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*Litterateurs' Response to Extremism in
Pakistan*

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Introduction

Extremism is defined in Pakistan in a number of ways, mainly in political, religious, and social contexts.ⁱ Political scientists consider it a political phenomenon, triggered by inequality, socio-economic injustices, and state policies. Clerics and religious scholars see the phenomenon in socio-political perspective but through religious prisms. They consider Talibanization to be an outcome of state policies, and the state's failure to enforce *Shariah* in the country.ⁱⁱ They also express concern over Westernization of Pakistani society. These narratives are also reflected in public opinionⁱⁱⁱ and policy makers follow the same discourse. Even the debate on the issue in the right-wing media reflects the same approach. The opinions of the segments that are among the first targets of extremism are of obvious significance. In Pakistan's context, these include religious and sectarian minorities, women, people associated with the entertainment industry, cultural expression, creative arts and literature. The Taliban in the Federally Administrative Tribal Areas (FATA), Malakand region and adjacent parts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province first targeted women, confining them to their homes and banning their entry into markets. Girls' schools, shrines of *Sufis* (mystics), cultural heritage sites and music shops were torched and bombed. Violent activities and threats by the Taliban brought cultural activities and creative expressions, such as painting and poetry, to a halt. Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) initiated a number of studies in order to determine the opinion of the specifically targeted groups.^{iv}

The study under review is based on a survey, which aimed to analyze the opinion of intellectuals, mainly individuals associated with literature and creative arts, in order to assess their opinion about the reasons for the steady rise of extremism in Pakistan and what they consider can be done to counter that. One of the objectives of the study was to explore the potential role of Pakistani intellectuals to counter extremism.

Agreeing on a definition of who is an intellectual for the purpose of this survey was among the first difficulties encountered by the study. It was considered whether religious, political, economic and social thinkers should be included in the category. And if they are included how such diverse opinions would be accommodated and treated scientifically within the limited scope of this study and what would be the criterion for the analytical process? It was also considered whether the views expressed by individuals associated with literature and philosophy would be representative of the collective intellectual thought.

The ability to understand complicated ideas defines intellect, while reason and analytical thinking are considered hallmarks of an intellectual.^v Religious scholars, and experts associated with physical and social sciences are as engaged in intellectual activity as the people associated with creative arts. But measuring the opinion of all these segments as a single entity presents difficulties on account of diversity of disciplinary backgrounds. PIPS decided to conduct an open-ended survey to assess the views of creative artists, poets, novelists, literary critics and researchers associated with the philosophical discourse. The results of the survey were compared with the opinions expressed by social scientists and religious scholars on the issue of extremism in similar surveys and focused group discussions conducted previously by PIPS.

Litterateurs from five main urban centers in Pakistan took part in the survey. The surveyors tried to engage three generations of litterateurs in order to determine if age differences influence opinions regarding extremism. For the purposes of this study, litterateurs were divided into three categories or generations: the first generation included litterateurs who started writing prior to the creation of Pakistan

or before the 1970s; the second generation comprised those who started writing between 1970 until late 1989; and the third-generation included litterateurs who engaged in literary work from the 1990s onward. The categorization is also important in the context of political history of Pakistan. The new state of Pakistan was in a phase of ideological and political transition until the late 1960s, the 1970s witnessed the breaking away of East Pakistan, the military dictatorship of Ziaul Haq and the Afghan-Soviet war, whereas the post-1990 era was characterized by transition to democracy, emergence of jihadi culture and the impact of the 9/11 attacks in the United States on Pakistan.^{vi} The classification was aimed at determining if the age factor had an impact on opinions in the political perspective. However, all first-generation litterateurs contacted for the survey declined requests to express their opinion. Therefore, this survey only reflects the views of second- and third-generation litterateurs.

In order to obtain accurate and comprehensive data, the survey forms were handed over to the respondents to allow them to answer the questions at their leisure. Zahid Hasan,^{vii} a field researcher with PIPS, observed that the majority of first-generation litterateurs questioned the utility of the survey. Reluctance expressed by first-generation litterateurs is significant in so far as it records their belief that such studies would not add value to the fight against extremism.

The survey sample consisted of 50 litterateurs, 16 and 34 from the second and third generations, respectively. The survey was conducted in Lahore, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Peshawar and Quetta as the five cities are considered hubs of litterateurs' activities. Litterateurs from other parts of the country frequently opt to settle there because of the opportunities and exposure to new literary trends. The participation of 10 female litterateurs in the survey helped gauge the input from both genders. The respondents unanimously declared extremism to be "a real problem" for Pakistani society. In addition to their literary credentials, the respondents were associated with various walks of life, including teaching, journalism and government service.

The respondents were asked the following five questions in the survey:

1. What is extremism?
2. What are the factors breeding extremism?
3. What is the reaction of litterateurs to extremism?
4. If the reaction is not positive, what could be the reasons?
5. What are your recommendations for eradicating extremism?

The survey findings yielded the following five definitions of extremism.

- i. Imbalanced ideological attitudes and practices that lead to intolerance.
- ii. A state of mind in which an individual regards himself superior to others.
- iii. A constant struggle between a particular ideology being preached by the state and popular belief systems.
- iv. A synthetic symptom born of a clash of interests between international powers and their policies of violence.
- v. Socio-political and economic inequalities cause unstable behaviors, which at times lead to violence. Such patterns of behavior may be called extremism.

The five definitions largely revolve around two main factors: psychological and physical. Most of the respondents (76%) also talked about the cause and effect relationship between the two factors. The psychological aspect includes beliefs and ideologies, while physical dimensions encompass political, social and economic disparities, interests of external powers and their pressure that influences individuals, states and collective behavior of a society. (See Table 1)

1: What is extremism?

No	Definition	Overall Percentage	2 nd Generation	3 rd Generation
1	Imbalanced ideological attitudes	48%	50%	47%
2	State of mind	26%	37%	20%
3	Behaviors caused by political, social and economic inequalities	16%	6%	20%
4	Behaviors born of state's oppression	6%	6%	6%
5	A synthetic symptom born of a clash of interests between international powers	6%	6%	6%

As many as 48 percent of the respondents defined extremism as imbalanced ideological attitudes, 26 percent called extremism a state of mind in which an individual regards himself superior to others and acts as an inquisitor. Importantly, 20 percent of third-generation respondents termed extremism as imbalanced behaviors caused by political, social and economic disparities. However, only 6 percent of second-generation respondents agreed to that definition.

More diverse opinions were expressed regarding the causes for the spread of extremism. (See Table 2) The largest section of the respondents described sectarianism and misinterpretation of religion as the main causes of extremism. A combination of factors including political oppression, class system, ignorance and sectarianism were considered the second most important factor.

2: Causes of extremism

No	Opinion	Overall Percentage	2 nd Generation	3 rd Generation
1	Political oppression; class system; ignorance	12%	12%	11%
2	Sectarianism; misinterpretation of religion	22%	38%	14%

3	Irrational behaviors	16%	19%	14%
4	External factors; clash of values between East and West	6%	-	6%
5	State's bid to promote a specific ideological identity	8%	13%	6%
6	Lack of cultural activities	6%	-	6%
7	Combination of opinion #1 & #2	18%	13%	21%
8	Combination of opinion #1 & #3	12%	19%	9%
9	Combination of opinion #2 & #5	3%	-	3%
10	Combination of opinion #1, #4 & #5	12%	-	12%

With regard to litterateurs' overall reaction to extremism, the largest section of the respondents was of the view that they are yet to react positively and in a significant manner to the rising wave of extremism in Pakistani society. As many as 18 percent opined that pro-establishment intellectuals have been supporting and promoting radical and extremist ideologies intentionally or unintentionally. (See Table 3) According to 32 percent of the respondents, the litterateurs have reacted positively and raised awareness about the crucial issue through their writings. The respondents believe that the three main factors responsible for lack of intellectuals' response to extremism are fear of oppression by state, which has at times tacitly supported extremists, failure to grasp the gravity of the issue and fear of a backlash from extremists.

3: Litterateurs' overall reaction to extremism

No	Opinion	Overall Percentage	2 nd Generation	3 rd Generation
1	Have not played a significant role	34%	38%	32%
2	Reacted positively through their writings and verbal communications	32%	31%	32%
3	Supported extremism intentionally or unintentionally	18%	31%	26%

4	Don't know	8%	-	8%
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4: What could be the possible reasons for insignificant or no reaction?

No	Opinion	Overall Percentage	2 nd Generation	3 rd Generation
1	Fear of state's oppression	24%	13%	29%
2	Failure to grasp gravity of the situation	36%	31%	38%
3	Fear of extremists' backlash	6%	13%	3%
4	Don't know	34%	43%	29%

The respondents advocated a range of options to counter extremism. (See Table 5) The largest section of the respondents believed that extremism should be countered through promoting enlightened moderation, rationality and the idea of *Ijtihad*.^{viii} A significant number of respondents also favored eliminating social and economic disparities, strengthening democracy, promoting education and a culture of reading, a balanced role of media and declaring Pakistan a secular state in order to counter the spread of radical ideologies.

5: Recommendations to counter extremism

No	Recommendation	Overall Percentage	2 nd Generation	3 rd Generation
1	Enlightened moderation; promotion of rationality; <i>Ijtihad</i>	24%	25%	23%
2	Eliminating social and economic disparities; strengthening democracy	14%	13%	14%
3	Strengthening a culture of reading and increasing the literacy rate	9%	-	9%
4	Balanced role of media	6%	6%	6%
5	Promoting cultural activities	8%	6%	8%
6	Declaring Pakistan a secular state	8%	13%	6%
7	Launching an organized movement	6%	6%	6%
8	Liberation from external influence	6%	6%	6%
9	Combination of recommendations #1 & #2	12%	18%	6%
10	Combination of recommendations #1 & #3	3%	-	3%
11	Combination of recommendations #1 & #5	3%	-	3%

12	Combination of recommendations #1 & #6	4%	6%	3%
13	Combination of recommendations #2 & #5	6%	-	6%

Findings of the Survey

The survey yielded the following findings:

1. The respondents unanimously declared extremism in Pakistani society a crucial issue.
2. Opinions regarding the causes spawning extremism can be classified under three main categories:
 - Misinterpretation of religion
 - Political, economic and social inequalities
 - Lack of rational and logical behaviors

It is important to comprehend the cause and effect relationship among these aspects at the policy level.

3. Opinions were almost equally divided on whether intellectuals have responded appropriately to extremism or not, signifying confusion among litteratures about their role on this crucial issue. A considerable segment wants to limit their role as intellectuals to avoid being targeted by extremists, while others are willing to play an active role to counter extremism.
4. Recommendations to counter extremism largely revolve around ideological and empirical efforts, while a very small section of the respondents suggested political initiatives to deal with the threat. Only 6 percent of the respondents supported the idea of launching a mass movement to educate public opinion and a similar number favored freedom from foreign influence.

Comparison with Opinions Expressed by other Segments of Society

In 2008-09, Pak Institute for Peace Studies consulted several experts in the fields of political science, international relations, faith studies, science, media and human rights. Their opinion was sought through detailed discussions and a survey on the issues of terrorism and extremism.^{ix} Out of 16 experts, 11 agreed that extremism is a political phenomenon; only three looked at extremism as an ideological struggle, whereas two experts linked extremism to misinterpretation of religion. The experts also differed on what they considered to be the reasons that breed extremism. Most of the social experts pointed to political, social and economic disparities as the main causes of extremism.

A similar study^x conducted among teachers of madrassas by PIPS in 2009 demonstrated that the majority of clerics and madrassa teachers declared extremism a political issue. However, they considered that

regional and international political issues were more important. A large number of madrassa teachers were of the view that extremism can only be countered if Pakistan distances itself from the US-led war on terror. Very few discussed the religious and ideological aspects of extremism.

Public opinion is shaped by the media, and religious and political leaders and ultimately influences the political trends of a society. A number of public surveys suggest that most of the Pakistanis disapprove of terrorism. A survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan in April 2009 found that 51 percent Pakistanis supported military operations against the militants in the country's tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, 36 percent did not offer any opinion and only 13 percent opposed the military action.^{xi} As many as 35 percent of the respondents held the United States responsible for a spike in the number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan and 31 percent blamed the Pakistani government. Such public views can be influenced by the media, and political and religious parties. But signs of confusion are discernable in the public opinion regarding extremist and violent groups. A survey conducted by PIPS^{xii} in 2008 to map the political behavior of the masses revealed that though more than 56 percent Pakistanis acknowledge the services of religious scholars for Islam, over 53 percent oppose their political role.^{xiii} Public opinion considers the provision of justice and basic necessities as crucial for countering extremism. Table 6 captures the variety of opinion on the issue of extremism—assessed through a number of surveys—among various segments of Pakistani society.

6: Diversity of opinions

No	Segment	Extremism	Causes	Proposed Solutions
1	Litteratures	Imbalanced ideological attitudes	Misinterpretation of religion and lack of rational behaviors	Efforts on the intellectual front
2	Social scientists	Political phenomenon in which internal political, social and economic factors are more important	Political, social and economic disparity	Proper policy making
3	Clerics/religious leaders	Political phenomenon where external factors are also important	Involvement of state	Close ties with Muslim world (<i>Ummah</i>) and disassociation from the West
4	Public opinion	Political phenomenon	Involvement of state and external forces	Justice and provision of basic necessities.

The opinion, particularly with regard to countering extremism, is so diverse that it may not lead to an effective response. Whereas the intellectuals lay more emphasis on ideological and empirical aspects for countering extremism, social experts and religious scholars vehemently assert that that is not an effective solution. More comprehensive studies and analysis may yield a more clear answer.

Notes:

ⁱ For details, see *Defining Radicalization in Pakistani Context, A Report*, Conflict and Peace Studies, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2009, Pak Institute for Peace Studies, Islamabad, Pakistan.

ⁱⁱ Muhammad Amir Rana, *Mapping the Madrasa Mindset*, Conflict and Peace Studies, Volume 2, Number 1, Jan-Mar 2009, Pak Institute for Peace Studies, Islamabad, Pakistan.

ⁱⁱⁱ A survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan in April 2009 endorsed the fact. <http://www.gallup.com.pk/Polls/28-4-09.pdf>. Last accessed April 20, 2010.

^{iv} A study by Saba Noor and Daniela Hussain, assessing radicalization among women, is included in the current issue.

^v Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Second Edition, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

^{vi} For details, see *Class and Politics in the Radicalization of Pakistani State and Society*, by Robina Segal (Heirich Boll Stiftung Publication Series on Democracy, Volume 16, 2009)

She analyzes the history of conflict among the religious and political elites and military establishment and the impact on society.

^{vii} Zahid Hasan is a novelist, columnist and poet. PIPS acknowledges his commitment to conduct this survey in a short period.

^{viii} According to Encyclopedia Britannica, *Ijtihad* is one of the sources of Islamic jurisprudence, for the independent or original interpretation of problems not precisely covered by the Quran, *Hadith* (traditions concerning the Prophet's life and utterances), and *Ijma* (scholarly consensus). Only adequately qualified jurists are entitled to exercise such original thinking, and those who do are termed *Mujtahids*.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/282550/ijtihad>

^{ix} *Defining Radicalization in Pakistani Context, A Report*, Conflict and Peace Studies, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2009, Pak Institute for Peace Studies, Islamabad, Pakistan.

^x Muhammad Amir Rana, *Mapping the Madrasa Mindset*, Conflict and Peace Studies, Volume 2, Number 1, Jan-Mar 2009, Pak Institute for Peace Studies, Islamabad, Pakistan.

^{xi} Gallup survey report, April 2009. <http://www.gallup.com.pk/Polls/28-4-09.pdf>. Last accessed April 20, 2010.

^{xii} The survey targeted two groups: registered political party workers and voters. A total of 934 interviews were conducted across the country with a view to identify the key determinants of political behavior in Pakistan. The results can be accessed at <http://www.san-pips.com/index.php?action=san&id=43>

^{xiii} A PIPS Report, *Elections 2008: PIPS Survey Challenges Conventional Wisdom*, <http://www.san-pips.com/index.php?action=san&id=43>

About Institute

The Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) is an independent, not-for-profit non governmental research and advocacy think-tank. An initiative of leading Pakistani scholars, researchers and journalists, PIPS conducts wide-ranging research and analysis of political, social and religious conflicts that have a direct bearing on both national and international security. The PIPS approach is grounded in field research. Our surveys and policy analyses are informed by the work of a team of researchers, reporters and political analysts located in different areas of conflict in Pakistan. Based on information and assessments from the field, PIPS produces analytical reports, weekly security updates and policy briefings containing practical recommendations targeted at key national and international decision-makers. We also publish survey-based reports and books, providing in-depth analysis of various conflicts or potential conflicts.



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