

Violent Extremism: The Status of Religious Minorities as targets and Victims in Pakistan

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Abstract

Religious and violent extremism has taken Pakistan in its grips. There are various driving forces behind violent extremism; the target of which are innocent lives. Among others religious minorities are the most effected. The founding father of Pakistan laid the dream of equality and equal right for minorities. Pakistan was declared as an Islamic Republic in the 1949 Objective Resolution, which guarantees equal fundamental rights and protection against any discrimination. Similarly, the three constitutions – 1956, 1962 and 1973 – reiterate this guarantee. Religious minorities have their representation in the Provincial and National Assemblies; however, they do not have the legislation power as opposed by others. The situation at present is threatening the basic human rights of an individual through suppression and religious extremism, which is not limited to Christians but is also aimed at Muslim minority sects. Furthermore, the misuse of laws like Blasphemy Laws further intensifies their plight. The growing religious intolerance and discrimination is a widely debated subject, however, it lacks a detailed scholarship on why, how and who carry out these acts of extremism against religious minorities and, how the government in the presence of laws has responded to and addressed the problem.

Keywords: Violent Extremism, Religious Extremism, Religious Minorities, Minority Rights, Blasphemy Laws, Objective Resolution, National Action Plan (NAP)

Approach to the Study:

The paper is attempts to adopt an unbiased approach to the subject in discussion. The current study aims at analyzing the status of religious minorities who become targets as well as victims of violent religious extremism in Pakistan. While the Constitution of Pakistan guarantee equal rights to all, irrespective of their caste, creed or religion, violent religious extremism has taken roots in Pakistan due to internal as well as external factors. In addition, the study evaluates whether in the presence of laws to protect the rights of religious minorities, what is the state response towards the issue of religious extremism that is tarnishing the image of Pakistan as an Islamic state?

The research advances in different sections. While introducing the subject, it examines the existing laws and intellectual discourse on the Constitution of Pakistan that guarantee rights to religious minorities and highlights merits and demerits present in the existing laws and Constitution. Based on findings of the study, it presents recommendations and conclusion.

Methodology of the study:

This research project follows mixed method strategy having qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the issue of concern besides examining the Constitution of Pakistan and highlighting the policies of different ruling elites resulting in religious extremism where religious minorities are at the receiving end. Both primary and secondary sources are utilized. Primary sources include surveys, interviews and follow up interviews with ulema (religious leaders), politician, prominent religious minority figures, social activists and

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academicians, historical and legal documents, speeches, communications via email and Skype, statements and declassified official documents issued by the Governments of Pakistan. The overall analysis is based on interviews with religious and political leadership, members of civil society and surveys that the researcher intends to conduct in Madrassah, public sectors universities of Sindh, Balochistan, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). The secondary sources include books, journals, periodicals, and newspapers, published and unpublished documents and statistical reports on the subject.

Objective of the Study:

While much time has been devoted to research the failure of the government to address the issues of discrimination against religious minorities, however, due to complexity, there exist gaps in the knowledge and understanding of the issue. This is an universal fact that minority rights is an important component of human rights and this regards, religious freedom in any society is essentially important for other freedoms.¹

The growing religious intolerance and discrimination is a widely debated subject, however, it lacks a detailed scholarship on why, how and who carry out these acts of extremism against religious minorities and, how the government of Pakistan in the presence of laws has responded to and addressed the problem. With these queries, the current research attempts to achieve the following objectives:

- To create an environment of mutual respect and understanding, a prerequisite for interfaith harmony
- To bring political and religious leadership on the same page for a consensual voice against all sorts of discriminations.
- To influence policy making circles to address the weaknesses in legislation that fails to protect its citizens – religious minorities
- To project Pakistan as an enlightened and responsible Islamic state thriving on equal rights and religious freedom for all.

Significance of the Study:

This study highlights an important subject which will help policy circles, academia and religious as well as secular scholars in designing policies that will improve the image of Pakistan as a Muslim state where all enjoy equal rights irrespective of their caste, creed or religion. It will also benefit international academia and policy makers that in the presence of sane minds, a handful of religious bigots cannot hijack the policy making process in Pakistan.

This research introduces its readers to the ground realities related to sensitive issues like discrimination against religious minorities. It also helps the readers to examine the Constitution of Pakistan thoroughly, which guarantees equal rights to all, and the later amendments in it that changed things for religious minorities in Pakistan. Though the Constitution grants equal rights, it is still debatable.

Therefore, this paper not only takes back its readers into the history but also the policy makers at home and abroad to the history of Pakistan with regard to the status of religious minorities to make a comparison of how they lived in the initial days of Pakistan and how things changed for them over the period of time. Moreover, this project highlights the status of religious minorities, their problems, their own efforts, the civil society struggle, and the

influences on policy-making circles, which resulted in introducing various Bills meant for countering religious terrorism.

Steps were also taken to introduce Madrassah reforms besides scrutinizing of religious material to prevent the spread of hate material. However, there are gaps in policy making which needs to be addressed to guarantee minorities rights and security as well as ensure a stable and peaceful Pakistan. One important thing that makes this project significant is that religious and political leaders also are aware and many showed their willingness in bringing changes in laws like Blasphemy law but they were reluctant to talk about it openly fearing opposition and reaction from conservative elements. Moreover, nearly all the secular political parties made attempts to amend laws like blasphemy laws but no progress could be made due to sensitivities of the issue besides political leadership did not want to antagonize religious political parties

Introduction:

Most of the existing scholarship on peace and security suggest that religious element is a critical component of political and social stability and security worldwide. The growing interaction between religion and politics has led to complex international affairs. One of the symptoms of this complexity is that the world has grown more oppressive for different faith followers because of religious extremism.²

Pakistani society is an amalgamation of religious, regional and national identities. The total population is divided on economic, religious, regional, ethnic and linguistic basis. At the time of independence, the number of religious minorities out of the total population was twenty five percent, which has now dropped to three percent. This is due to various factors, religious violence and discrimination are amongst many others. According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 96.28% of the population is comprised of Muslims with 85–90% Sunni, 10–15% Shia, 1.59 include Christians, 1.60% Hindus, 0.22% Ahmadi and 0.07 others.³

Pakistan today is passing through challenging times. Violent extremism of all shades and menace of terrorism are the major threats at present to internal as well as external security. The religiously motivated extremism has created a situation where the extremist elements of all shades play on the religious sentiments of the masses and incite mobs. This has invited international attention to the violence in the name of religion against religious minorities that relates laws like Blasphemy and Hudood ordinances in Pakistan to the problem. This has also led to perceptions that religion and terrorism are correlated because it is widely discussed in certain quarters of the West that religions passively endorse violence. To know whether religion and terrorism are correlated, a survey was conducted where the result shows that out of the total respondents, 19 percent strongly agree and 31 percent agree on the correlation of religion and terrorism. However, among the respondents of the survey 27 percent disagree, 20 percent strongly disagree with notion and 03 percent did not respond. Another observation, based on attacks on mosques, temples, churches and other religious institutions, is that there is religious extremism in Pakistan. The data in the above table show that among the respondents, 40 percent strongly agree and 43 percent agree that religious extremism exist in Pakistan, whereas 09 percent disagree, 05 percent strongly disagree and 03 percent did not support the notion.⁴

Discrimination against religious minorities due to violent religious extremism and religious intolerance has significantly eroded Pakistan's image resulting in a negative world opinion about the country. While there is divergence within Pakistani society on factors adding to

the increasing religious extremism and intolerance in the country, the general perception, however is that there are internal as well as external factors behind the problem. While some argue that Pakistan's alliance in GWOt has resulted in political, economic, social and religious chaos, others believe that pursuing policies to please the US have exacerbated the situation further. As a result of this division in public opinion and among political parties, the external forces further exploited the vulnerable situation.⁵

There are various driving forces behind violent extremism; effecting innocent lives in Pakistan. Among others the most effected, because of social discrimination and religious intolerance, are religious minorities. The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees minority rights, however, it is believed that oppression of religious minorities on many occasions goes unnoticed by the state of Pakistan.⁶ It resulted in distancing different faith communities with in Pakistan. Moreover, it has also effected Pakistan's relations with other countries and its standing globally⁷

Causes and Evolution of Problem:

This study examines the status of religious minorities at two levels: the policy making level and individuals role as contributor to violent extremism against religious minorities.

A revisit to the history of Islam and the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) shows a very clear direction for all Muslims with regards to the status of minorities in an Islamic society. The founding father of Pakistan, Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, laid the dream of equality and equal rights for religious minorities. Pakistan was declared as an Islamic Republic in the 1949 Objective Resolution, which guarantees religious and cultural freedom to religious minorities.⁸ Nevertheless, there are arguments that mixing of religion in politics is the source of all ills with regard to minority rights in Pakistan. Many argue that the inclusion of Islam in politics after the death of Jinnah, through the Objective Resolution was the main reason of marginalization of minorities.⁹

It is important to mention Jinnah's speech on the inauguration of the Constituent Assembly on September 11, 1947 that spells out the spirit of nationhood. He said,

“ you will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in religious sense because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state.”¹⁰ Jinnah's address is often quoted by some quarters as a principal de jure policy statement of the founder. It is termed as 'Magna Carta' of Pakistan declared by Jinnah who was most highly qualified authority to spell out the *raison d'être* of Pakistan.¹¹

It is also pertinent to mention that Jinnah unequivocally held that Pakistan is not going to be a theocratic state. Besides this, the white portion of Pakistani flag also reflects the 25 percent of religious minorities who supported the creation of Pakistan.¹² The above mentioned speech of Jinnah clearly shows that he wanted religious freedom for all and there was no distinction between a Muslim and non-Muslim in terms of rights, privileges and responsibilities.¹³ However, many quarters believe that after the death of Jinnah, the religious right in Pakistan was distorting his words and in some instances, there was a deliberate attempt to censor this famous speech.¹⁴

It is also argued that the textbooks in schools and universities of Pakistan teach that Pakistan is an ideological state created for Islam. Even decades after its independence, many quarters

are arguing that Pakistan is finding it difficult to determine its identity. The statement of Jinnah is quoted that Pakistan is liberated to become a laboratory of Islam.¹⁵ Moreover, giving a distorted picture of Jinnah's interfaith legacy sowed the seeds of ignorance for the future generations in the textbooks of Pakistan. Therefore, it is argued that textbooks falsely presented the idea of Pakistan as an Islamic republic as Jinnah's vision for the country.¹⁶

Some quarters argue that the problem is the departure from the ideology that was defined by Jinnah, which has led to a clash amongst religious minorities and Muslims as well as different sects of Islam. This has become a serious issue at present, which is questioned in the West. There are others who view poverty and the economic status of the masses, on many times, leads to the clash of religions and civilizations.¹⁷

Having said that, minority rights are protected by law, and guaranteed in the three Constitutions – 1956, 1962 and 1973 – of Pakistan. However, Constitutional provisions which can be deemed to be alienating religious minorities are the qualifications to become President (Art 41(2)) and the Prime Minister (91(3))¹⁸ and Governor are to be Muslims, thereby making all non-Muslims ineligible.¹⁹ It is argued that the two Constitutions of 1956 and 1962 had unequivocal protection of minority rights as opposed to 1973 Constitution. Under the Constitution, the Ahmadi group was declared as non-Muslims through an Amendment, by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, on the insistence of religious political parties like, Jamat-i-Islam (JI), the Deobandi Jamiat – Ulema – e –Islam (JUI), and the Bareilvi Jamiat Ulema-i-Pakistan (JUP), along with the center right Pakistan Democratic Party, and Pir Pagara's Musim League.²⁰

During General Zia ul Haq era (1977 – 1988), Articles 298B and 298C were added to Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) in 1984, which prohibit Ahmadis from adopting Muslim identity. It is also argued that sectarian violence increased during Zia era, certain quarters, however, disagree with this perception and blame the sectarian rift particularly between Shia and Sunni Muslim as an agenda of the West.²¹

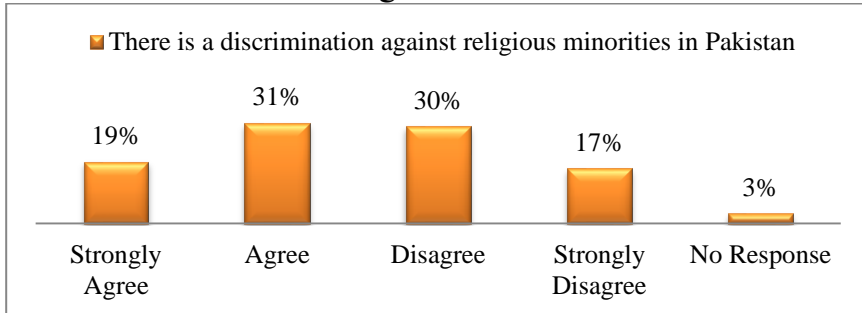
Moreover, in 1985 General Zia introduced separate electorate for religious minorities as an essential part of his plan to turn Pakistan into a theocratic state, which was earlier abandoned under another military ruler, Field Marshall Ayub Khan,. Under the separate electorate, all religious minorities including Ahmadis were required to declare themselves non-Muslims in order to gain limited right to vote for only the 5 percent minority seats of the National Assembly of Pakistan. Later on, through Executive Order 24 of 2002 under General Pervez Musharraf, a joint electorate was put in place. The general elections of 2002, 2008 and 2013 were held on the basis of joint electorate.²² The joint electorate lifted the requirement to declare religion when registering to vote. Millions of Hindus and Christians in Pakistan were listed along with Muslims, and could vote in general elections. However, a supplementary voters list was created for Ahmadis.

It is generally believed that these problems are not constitutional but societal as contrary to the past people have become socially active and they complain about discrimination against Christian and Hindus, particularly Hindus in Sindh and Christians in Punjab.²³ On the contrary, Shia and Sunni political leaders and government official say that the violence against religious minorities is not the result of societal intolerance among religious communities but is organized and carried out by groups of religious extremists.²⁴ For example, 'Christianity Today' reported that minorities faced problems during the 2009

Taliban offensive in Swat Valley, when Taliban declared and enforced its version of Sharia law and Pakistan government surrendered all governance of Swat Valley to Taliban forces.²⁵

In this regard, a survey was conducted for the purpose of this research to analyse the discrimination against religious minorities. The respondents' views in the survey varied as 19% of respondents the strongly agreed, 31% agreed that there is discrimination against religious minorities in Pakistan. However, 30% disagreed, 17% strongly disagreed and 03% did not respond to the question.

Figure - 1



It is also to be noted that many respondents, which the researcher interviewed for analysis of this study, disregarded the notion that religion has anything to do with violent acts against religious minorities, it is a fact that the name of religion has been used in all the incidents. In case of Pakistan, the sectarian and religious motivated violence and the government response to these issues, the Madrassahs' role in ideological indoctrination has been highlighted at various forums.

A State Department's report mentions that Blasphemy laws give birth to the violence against Christian, Hindus and members of the Muslim offshoots factions, such as Ahmadi and Zikri in Pakistan.²⁶ An op-ed in Washington Times called on the US government:

... to press Pakistan to decriminalize blasphemy and to urge the Pakistani government to take more serious steps to combat Islamic extremism.²⁷

It is argued that the Blasphemy law itself is not incorrect for it has basis and reasons behind it. However, the misuse must be checked and analysed, otherwise the society will be destroyed.²⁸ Looking at it in this perspective, many European countries that are considered secular also condemn and penalize blasphemers.²⁹ However, Pakistan's Blasphemy law is criticized because it is "used as a pretext to attack minorities,"³⁰ and is considered hostile and discriminatory because in most of the cases the allegations leveled against any person are false.³¹ It is also true that because of the influence exercised by the perpetrators, in many cases nominal or no action is taken against them. However, saying that the government has a role to play in all such cases would be an exaggeration. Still, it is maintained that due to fear the political and religious leadership, despite knowing the facts, on many instances are reluctant to speak against or punish the perpetrators.

Haq opines that every individual, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, is granted rights in an Islamic state, which are; right to life, employment, security and education.³² Moreover, many others support Blasphemy Laws but blame the government for its failure to implement the law. Shahidi discussing the merits and demerits of the Laws argue, "where blasphemy exists, that is where the Law is misused. He further said that when Blasphemy

Laws were not enacted, blasphemy cases were very less in number as compared to now. Amongst these, there are some who are bribed to commit this crime, while the others being ignorant commit it. Thus, each scenario has to be individually analyzed.”

In support of the above arguments, Naeemi maintains, “unfortunately, Blasphemy Laws are misused. But you cannot blame the public or the people of a religion for it. The problem is in the procedure in the police stations and the courts that is helping the misuse without realization of the harm they are causing Islam. Hence the procedural laws regarding Blasphemy must be reviewed. There must be stricter criteria for registering FIR and a senior police officer should investigate the cases.”³³

Another aspect of discrimination against religious minorities is the extremist elements that want to create fear and instability in the country. A report of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) stated, “there was a direct link between the rise of the Taliban and the suppression and oppression of the minorities and of all those whose beliefs differed with those of the extremists who dared to expose hatred and violence in the name of religion. It is obvious that the mere charge of blasphemy, however preposterous it may be, is now a conviction in itself.”³⁴

Many cases of alleged blasphemy are examples, which have raised controversies over these Laws. In these cases Christians, Ahmadis, Hindus and Muslims of other sects were arrested. Extremists killed many of those who were arrested, awaiting trials. Unfortunately, in all these cases, no perpetrator was arrested to guarantee law,³⁵ and many of the accused are still awaiting court proceedings.³⁶ The death sentence, however, has never been implemented.³⁷

There are arguments in support of Blasphemy Law that it is secular as British in the undivided India introduced it. The Section XV of Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) is important as it deals with offences related to religion. Article 295 is about “injuring or defiling places of worship, with intent to insult the religion of any class”; 295–A addresses “deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious belief”. In 1982, General Zia ul Haq introduced 295–B through an ordinance, which addresses defiling etc., of the Holy Quran and the then Prime Minister Muhammad Khan Junejo introduced 295–C in 1986 which deals with use of derogatory remarks etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).³⁸ Hence, it is argued that Blasphemy Laws contain protection for all religions, however, the misuse and the punishment for blasphemy is criticized nationally and internationally.

It is also argued that certain elements within Pakistani society violate these laws for vindictive³⁹ and political purposes, particularly the land mafia which results in an increase in violence not only against religious minorities but Muslims as well.⁴⁰ Vankwani suggested that to stop its misuse the perpetrators should be punished just as Justice Khosa⁴¹ had proposed,⁴² and that there should be legislation to control the misuse of blasphemy laws and punishment for the perpetrators if they commit such an act.⁴³

Many quarters view no compromise on Blasphemy⁴⁴ and see it as the decision of God, stating that an Islamic state does not give one the right to denounce religion.⁴⁵ However, Ghamidi termed, “Blasphemy Law is baseless as it does not have any foundation in the Holy Quran or Hadith. He further says that this is an adopted belief of many people inside Pakistan and unfortunately, it has led to a reference point of introduction for Muslims in the World.⁴⁶ So far the government has failed to implement Blasphemy Laws properly in Pakistan, due to which individuals take it into their own hands.”⁴⁷

Unfortunately, religious and political elites in Pakistan have remained hesitant on debating Blasphemy Laws due to fear of reaction from religiously conservatives.⁴⁸ For example the killings of Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer and Minister for Minority Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti for criticizing the Blasphemy law and the support these killings received in some circles is all very disturbing.

Nearly all the secular political parties made attempts to amend Blasphemy Laws but no progress could be made due to sensitivities of the issue besides political leadership did not want to antagonize religious political parties. In this regard, Sherry Rehman, a Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarian proposed in 2010 that the "death sentence (PPC- 295C) be reduced to a ten year imprisonment and recommended that the life imprisonment (Section 295 B) be substituted with five year imprisonment sentence." She also proposed that, "a new section 203A should be added to PPC which states that 'anyone making false or frivolous accusation under any of the sections of 295 A, 295 B and 295 C of the PPC shall be punished in accordance with similar punishments prescribed in the section under which the false frivolous accusation was made.'⁴⁹

It is also a fact that many quarters within Pakistan are supportive of reforms in Blasphemy Laws. Ghimidi, while supporting reforming the Laws, argue that these are introduced in the name of religion, which are not relevant to present day.⁵⁰ It was in this context that on January 28, 2016, the Chairman of Islamic Ideological Council (IIC) Maulana Muhammad Khan Sherani came very openly and said that we are willing to review Blasphemy Law. Maulana Sherani advised the government on compatibility of laws with Islam and for this purpose to reopen the debate and see whether sentences as harsh as the death penalty were fair.⁵¹

An analysis of the survey⁵² conducted for this research show that majority support review of the Blasphemy Laws due to their misuse for vested interests. Among the respondents, 32 percent strongly agree, 41 percent agree, 14 percent disagree, 05 percent strongly disagree on the question that Blasphemy Laws should be reviewed as suggested by the Chairman IIC.

By the same token, Haider states that it is up to the citizens of Pakistan to decide how much or little religious tolerance may prevail in the society. He further deliberates on the status of Pakistan whether it shall continue to be a country where the minorities discriminated or whether it shall be a country, as envisioned by Jinnah, where religious pluralism would flourish.⁵³

Measures Taken by the Government of Pakistan:

While there is fair consensus among political parties that religious minorities need to feel secure and protected, and they should be given due share in country's resources. Sarmad argues that there is no dearth of commitment but in reality, this does not happen. She believes that there is discrimination against Hindus particularly.⁵⁴ Voicing their grievance, Vankwani said that, Hindus should be given basic facilities like the right to impart their religious education and allowed to marry according to their religion; Hindu marriage act bill should be passed and concrete steps should be taken to stop forced conversion. Moreover, the property of Hindus should be returned and they should be allowed to create their community centers for carrying out social activities.⁵⁵ Concerning property rights of minorities, Ayaz said that Hindu property like Gaushalas* or the Evacuee Property Trust has confiscated many other Hindu worship places. However, one temple in Banda Daud Shah (in KP Province) was in possession of some people, which has been evacuated and handed over to Hindus for worship.⁵⁶

The Sikh community in Pakistan feel more secured as Arora explains that among the three non-Muslim minorities, that is: Hindus, Christians and Sikhs, Sikh community feels that they are not ill-treated. That is because they are not stopped from carrying out their rituals and have complete religious freedom. Majority of the Sikh community are residing in KP Orakzai Agency and Tirah valley (located in Federally Administered Tribal Areas – FATA) where their security is not under threat. However, when the Taliban took over in Afghanistan, a little unrest was witnessed which led the Sikhs to move to settled areas from Tirah valley to Peshawar (in KP) and Hassanabdal (in Punjab Province).⁵⁷

As far as the role of the Government is concerned, it from time to time exhibited its willingness and support in fighting religious extremism. In this regard, General Pervez Musharraf as the President of Pakistan on June 5, 2001 while addressing a group of clergy advocated greater tolerance between different sects of Islam in society. He also banned two sectarian groups and introduced 'Pakistan Madrasah Education Board Ordinance – 2001' to introduce reforms in Madrasah curriculum and the 'Voluntary Registration and Regulation Ordinance – 2002 to control and check the enrolment of foreigners in different Madrasahs'.⁵⁸

The government has shown consistency in registration, regulation and reforms of Madrasah and scrutinising their curriculum to prevent the spread of religious extremism. These measures include mapping of registered and unregistered Madrasahs, auditing of their account and check their sources of funding and action against those found to be involved in hate speech and militancy. In mid – 2005, the Government renewed its effort to require all Madrasahs to register with the government and to expel all foreign students. By that year's end, despite protests from some violent extremist groups, most of the religious schools had registered.

Furthermore, the government and the Madrasah authorities agreed to draft a uniform registration form. It was also decided that Madrasahs would receive foreign financial aid only through the government to ensure proper auditing of their funds.⁵⁹ In Punjab the government geo-tagged 11000 Madrasahs across the province and compiled their sect wise breakdown.⁶⁰ According to a report, 167 suspected Madrasahs in Sindh, 13 in KP, 02 in Punjab and 72 unregistered Madrasahs in Sindh have been closed. Regarding the registration and regulation of Madrasahs, 100 percent mapping on agreed parameter in Islamabad and Punjab, 80 percent Sindh, 75 percent in KP and 60 percent in Balochistan has been completed. Moreover, action against authors, publishers and retailers circulating hate material besides removing of objectionable material from textbooks has also been initiated.

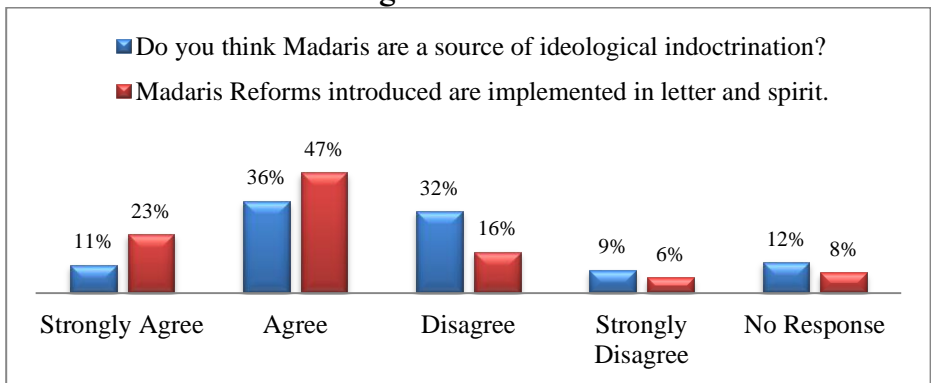
It is reported that registered Madrasahs with Ittehad-e-Tanzeemat-e-Madaris Pakistan (ITMP) which registers all major schools of thought Madrasahs, is 26000. With the increase in the number of Madrasah in Pakistan, some government officials believe that 8000-9000 other Madrasahs may be unregistered. The report also said that 02 to 05 percent of these Madrasahs are linked to extremism and radicalisation of students and many are reportedly linked to militancy.⁶¹ The indoctrination of students, hate speech against minority sects further intensifies the plight of religious minorities.

Despite these efforts, the number of unregistered Madrasahs is still increasing particularly in remote areas. According to Vankwani, "unregistered Madrasahs are proliferating in the country, for example in Tharparkar (in Sindh Province), 60 percent population is Hindu but the number of unregistered Madrasahs is increasing, especially in Badin (Sindh). According to him, these Madrasahs teach hatred and religious intolerance."⁶²

Supporting the above argument, Naeemi agrees that to some extent, a few unregistered Madrasahs spread hate speech and it is also true that ideological indoctrination is practiced. Stating that this should not happen, he agrees on the registration of Madrasahs and also argues that hate speech comes from mosques and not Madrasah. Lamenting the role those at helm of affairs, he maintains that most of the times they ignore hate speeches in Madrasahs because it serves their own interests. Therefore, he suggests that instead of blaming all, the government should clearly define as to who is a terrorist and who is not.⁶³

There are also reports that a number of terrorist organizations and Madrasahs receive foreign funding, to spread hate against minority sect, from Muslim countries. In this regard, the Foreign Office of Pakistan, in a very diplomatically reserved language, stated that money sent through informal channels from abroad would be scrutinized.⁶⁴ Various studies show that some of the Madrasahs are eager to play a political role and a majority considers it a religious obligation. According to a survey conducted by PIPS 62 percent of Madrasahs, have political affiliations out of which 59 percent were affiliated with religious political parties, 03 percent with other mainstream political parties, 18 percent with sectarian and jihadi organizations, whereas 18 percent did not express any affiliation. This affiliation, however, was denied by the administration of these Madrasahs.⁶⁵ Moreover, the religious political leadership disagrees⁶⁶ with the notion that these Madrasahs have any role in religious extremism and violence. Similarly, the following survey's findings also show the responses regarding the Madrasahs role in ideological indoctrination and whether the reforms are introduced in letter and spirit or not.

Figure - 4



About Blasphemy cases, the Supreme Court Pakistan's decision to maintain the conviction of Qadri who killed Governor Taseer was a major step. In this regard, the remarks of the Judges of the Superior Court are very important. Justice Khosa quoting the 21st Amendment⁶⁷ said that while in most cases, Blasphemy Law is misused for personal benefits and in any democratic government, it is the right of the nation to criticize the laws made by the Parliament. He further said that in matters of Blasphemy taking the law in their own hands instead of going to courts would instill fear in society. Another key point was the statement of Justice Dost Muhammad Khan who said that allowing individuals to deal with such matters on their own is fraught with danger, especially in a divided society like ours.⁶⁸

Military Operations and Bills to Counter Violent Religious Extremism:

Taking note of the overall unrest and violence due to terrorism and violent extremism, which has distorted Pakistan's image internationally, the government started various military operations that have been successful. Since 9/11, Pakistan Army has conducted four large scale and around eight medium to small scale counter terrorism operations against Pakistani Taliban. The large-scale operations include, Rah-e-Rast and Rah-e-Nijat, under the former Army Chief, General Ashfaq Pervez Kiani and Zarb-e-Azb and Khyber-1 under General Raheel Shareef, which exhausted the operational capabilities of the militants⁶⁹ and currently Operation Raad ul Fasad under General Qamar Javed Bajwa.

De-radicalization program were initiated in Swat after defeating Tehreek-e-Taliban-Swat (TTP-Swat) in September 2009 and another one in eastern Punjab in 2011, focusing on Kashmiri Jihadi groups like Laskar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) and anti-Shia militant groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). The rehabilitation programmes for the indoctrinated youth were introduced under the supervision of Pakistan Army; some were supervised by Counter Terrorism Departments, others in collaboration with NGOs.⁷⁰ It is important to mention that, inline with counter insurgency, beside the efforts of civilian government, Pakistan Army is focusing on the socio-economic development spheres, such as education, health, communication, national logistics, infrastructure development including rescue, relief and rehabilitation activities in these areas.

After the brazen attack on Karachi airport by Taliban and the failed peace talks, the launch of Operation Zarb-e-Azb on June 15, 2014 in FATA, proved successful in debasing and dismantling the organizational structure of militant organizations. It helped in improving the security situation inside the country and provided space for better regional coordination to counter terrorism and promote stability in the region.⁷¹

Pakistan National Assembly passed the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) – 2010, National Counter-Terrorism Bill – 2013, which revitalized the dysfunctional NACTA,. As a result of the Bill, Pakistan announced its first ever National Internal Security Policy (NISP) on February 25, 2014. NISP is established on mutual inclusiveness and integration of national efforts which includes three elements: 1) dialogue with all stakeholders, 2) isolation of terrorists from their support systems, 3) enhancing deterrence and capacity of security apparatus to neutralize the threats to internal security of Pakistan.⁷²

Another breakthrough was initiation of the National Action Plan (NAP) after the brutal attack on Army Public School in Peshawar on December 16, 2014. The 20-point NAP⁷³ outlines the government's counter-radicalism and counter-terrorism strategy by announcing zero tolerance for militancy and strangling the terrorist organizations through choking their financing, dismantling their communication networks physically and on media as well.

Most recently, in 2017 after the deadly suicide attacks in Lahore and on the Sufi shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan Sharif, Jamshoro in Sindh, Pakistan Army launched Operation Radd ul Fasad across the country to indiscriminately eliminate residual and latent threat of terrorism. The ISPR stated that the pursuance of National Action Plan would be the hallmark of this operation.

To counter religious and sectarian terrorism, Madrasah reforms and scrutinizing of religious material were made necessary to prevent the spread of hate material. NACTA was recommended to be strengthened and to make peace long lasting. FATA reforms, issue of Afghan refugees, Balochistan reconciliation and taking the Karachi Operation to its logical conclusion were enshrined in NAP.⁷⁴

Interfaith Initiatives:

It is imperative for the Government to take civil society and local and international NGOs onboard to tackle and counter religious intolerance and extremism. Many local and foreign Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) and NGOs took up the task of humanitarian assistance and trust building and tolerance among different faith communities in Pakistan after 9/11. These organisations also create cross-cultural and interfaith partnerships that could help empower local communities to deter the violent ideologies adopted by the extremist, an important element to peace and prosperity in Pakistan.⁷⁵

Similarly, efforts were made for inter – religious dialogue in Pakistan by initiating ‘Faith and Friends’ – a program of Pakistan’s World Religions Council to encourage dialogue between the Muslims and the Christians in KP.⁷⁶ After 9/11, Institute of Global Engagement (IGE) that works for interfaith cooperation through dialogue became active partner with Faith and Friends.⁷⁷ Because of this engagement, the MMA government helped renovate two churches, one at the Peshawar University and the other at Nathiagali, a small hill station in KP.

There are other instances where individuals have taken interfaith initiatives. In a small village in Punjab where majority of population is Muslim with only eight Christian families, Muslim and Christian in escalating situation of religious extremism are living in harmony. Despite the presence of mosques in the village, Muslims felt the absence of a place of worship of Christians and are constructing first ever church in the village.⁷⁸ Another example is the existence of a church and a mosque separated by a wall in Faisalabad. There has not been any violence or controversy between the two communities, infact they have adjusted prayer schedules in order to not disturb each other.⁷⁹

It is true that religion can be used as a channel for peace making, instead of a basis for conflict. Islam is not a narrow religion because it clearly tells that Jesus (PBUH), Moses (PBUH) and Ibrahim (PBUH) are part of silsila (order) of Prohethood It is in the Quran that “we make no distinction amongst the prophets”.⁸⁰ Dialogue among religions is one way of creating an atmosphere of peace and tolerance. Marginalization of any religion leads to confrontation. In a survey conducted on the question that all religion teach tolerance, the respondent response was; 40 percent strongly agree, 37 percent agree, 14 percent disagree, 04 percent strongly disagree whereas 05 percent did not respond.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

The phenomenon of violent extremism is quite diverse in Pakistan context as it is mostly seen in religious prism ignoring other factors associated with it. This is more so when the scholarship on religious extremism in Pakistan is mostly centred on the subject that the process of Islamization in 1970s gave birth to religious divide in Pakistan. Others argue that religious extremism in Pakistan increased during Pakistan’s partnership with the West’s ideological war against the Soviet Union in the Cold War.

That is to say, there is interplay between different factors leading to religious extremism and intolerance and particularly toward religious minorities in Pakistan. It is a fact that religious extremism has been fueled by religious extremists, terrorist organizations and their links with hostile foreign agencies. Whether it is ethnic or religious conflict or violence against religious minorities, it presented fertile grounds for foreign powers to manipulate the situation in their interest. Similarly, the killing of sectarian and religious minorities at the hands of religious extremists has also been manipulated by foreign agencies.

People do not talk about sensitive issue like Blasphemy. Interest groups misuse the law in Pakistan. Though the law exists in many of the western countries, it is its misuse for vested interests that needs to be addressed. The governments on many occasions have moved in the direction to take up the matter in the Parliament. Recently punishment of the Mumtaz Qadri is a positive development, which will help in strengthening the provisions in the law to stop its misuse.

The government has also shut down various suspected and unregistered Madrasahs in the country. Under the NAP, both Federal and Provincial governments are working towards elimination of religious and sectarian violence, countering hate speech and extremist material, dismantling communication networks of terrorists and ending sectarian terrorism.⁸¹ However, it is criticized that NAP is not implemented in letter and spirit. The Federal Government should ensure that the provinces are dedicatedly working to remove text inciting hate and biases against sects of Islam and religious minorities from textbooks.

It is important to take tangible measures to revise, modernize and regulate Madrasah syllabus and advance public education on Pakistan's diversity. Moreover, "there should be a monitoring body to monitor the progress of Madrasahs on reforms"⁸². Moreover, the government should keep a check on mosques and particularly the Friday sermons through local communities. The imam in a mosque should be a madrasa qualified person and appointed by the government.

It is important to create a national counter-narrative to refute the extremist's narrative. For that to happen, we need to engage in dialogue with each other. It has to be done at both the individual and the policy-making levels, by bringing different faith communities to actively engage in cutting edge research, convene seminars and workshops for further capacity building, and create space for exerting influence on policy making from their expertise in respective fields.

To curb religious extremism and intolerance towards religious minorities, the government should engage and support civil society organization, academics, policy analysts, journalists and advocates and adherents of different religions, in their efforts to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence as it existed in the past.

The government should hold national seminars and conferences regularly to evaluate religious extremism, discrimination and persecution of religious minorities in order to improve upon the weaknesses in policies on the issues and share the proceedings with policy-making circles.

Dealing with religious extremism is a long-term process, which needs commitment, mutual consensus and collective efforts from all stakeholders at the policy level. The government's decision and strategy of zero tolerance towards terrorism and violent extremism is a step in the right direction, however, there is a need for innovative political, economic and educational strategies to prevent future threats. It is only possible in a strong democratic society, which empowers people who are able to influence their governments on key issues.

EndNotes:

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