The Impact of Violent Religious Extremism on Various Cultural Components of Pakistani Society

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Abstract

Aim. The aim of this research paper is to investigate threats of religious extremism to the various cultural components of Pakistani society. Religious extremism has rapidly increased in Pakistan since the 1970s, but this study is particularly focused on its impact on cultural elements of the country in the post 9/11 and post-Arab Spring eras.

Methods. The author applied the process tracing method of qualitative approach for examining chains of the events related to the question of the impact of religious extremism on the various cultural components of Pakistani society. The situational analysis also explored the various situations connected with threats of extremism to Pakistani culture.

Results. The study identified the threats of religious extremism to a number of cultural aspects of Pakistani society, such as schooling (education), traditional literature (*Sufi* poetry), customary art and folk music, social cultural networking, and sports in the tribal areas and other regions in the country.

Conclusion. The cultural life of a state encompasses various traits of the cultural aspect of national security. In the case of Pakistan, initially two important developments; Islamization of the country and Afghan Jihad in the 1970s both severely affected the society. Then, the eras of post 9/11 and post Arab Spring further witnessed the fast emergence of threats by religious extremists to the cultural elements in various parts of the country, including its tribal regions bordering Afghanistan, and these trends also impacted other regions of the country.

Keywords: violent religious extremism, cultural components, Pakistani society

Introduction

Apart from violent religious extremism being the main influencing factor of many of terror involvements in Pakistan since the 1970s, it has also affected various cultural components of the society. In particular, key cul-

tural aspects such as education, traditional literature, art, folk music, social values, customs and sports in various regions in the country have been severely damaged by violent religious extremism. The 1970s was a turning point in the perspective of the rapid spreading of religious extremism in Pakistan, as two significant happenings, i.e. the controversial Islamization of the country (in the 1970s and 1980s) and Afghanistan's disputed jihad (started in 1979) hugely influenced the Pakistani society (Shams, 2016). In the post-Afghan war era, Pakistan continued to witness violence linked with the religious extremist elements inspired by these two crucial developments. In the post September 11, 2001, the U.S. war against terrorism (Khan, 2005) and the post-Arab Spring eras, besides these challenges, other interior and exterior security issues also contributed to further increase the extremism in Pakistan (Shah, 2019). It is more than four decades now, along with the political, military and economic securities, the cultural elements of the Pakistani society have been also harshly targeted by the religious extremists rising in many parts of the country. According to one author, "The growing extremism and terrorism has affected Pakistan adversely" (Khan, 2015, p. 24). Although initially the Islamization of the country momentously shaped a new fundamental religious fanaticism and its constant growth badly affected the society in the different phases, the post-9/11 and post-Arab Spring periods were vitally identified for the negative effects of religious extremism on the cultural components of society. This study will cover the impact of religious extremism on cultural aspects of the security of Pakistan in the post-9/11 and post-Arab Spring phases (2001-2021).

In this period, besides religious radicals associated with the groups from other Islamic countries, a large number of *madrasas* (religious schools) at the domestic level also produced various groups of religious extremists in Pakistan. The post-9/11, Pakistan's cooperation with the U.S. against the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan also provoked religious militancy in Pakistan (Khan, 2015), and the appearance of "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) or "Islamic State" (IS) also affected Pakistan's environment in the post-Arab Spring era (Parvez, 2016). The Pakistani religious fanatic groups possessing specific religious ideology expanded their anti-state terrorist activities and many of them - like the Pakistani Taliban or Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) - established their links with foreign violent extremist organizations, including Al-Qaeda (Ali, 2013), and ISIS having supra-state and supranational ideology (Sharb, n.d.). As a new challenge to the national ideology of Pakistan, the circumstances posed severe implications for the internal security of the country (Rana, 2015). During this period, Pakistan declared the home-grown militancy, inspired by violent extremists, as a grave threat to the national security of the state, covering all aspects of the security including cultural components of the society. The difficult situation forced the state to alter its traditional security policy and declared internal violence as the main challenge to the state's security (Express Tribune, 2013). Due to the seriousness of the matters, the state initiated the

wider military operation titled, "Zarb e Azb" in 2014 and this operation was followed by another operation known as, "Radul Fassad" in 2017. The purpose of both of the operations, which forced many of violent extremist and terrorist groups based in Tribal areas of Pakistan to escape to Afghanistan, was to protect the country from all types of threats that erupted due to the brutal extremism. The armed operations against the militant groups admitted the emergence of threats of religious fanaticism to all types of the safeguards of Pakistan including cultural security, particularly in the above-mentioned periods. Society's cultural components are being considered as an essential part of the state's security covering many aspects of the security of a nation. The literature validated that culture becomes a part of the area of societal security and the role of culture is being discussed in academic work as one of the decisive factors in designing and implementing the states' security strategies (Bilandžić, 2018).

Consequently, the primary aim of this study is to systematically analyse the events concerning the impact of the religious extremism on cultural components of the Pakistani security especially threats that emerged to the various aspects of cultural security of the country in the stated eras. The disparity in the existing literature was also among the important reasons for choosing this research topic as there was less attention on current scholarly works on the subject of the impact of religious extremism on various cultural aspects in Pakistan. For instance, the author of a book titled, "Pakistan's Counterterrorism Challenge," agreed that in post 9/11 era, U. S. operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan became home of Islamic militant groups, but this piece of literature doesn't discuss the impact of religious extremism on cultural components of the Pakistani society (Yusuf, 2014). Another author concluded that the extremism upset the social values in Pakistan, but it also doesn't identify the social-cultural values one by one as parts of the society. This author however explained how the state of Pakistan promoted *Sufi--Brelvi's* thoughts (a softer form of the Islamic religion) in order to counter the influence of *Wahhabi and Deobandi's* schools (a conservative version of the religion) accused of spreading extremism in Pakistani society (Suleman, 2018). An article dedicated to the U.S. perspective of militancy and extremism in Pakistan overall discussed the extremism and particularly highlighted the American perception of the extremism in the country (Weinbaum, 2014). Another piece of literature titled, "Impact of the War Against Terror on Pakistan," decorated the implications of the U.S. led war on terror against al-Qaeda and the occupation of Afghanistan for Pakistan, but the impact of extremism on the culture of Pakistan was not covered by this academic work (Ahmer, 2011). Without giving distinction to the effects of extremism on the cultural aspects in Pakistan, the present literature underlines the country's achievements in countering terrorist activities, such as the military operations including Zarb-e-Azb, conducted by the state of Pakistan (Ministry of Finance, 2018). Concentrated on the issues related to religious and sectarian beliefs, ethnic identities and political intolerance in

Pakistan, a section of the literature argues that socio-cultural intolerance has separated the communities in the country on the basis of religious, sectarian, ethnic and linguistic disparities (Qadeem, 2020). This portion of the scholarly work also could not give a wider picture of the impact of extremism on the cultural components of Pakistani society. Thus, this study fills the gap in the prevailing literature by a comprehensive analysis of various characteristics of Pakistani culture impacted by religious extremism.

Since the main subject of the study is the impact of religious extremism on cultural components of Pakistani society, this paper presents the concept of religious extremism, the importance of culture and its various components in the broader prospective of the cultural security covering education, art, music, literature, sport etc. By collecting and analysing the secondary data in this study, the author has applied two approaches to qualitative research. The process tracing tool of the qualitative approach was employed to address the questions of why and how religious extremism impacted the various cultural aspects of Pakistani society influenced by a specified change or a set of changes (Intrac, 2017). The chains of the events and incidents related to religious extremism in Pakistan and their effects on cultural security of the state has been assessed and examined in the study. Another research design is a situational analysis which evaluates the qualitative data for studying the complex situation (Kalenda, 2016). This paper applies the situational method for analysing complicated situation linked to various elements of Pakistani culture damaged by the religious extremism in the post-9/11 and post-Arab Spring eras.

Theoretical Prospective

Religious extremism defines as a belief or an action of the individual or the group of individuals pursuing their radical objectives by exploiting the sacred emotions of the people. In general understanding, religious extremism indicates exceptionally violent actions in the name of religious concerns. The basis of the action might be religious beliefs and the purpose of the actions could be to forcefully oppose others or brutally deny others, or bias towards other persons or groups. In other words, it means an expression in a very different way. According to the literature, the expression of religious extremism produces adverse labels towards certain clusters of religious individuals and policy inventors among the masses (Wibisono, Louis, & Jetten, 2019). In Pakistan, there are several religious extremist groups and radical religious individuals in the political and religious-political parties having specific religious faith pursuing their political objectives.

The culture, which is a "way of life" of various sections of people, means different groups may have different cultures that cover their separate values, arts, beliefs and institutions surviving for a long time. It is a system of life for a society which includes its customs, dress codes, dialect,

religious faith, other social practices and art etc. In a broader definition, "culture" refers to the collective security of knowledge, performs, beliefs, values, behaviours, senses, rules, religion, ideas, roles, societal relations, concepts of life, material kinds of stuff and various other assets developed by a group of people in the society (Texas A&M University, n.d.). Thus, culture involving ideas, customs, and social behaviours are collective manifestations of human intellectual achievement.

The theory of social constructivism, considering culture as a communal objective, describes that culture gives people much of the content of their thinking in order to acquire knowledge. According to this theoretical understanding, the human truth is importantly motivated and experienced through cultural and societal standards (Santos, 2015). Then, it provides people with the cognitive instruments needed for development, thus culture teaches people both what to think and how to think. Social constructivism as a concept of a social purposeful system tries to explain how social bodies like social groupings and associations are formed (Science Direct, 2001). This concept of social science about knowledge emphasizes, how human development is socially established, and knowledge is constructed through communication with others. It means people work together to discover knowledge and collectively build traditions in society. This assumption of social constructivism argues that sources of knowledge and reality are actively created by social connections and relations. In the case of religious extremism affecting the cultural dimension of the security of the Pakistani nation, the circumstances could be understood through diverse traditions of one or more groups opposing the country's ideology, identity and cultural values connected with the centuries-old traditions in the region. Besides other aspects of security, the culture's security is equally important for survival of a state and particularly for the persistence of its values.

The Cultural Aspect of the Security of a Nation

Cultural security is normally a perspective and a way of working to guarantee that all individuals and groups are viewed with regard to their unique cultural requirements, and variations (University of Norte Dame Australia, n.d.). The culture and national security of a nation are directly related to each other. Concerning culture, the most surprising scholarly information has emerged that culture as part of the security policy of a state can significantly affect the strategy and behaviour of the state (Lantis, 2002). A country that preserves its culture has a high-level prospect of achieving its national security goals. It has been also acknowledged in the literature that a nation could be considered secure with high preferences of its national values and high ethical standards (Ministry of Information Eritrea, 2019). It means every nation has to maintain a mechanism to secure its cultural values and social norms in order to safeguard

peace and order within the society. Then, the security of the culture of a nation, which can be called the cultural aspect of national security, is a defining element in the construction of identity, ideology and overall performance of a nation. The survival of the culture of a nation stands on its cultural approach, which is a vital tool of its social appearance. According to a definition of human culture, it is a collection of living patterns including guidelines, beliefs, morals, traditions and forms of life (Wilson, 1984). The threat to cultural security is classified as a threat to the traits of a nation covering relationships, ideals, education, social activities, music, skills, language, faith and food (Krane, n.d.). It is understood that culture is part of the security of a nation and a nation cannot survive without the safety of its social and cultural norms. In another definition, culture includes social, religious, civil, ethical, and technical standards. Defining the culture, the noted British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor says, "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a human as a member of society" (MITOCW, n.d., p. 1).

The cultural aspect of Pakistan's security was influenced by the country's Islamization, which inspired the religion-based extremism in the country. As a result of the Islamization, fanatic groups began their assaults on modern seminaries, cultural centres such as cinemas and professional people related to art, and music - especially folk music in different parts of the country. Such attacks were regularly reported in the post-9/11 and post--Arab Spring periods witnessing the strong connections between Pakistani militant groups and foreign terrorists. Although Islamization was initially established by then military dictator general Zial ul Haque in Pakistan in the 1970s and 1980s, it later encouraged various individuals and religious groups acquiring specific radical religious ideologies. This situation dangerously affected major traits of Pakistani culture, including schooling (education), traditional poetry, folk music and its art and athletics (Ronaq, 2014). The culture of the areas of Pakistan on Afghanistan's borders was particularly impacted by the activities of the religious fanatic groups in the post-9/11 and post-Arab Spring periods.

Threats to the Cultural Components of Pakistani Society

Schooling (education), which is an essential element for the educational development of a nation (it is specifically vital in the cultural construction of a nation) was for a long time badly influenced by religious extremism in Pakistan, especially in the areas bordering Afghanistan. The religious fanatic groups opposing the modern ideology of the state preferred conventional religious learning and forcefully deterred the modern schooling system. Specifically, the religious militant groups deprived the

people of modern education during their illegal occupation of areas such as Swat and Waziristan and other bordering regions of the country in various post-9/11 periods. An international human rights organization verified a report about the denial of education to 120,000 female students by closing 900 schools in the Swat region and describing how in 2007, the Pakistani Taliban group during its unlawful rule in the area prevented the schooling of thousands of girls students by closing hundreds of the schools just in this particular area. Highlighting the clear setback to the nation's modest education system by violent extremism, the human rights organization also reported hundreds of attacks on schools by Pakistani militant groups throughout the country in the period of 2007-2015 (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The famous Pakistani female education promoter Malala Yousafzai, who later won the Noble peace prize for her humanitarian work, was brutally assaulted by a religious fanatical band in her native town Swat in 2012 (Afzal, 2018).

Traditional poetry, especially the Sufi poems reflecting the mystical code and communicating pleasantness and association in society, was always a significant characteristic of Pakistani social life. Religious militants targeted the tombs of various popular spiritual figures and Sufi poets such as Shahbaz Qalandar in the town of Sehvan Shareef of Sindh province, Ali Hajvery alias Data Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore, the capital of Punjab province, and Rehman Baba in Peshawar, the capital of Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa (KPK) province in the post-9/11 era (Chughtai, 2017). According to one author, the Sufis in their literature spread message of peace, love, harmony, sociability and unity in society, and this message is still valid and remains popular among the common people of Pakistan (Sial, n.d.). The traditional Sufi verses, which raise human values, the importance of friendliness, love, compassion and sympathy, and oppose hate, racial discrimination and radicalism still have a deep influence on the Pakistani nation (Ewing, 1983). The contradictory dogma of the religious fanatics in Pakistan was among the reasons for the attacks committed by these religious radicals on shrines of Sufis holding different spiritual beliefs in the country.

Folk music and its art are also among the traditional cultural attributes negatively affected by religious fanaticism in Pakistan. The anti-music religious extremist move was initially escalated due to the post-9/11 military operations conducted by the Pakistan state against the violent religious extremist groups motivated by specific religious ideas. Besides the Sufi shrines, various events centres, including places of traditional festivals throughout Pakistan, came under attack by the religious fanatical elements in further eras, including post-Arab Spring, witnessing the entry of ISS into the scenario of extremism in the country. The harmful trends of attacks of religious fanatics on folk music were reported by the media. For instance, a newspaper described that *Barelvism* (A Sufi sect), which is one of the Islamic sects influenced by Sufi traditions, came under

ideological assault by religious fanaticism due to its different traditions (Boone, 2014).

The extremists continued their attacks on these centres of traditional music and art, such as traditional festivals and Sufi shrines having folk music, folk art and folk dance. This trend creates a disappointment, an unfriendly atmosphere, dread and terror among the performers of folk art, music and dance throughout the country. Confirming such an unfavourable environment for folk music and its art, a report described that since 9/11 hundreds of musicians and artists suffered, and many of them (including female performers) were reportedly killed in the northwest areas of Pakistan affected by religious fanaticism (Freemuse, 2014). In the same article, it was stated that dozens of Sufi tombs, a large number of music CD shops and music hubs, art and artistic display centres, community cultural performances and movies exhibition centres had been destroyed in bouts of violent religious fanaticism in these parts of Pakistan since 2001 (Freemuse, 2014). Among the religious fanatic groups having their specific agenda, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was involved in the brutal attacks on cultural norms, and these trends rapidly increased in the entire country as this group illegally occupied Swat and Waziristan regions from 2007 to 2014 and prevented cultural shows, cinemas, and music in the community centres in these regions (Zada, n.d.). Due to the terror in these areas, many folk singers and artists migrated to other regions of the country. Kamal Mehsood, the folk singer of Waziristan who later mysteriously died in Islamabad in 2010, was among the victims of fanaticism (Taj, n.d.). Amjad Fareed Sabri, a *Qawal* (A spiritual Sufi folk singer) was also killed by religious fanatics due to his distinct Sufi poetry performance (Tsioulcas, 2016). A number of musicians and players of traditional musical instruments in tribal areas of Pakistan left their professions because the music was prohibited by the religious extremists in these areas (BBC, 2018).

The socio-cultural characteristic covering spiritual, tribal and ethnic beliefs, traditions, customs and social activities of society has also been influenced by religious fanaticism in Pakistan. It has badly affected the enriched traditional social networks of the people in Swat of Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa (KPK) province (Elahi, 2015). Waziristan and many other tribal areas of Pakistan were also facing a similar situation. The extremists imposed bans on the movement of women from houses, and even the elders of the society averted to sit in public gatherings due to fear of terrorist attacks by religious fanatics during their unlawful occupation of the areas. The people even avoided participating in marriages and funeral gatherings because of the terrorist attacks. The public social cultural systems in these areas were further damaged when a large number of the people migrated to other areas due to fear of the violent extremists and during the state's military operations against these militants in aforementioned periods.

Athletics play a crucial role in the advancement of the social cultural performance of a nation, especially as it reveals the cultural character of a

nation. Although hockey is the national sport of Pakistan, cricket became the most famous game in the country since the 1970s, but unfortunately in the post-9/11 era, due to rising militancy driven by religious extremism, many countries avoided sending their cricket teams to play in Pakistan. New Zealand, Australia and South Africa were among the countries which cancelled tours of their cricket teams to Pakistan in 2002 and 2003 due to a fear of violence. An attack on the Sri Lankan Cricket team in Lahore in 2009 further discouraged international cricket tournaments in Pakistan (Masood, 2016). These trends of terror against cricket were continued for further periods (Chaudhry, 2017). The situation in the context of international cricket in Pakistan remained uncertain till September 2021 when the New Zealand cricket team cancelled its tour to the country (Tanzeem, 2021). The situation concerning international sports has been disappointing in the past two decades, but the visit of some foreign cricket teams including Australia to Pakistan in 2022 has created a hope for the betterment of the situation.

CONCLUSION

This research covering the impact of religious extremism on cultural components of Pakistani society acknowledges that extremists having the specific religious thoughts attempted to create terror in Pakistani society and divide its population into religious and sectarian bases. People of the tribal regions of Pakistan, including Waziristan and settled areas of the country including Swat, especially faced violent extremism for a long time, and these trends also affected other areas of the country. The cultural aspect of the state's security, including schooling, particularly female education, folk literature, traditional music, art, social cultural networking, and sports activities were affected due to rising religious extremism in the different segments of Pakistan, especially the bordering areas of the country in the periods after 9/11 and the Arab Spring. The modest schooling system which is the basic essential part of the building of a nation in the contemporary world was increasingly attacked by religious fanaticism. Bans on female education and attacks on the schools and students in the different areas of Pakistan, including Waziristan and Swat, were examples of such threats to educational safety. The customary literature, including Sufi poetry having an ideology of love and harmony, were targeted because this literature opposes the thoughts of the extremists. Social networks of the masses in tribal areas of Pakistan were equally impacted by the extremism. Folk artists and musicians were also targeted because their performance was prohibited according to the religious conservative thoughts of the extremists. Sport, especially cricket, was targeted by religious extremism as these radicals wanted to create fear among the masses and damage the soft image of Pakistan in other countries.

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