

Escalating Radicalisation in Pakistan: Underlying Factors and Emerging Concerns

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INTRODUCTION

Radicalisation, a phenomenon extending beyond geographical, religious, and cultural boundaries, has exhibited diverse manifestations throughout history, leaving a trail of societal turmoil and discord. In Pakistan's case, a nation profoundly influenced by radical ideologies, a complex interplay of historical legacies, socio-economic conditions, and political dynamics has fueled the ascent of extremism and militancy.

Criticism has been directed towards Pakistan's education system for fostering a limited understanding of Islam, particularly evident in certain religious institutions or madrasas. The absence of opportunities for critical analysis and exposure to a spectrum of perspectives can fuel the process of radicalisation. Despite the substantial level of Islamisation already entrenched in the nation, lawmakers appear to be further amplifying this trajectory instead of steering it in the opposite direction, largely driven by electoral motivations. This escalation of Islamic influence could potentially pose risks to both the country's security and its internal stability. Furthermore, the outmigration of individuals educated in liberal contexts, often termed as "brain drain," poses a risk of progressive voices being depleted from the country. This exodus potentially creates a vacuum that extremist ideologies are more likely to occupy.

Recent incidents, including the tragic killings of individuals like Safoora Bibi in D.I. Khan³ and Abdul Rauf in Quetta⁴, as well as the assaults on Ahmadi mosques and

the destruction of churches and Bibles in Jaranwala following allegations of blasphemy⁵, emphasise the escalating trajectory of radicalisation within Pakistani society.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Pakistan's history has been marked by government policies that inadvertently supported extremist groups for strategic reasons. The aftermath of such policies, combined with remnants of militant groups from previous conflicts, has contributed to the radicalisation of a segment of the population. These groups often label the West as the source of societal ills and injustices, perpetuating their narratives to attract disenfranchised individuals.

³Female radicalization rising in Pakistan: Report. (2022, April 9). ANI News. <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/female-radicalization-rising-in-pakistan-report20220409175124/>

⁴Baloch, B. (2023b, August 7). Teacher killed on blasphemy allegation in Turbat. DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1768725>

⁵Mehmood, R. (2023, August 17). The Jaranwala incident: Another month, another blasphemy mob. The Friday Times. https://thefridaytimes.com/17-Aug-2023/the-jaranwala-incident-another-month-another-blasphemy-mob#google_vignette

Pakistan has several laws related to protecting Islam and blasphemy. Some of the key laws include:

1. **Blasphemy Laws:** Pakistan's blasphemy laws are the most well-known laws related to protecting Islam. These laws criminalise acts that are deemed insulting to Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, or the holy book, Quran.
2. **Anti-Ahmadi Laws:** These laws specifically target the Ahmadiyya community, which is considered non-Muslim by the Pakistani state. They restrict Ahmadis from identifying themselves as Muslims, using Islamic terminology, or engaging in Islamic practices.
3. **Protection of Islam Laws:** Pakistan has laws and regulations that aim to protect the sanctity of Islam and regulate religious matters. These laws cover topics such as religious speeches, processions, and religious publications.
4. **Electronic Crimes Laws:** The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) includes provisions that address online blasphemy and online offenses related to religion. These provisions can also be used to prosecute individuals for online activities that are deemed blasphemous or offensive to religious sentiments.

These laws have been a subject of controversy and criticism, both within Pakistan and internationally. They have been criticised for being misused to settle personal scores, target religious minorities, and suppress freedom of expression.

POLITICAL ISLAMISATION AND LAWMAKERS' ROLE

The current situation in Pakistan is a reflection of the longstanding efforts by the country's political elite to Islamise the nation, primarily for electoral gains. Despite a significant level of Islamisation already present in the state, lawmakers seem to be intensifying this trend rather than reversing it, potentially jeopardizing the country's security and internal stability. The rising trend of proposing contentious religious bills holds serious implications.

Pakistan's history reveals a pattern of the state attempting to appease and align with violent extremism for foreign policy and national security reasons. Unfortunately, these efforts have often led to chaos and destruction within the nation. Over the past decade,

numerous terror attacks have claimed the lives of thousands of Pakistanis. While recent military operations have pushed some militant groups out of the country, this doesn't imply the complete eradication of threats, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

However, a more substantial threat to national security emerges from within, as certain lawmakers and political parties actively promote hatred and violence against religious minorities. A stark example is the case of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) party, which orchestrated large-scale protests and violence following the acquittal of a Christian woman on death row for blasphemy charges in 2018⁶. The TLP's call for the assassination of judges and state officials involved in the case highlights the severity of the issue. Disturbingly, the group and its leadership continue to operate freely within Pakistan.

The disturbing fact that the TLP secured significant support in the 2018 General Election further underscores the growing influence of such extremist parties. By eschewing traditional electoral debates centered on development and governance, the TLP relied solely on an emotional appeal, emphasising the protection of the Khatam-i-Nabuwat amendment in Pakistan's constitution.

This trend raises concerns about the motivations of mainstream political parties, which might be forsaking good governance in favor of endorsing and supporting bigoted legislation to secure votes. The culture of intolerance and bigotry, propagated by lawmakers, not only poses a threat to the broader society but is also becoming a perilous situation for the legislators themselves. Recent instances, such as accusations of blasphemy against politicians, highlight the precarious environment in which lawmakers operate.

The passage of such bills and legislation showcases the alarming transformation of Pakistan's political landscape. Mainstream political parties appear to be aligning with far-right ideologies to such an extent that they are becoming indistinguishable from Islamist parties. This convergence threatens the country's pluralistic fabric and may lead Pakistan further down the path of sectarianism and religious extremism.

⁶Constable, P. (2018, November 9). Release of Christian woman acquitted of blasphemy rolls Pakistan. Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/secret-air-lift-of-christian-woman-acquitted-of-blasphemy-rolls-pakistan/2018/11/08/b4403a96-e353-11e8-b759-3d88a5ce9e19_story.html

MIGRATION, MOB MENTALITY AND RADICALISATION

Mob mentality is a phenomenon that emerges when a group of individuals adopts a collective mindset or behavior, often leading to irrational and sometimes extreme actions. This phenomenon can spread rapidly within a society, particularly when there is a majority consensus on certain views or ideologies. In such cases, the power of the group dynamic can reinforce and solidify these beliefs, making it difficult for dissenting voices to be heard or for alternative viewpoints to gain traction. This dynamic becomes even more concerning when there is a lack of tolerance towards differing beliefs or when a society is grappling with radicalisation.

In Pakistan, where certain extremist ideologies have gained traction over time, mob mentality has played a role in amplifying the influence of such ideologies. When a significant portion of the population holds certain beliefs, the pressure to conform to these beliefs can be immense. Individuals may fear being ostracised or labeled as dissenters if they express differing views, leading them to suppress their own opinions in favor of the majority stance. This self-censorship, driven by the fear of backlash, reinforces the collective perception that the majority's beliefs are not only valid but also the only acceptable ones.

This dynamic becomes even more concerning when there is a lack of tolerance towards differing beliefs. In Pakistan's religious landscape, where intolerance towards religious minorities and diverse viewpoints exists, individuals who hold contrary beliefs may face social isolation, discrimination, or even threats to their safety.

The issue of migration, particularly the departure of liberal-educated individuals, compounds the problem of radicalisation. As more liberal-minded individuals leave the country seeking better opportunities or safety, the remaining society can become even more homogeneous in its beliefs. This homogenisation, combined with the echo chamber effect created by confirmation bias, results in a self-reinforcing cycle.

To counteract this trend, fostering an atmosphere of open dialogue, respectful debate, and tolerance is crucial. Encouraging individuals to critically examine their beliefs and engage with differing perspectives can help break the cycle of confirmation bias and mob mentality. Additionally, promoting education that emphasises critical thinking and encourages individuals to question prevailing narratives can help create a more informed and resilient society.

WOMEN AND RADICALISATION

In the midst of a worsening economic crisis and ongoing political turmoil, Pakistani society is undergoing a notable surge in radicalisation, affecting various segments of the population. Surprisingly, even women are becoming increasingly involved in this trend and may be systematically undergoing indoctrination within the widespread network of women-only madrassas across the nation.

While precise figures on the number of madrassas in Pakistan are not officially available According to the Pakistan Education Statistics 2021-22 Annual Report from the Academy of Educational Planning and Management, there are roughly 34,010 registered Deeni Madaris⁷ (religious schools), educating approximately 4.409 million students in matters of faith⁸. With around 2,000 of them being exclusively for female students, these all-female madrassas purportedly have the objective of safeguarding women from moral corruption along with giving them spiritual education. These religious organisations have taken upon themselves the responsibility of "protecting" women from the perceived erosion of society due to liberal Western values.

CONCLUSION

The challenges posed by escalating radicalisation in Pakistan demand a comprehensive approach that involves addressing historical grievances, socio-economic disparities, and political motivations. Countering radicalization requires promoting education that encourages critical thinking, empowering marginalized communities, and fostering an environment of pluralism and tolerance. It is a long-term endeavor that necessitates the cooperation of government agencies, civil society, religious leaders, and international partners. Only through collective action can Pakistan hope to overcome the threat of radicalization and pave the way toward a more peaceful and harmonious future.

The author is an experienced Research Analyst who is currently heading the Afghanistan Program at the Institute of Regional Studies. Her primary areas of research include International Law, Human Rights and Foreign Policy.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Pakistan Education Statistics 2020-21. (2023). AEPAM Library, ISBN: 978-969-444-119-1.