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Radicalization in Pakistan: Understanding the Phenomenon

A Survey by Pak Institute For Peace Studies (PIPS)

PAK INSTITUTE FOR PEACE STUDIES

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Introduction

Pakistan has adopted a two-pronged strategy to fight the menace of religious militancy: it has tried to undertake development activities in the troubled northwest of the country, hoping to wean its people from militant influence by addressing their economic grievances; and it has launched numerous clear-and-hold military operations in militant-infested areas, trying to prevent terrorist threat from reaching its urban centers.

Militant violence has, however, become endemic in recent years. In 2009, militants killed at least 3000 people in Pakistan.[1] While the top leader of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Baitullah Mehsud, was targeted in a drone strike, the militant outfit managed to regroup and launch audacious attacks against the country's security forces.[2] The group also extended the area of conflict to Azad Kashmir where, for the first time, two suicide attacks were recorded.[3] Apart from that, the local Taliban started targeting civilians with greater impunity, killing hundreds of innocent women, children and university students.[4]

It became amply clear in this context that military prowess and economic incentives, while necessary to win the war, were not enough to prevent religious radicalization in the country. The Pak Institute for Peace Studies conducted the following survey to examine the phenomenon more closely. The target population consisted of all urban and rural territories of the four provinces, Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (excluding military restricted areas).

General Profile

The survey population was selected through probability/random sampling. Most of the people (53.4 and 14.8 per cent, respectively) belonged to urban areas and small towns. Yet a significant proportion (29.9 per cent) also came from the rural community. A large majority of the respondents were either in intermediate (29.3 per cent) or pursuing a graduation or master's degree (37.5 per cent). Barely 8.3 per cent of the people were illiterate and 2.2 per cent had only received madrassah education.

Most of the respondents were not very affluent: only 21 per cent used private vehicles while 50.1 per cent relied on public transportation. A large number of these people belonged to the salaried class – as many of them were employed in public (19.6 per cent) and private (21.1 per cent) sectors – while only 15.3 per cent ran their own business. Meanwhile, 14.6 per cent of the people were without a job.

Despite the meager resources of these people, they seemed to be well-entrenched in their community, with 77.4 per cent living in their own houses. However, there were signs of family pressure and about 79 per cent people said they were living in a joint family system.

A large proportion of these people displayed their conservative streak when asked about women in the social arena: 67.2 per cent of them thought it was a woman's "religious duty" to veil herself. Similarly, 48.8 per cent believed that she should not get the right to divorce.

Meanwhile, nearly 23 per cent people did not listen to music. Many of them (15.8 per cent) attributed their decision to religious reasons. Interestingly, 51 per cent of the total sample endorsed Junaid Jamshaid's decision to quit singing.

Religious Concerns

The participants of the survey were visibly concerned about religion: 77.7 per cent of them thought that Muslims were lagging behind other nations in the world. Most of them (31.2 per cent) claimed this was because they had deviated from Islam. Only 18.1 per cent maintained that it was due to their scientific and technological backwardness.

It is also important to note that a significantly large number of people (46.8 per cent) said that religio-political parties should get a chance to rule the country. This is despite the fact that these parties only showed an impressive electoral performance in October 2002 when many analysts attributed their success to the strong anti-American sentiment in the country.[5] Interestingly, 63.6 per cent of the respondents believed that Pakistan's decision to join the US-led war on terror was incorrect.

However, a majority of people participating in the survey (46.3 per cent) was also wary of the Taliban. They categorically denied that the militant group was fighting for Islam. Even a large percentage of those who looked sympathetic to the radical outfit either condemned (37.9 per cent) its acts of violence – such as attacks on CD shops, girls' schools and cinema etc – or did not know (21.9 per cent) how to react to them.

Most of the respondents also expressed interesting views on jihad. Very few (2.7 per cent) maintained that Muslims had failed to progress in the world since they had lost their passion to fight against their enemies. Similarly, about 28 per cent people believed that jihad amounted to fighting against cruelty, not to spread Islam in every corner of the world (5 per cent). Many of them (20.4 per cent) were also concerned about internal religious differences. They maintained that these disagreements had led to sectarianism and religious extremism. However, a bigger proportion of people (21.6 per cent) took them casually, claiming that they were preordained and prophesied.

Conclusion

The question is: what do these findings signify?

The survey clearly captures growing religiosity among the masses. It is not surprising that 65 per cent of the respondents said that a person who did not pray five times a day could not become a better Muslim. Nearly 59 per cent of them contended that the struggle for the implementation of Shariah was also jihad. But despite their conservatism, about 81 per cent of the survey population also considered female education as "extremely necessary". Only a small percentage (12.5) thought it was "not very important". Similarly, 58.7 per cent of the people felt that women should be allowed to work outside their home. However, nearly 40 per cent of them disagreed with the proposition.

All these findings indicate that the average Pakistani takes his religion seriously and wishes to see it in the public domain. But, unlike the Taliban, he does not want to make it claustrophobic for other people. The average Pakistani thus wants to look progressive in a conservative framework. He is caught between two competing narratives: the first one, which is primarily grounded in religion and is now championed by militant groups, makes him want to see his religion triumph; the other, usually trotted out by the government and the media, is mostly based on information and rational analysis, making him realize the significance of progressing in the world.

It seems that both of these narratives are not resonating with him beyond a certain point. The religious discourse developed by militant groups, for instance, emphasizes the significance of the "Afghan jihad". Many of the groups that were previously passionate about fighting in Indian Held Kashmir shifted their focus of attention on Afghanistan to defeat the "crusading" foreign forces. They almost put their struggle in IHK on the backburner, as the two South Asian nuclear neighbors began the normalization process in the region in 2004.

Interestingly, the general perception about the wars in Afghanistan and Kashmir is at variance with the recent militant discourse. Nearly 55 per cent of the people maintained that the bloodshed on the western side of the Durand Line was a "political war". Yet, 56 per cent of them thought that fighting in Kashmir was the real jihad.

It is also interesting to note that most people (31.2 per cent), despite their passion for religion, were shaken by Benazir Bhutto's assassination instead of the Lal Masjid operation (29.1 per cent) or the military campaigns in the northwestern territories of the country (8.4 per cent).

It is important to remember, however, that militant groups can use the growing religious fervor among the people to their own advantage. The state must, therefore, try to transform the ideological mindset by developing counter narratives and challenging the literal and extremist interpretations of Islam.

Notes:

[1] Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), *Pakistan Security Report 2009*, p. 3

[2] In October 2009, the TTP attacked Pakistan's military headquarters in Rawalpindi. The attackers were wearing army uniforms and took a number of hostages in an adjacent building. For details, see "Six soldiers, four assailants killed in attack on GHQ," *Dawn*, October 10, 2009. http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/04-firing-outside-ghq-qs-04

[3] *Pakistan Security Report 2009*, p. 14

[4] Ibid, p. 29

[5] There were other factors as well. Some analysts believe that the Musharraf administration had unwittingly created a space for these parties by keeping the top leadership of the two mainstream political parties (the Pakistan Peoples Party and Muslim League-Nawaz) outside the political system. See "The buck stops at General Musharraf" by Najam Sethi in *The Friday Times*, (Oct 18-24, 2002).

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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