Extremism in Pakistan: An Existential Threat to the Country

Editorial Staff • February 11, 2019 • 13 minutes read

Outlines

Appeared first @ www.thecollegestudy.net
Introduction

Factors Fuelling Extremism in Pakistan

External Factors
- American imperialism
- Unsettled political disputes
- Discriminatory attitude against Muslim minorities or immigrants
- Western media’s obsession with anti-Islamic propaganda
- Afghan Jihad factor
- Unjust economic order

Internal factors
- Poor growth of democratic values
- Inseparable mingling of politics and religion
- The state patronage of religious and militant outfits
- The government’s poor control on the religious seminaries
- Menace of sectarianism
- Use of force to resolve political disputes
- Violation of human rights
- Propagation of hate literature
- Widespread poverty and illiteracy
- Monopolization of religion by illiterate or lowly literate clerics

Alarming Ramifications Triggered by Extremism
- Large-scale increase in violence
- Shrinking space for reasoning and disagreement
- Gradual radicalization of higher education institutions
- Widening gender gaps
- Increased persecution of minorities
- Massive erosion of the spirit of nationalism
There is no denying the fact that extremism is one of the gravest challenges facing Pakistan presently. Over the years, it has assumed monumental proportions. It has become so intensified that it has become an existential threat to the country, paralyzing it on different fronts. Socially, it has injected fear and insecurity in the environment so much that fear has become part of people’s psyche, hence, leaving them terrorized. On one hand, it has shrunk the space for liberal forces, making logic and reasoning a rarity, while on the other, it has resulted in increased stifling of ideas. Apart from that, it has accelerated the persecution of minorities so much that abuse of their rights has become a norm rather than aberration. They are being treated as the others and second class citizens in their own country. Economically speaking, extremism has worsened the law and order situation to such an alarming level that volume of foreign direct investment has decreased to a dismal level, which has led to shrink economic opportunities for the masses. On the political front, extremism has fuelled terrorism on an unprecedented level. Suicide attacks on public places, government security agencies, educational institutions and shrines are so common that people have lost faith in government’s capacity to provide them security. In this way, it has put government’s credibility at stake, hence, jeopardizing the future of democracy in the country. Of course, there are many factors which are responsible for making the scourge of extremism an existential threat for the whole country. The most prominent among them are the presence of jihadi outfits, weak democratic institutions, high incidence of poverty coupled with illiteracy, rapid expansion of religious seminaries, presence of US footprints in
Afghanistan, weak writ of the state etc. The menace of extremism can be contained only if its roots are targeted. In other words, Pakistan’s war against militancy and extremism cannot be won in the battlefields but in classrooms and Madaris.

The plant of extremism has taken quite a long period for its growth. And, to be sure, there are a number of external and internal factors which have contributed to its growth, making it ultimately an almost incurable disease.

Among the external factors which have greatly contributed to the growth of extremism, the most prominent among them is the American imperialism. There is no escaping the fact that after the end of the cold war era, the USA has accelerated the pace of its intervention in the internal problems of other countries, especially the Muslim ones. It has started establishing its military bases over there. The orthodox elements in the Muslim countries, thinking it an encroachment of a Christian country on their sacred land, violently react towards it. They also protest to their governments to force the USA to leave their sacred land. When their demands fall on deaf ears, they launch acts of extremism not only against the American military but also against their own governments. This offers one explanation for massive increase in attacks on government security agencies and security personnel in the country. Thus, American hegemonic attitude is one of the prime causes of extremism in the country.

The unsettlement of decade-long political disputes on the international scene is another cause which has contributed significantly towards the rise of extremism. Political issues like Kashmir issue, Palestine issue, Chechnya problem etc. have played great role in the birth and growth of extremism, especially in the Muslim countries. Western countries absolute indifference towards the settlement of these issues has made it quite clear to the inhabitants of Muslim countries that Western countries not only have unconcern for the interests, problems and demands of the Muslims but they are also bent upon maximizing their own interests at the cost of Muslim interests. Such hostile attitude on the part of the West has forced the Muslims to resort to acts of extremism in order to protect their interests. Extremism in Pakistan is also result of such phenomenon to some extent.

Previously, it was held that only poor and illiterate people were the main part of the group of extremists. But with the passage of time, it became clear that even educated people like engineers, doctors etc. were also involved in the extremist activities. When
the reasons behind their involvement were analysed, it came to light that most of them had been studying at the western universities. During their stay in the west, they observed the discriminatory attitude by the western people against the Muslim minorities or immigrants. This situation left relatively great imprints on their sensitive minds. After their return from the west, they joined the militant forces to retaliate against the western countries for their discriminatory attitude against the Muslims. The ramifications of such phenomenon can also be seen in Pakistan. If some untoward incident against the Muslim minorities takes place in the West, its ripple effects also appear in Pakistan in the form of extremism.

Similarly, western media is equally responsible for the growth of extremism. It has never let any opportunity slip its hands to strike a hard blow to the Muslim sentiments. Its guns were directed towards the destruction of communism until the fall of communism. But with the end of communism, it has turned all these guns against Islam. It makes utmost efforts to desecrate the sacred personalities of the Muslims. Incidences entailing anti-Islamic content are given full coverage by western media to blot the image of Islam. Obviously, such sort of harsh and anti-Islamic attitude on the media’s part harbours resentment among orthodox Muslims whose religious sentiments rise to the extreme and find their expression in acts of extremism.

Massive increase in the number of militant outfits over the last couple of years has also contributed towards nurturing the scourge of extremism. And the role of the USA is undeniable in this regard. Historically speaking, after the Soviet Union’s attack on Afghanistan, orthodox Muslims from different countries gathered on the land of Afghanistan in order to counter the attack. The USA started funding these people on massive level, thinking it a great opportunity to ensure the fall of its rival, the Soviet Union. After the fall of Soviet Union, it was the moral duty of the USA to ensure the rehabilitation of mujahideen of Afghanistan to bring them towards normalization. But unfortunately, it neglected it and showed no interest in their rehabilitation. This indifference on USA’s part gave birth to Taliban who resolved to respond in terms of weapons to the oppression of the Muslims in other countries. This ultimately prepared ground for the growth of extremism. The situation reached alarming levels with the USA’s invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, leading to massive increase in the number of militant outfits in the Muslim countries and in Pakistan as well. There is no denying that such dire phenomenon is one of the predominant factors as far as growth of extremism in Pakistan is concerned.
The existence of unjust economic order in the world has further aggravates the disease of extremism. The structure of industrialization depends heavily on the natural resources and raw material. It is a fact that Muslim countries are in possession of almost 70% of the natural resources of the world and 40% of the raw material of the world. With the exhaustion of their own natural resources, the industrialized western countries launched attacks on the resource-rich Muslim countries on the pretext of their propaganda of the restoration of democracy in the Muslim countries. The USA’s invasion of Iraq could be seen in this context. With the occupation of natural resources by western countries, the economy of some Muslim countries has weakened to great extent. This has given birth to the unjust economic order in the world, making the poor poorer and the the laws on religious and social issues. In fact, they have reduced the space for any debate on these issues within and outside parliament. In this way, parliament has been rendered so ineffective by the religious political parties and extremist groups that there is a dire dearth of logical and rational debates on the major political and social issues facing the country. Briefly speaking, weak and ineffective parliament is simultaneously the cause and effect of extremism in the country.

The role of religious seminaries is quite undeniable as far as extremism in the country is concerned. Before the fall of the communism in 1990, most of the madaris of Pakistan used to inject into their students the teachings of Islam in their true shape. But these very madaris went through massive transformation with the fall of communism. Most of these madaris came under the leadership of those very people who had taken part in the war against the Soviet Union and who were saturated with the spirit of jehad. These people began to present before their students the misinterpreted teachings of Islam in order to materialize their own vested interests. Over the last couple of years, there has been unusual increase in the number of religious seminaries. The state’s poor control on them coupled with rampant poverty in the society has turned them into breeding grounds of militancy and radicalization in the country.

There is no denying that these madaris are at the forefront in giving rise to the disease of sectarianism. The existence of different sects in harmony with each other was never a problem before the Soviet Union’s attack on Afghanistan in 1979. But after the fall of Soviet Union, the visibility of the principle of co-existence of different sects has reduced to a great extent. Now, the situation is so grave that madaris have become the breeding grounds of sectarianism. Violent attacks by one sect against the other have become a norm in the country. The leaders of one sect are usually seen teaching their students
that their redemption lies in eliminating the members of other sects. Hence, it can be inferred that sectarianism has become the mouthpiece of extremism in the society.

The hallmark of democracy is that it promotes the settlement of political disputes through dialogue. As Pakistan has seen most of its period under the dictatorial regimes, there is a dire dearth of democratic values of consensus building, consultation and dialogue. Due to scarcity of these values, we see that most of political disputes are tried to be resolved by the use of force, which, undoubtedly, generates harsh feelings in the people. It is a fact that the results of the use of force are always counter-productive. These results are seen in the form of extremism. The state’s use of force to resolve the Balochistan issue is an obvious example of this phenomenon.

Furthermore, the violation of human rights by the government is another factor which contributes towards nurturing extremism. For instance, in Pakistan, the intelligence agencies are often seen violating the human rights by disappearing dissidents from some provinces, especially Balochistan. Subsequently, the bullet-riddled bodies of missing people are often found in streets. The extremists then exploit this opportunity and use the grieved relatives of missing people as recruitment tools for their own purposes. In this way, human rights violation by agencies prepares the ground for the growth of extremism.

The breeding grounds for extremism are mostly found in those areas which are overwhelmingly influenced by poverty and illiteracy. Due to the extreme level of poverty, life has not much charm for the people of these backward areas. Perhaps that is the reason that poverty-driven suicides are much common in such areas. So the people of these backward areas serve as recruitment tools for the extremists who give them financial incentives in order to use them for their own criminal purposes. In this way, the disease of extremism is much more worsened by the rampant poverty and illiteracy.

It is an admitted fact that in Pakistan, religion is considered as the personal domain of the clergy. In other words, the clerics have a monopoly over the religion and it is an equally admitted fact that most of these people are illiterate or lowly literate. These are the men who are running madaris in the society. These people lack the capability to understand the true spirit of Islam. So they teach their students something quite
contrary to the real spirit of Islam. Such sort of misguided teaching ultimately gives birth to the disease of extremism.

After analyzing the prominent factors of extremism, it would be quite appropriate to take into consideration the dire manifestations of extremism in different walks of life.

Extremism manifests itself in different ways. The most common manifestation of extremism is the spread of violence in the society. Violence is so rampant that it poses a serious threat to people’s right to life and security. Suicide bombings, armed attacks and killings by the militant outfits have become a norm rather than aberration, targeting almost all segments of population – religious and ethnic minorities, security personnel, health workers, lawyers, and journalists. Thousands of people have lost their lives as a result of massive increase in the violence. Apart from human lives, physical infrastructure has also been subject to colossal damage, causing immense strains on the national exchequer.

Apart from violence, extremism has also resulted in the shrinking space for ideas. It is quite an unfortunate fact that due to penetration of extremism into all walks of life, many people are hesitant to express their ideas. Such alarming phenomenon has not only led to the stifling of ideas, but has also decreased the space for reasoning and logical debate. The situation is so dire that whenever, extremists are confronted to people having different point of view, they resort to acts of violence. In fact, violence has become a means to communicate disagreement in the society, giving a death blow to the element of tolerance. Such violent attitude has not only reduced the space for the freedom of expression and free movement of people by creating the environment imbued with fear and uncertainty but has also jeopardized the existence of heterodoxy in the society.

The effects of extremism are so rife in the society that even colleges and universities, the seats of higher learning, have become vulnerable to extremism and radicalization. Over the couple of years, it has been seen that universities have become a breeding ground for violent extremism. This has been proved by the fact some terrorists arrested by the agencies had university education. There is no denying the fact that the trend of extremism amongst educated youth is an alarming phenomenon as they represent technically skilled and academically strong individuals. Extremism in the educated youth
is not only a great loss of the nation’s talent, but it also reinforces the disease of extremism with such qualified individuals joining extremists’ camps.

In the same way, another manifestation of extremism appears in the form of gender bias. Owing to the rampant extremism in the society, gender gaps have increased to great extent, giving a severe blow to women empowerment. Extremism has not only resulted in decreased economic opportunities for women, aggravating their vulnerability to poverty, but has also decreased their physical mobility in the society, leading to their reduced access to information. Apart from that, women education is also under severe threat. This is corroborated by increase on attacks on girls’ schools in some parts of the country. Briefly speaking, the growth of women empowerment has been greatly stymied by the prevailing extremist tendencies in the society.

Along with women, the rights of religious minorities are also subject to blatant violations because of massive increase in the extremist tendencies in the society. There is no escaping the fact that extremism has escalated the persecution of religious minorities. The hostility against religious minorities is so entrenched that it has shrunk the space for their economic and social development to alarming extent. The state’s increasing helplessness against the mounting strength of extremists has further compounded the issue. Such helplessness on the part of the state can be gauged from the fact that extremists blatantly violate the minorities’ rights. Frequent attacks on their business premises and places of worship have become a norm in the country. Killing them on the charge of blasphemy is another dangerous trend which is on rise. It would not be an exaggeration to say that religious minorities in the country are confronted with the threat of extinction because of deep-seated extremism in the society.

There is no denying that extremism has unleashed waves of division in the society to such extent that the whole society seems divided on ideological lines. Ideological divisions among different segments of population have increased so much that it has given a death blow to the spirit of nationalism in the country. Ethnic and sectarian identities are preferred by people over the national one. The erosion of nationalism has not only undermined the growth of democratic values in the country but has also reduced socio-economic and political space for the religious as well as ethnic minorities.
In addition to it, the role of extremism in dwindling economic opportunities in the
country is also undeniable. Extremist trends are so rife that local as well as
foreign investors are reluctant to invest in the country. Needless to say, such alarming
trend has resulted in reduced economic space, thus aggravating the vicious cycle of
poverty in the society. Entrenched poverty coupled with illiteracy goes a long way in
nurturing the disease of extremism in the country.

In order to counter the growth of extremism, there is a dire need to take some
revolutionary steps on the part of government.

First of all, the government should try its best to resolve the political disputes through
the means of dialogue. This is because only dialogue or negotiation has the capacity to
resolve the issues in an amicable manner without giving rise to the counterproductive
effects. This is perhaps the best way to check the growth of extremism. It will not only
pose barrier to the growth of extremism, but will also make people’s attitude towards
the government friendly.

In addition to it, the government should open institutes for the proper education and
training of the clergy on the modern lines. The education of the clergy is very essential
to put a lid on the growth of extremism. The proper and modern education of the
clergy will enable them to understand the true spirit of Islam. It will enable them not
only to understand the worth of peace in the society, but also to solve the current
issues in the light of religious teachings.

In the same way, the government should take steps to eliminate the poverty which is
also the main factor for the growth of extremism in the society. For this purpose, it
needs to initiate development projects on a large scale, especially in the backward
areas. On one hand, this measure will increase the employment opportunities in the
backward areas, while on the other, it will create pro-government elements. In this way,
government can put an efficient check on the growth of extremism.

Furthermore, the government must involve the local elements in the exploitation of
natural resources in a province. Most of the revenue generated by the government from
the natural resources should be spent on the development of that province which
contributes to the generation of these resources. In this way, it will be able to generate
employment opportunities for the local people. This further will lead to putting a check
on the growth of alienation among the local people. Therefore, the elimination of the sense of marginalization and alienation will give rise to the environment of tolerance and moderation.

Summing up the discussion, it can be said the plant of extremism has not cropped up overnight. Rather, it has taken a long period in its growth. To be sure, a host of factors like American imperialism, unsettlement of political disputes, discriminatory attitude against the Muslim minorities or immigrants, western media’s anti-Islamic propaganda, American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, lack of democracy, rampant poverty coupled with illiteracy, poor control of the government on religious seminaries, gross violation of human rights in some areas etc. have contributed to the rise of this disease. Extremism is so rampant in the society that extremist tendencies are reflected in all segments of society, irrespective of their socio-economic status and educational backgrounds. But the situation has not reached to uncontrollable level yet. It can be controlled by introducing revolutionary steps like promoting a vibrant democratic system, massive investment in the education sector, initiating development projects in the underprivileged and backward areas, efficient monitoring of foreign funding to religious seminaries, ensuring supervision of syllabi taught at these seminaries, arrangements for the training and education of the clergy on modern lines, etc. These measures will go a long way to cure the disease of extremism, thus creating a peaceful society to live in.

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