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## IN THIS ISSUE

Policy Brief: Political  
Expression of Religious  
Radicalism in Pakistan

Training and Orientation  
Session with Young Observers

Report Launching Ceremony:  
Bridging Ideas and Impact


True unity grows from acceptance of  
diversity; without it, division erodes our  
shared future.

SENATOR KHALIL TAHIR SANDHU



## CONTACT US:

 [pips@pakpips.com](mailto:pips@pakpips.com)

 [www.pakpips.com](http://www.pakpips.com)

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# POLICY BRIEF: POLITICAL EXPRESSION OF RELIGIOUS RADICALISM IN PAKISTAN

**Zain Zaigham**  
Research Officer at PIPS

## Introduction

Over the past decade, religious radicalism in Pakistan has evolved from operating covertly through militant networks to asserting itself openly in the political sphere. Groups that frame their agendas as uncompromising religious imperatives have increasingly relied on mass mobilisation, street pressure, and selective participation in elections to gain concessions from the state and shape public discourse.

This policy brief explores how religious radicals engage politically in contemporary Pakistan, focusing on Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) as a case study to illustrate how street power and agenda-setting can yield significant influence even without strong parliamentary representation. The analysis aims to identify emerging patterns, assess state responses, and reflect on the short-term implications for governance and public order.

For clarity, the term 'religious radicals' here refers to actors who translate doctrinal beliefs into political demands, seek to narrow Pakistan's pluralist space, and use coercive mobilisation or vigilantism to enforce compliance. This distinguishes them from religious parties that operate primarily through legislative processes. Over the past ten years, several networks have adopted this mode of politics, but TLP stands out as the most prominent example. Rooted in the Bareilvi tradition, TLP has transformed emotive religious issues into tools for mass mobilisation and political signalling.

These religiously radicalised groups generally rely on a blend of three interlinked strategies. First, they orchestrate rapid mass mobilisation in response to perceived affronts to religion - organising road blockades, sit-ins, and marches that can paralyse major urban centres. Second, they exert pressure on executive decisions, legislative priorities, and bureaucratic functioning, often through the threat of escalation rather than engagement through institutional channels. Third, they practice selective electoral participation—using the ballot box less as a route to power and more as a platform to

amplify street influence. This allows them to convert public visibility into political leverage, whether by influencing policy outcomes or brokering tactical compromises.

In this context, independent analyses of the 2024 General Elections estimate that TLP secured approximately 2.9 million votes nationwide, underscoring its capacity to exercise political leverage despite limited representation (Gallup Pakistan, 2024).

## The TLP Showcase: Cycles of Disruption and Accommodation

TLP's record shows how this method works. Founded in 2015 by Khadim Hussain Rizvi, the party organised around the defence of Pakistan's blasphemy framework and the banner of honouring the Prophet (PBUH). In the 2018 general election, it won more than two million votes, about four per cent of the national total, secured 2 provincial seats in Sindh, and established urban vote banks across Punjab and Karachi. Its comparative advantage, however, remained disruptive collective action (Ayub, 2018).

Between 2017 and 2021, several major mobilisations by TLP ended with written or verbal concessions. The Faizabad sit-in in November 2017, sparked by changes to the electoral oath, lasted three weeks and ended with the Law Minister's resignation and a government agreement later criticised by the Supreme Court (The News, 2017). The agitation after Asia Bibi's acquittal in late 2018 produced a deal that promised administrative and legal steps and led to brief, mostly reversible arrests of TLP leaders. When the state preemptively arrested Saad Hussain Rizvi in April 2021, violent unrest followed, and the party was proscribed under anti-terror laws, only for the ban to be lifted months later after back-channel talks (Bilal, 2018). Most recently, in October 2025, the TLP launched a pro-Palestine "Labbaik Ya Aqsa" long march from Lahore towards Islamabad. As the procession moved along the GT Road corridor between 10 and 13 October, clashes broke out between marchers and law-enforcement personnel at several points, leaving multiple people injured and prompting security lockdowns and traffic closures across Punjab (Chaudhry, 2025).

Operationally, the October events also saw geo-fenced communications curbs and extensive road closures in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, as authorities sought to disrupt coordination and contain spillover; schools and transport were affected as the situation unfolded.

The Punjab government was the first to proscribe the TLP, and the federal government followed (Mahmood, 2025). The federal cabinet approved proscription on 23 October

2025, and the Interior Ministry notified the ban on 24 October 2025 under Section 11B of the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, placing TLP on the First Schedule. Dawn's reporting also noted that TLP is the first political party to be proscribed twice (after an earlier, short-lived 2021 proscription) (Dawn, 2025). Rizvi and his brothers have not been seen since the protests. Punja'b IG claimed they are not with them or any other agencies. According to him, they are hiding, and the police are in search of him, while different conspiracy theories are circulating about their well-being.

During the Lahore/GT Road violence in October 2025, the police launched a large-scale operation against the TLP. Reports emerged claiming that TLP chief Saad Hussain Rizvi had been injured amid the confrontation. The operation resulted in hundreds of arrests of TLP supporters and activists, and extensive security measures, including protests camps being cleared and roads being blocked (Chaudhry, 2025).

These events reaffirm a familiar loop: mobilisation, disruption, negotiation, concession, yet they also mark a post-October shift: after years of episodic accommodation, the state moved to proscription and heavier policing, even as casualty counts and conduct were contested by the parties.

Beyond the Showcase: There have been other channels of radical expression and their effects. Methods popularised by TLP have been copied in form, if not in scale, by other radical actors. Campus and community spaces are used to spread hardline narratives, including the celebration of those who attack alleged blasphemers. Local administrations face organised petitioning and protest campaigns to change signage, restrict the worship of minorities, or police cultural expression. Social media accelerates triggers, reducing the time between a perceived affront and a call to mobilise. Together, these channels expand the field beyond spectacular sit-ins and insert radical veto points into routine governance.

A major risk is the social licence for vigilantism. When rallies praise "ghazis", when leaders or preachers justify extra-legal punishment for alleged blasphemy, and when famous assassins are celebrated, those inclined to violence receive validation. The effect is diffusion: even when organisations deny direct responsibility, lone actors feel empowered to attack officials, teachers, or citizens accused, often wrongly, of religious offences. Street pressure then bleeds into daily fear, chills speech, and further shrinks pluralism.

State responses have swung between coercion and accommodation. Proscription, mass arrests, and communications curbs signal resolve but are often short-lived or diluted by

later settlements. Confidential agreements are frequently brokered by religious intermediaries. These end immediate crises but move bargaining outside transparent, accountable forums. The result is a cycle in which the state buys quiet at the cost of precedent, encouraging future use of the same tactics. Where force has been used more decisively, as in October 2025, the price has included fatalities, reputational damage, and the diversion of policing resources from other urgent needs. The legal position should be noted: proscription under the Anti-Terrorism Act does not by itself dissolve or de-register a political party; dissolution or de-registration engages Article 17(2) of the Constitution and the Elections Act framework, which is why banned groups may retain some residual political footprint including seats in the assemblies pending separate proceedings as seen from the TLP Ban in April 2021, its elected representatives in the Sindh Assembly were not automatically unseated. (Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, Constitution of Pakistan, Article 17, Elections Act, 2017)

## Policy Discourse and Recommendation

The core issue lies in governance and the external effects of policy decisions. In recent years, Pakistan has shown a repeated willingness to revisit or delay administrative decisions, judicial outcomes, or foreign policy signals in response to street pressure. Such responses weaken the authority of institutions and create uncertainty about where real decision-making power lies.

As a result, protections for minorities tend to shrink. When bureaucrats and police officers face protests or threats, they often adopt cautious interpretations that align with the loudest or most radical voices. Public order also deteriorates highways, schools, and markets shut down, and mobile networks are restricted to prevent rumor-spreading or coordination. These disruptions consume parliamentary and cabinet attention that should instead be focused on reform. Moreover, ad hoc settlements reached behind closed doors leave citizens uncertain about what has been promised on their behalf.

A more stable approach is ***managed containment***, a system where law enforcement follows clear and predictable procedures. Advance notices, time-bound liaison arrangements, and transparent policing can limit coercive disruption without violating the constitutional right to peaceful assembly under Article 16. This approach makes protests shorter, less harmful, and more transparent, replacing crisis improvisation with advance clarity.

An even stronger alternative is ***institutional hardening with rights safeguards***. Here, parliament, courts, and regulators would set firmer rules around incitement, political conduct, and event safety, while ensuring independent oversight to prevent abuse or accusations of authoritarianism. The goal is to increase the cost of intimidation politics while keeping legitimate dissent open and credible.

Another emerging challenge is fragmentation and ***lone-actor violence***. When large protest movements splinter, vigilantism can spread to campuses, courts, neighbourhoods, and against minorities even if large demonstrations decline. This erodes democratic life, as fear discourages open speech and association. Addressing this requires clear criminal laws, consistent prosecution, and prevention measures at the community level.

Finally, ***conditional mainstreaming*** should remain an option. Political parties that commit to non-violence, avoid incitement, and discipline their supporters could retain full electoral privileges. Those that fail to do so would face predictable and automatic sanctions. This balance preserves democratic competition while denying impunity to groups that use coercion to influence the state.

The overarching goal is to restore ***institutional predictability***. Pakistan must move from one-off bargains to transparent, codified processes and clear timelines. Deterrence should target coercive tactics - not dissent itself - by drawing a firm line between legitimate protest and intimidation or violence. Protecting pluralism and minorities requires active enforcement, not just symbolic gestures. The freedom to speak, worship, and learn must not depend on the street's mood. Transparency should be the default; citizens deserve to understand decisions and their reasons if democratic trust is to be rebuilt.

In this background, the following measures are recommended:

- In terms of the direction policy should take, the Interior and provincial home authorities are recommended to adopt and publish a tiered escalation framework for mass-action events that sets out notification channels, liaison structures, evidentiary capture, and proportionate dispersal thresholds.
- Police leadership and training academies are recommended to include scenario-based modules that are tailored to religiously framed mobilisation, including protected-officer extraction, non-lethal options, and post-event case building.

- Parliamentary standing committees are recommended to hold post-incident hearings within a fixed window after any major disruption, issue short public summaries that record triggers, actions, casualties, and any undertakings, and require formal government responses.
- Law officers need to clarify prosecutorial routes for crimes committed under the cover of protest, especially grievous assault, kidnapping, arson, and attacks on officials, so that blanket withdrawals are the exception and not the norm.
- The Election Commission needs to link party privileges to enforceable commitments on non-violence and non-incitement, monitored through objective indicators that are drawn from campaign material and event conduct.
- Where proscription is in force, the government is urged to publish what privileges (if any) are suspended, and post all SROs, First-Schedule listings, and review timelines in one place to improve transparency and predictability.
- A binding code of democratic conduct should condition core party privileges, election symbols, access to state-media time, and eligibility for public support, on verifiable commitments to non-violence and non-incitement. Compliance ought to be measured against objective indicators drawn from campaign material and event conduct, with proportionate, pre-announced penalties for breaches.
- Candidate-level liability should be tightened so that organisers who incite, tolerate, or fail to prevent violence at their events face expedited sanctions, including fines, disqualification, and personal civil exposure for proven harms. This shifts incentives from performative brinkmanship to professional stewardship of assemblies.
- Campaign venues should be governed by shared safety protocols agreed in advance with local authorities. Stewarding ratios, ingress and egress plans, medical readiness, and designated liaison officers must be standard conditions for permits. Where parties meet these duties of care, the state's policing posture can remain facilitative; where they do not, restrictions become a foreseeable consequence rather than a discretionary punishment.
- Predictable, Proportionate, Documented Public order should be managed through a national protest playbook that specifies notice windows, accredited liaison channels, graded dispersal thresholds, and the lawful sequence of non-lethal options. The same framework should require concise after-action reports within fixed timelines, recording triggers, tactics, injuries, and detentions, so that

learning is institutional rather than episodic. Pakistan has been going through the same cycle without end for decades, and yet it is shocked every time this occurs.

- Evidentiary integrity is a central element to credible prosecution and deterrence. Body-worn cameras, calibrated drone footage, and secure chain-of-custody protocols must be routine, supported by model documentation for arresting officers. When facts are preserved and disclosed, courts can act with confidence, and political narratives lose their monopoly over interpretation.
- Communications restrictions, if required, must be strictly geo-fenced, time-boxed and justified in writing, with brief public impact notes issued afterwards. The test is necessity and proportionality, not convenience. Predictable, minimal curbs reduce collateral harm to commerce, education, and emergency services while denying agitators the propaganda value of blanket shutdowns.

## Conclusion

Religious radicals in Pakistan have shown that emotive frames, disciplined street power, and selective use of the ballot can secure policy influence far beyond legislative strength. The TLP experience is a clear showcase of this pattern, but the field is wider, and the methods are now general. Durable mitigation does not require maximum force; it requires institutional regularity. Clear rules, known in advance, applied consistently, reviewed promptly, and communicated transparently can restore credibility to state responses while protecting rights. Without such a shift, the veto of the street will retain a premium, and pluralism will continue to contract in the shadow of zeal.



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## TRAINING AND ORIENTATION SESSION WITH YOUNG OBSERVERS

**Esham Farooq**

**"Intolerance is rooted in deep-seated sociocultural and ideological biases, amplified by hate speech"**

The Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) organized a two-day national training and orientation workshop titled *"Youth Observers Cohort"* on November 6–7 in Islamabad. Around 40 young participants, including students, peace activists, and emerging faith and civil society leaders from across the country, took part in the event. The training aimed to equip them with the skills to monitor and report rights violations, as well as to design and implement local peace initiatives or Social Action Plans (SAPs) that foster interfaith harmony and counter hate speech and persecution. Led by expert trainers from diverse fields, the workshop offered interactive sessions on inclusivity, constitutional values, cultural diversity, education, responsible social media use, and policy frameworks for countering radical narratives.

Key discussions highlighted that deep-seated sociocultural biases and historical radicalization fuel intolerance, which is often exacerbated by hate speech. Furthermore, a significant gap exists between constitutional rights that guarantee equality and their implementation, leading to the marginalization of minorities. Finally, fostering genuine coexistence requires community-led initiatives, promoting respect over tolerance, and actively deploying counter-narratives through education and media.

Senior journalist Imran Mukhtar delivered an insightful presentation tracing the historical evolution of Pakistan's constitutional development. He emphasized the importance of fundamental rights and the distribution of state power. Mukhtar elaborated on the trichotomy of power among the legislature, executive, and judiciary, and explained the roles of key constitutional bodies such as the Parliamentary Standing Committees, National Finance Commission, and Public Accounts Committee. He concluded by stating that citizens of a sovereign state should be encouraged to attend parliamentary sessions. This will foster transparency and accountability.

Human rights activist and High Court advocate Dileep Doshi led a dynamic session exploring diversity through the lenses of culture, civilization, and religion. He engaged participants in interactive discussions and activities to highlight the importance of inclusivity in a pluralistic society. Stressing Pakistan's identity as a multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic nation, he asserted that embracing diversity is essential for sustainable development. Doshi also discussed the link between violence and societal frustration, noting that youth often lack proper guidance and counselling. "Narratives are shaped by societal perceptions and historical precedents, but dismantling stereotypes requires time and effort," he remarked.

Safdar Sial, Research Analyst at PIPS, conducted a session on the concept of the Social Action Plans (SAPs), describing it as a small, time-bound, and community-led initiatives. He outlined the key features of a SAP: it should focus on a shared community issue, ensure inclusion of all religious and ethnic groups, and foster peaceful coexistence, cooperation, and mutual respect.

Dr. Muhammad Hussain, Editor at PIPS, emphasized the importance of cultivating interest within the local community and actively engaging stakeholders to ensure the success of SAPs. Participants representing various provinces and districts were organized into groups, where they collaboratively developed social action plans tailored to their respective regions. These proposals were formally documented to capture the diverse ideas and initiatives put forward.

The next session focused on key policy documents, including the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution of Pakistan, Paigham-e-Pakistan, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the National Cohesion Policy, the National Prevention of Violent Extremism Policy by NACTA, and provincial amendments to Anti-Terrorism Bills. Mr. Amir Rana, President of PIPS and a security analyst, highlighted the profound impact of state and institutional policies on societal dynamics. He noted that while state policies may evolve based on strategic interests, fundamental rights must remain inviolable.

Dr. Qibla Ayaz, Former Chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology, provided a historical overview of radicalization in Pakistan. Dr. Ayaz highlighted that the future of the nation rests in the hands of its youth. It is their responsibility to lead, foster meaningful dialogue, and strengthen social cohesion. Historically, schools, colleges, and universities have played a central role in nurturing this dialogue. However, in recent years, these institutions have become increasingly profit-driven, weakening their engagement with students, a

trend he described as both dangerous and disappointing. From the late 1980s onward, regional dynamics began to reshape Pakistan. The Afghan conflict, the presence of Russian forces, and the Islamic revolution in Iran under Imam Khomeini had profound effects on the country. This era also witnessed the rise of extremist ideologies, such as the Khawarij movement, which legitimized declaring others as non-believers. Extremism escalated, leading to attacks and bombings against the army and places of worship.

He recalled Pakistan of the late 1970s and early 1980s as a country rich not only in natural beauty but also in its social fabric. Communities were tolerant, humble, and respectful, with strong interpersonal communication and valued traditions. All national and local languages were respected, and community linkages across cities and villages were vibrant and inclusive.

The tragic Army Public School (APS) attack in 2014 marked a turning point. In its aftermath, the entire nation, including political parties and the military, united to implement the National Action Plan (NAP) against terrorism. As part of this initiative, the Paigham-e-Pakistan declaration was launched, with religious scholars affirming that only the state holds the authority to declare someone a non-believer.

The concluding panel featured Dr. Khalid Masood, former Chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology, Dr. Pervaiz Hoodboy, renowned author and scholar, and Abdul Hameed Nayyer, intellectual and educationist.

Dr. Masood argued that societal intolerance stems from ingrained prejudices based on religion, class, and ethnicity, often perpetuated through casual communication. He advocated for informed debate and knowledge-based counter-narratives to dismantle these biases. He clarified that the issue at hand is not simply hate speech. The deeper concern lies in how we define boundaries. Exclusivity, in this context, does not mean hostility or rejection; it is about setting parameters. Problems arise when exclusion is interpreted as inferiority, leading to subtle expressions of dislike or negativity. Such attitudes, he warned, are the seeds of animosity.

Dr. Masood noted that while society engages extensively with knowledge, particularly scientific ideas, we often fail to apply rational and logical thinking in practice. Without objectivity, bias and pride distort our understanding, fuelling quarrels and conflicts. Rationality, he argued, is essential for clarity and fairness in discourse.

He stressed that inclusivity and exclusivity are not inherently in conflict; the challenge lies in integrating them effectively. A balanced approach where inclusivity ensures respect and equality, and exclusivity defines necessary boundaries, creates harmony in social and intellectual life.

Mr. Nayyer emphasized that adherence to laws and regulations defines good citizenship but also acknowledged systemic flaws in majoritarian governance where minorities are frequently marginalized. Equally important is how we treat one another. A good citizen not only demands respect for their own rights but also extends the same courtesy to others. True citizenship requires us to be accommodating, empathetic, and mindful of the dignity of those around us. A fundamental duty of every responsible citizen is to uphold the laws of the state. Respecting the legal framework is not merely an obligation; it is the foundation of a well-ordered society. Our constitution enshrines the principle that all citizens are equal. Yet, the pressing question remains: do we genuinely practice equality in our daily lives? Are we embracing diversity and ensuring that every individual receives equal respect? The gap between constitutional ideals and societal behaviour must be bridged if we are to progress as a nation. History offers sobering lessons. Our nation once suffered irreparable loss because of discriminatory attitudes and the failure to treat fellow citizens as equals. The tragic division of our country stands as a reminder of the consequences of exclusion and prejudice. Even today, unrest continues to grow, and the state's reliance on force often deepens rather than resolves the crisis.

Dr. Hoodboy expanded the discourse to address the structural and philosophical roots of social conflict. He stressed that the disparity between the state and its citizens has severely undermined national cohesion. The division between “us” and “them” often stems from differences in religion, ethnicity, language, or social class. When these distinctions are framed as markers of superiority or inferiority, they cultivate intolerance and resentment. The perception that one group is inherently more legitimate or deserving than another fosters exclusion, while stereotypes and prejudices reinforce hostility. Over time, such divisions erode trust, normalize discrimination, and create fertile ground for hatred. Instead of celebrating diversity as a source of strength, societies trapped in the “us versus them” mindset risk deepening polarization and undermining social cohesion. He proposed replacing the concept of “tolerance” with “respect” to achieve genuine coexistence.





## BRIDGING IDEAS AND IMPACT: REPORT LAUNCHING CEREMONY

### PIPS launches reports on youth pluralism, policymakers stress dialogue to curb extremism

The Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) launched its comprehensive national report, “Building Bridges: Fostering Tolerance and Inclusivity among Youth,” along with four provincial editions, on November 7 in Islamabad. Drawing on empirical insights from over 300 university and madrasa students, as well as peace activists from across Pakistan, the report explores youth perspectives on inclusivity and tolerance, the factors influencing their worldviews, and emerging trends of radicalization with implications for interfaith harmony and social diversity.





Muhammad Murtaza, PIPS Project Manager, presented the report's key findings, which analyzed the thought patterns of youth nationwide. The data was compiled from workshops, qualitative interviews, and extensive surveys conducted with students from universities, colleges, and religious seminaries across all four provinces and Islamabad between November 2024 and June 2025.



Mr. Amir Rana, President PIPS emphasized that evidence-based research lights the path for informed policy making.

Laurens Bistervels, First Secretary Political at the Netherlands Embassy in Islamabad, spoke as the chief guest, underscoring the vital importance of promoting lessons of tolerance and pluralism. He affirmed that the Embassy of the Netherlands will continue its support for the youth-led initiatives for promoting minority rights.



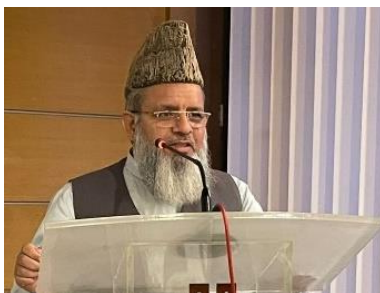
Senator Khalil Tahir Sandhu (PML-N), former provincial minister for human rights, stressed the need to “continue and strengthen the process of dialogue” to decrease rising extremism, noting a significant lack of such engagement in society.

Dr. Afshan Huma, educationist and author, advocated for promoting peaceful co-existence over mere tolerance, arguing that tolerance often permits prejudices and biases to remain.



Dr. Khalid Masood, Judge of the Shariat Appellate Bench of the Supreme Court, stressed that the society itself must take the initiative to end growing intolerance and extremism, rather than relying solely on the state.

Ex-Senator Afrasiab Khattak, political analyst and human rights activist, argued that extremism in Pakistan is not "homegrown," but rather a result of social and cultural engineering. He called for optimism and the need to "tolerate the difference of opinion," recognizing that disagreement often generates new ideas.



Dr. Raghیب Hussain Naeemi, Chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), expressed the hope that the workshop participants would implement social action plans in their communities to actively promote peace and tolerance, urging a collective understanding of the radical shift among societal segments.

Dr. Ishtiaq Ahmad, former member of the Planning Commission of Pakistan, highlighted the national issue of lack of opportunity for political participation for youth.



Dileep Doshi, Advocate High Court and Human Rights Activist stated that research and literature illuminate diverse voices, fostering understanding and inclusion.

Abdul Hameed Nayyer, intellectual and educationist, highlighted the importance of research reports for the promotion of knowledge economy in the country.



Ms. Esham Farooq, Research Officer PIPS, concluded the event by emphasizing that societal growth is achieved through a continuous cycle of learning, un-learning, and relearning from collective experiences.



[pips@pakpips.com](mailto:pips@pakpips.com)  
Tel: +92-51-8359475-6  
Fax: +92-51-8359474  
P.O. Box 2110, Islamabad