Treating citizens and regions with equality, will dent extremist spaces

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Islamabad:

To deal with the menace of extremism in the long-run, there is a need to treat all citizens of the country and their areas with equality, as promised in the constitution. Only then can the ideological and physical spaces against militants be secured.

These recommendations were suggested by the working-group discussing “Constitution, Governance, and Citizenship”, the fifth in a series conveyed by Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), an Islamabad-based think tank, on countering violent extremism in the country.

Members of the group underscored that even though the constitution of Pakistan vows equality to all, in practice, some are accorded less treatment than others. This “exclusion” appears in violent extremism one way or another way.

One way this exclusion manifest is how religious minorities, among the worst to be hit by violent extremists. Their rights, despite promises in the constitution, are not provided.

Participants called for promoting the concept of citizenship which accepts all Pakistanis, irrespective of their faiths and ethnicities. This framework of citizenship will automatically help in embracing minorities, otherwise pushed to the sidelines. Gestures like acknowledging the contribution of non-Muslims in Pakistan shall be undertaken.

It was recommended that “education leading to social apartheid” should be abolished. To instill how diverse Pakistani citizens are, courses on “citizenship” be taught at different levels. All shades of opinion of all citizens, within the remits of the constitution, should be accepted and provided space. A dedicated TV channel streaming parliament’s sessions can serve a healthy avenue.

Seen from another angle, violent extremists are able to find their space through excluded areas, where normal application of law is missing. FATA, with its distinct administrative code, is one such example. The group recommended that special statuses accorded to areas like FATA, Balochistan’s B-Area, and Gilgit-Baltistan, be reviewed, so that normal rule of law applies.

Members also touched upon the providing efficient services to all, especially robust criminal justice system, so as to peel off militants recruit.

A strengthened justice system will help prosecute militants, for sure. The pointed is also highlighted in the National Action Plan. But more than that, a responsive criminal justice system, especially at lower level, will help deter criminals in the first place, many of whom are then radicalized by militants. Similarly, bereft of robust criminal justice system, extremists have also invoked the call to justice, in their attempts to attract people.

To this end, the group called for investing in lower policing system as well as prison centres. It was also recommended that procedural overhauls be carried out, especially in collecting evidence.

Members of the group include Ghazi Salahuddin, senior journalist; Yaqoob Bangash, historian; Barrister Shahzad Akbar, lawyer; Dr. A. H. Nayyar, educationist; Afrasiab Khattak, former senator; Ammar Khan Nasir; Islamic scholar; Dr. Niaz Murtaza, political scientist; Khursheed Nadeem, columnist and anchor; Khalid Aziz, former secretary, KP; Dr. Farhan Zahid, security researcher; Humera Mufti, NACTA; and Muhammad Ismail Khan, PIPS.