Religion and Politics in Pakistan: The Weaponization of Faith

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Abstract

There are many religions in the world and people in different regions practice different religions. Sometimes religious beliefs are exploited to achieve certain selfish interests. Muslim Majority of the subcontinent gained independence in the name of religion and as a result, Pakistan came into being on 14 August 1947. The analysis of religion and politics reveals that the interplay of external and internal forces has contributed to extremism and political sectarianism in Pakistan. From the beginning, the leadership in Pakistan struggled to sustain an ideological foundation based on religion, Islam. The research examines how different factions have deliberately exploited Islam to advance political agendas and vested interests. Moreover, the use of religion as a tool for personal interests has significantly influenced the development and peaceful co-existence of the country. This research not only highlights the role of religion in the politics of Pakistan during post-partition but also in the context of different governments of Pakistan such as the eras of Bhutto and General Zia. Furthermore, during the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Zia-ul-Haq religion was part of politics to develop narratives in favor of their governments to consolidate power. Similarly, the policy of Islamization was used to manipulate people's narratives by the use of religion. The post-9/11 era witnessed the repercussions on the political fabric of society due to the intensification of radical forces and the surge in regional and extra-regional actors. The recent incident in Parachinar also highlighted the challenges Pakistan is facing due to the complex interplay between religion and politics. Over the past 76 years of independence, the vision of a Democratic Islamic Republic remains vague. This research attempts to study the complex relationship between religion and politics and the ongoing challenges faced by Pakistan from multiple perspectives so that one can find ways forward.

Keywords: *Islamization, Political manipulation, Sectarianism, Extremism, Pakistan, Religious politics*

1. Introduction

Pakistan is the only country in the world that was formed in the name of religion. Pakistan's politics has been deeply intertwined with religion since its inception in 1947. The country was founded on the premise of creating a separate nation for Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. The ideological foundations envisioned Islam as

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a guiding principle for its socio-political framework. If we deeply look into the history of the separation movement and the Two Nation theory in the subcontinent was based on religion. As a result, the All-India Muslim League led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, advocated for a separate Muslim state, emphasizing Islam as a unifying force (Zubair et al., 2022).

Soon after independence, Pakistan faced different challenges such as defining itself as an Islamic state while trying to establish democratic institutions. The Objectives Resolution of 1949 declared that sovereignty belonged to Allah and that all laws would follow Islam. It marked a formal step towards integrating religion into the state's governance. This set a precedent for religion becoming a central aspect of political discourse. Moreover, subsequent governments have grappled with the question of to what extent Islam would influence state policies and the legal system (Sultana & Falki, 2023).

Furthermore, as the years passed the exploitation of Islam for political purposes became more pronounced. During the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq in the late 1970s and 1980s policies sought to embed Islamic law into Pakistan's legal and educational systems. Political and religious parties, particularly Islamist groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami, played significant roles in advocating for these changes, which altered the political structure of the state. His government implemented policies aimed at Islamizing the legal and social structures of Pakistan, including the introduction of Sharia-based laws, the Hudood Ordinances, and the establishment of religious courts. These changes not only reinforced Zia's power position but also shifted the political landscape by intertwining religion with governance in a way that would have long-term consequences for Pakistan's social fabric (Hassan, 1985).

This manipulation of religion for political purposes has established a pattern for successive governments and political leaders to use Islamic rhetoric to justify their policies, garner popular support, or discredit opponents. Over time, political parties and leaders have invoked Islamic values and narratives to appeal to conservative voters or to consolidate power, often at the expense of democratic principles. This politicization of religion has also led to sectarian conflicts and the rise of extremist groups. Different regimes have often exploited religious sentiments to consolidate power, which has resulted in increased radicalism (Nation, 2022).

A brief look at Pakistan's historical relations demonstrates how the Islamization process was used for political benefit. If there is one thing that has defined Pakistan since its creation it is religion and yet religion has been used as a tool in political maneuvering which has shaped governance, society, and even the growth of democracy in the country. The manipulation of Islam to achieve political objectives has further polarized the society along sectarian lines hence inhibiting the growth of democracy and nurturing radicalism and extremist ideologies among society. This research aims to discover the complexity of the relationship between religion and politics, and the ever-recurring theme of Muslims' accommodation of sovereignty with democracy.

2. Islamization in Pakistan: A Historical Perspective

Islamization process in Pakistan has shown a complex dynamic of political, religious, and socio-economic factors. The Two-Nation Theory, which underpinned the creation of the state, defined Muslims in the Indian subcontinent as a distinct cultural and political entity that eventually resulted in the emergence of Pakistan. It has evolved with time from a fundamental belief into an enhanced form of Islamization headed by politicians and religious groups. The attempts to strengthen an Islamic element have a direct impact on Pakistani society, law, and politics. This change in ideology can only be understood if the crucial role of several religious and political parties is taken into account. However, the Islamization of Pakistan by successive governments, especially during authoritarian regimes, has seriously impacted Pakistani society and has led to sectarianism, extremism, and threats to democracy (Esposito, 1982).

A. Early Efforts Toward Islamization (1947-1970s)

After the division of India and the emergence of Pakistan as a new independent state, Muhammad Ali Jinnah concentrated on the principles of religious tolerance and gaging the vision of a new country for protecting the rights of Muslim minorities. Once again, the vision that Jinnah had in mind was not entirely clear and could have been given several different meanings. He dreamt of an Islamic nation but the nature of a modern state – a state that is democratic with population drawn from various parts of the world.

The Objectives Resolution was passed in 1949 in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan which stated that, sovereignty rests with Almighty Allah alone and the people of Pakistan are to exercise their powers within the limits prescribed by Him as a pious trust. This was critical given efforts at establishing the sharia as the foundational basis for Pakistan's legal and political frameworks (Wachani, 2021).

While Objectives Resolution synched governance with sharia law which was fundamental to the creation of Pakistan, early leaders such as Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan were more interested in nation-building and development of economy than in mass Islamization. Even political organizations such as Jamaat-e-Islami demanded more Islamic structure and shariah implementation but had not much impact in the early decades of Pakistan's formation.

B. Islamization under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977)

During the era of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977), there was a significant shift in Pakistan's efforts to implement Islamization. Even though his party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), was rooted in socialist ideals, he started using Islamic rhetoric more frequently to strengthen his political position amidst rising economic and political problems. To attract the conservative part of society and tackle increasing resistance from religious parties, Mr. Bhutto introduced several steps toward Islamization (Tahir, 2015).

In the year 1974, Bhutto's administration identified the Ahmadi community as non-Muslim. Many perceived this to be an act of appeasement towards Islamist groups but it also had lasting impacts on religious minorities in Pakistan. Laws restricting alcohol use and gambling were implemented by him too, that were seen as part of a renewal process within Islam. However, the utilization of Islam by Bhutto was chiefly for political purposes intended to mollify religious factions such as Jamaat-e-Islami who were becoming strident opponents against his socialist intentions. Even though Bhutto took these steps, his style of Islamization didn't change Pakistan's legal and social structures in a basic way. However, it created the basis for more comprehensive attempts at Islamization by the person who came after him (Sharif & Sadiq, 2024).

C. Islamization under General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988)

The most impactful and game-changer period of Islam in Pakistan was the military control by General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988). After taking power from Bhutto in a sudden, unexpected takeover, Zia wanted to make his rule more accepted by showing himself as a protector of Islam. His government started broad-ranging actions making Islam stronger that deeply influenced legal, educational, and social systems in Pakistan (Shafiq et al., 2020).

Zia had done something very significant. He introduced the Hudood Ordinances in 1979. This was intended to align Pakistan's criminal laws with Sharia law. The decrees were quite severe and included harsh penalties for crimes like theft, adultery, and insulting religion. These punishments ranged from whipping to cutting off body parts or even causing death by throwing stones at a person. Even though these brutal practices weren't commonly enforced, they greatly affected the legal system of Pakistan, especially in matters related to the rights of women. In these legislative rules, women suffering from rape had to accomplish considerable proof of responsibility (Aguilar, 2024).

Zia also put Sharia courts into operation to supervise the application of Islamic rules and formed the Federal Shariat Court to ascertain that all laws were in line with Islamic ideals. His government had put forward compulsory Islamic education in schools while necessitating government officials to display their comprehension of Islam. Such steps were portrayed as a part of Zia's goal of shaping Pakistan into an authentic Islamic nation, however, they too functioned to strengthen his political power by affiliating his rule with traditional religious groups. Zia worked on bringing Islamization into Pakistan's foreign policy, especially during the Soviet-Afghan War from 1979 to 1989. With support coming from U.S., Zia's government gave backing to Afghan mujahideen fighters who were largely inspired by religious jihad against the Soviet occupation (Asfaham, 2022).

D. Role of Political and Religious Parties in Shaping Islamization

In the formation of Pakistan's Islamization path, both political and religious groups have been pivotal. Islamic parties like Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) consistently demand more application of Islamic laws. The establishment called "Jamaat e Islami", created by Maulana Maududi, has always expressed strong

support for an Islamic state that follows Sharia law. Even though Jamaat-e-Islami never achieved significant success in elections, it greatly impacted the political conversation in Pakistan. This impact was especially noticeable during the Zia regime when members of this party held crucial roles within the government (Nawaz, 2020).

Religious groups have utilized Islamization for political benefit to get support in elections. For instance, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), which is a coalition of Islamist parties, got substantial backing in the 2002 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa elections (previously called North-West Frontier Province) by campaigning with an Islamist agenda. However, regardless of their statements, these parties frequently sided with military governments or other political sections and this shows that their dedication towards Islamization can be more strategic than based on belief systems (Nasr, 1992).

3. Impact of Islamization on Pakistan's Social Fabric

The repeated use of Islam for benefit by one government after another has caused powerful and enduring influences on the societal structure in Pakistan. The employment of the Islamic dialect assists political heads in solidifying their authority, but it also intensifies religious and sectarian splits within the community. Especially misuse of Zia's strategies promoted the expansion of Sunni Islamist factions at a cost to minor sects like Shias and Ahmadis. This kind of division has resulted in a rise of aggression and lack of understanding. Organizations such as Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi are conducting assaults against Shias along with other smaller groups (Zaman, 1998).

Also, Islamization has led to the sidelining of women and religious minorities in Pakistan. The Hudood Ordinances along with blasphemy laws have impacted women and non-Muslims severely, resulting in extensive violations of human rights. Especially, the blasphemy laws are frequently employed to aim at religious minorities and settle personal disputes; these accusations typically result in crowd aggression (Weiss, 1985).

Regarding the social and economic effects, it is frequently seen that attention to Islamization has dwarfed measures taken to tackle poverty, inequality, and education problems. Though Islamic charity (zakat) systems have been established formally, they haven't considerably lessened the socio-economic difficulties confronted by people in Pakistan. Furthermore, highlighting religious studies in schools - especially during Zia's rule - has led to a decline of the overall educational system as many schools put more emphasis on religion-based teaching rather than important subjects like science or technology (Haque & Gardezi, 1991).

A. Sectarianism and Political Structure

Sectarianism has significantly influenced the political framework of Pakistan, resulting in profound divisions within its religious and political spheres. The country, predominantly Sunni with a notable Shia minority, has faced sectarian strife since its establishment. Which escalated notably during the late 1970s and 1980s under General Zia-ul-Haq's military rule. The improper application of Zia's Islamization policies promoted Sunnism and enabled sectarianism while discriminating against the

Shia population (Nasr, 2000).

Sectarian strife in Pakistan gave rise to different factions in politics such as Sunni-Deobandi groups like Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and its armed wing Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). These organizations also specifically persecuted Shia people, citing their actions as to protect Sunni Muslims from what they deemed to be heretical Shia. In response, Shia organizations such as Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafaria (TNFJ) came into being to compensate the rising influence of the Sunni sectarian organizations. These sectarian parties gradually entrenched themselves within Pakistan's political structure through vote, coalition, and activism (Shiism and Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan: Identity Politics, Iranian Influence, and Tit-for-Tat Violence, 2010).

Religious influence in the political arena by the state authorities was another key factor that fueled sectarianism. This administration was strongly supporting Sunni Islam and collaborating with Sunni Muslim groups. The regime encouraged the establishment of madrassas most of which are funded by Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia. Sectarian ideologies found fertile ground in these religious institutions, especially among the Deobandi school of thought. With Islamic identity as a foundation for favoring the government, there was a division of society based on classifications; however, the rise of sectarian parties and militant groups weakened social cohesiveness. This resulted in a fragile feeling of togetherness in the nation. Sectarian violence, however, increased in the 1990s contributing to the promotion of further instability in the already vulnerable social structure of Pakistan (Nasr, 2000).

B. Radical Forces and Terrorism

The penetration of the extreme radicalism in Pakistan in one way owes its origin to the politics of religion. The Afghan jihad in the 1980s was also important to Pakistan for it assumed the role of a front-line state on the side of the United States and it successfully fought against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Thus, the Pakistani state, with the support of Islamic organizations and madrassas, promoted the ideal of Jihadism, which called people to become fighters. Thousands of mujahideen, many of them coming from radical madrassas in Pakistan, were trained in arms and those fit to fight were sent to Afghanistan to eliminate the Soviets. Although this approach had ingrained the Soviets in the initial stage, it paved long-term damages for Pakistan.
Contrary to what was clear, the militant organizations that were constructed during the Afghan conflict did not blind themselves after the war. Some of these fighters returned to Pakistan and reassembled themselves there to create new militant organizations that would focus their efforts on their country of origin. Out of these, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which emerged in 2007, became a formidable force against the internal security of Afghanistan. The TTP began an armed revolt against security forces, the people, and the government due to religious fervor and perceived oppression by the state.

Religious prejudices were also being employed as a weapon in creating new radical sectarian groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) & Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)

which were bent upon carrying out attacks against religious minorities, particularly Shiites. These organizations deployed jihadist rhetoric to explain the terrorism and paint the attacks as part of a divine struggle to defend the faith. Furthermore, the blasphemy laws that were legislated during Zia's tenure have been used by the extremists to incite violence against minorities and any individuals who hold dissenting opinions.

C. Challenges to the Democratic Islamic State Vision

Indeed, Pakistan faced the issue of searching for harmony between the Muslim identity of the newly-formed state in 1947 Pakistan, and democracy. It was the dream of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of the nation, to provide a country for Muslims wherein they can freely perform their religious obligations and at the same time enjoy the blessings of democracy and the safety of the minorities. However, the realization of this vision has not yet been realized given the oscillation of Pakistan between authoritarianism and democracy majorly under military influence.

One of the challenges that have hampered the formation of a democratic Islamic state is the issue of politics of religion. Different governments including military ones have used Islam as a tool for legitimizing their political power and silencing opposition. Acting upon the principles coined by General Zia-ul-Haqq, subsequent regimes also sought Islamic authority to execute authoritarian moves. Blasphemy laws, Hudood Ordinances, and Sharia courts are examples of how high-minded religious discourse has been used to stab democracy in the back and promote the cause of religious leadership.

On the same note, the appearance of hard-liner Islamic parties and groups that categorically deny democratic principles is another challenge these parties fight for the establishment of an Islamic state that enforces the Shariah law. Unfortunately, these groups have had negligible electoral success; however, they have brought considerable influence to Pakistan's political fabric and have forced mainstream parties to shift their viewpoint to the right to capture the religious vote. This dynamic has limited political debate and delayed the improvement of progressive policies regarding women, education, and minorities.

4. Remedies

In the case of Pakistan, the ulema or religious scholars have played a vibrant role in the politics of the country right from its early years. They have played significant roles as far as pushing for an Islamic state is concerned, and most of the time they put forward policies that are by Sharia laws. It is not uncommon to find ulema involved in political affairs, and those who are involved have significantly influenced the people's opinions and policies of the government, particularly in religious issues. Right-wing movements like Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, rely on the ulema's support to legitimize their political policies, which essentially involve the establishment of Sharia law and the protection of Pakistan's Islamic identity. These parties have been successful in using religious feelings in people, especially in the

countryside where the ulema exert control over the people. However, their political activity also influenced sectarianism since religious scholars support one sect and thus contribute to sectarian discourses.

Due to instruction and support by the ulema for hard-liner religious stances, sectarianism and extremism have even been exacerbated. Religious zeal groups have in many cases been supported by local clerics providing theological underpinning of the repression of non-Muslims and women and all perceived enemies of Islam. This makes it very difficult for the state to fight against extremism because many religious leaders are often reluctant to condemn the militants or embrace any radical posture. To address the challenges of sectarianism and extremism, their representatives should be reached out to, and the ulema especially should be encouraged to promote moderate and tolerant Islam. Suggested measures include modifying educational methodologies in madrassas, restricting the power to give religious speeches, and initiating interfaith dialogue; Nevertheless, such steps are opposed by clerics fearing they may lose some of their power. Therefore, to overcome these challenges, there is a need to have cooperative efforts that leave room for the recognition of religious feelings while promoting peace and togetherness.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion from this study is drawn that Pakistan's identity, formation, and political structure have been influenced to a significant extent by its interaction with Islam since the time of its formation in 1947. The issues of sectarianism, radicalism, and politicization of religion have posed a great threat to the political development of the country and contributed significantly to the fragile political unity of the country. This has been seen in successive governments including the era of military dictatorships like Zia-ul-Haq where Islam was instrumentalized to justify the military rule which in turn has been misused to strengthen sectarian forces and gave birth to the armed extremism in the shape of TTP. The exploitation of religion for political gains has a devastating effect on Pakistan's social fabric, staging sectarian violence, extremism and terrorism.

The ulema, mainstream clerics, or Islamic scholars have been influencing the Political parlance of Pakistan either in sectarian prejudice or conservative Islamic sentiments. Their presence, along with the appearance of sectarian parties, helped to deepen the division of the population based on their religion, dividing Sunnis and Shias. However, the problem of the Islamic identity of the democratic state has not been solved yet, if one considers more recent years, when radical forces have threatened the state's authority and democratic values more actively.

However, it has not been smooth sailing as Pakistan has also come up with some advancements towards democracy with the help of elections and civilian rule coming up with some hope towards a better political system. However, the part played by religion in politics, theories of extremism, and sectarianism is still present and still works against the progress of Pakistan and, the Islamic State becoming a reality. Solving these problems is possible only through political demand, religious leaders'

involvement, and the desire to build a tolerant Islamic interpretation. The exploitation of religion for personal gain and to instill fear and doubt among people should be forbidden. Religious organizations must safeguard sacred spaces from being misused by extremists to further their objectives.

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