirdly, to be sympathetic to Islamic causes, including Palestine and Kashmir. The newspaper supports reconciliation with India, but not at the cost of Kashmir, nor does it support the war on terror, Pakistan's support of it or the U.S. presence in the region. The Urdu print media, or at least the oldest and most widely read titles, are not simply newspapers; they are custodians of Islam and, specifically, the idea of an Islamic Pakistan. This defining feature of the print media has lent itself to the promotion of sectarianism that propagated the virtues of Pakistan and Islam while denigrating individuals or institutions that appeared to erode these virtues. There is an overwhelming emphasis on Islam and the country's Islamic identity at the expense of ethnic or religious subidentities, while any other identity is considered to be injurious to the country. The broadcast media have not received the same level of scholarly analysis as print, although there are concerns that individual journalists and programmes tolerate or even promote viewpoints that emphasise division, hatred and even extremism.

Support for militancy

The U.S. and UK governments invest hundreds of millions of dollars in Pakistan's schools in the belief that an educated Pakistani public will be a stable and prosperous one. There is thus a view that militancy among Pakistanis is the result of poverty and/or a lack of educational opportunities. However, there is a growing body of scholarly work that suggests this connection is incidental at best and unfounded at worst. Pakistani schoolbooks promote anti-minority and anti-Indian viewpoints, so the provision of better or even more education is not in itself a safeguard against extremism. Public school textbooks often have a strong Islamic orientation at the expense of minorities, which are referred to in a derogatory fashion or completely omitted. Madrasa textbooks generally depict non-Muslims as infidels or pagans. They are not described as citizens deserving protection and rights: "Once instilled in early life, negative attitudes often resist change and can factor into the social disintegration of the social fabric of communities, discrimination and even sectarian violence" (Hussain & Hussain, 2011). Public support for militancy is said to be more likely when groups pursue political goals that individuals care about and violence is seen as a way to achieve these goals. Militant groups with distinct goals appeal to people with distinct grievances (Fair, 2010). Sympathisers of pro-Kashmir groups may believe that Kashmiris are being abused and that their emancipation can only be achieved through militant activity, but they may not be anti-Shia or support anti-Shia groups.

Recommendations

- The problem of religiously motivated extremism violence requires bold solutions – so bold that they appear to be unrealistic. The government must delegitimise the groups and causes it once nurtured by severing all forms of support for them. Pakistan must cease using militants as proxies to fight wars that conventional forces cannot and then explain to the public why people once described as freedom fighters are now being demonised.
- Legislation that discriminates against minorities or disproportionately affects them must be repealed. It reinforces social segregation and hostility towards Pakistanis who are not Muslim or do not conform to a narrow interpretation of Islam. It does not instil law and order – the blasphemy laws have not made Pakistan a safer place – and it encourages extra-judicial violence.
- Textbooks – whether in public schools or madrasas – must be revised to reflect historical facts and remove negative references to Pakistan's minority groups. The UK government, which is investing more than £500 million in the Pakistani education system, is carrying out spot checks and audits to ensure that its money does not directly or indirectly support extremist viewpoints. It is also supporting the development of lessons plans for both primary and secondary classes and monitoring their use. However, if governments are to focus on remoulding Pakistani society through classrooms, it is important to recognise that Islam is held in high esteem

and that attempts to remove religion from the public sphere altogether or dilute it according to Western tastes are counterproductive.

- There needs to be greater accountability in the print and broadcast media. Newspapers and programmes present extremist opinions – through their columnists, guests and presenters – that go unchallenged. The code of conduct of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority concerns itself with discouraging sectarianism or untruths, but it is neither observed nor enforced.
- The cost of violence must be expressed in terms other than a death toll in order to convey the damage done by attacks. Research on the fiscal impact of militancy is one way of doing this. Acts of violence affect the economy and security at the international, national and provincial levels. Loss of employment and foreign investment harms Pakistan's long-term chances of prosperity and stability: it is not only Christians or Shia who suffer as a result of militancy. It also needs to be articulated that people targeted because of their religious affiliation are Pakistanis first and foremost. It is difficult to promote social cohesion or solidarity when minority communities are routinely talked about in terms of a death toll.
- Pakistani citizens must take ownership of the situation and decide whether violence should continue to be the first course of action for those with grievances. Given the failure of Pakistan to act in the interests of the people, the people must act in the interest of Pakistan. There are

signs that social media are increasingly being used to promote solidarity with more vulnerable communities. For example, one group – Pakistan For All – organised human shields around churches immediately after the Peshawar bombing in September 2013. Christians and Muslims stood side by side calling for an end to the violence and for Pakistanis to put their religious differences aside for the sake of a lasting peace. To facilitate the work of such groups and to share best practice, efforts should be made to connect Pakistani initiatives with those in other parts of the world that have also experienced violent extremism.

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