

## Theorizing Religious Extremism: Causes and Impacts

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**Abstract:** *Extremism is a great threat to the security of Pakistan. The growing extremism is affecting all fields of life. In Pakistan, many people have been killed in sectarian violence. Since independence, Pakistan has been confronting the problems of ethnonationalism, sectarianism and extremism. Furthermore, after 9/11 Pakistani society faced a lot of problems due to religious extremism. With the passage of time sectarianism and religious intolerance is enhancing and extremism has deep social, economic and psychological impacts on Pakistani society.*

**Key Words:** Extremism, Sectarianism, Government, Madrassa, Impacts, Zarb-e-Azab

### Introduction

The word extremism means, the condition or act of taking an extreme view or the taking of extreme actions by the people. In simple words, it can be defined as a person who favours or resorts to immoderate, uncompromising, or fanatical methods or behaviour. Similarly, religious extremism can be defined as extreme ideas, actions and will to implement those ideas, beliefs and faith in other people in society. Terrorism and extremism are often associated with each other but both are different. For instance, some extremists use terrorism as a means to manifest their beliefs and ideas. Therefore, one can say that all terrorists are fanatics but all extremists are not necessarily to be terrorists (Adil, 2021). The main purpose of this study is to explore the origin of religious extremism in Pakistan and its effect on the society of Pakistan. Furthermore, it also explores whether religious extremism is a threat to Pakistan. It also elaborates on the impacts of religious extremism on Pakistani society. Pakistan is a Muslim country and the majority of the population is Muslim, with which approximately 70-75 per cent

population is *Sunni* and almost 25 per cent population is *Shiia* (Riffat, 2015).

### The Analysis of Religious Extremism and Social Constructivism

Social constructivism states that ideas play a vital role in shaping the actors' identities, actions and interests. Ideas shape the self-image of the actors as well as the image of others. Moreover, the interaction among different actors is also shaped and affected by the ideas (Shaughan A. Keaton et.al. 2011). For instance, a positive representation of a state by other states will reveal the friendly relations among them. Similarly, a negative perception of other actors will show the unfriendly nature of the relations between two actors/ states. As the main focus of this study is to explore the root causes of extremism in Pakistan.

Social constructivism will be used to analyze how different politicians particularly President Zia-ul-Haq's policies enhanced extremism in Pakistani society. For instance, President Zia-ul-Haq belongs to *the Sunni* sect of Islam and he mainly focused on policies according to *Sunni fiqh*. When President Zia-ul-Haq made the collection of zakat mandatory it

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created unrest among the *Shiia* community of Pakistan and they raised voices against the policy. *Fiqah-e-Jafaria* has different beliefs regarding *zakat* and they felt fear of *Sunni* dominance because of government ordinance. This policy of President Zia-ul-Haq was perceived as fear and threat by the *Shiia* community of Pakistan and to counter such policies by the government they have made their own *Shiia* organizations like *Sipah-e-Muhammad* etc. In such an environment, the *Sunni* community also established organizations such as *Sipah-e-Shaba* etc. (Hashmat Ullah Khan et.al. [2020](#)).

Fanatic organizations and groups have their own beliefs, values, perceptions, identity and misperceptions regarding religious beliefs, and socio-political setup. Since the era of President Zia-ul-Haq religious extremism is one of the major challenges for Pakistan. The majority of the population of Pakistan is *Sunni* and *Shiia* and these are two major sects in Pakistan. Both sects have different beliefs, identities and interests. Therefore, both have established their own madrasa, and organizations. Moreover, the gap between the two sects has increased due to the role of different Heads of these organizations and groups. Consequently, the misunderstanding of the gap between the two groups has affected the peace of Pakistani society for the last few decades.

Furthermore, negative perceptions, differences in identities and beliefs further resulted in sectarianism in the society. According to social constructivism, ideas, perceptions and misperceptions play a vital role and in the case of Pakistan, the misperception among *Shiia* and *Sunni* sects has intensified the extremism and sectarianism in Pakistan. From the 1980s till 2000 Pakistan witnessed many sectarian clashes between the two sects (Montero, 2007). In 2007, a sharp resurgence in sectarian violence was reported. For instance, in *Shiia*, the *Sunni* target killed many innocent people were killed in the main cities of Pakistan such as Karachi, Quetta, Peshawar etc. Social constructivism helps to analyze the role of norms, values, beliefs, perceptions and misperceptions. In the case of Pakistan, the role of perceptions, misperceptions and ideas of *Shiia* and *Sunni*

sects helps to explore the main causes of extremism in Pakistan.

### **The Historical Background of Religious Extremism in Pakistan**

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The root of religious extremism can be traced back to 1947 when *Majlis-e-Ahrar-e-Hind* announced its reinstatement as a religious group in Pakistan. *Majlis-e-Ahrar-e-Hind* was against the partition of India and post-partition they become active in Punjab, Pakistan. The founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah also realized the danger of the misuse of religion in politics. Therefore, on August 11, 1947, in his first address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared that there will be no part of sectarianism and such beliefs in the politics of Pakistan. Later on, in 1952-53 the first anti-Ahmadi agitation was reported (Mahmud, [2019](#)).

A strong consensus was existing on the issue of Ahmadi. In Pakistan, most political parties choose sensitive religious matters to get public support or to divert their attention from any particular national or foreign policy issue. In 1974, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto declared Ahmadi as non-Muslims (Moin, [2019](#)). However, the same group played a key role in the toppling of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's government. However, with the passage of time extremism has intensified when different politicians ignored the issue and adopted policies to protect their own interests in politics. The main example of religious intolerance is the era of President Zia-ul-Haq, as during his presidency sectarianism and extremism increased (Ali Shan Shah et al., [2016](#)).

### **Extremism during the Regime of President Zia-ul-Haq**

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General Zia-Ul-Haq imposed martial law in Pakistan on July 5, 1977, suspended the constitution of 1973 and stated that Islamic laws will be enforced in the country. He further announced that the new elections will be held within ninety days but later on he postponed the elections and blamed Bhutto's government for fraud in the elections. Furthermore, Zia-ul-Haq banned all political activities in the country and postponed the elections again in 1979. (Imran Khan et.al., [2017](#)). On the other

hand, in February 1981, the Pakistan people's party started a movement for the restoration of democracy with the help of other parties. (Amir Ahmed Khuhro et,al., [2013](#)). While instead of the restoration of democracy President Zia-ul-Haq tried to legitimize himself through the program of Islamization. Moreover, Zia-ul-Haq had taken a few steps toward the Islamization of the country. Like during 1979, different ordinances such as the Haddood ordinance, Shariat Courts, Zakat and Usher ordinance were introduced by President Zia-ul-Haq. Moreover, reforms in education policies were also introduced. For instance, the syllabus of Islamic studies was modified according to *Sunni Fiqqah*. Consequently, such reforms in education policies made *the Shiia* community uncomfortable and dissatisfied. *Shiia* community also demanded education and syllabus according to their Fiqqah. It further enhanced the gap between the two sects and due to a lack of trust the elements of sectarianism were also triggered.

Furthermore, Zia-ul-Haq policies regarding the compulsion of Zakat and enforcement of *Shariah* were perceived negatively by the *Shiia* community as they have different practices in this regard. It further resulted in demonstrations by *the Shiia* community against the government on July 1980 in the capital city of Pakistan (Riffat, [2015](#)). Additionally, *Shiia* and *Sunni* communities started to establish separate organizations to protect their identity and interest. For instance, *Sipah-e-Muhammad* was created by *Shiia* and *Sipah-e-Sahaba* Pakistan was made by the *Sunni* community. The main purpose of such organizations was to counter the threat and dominance of other sects (Azam, [2020](#)). As a result, the extremism in society increased which affected the peace and stability of Pakistan badly.

In 1979, two major events further enhanced the extremism in Pakistan. The first was the Iranian revolution which had a great impact on the *Shiia* population of Pakistan. On one hand, the Iranian revolutionary government was also trying to extend their support to *Shiia* sects throughout the world, particularly in Pakistan (Abou Zahab, [2002](#)). Saudi Arabia was afraid of Iranian influence and to counter the threat of Iran, Saudi Arabia also provided all kinds of assistance to *Sunni*

groups in Pakistan (Ahmar, [2007](#)). This was the time when the Soviet Union also invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and it also provided a justification for foreign powers to play their cards and support their allies in Pakistan.

The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan also gave a justification to President Zia-ul-Haq to stay in power. President Zia-ul-Haq extended his term and used the justification of Jihad to contain the influence of the Soviet Union (Tariq, [2007](#)). Many Afghan refugees migrated to Pakistan after the Soviet invasion (1979) and Pakistan provides shelter for millions of Afghan people. As a result, a large number of refugees, drugs and lethal weapons found their way into Pakistan. (Ahmar, [2016](#)). Religious parties gained unprecedented influence in national affairs during this period. Huge funds were channelled through Pakistan and given to the religious parties, which lodged, motivated and trained the Mujahideen to fight against communist infidels. The Afghan people lived in camps and in the rural areas of NWFP and Baluchistan (Frédéric Grare et al., [2011](#)). These two provinces have cultural, linguistic and religious ties with Afghanistan. The Afghan refugees belong to different tribes and systems which further resulted in clashes within groups and leads to bloodshed. Furthermore, the migration of massive Afghan people affected Pakistan's economy and threatens to social conditions of the society. Moreover, the Pakistani government provided shelter and food to Afghan refugees and it was a burden on Pakistan's economy (Anchita Borthakur, [2017](#)).

Furthermore, because of Pakistan's support for the Afghan mujahidin Soviet Union initiated a hostile campaign against Pakistan. The Soviets stated that Pakistan had established many bases and centres that trained terrorist groups for armed riots within Afghanistan. In response, the Soviets exploited the ethnolinguistic and regional differences between Pakistani provinces especially in Balochistan and NWFP. To create instability in Pakistan, the Soviet Union further supported Balochistan against the government and threatens Pakistan through national elements of Balochistan to establish an independent Balochistan. (M. Mushtaq, [2009](#))

### A Brief Analysis of Extremism in Pakistan

In Pakistan, madrassa are providing free religious education, boarding and lodging and are essentially schools for the poor after completing most pupils find it hard to get a job in any good institution. Therefore, most of them hold the office of mullahs or become a part of religious organizations and often are acting in dubious activities. A few madrassas got financial aid from the government Zakat fund. Whereas the rest are being run by their organizations either using foreign funds directly provided to them by foreign countries/organizations or through donations (Shaikh, 2009).

In Pakistan, the rise of sectarianism conflicts is closely related to the madrassa boom. Madrassa culture is posing an internal security threat to Pakistan as almost all sects have their own madrassas which resulted in sectarianism. Similarly, different religious groups are promoting extremist thoughts about religion which is further promoting religious intolerance in the country. Moreover, a few extremist groups are using madrassas to train the Jihadi groups and they are preaching the concept of Jihad as an individual act rather than a state affair. In 1979 two major incidents increased the influence of Saudi Arabia in Pakistan. The first of the Iranian revolution and the second was the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. Many scholars claims since then many madrassas are getting financial help from private sources linked with Saudi Arabia. The main reason behind Saudi Arabia's interest to support Sunni groups was to contain the influence of post-revolutionary Iranian influence ( Afzal, 2019). With the passage of time, two main religious parties emerged as one of the main political parties of Pakistan. Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamat-e-Ulma-e-Islam and both religious-political parties have an influence on different madrassa of Pakistan. Saudi Arabia being a supporter of the Wahabi school of Islam has started supporting the *Sunni* madrassas of Pakistan. Moreover, during the 1980s-90s *Shiia-Sunni* clashes were also at their peak (Riffat, 2015).

Due to sectarianism, many people including religious scholars, of both sects got injured or dies. As a result, during that decade sectarian violence, target killing and attacks increased and it becomes a major threat to the

peace, stability and security of Pakistan. Since the regime of President Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan was gradually Islamized but it reached a peak in the 1980s and extremism was an outcome of Zia-ul-Haq's policies of Islamization (Mir Zohair Hussain, 1994). During the 1980s-1990s *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi* and *Sipah-e-Sahaba* openly declared war against each other (Riffat, 2015). Consequently, more people became the target of sectarian attacks. In Pakistan; unfortunately, the military and civilian governments could not cope with extremism. In political activities both religious parties, SSP and TJP were allowed to participate. Furthermore; different governments used these groups for their political purposes.

The major political parties PPP and PMLN also did an alliance with these groups. During the second term, Benazir Bhutto made an alliance with religious zealots such as Jamiyat Ulma-e-Islam (JUI) of Maulana Fazal-ur-Rehman which further provided an opportunity for SSP to pursue sectarian violence in Pakistan. The extremists also gained a stronghold when Nawaz Sharif came to power and Nawaz Sharif seriously tried to concentrate on this issue during his government (1997-1999). The anti-terrorism act bill of 1997 was accepted by the parliament which emphasized combating terrorism and sectarianism in the country. Later on, under the anti-terrorism ordinance of July 1999, this law was amended.

Before 9/11 Pakistan was a fragile state in the eyes of America. Since the Afghan-Soviet war, Pakistan was supporting the Taliban government and it had been criticized internationally. On the other hand, India was constantly blaming Pakistan for the growing activities of Jihadis in Kashmir and it was taken as terrorism by India. The Kargil war (1999) between Pakistan and India was stopped with the interference of the U.S and again they considered that Pakistan was responsible for the Kargil war (Rashid, 2011). The U.S strongly disliked the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Pakistan in 1998. Furthermore, the lack of democracy in Pakistan also became a serious alarm for the U.S as General Musharraf disposed of the democratic rule of Nawaz Sharif in 1998. The 11 years of Civilian rule in Pakistan ended with General Musharraf's military coup in 1999.

9/11 has brought a U-turn in the foreign policy of Pakistan towards Afghanistan. There was no other option for Pakistan except to join US WOT against zealot groups (Naeem Mahboob Malik, [2020](#)). Once again the general public was hopeful that they would eliminate the extremist elements if the wave of liberalization would flourish in Pakistan but unfortunately, it could not happen. According to US State Department's report, General Musharraf remained an influential ally to get rid of terrorism and extremism. The government had remained uneven in coping with these religious organizations. Hence, the government crackdown has been termed as uneven owing to the fact that the government has treated different religious groups differently.

Post 9/11 Pakistan's alliance with the USA against the Taliban has created a security dilemma as people of northern tribal areas were supporting the Taliban. Moreover, to support the Taliban they stood against the government which further enhanced security problems for Pakistan (Fazal Rabbi, [2012](#)). Such a critical environment paved the way for terrorism in Pakistan. Post 9/11 Pakistan has suffered due to suicide attacks, and bombings and become a hub of terrorism. The terrorist attacks on public and official places increase security threats for Pakistan, in this regard attacks sensitive places such as GHQ and PNS Mahran base are key examples of it (Irshad, [2011](#)). Therefore, it can be said that religious intolerance and extremism can lead to terrorism and it poses real challenges to the peace and development of a society.

In 2007, President Musharraf launched "operation silence" to eliminate the extremist group of Lal-Masjid as they were involved in illegal activities. Furthermore, they alleged relations with the extremist and banned organizations and they threatened the Pakistani state to implement strict Sharia laws and their demands were much influenced by the Taliban. Moreover, they were involved in harassing the general public in the capital city of Islamabad. However; due to the operation's silence Pakistan faced the serious threat of extremism and terrorism. Lal-Masjid leadership asked for support from the Taliban.

At the time of the operation, the Taliban announced that if the government takes any

step against *Lal-Masjid* then they would take serious counter-insurgency. This gave the opportunity to the Taliban to enter Islamabad and pose a serious threat to the capital and after the *Lal-Masjid* operation extremism further increased in the country (Sobia Jamil et al.2019). Moreover, after the Musharraf government, the civilian government of the PPP could not address the issue of extremism and terrorism which further enhanced unrest in the country. Like in Aafia Siddiqi's case if Musharraf was alleged and the same occurred with the civilian government of PPP in Raymond Davis case, who was an American national (Sawh, [2015](#)). Even Musharraf's policies about WOT were adopted by PPP's elected government (2008-2013). In May 2013, PMLN came into power and the new government tried to negotiate with the extremist groups (Umbreen Javed, 2016).

However, after the failure of any agreement/negotiation, the government of Pakistan has decided to take strict action to bring peace to the country. Therefore, the government has launched a military operation in North Waziristan and FATA areas to eliminate the extremists and terrorists against the foreign and local rebellious groups. The operation is proceeding successfully and on 15<sup>th</sup> November Major General Zafarullah Khan (commander of Zarb-e-Azab) stated that 90% of areas have been cleared from the terrorist by the Pakistan military. (Ehsan,2014). Up till now, many terrorists have been killed and this operation will be continued until the clearance of North Waziristan from terrorists (ISPR, October 2014). Between 2002-2013 more than 52000 people including innocent civilians and personnel of different forces were killed in different attacks (Nadia Mushtaq, [2013](#)). However, the government of Pakistan took security measures to deal with terrorism and Operation Rah-e-Rast and Operation Rah-e-Nijat, Zarb-e-Azab is some main operations against terrorism (Umbreen Javed, 2015).

### Impacts of Extremism on Pakistani Society

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Religious extremism has many impacts on Pakistani society which are discussed below:

### Socio-Culture Impacts of Extremism

Extremism deeply affects the socio-economic and political aspects of any society. In the context of Pakistan, extremism the impacts of extremism are still affecting the peace and stability of Pakistan. Extremism has influenced the economic-social institutions, the psyche of the general public and social gatherings as well. Due to numerous incidents of religious intolerance, debates and discussions on extremism are quite common in Pakistan. Post 9/11 terrorism has severely affected the socioeconomic fabric of Pakistani society. Due to terrorism and extremism poverty, unemployment, inflation, corruption, and crimes have increased, while tourism and foreign investment in Pakistan have decreased (Irshad,2011). Since the last few decades the incidents of extremism, sectarianism and ethnic problems have increased. It further divides society into different sects, and groups which are further contributing to extremism. Moreover, extremism is not only affecting and involving men but it is also influencing the lives of women in Pakistan. For instance, most of the extremist religious groups want to limit and restrict the role of women within the four walls of the home. They also encourage the strong hold and control of men in all matters including family affairs. Moreover, these extremist groups are not in favour of women's right to education. Therefore, they mainly target girls' schools and other educational institutions.

Post 9/11 Taliban has attacked and destroyed many educational institutes of women as they perceive that the modern education system is a threat to their beliefs (Manzoor Afridi, 2014). For instance, only in the Valley of Sawat almost 120 girls and 80 other schools were destroyed by the Taliban ( Zahid Khan, 2011). Furthermore, these groups were also against the use of modern technology and techniques, especially in the field of health and they banned vaccination in northern areas. Therefore, extremism can easily lead to terrorism and this social evil has harmed the social and cultural values of Pakistani society.

### Psychological Impacts of Extremism

The psychological impacts of extremism are also undeniable. For instance, Pakistani people remained in hopelessness, uncertainty and

trauma for years due to numerous suicide attacks, bomb blasts etc (Jamal-ud-Din et al.,2022). People were uncertain about the security of their lives and future. A huge number of females suffered from insomnia, and depression and most men suffered from fear and disillusionment ( Farzana Bari,2010). On daily basis, different incidents of attacks, terror and extremism were reported and it also enhanced the insecurity among the general public.

### Economic Impacts and Extremism

Extremism has not only ruined the education, and health sectors but also affected the economic growth and development of Pakistan. People suffered because of economic loss as it increased unemployment, poverty, corruption and crimes in society. Due to extremism economic, agricultural, industrial and tourism sectors have been affected badly. Terrorism and extremism have deeply affected the peace and development of Pakistan especially the people of FATA and KPK suffered the most. All this further affected the revenues of agriculture, industries, and manufacturing sectors (Ali, 2010). Due to extremism, "the loss to agriculture alone amounts to Rs.35 billion," (Arshad, 2010). The poor law and order situation has also damaged the fruit-based economy of Northern areas of Pakistan. It has resulted in the loss of billion of rupees to farmers, labourers and landowners ( Ali, 2010).

Due to the poor law and order situation, low literacy rate, climate change disasters, energy crisis, water shortage, lack of advanced techniques in the agriculture sector and low investment in business the economic growth of Pakistan has been affected. In this regard, poor governance and uncertain economic condition further triggered social issues like extremism in Pakistan. As a result, foreign investment and tourism have also decreased in Pakistan. Therefore, it cannot be ignored that extremism and terrorism have affected the growth, productivity and development of the entire country (Arshad, 2010).

### Overcoming the Religious Extremism

- Without education, no society can progress. Therefore, the government of

Pakistan should allocate more budget for education as with improving literacy rate, Pakistan cannot completely extremism.

- The role of religious scholars is also important to deal with extremism. However, only *muftis* and knowledgeable *molvies* should be allowed to teach about Islam and Deen.
- All madrassa should be officially registered and government should keep a check on their financial resources to avoid foreign funding.
- Media can also play a vital role to promote peace and harmony among the people of different sects and groups. In this regard, only trained and educated journalists can understand the spirit of the cause to make Pakistan a peaceful country.
- The infrastructure of extremist and terrorist groups should be dismantled and government should not allow them to reemerge with new names and identities.
- The government should do negotiations with such groups to understand their psyche and demands. However, if the use of force is necessary for the peace of society then the government should use force to dismantle such extremism and terrorist groups.
- The government of Pakistan should close all those madrassas that are affiliated with terrorist or extremist organizations. There should be a madrassas regulatory authority to check the role and functions of madrassas.
- Political leadership can play a positive role by including the people of all sects,

and groups in their parties by bringing them under one flag of Pakistan. With the promotion of nationalism, people from different sects and groups may think of one nation and stop promoting their interests as separate groups.

- Political stability is also important to make a long-term policy to deal with all social, political and economic issues successfully.
- The role of individuals is also important to promote peace at the societal and state level. The individuals should also play their role to eliminate the evil of extremism from society by promoting the message of brotherhood and peace rather than dividing themselves into different groups and Sects.

### Conclusion

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Extremism has a negative impact on the social-economic and political aspects of Pakistani society. Terrorist attacks, poor governance, and law and order discourage local and foreign investment. Consequently, it resulted in more unemployment, poverty, corruption, crimes and human rights violation. Pakistan is an underdeveloped country and without dealing with social evils like extremism it would not be easy to make Pakistan a better, peaceful country. Therefore, the government shall pay special focus to promote harmony among the people of different sects, organizations and ethnic-religious-political groups. In this regard, the role of politicians, education, academia, religious scholars, and media is vital to promote peace and religious tolerance.

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