

## **Pirs and the Politics of Security: Assessing the influence of Religious Authority on Pakistan's Strategic Culture**

Irfan Farooq<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad Imran<sup>2</sup>, Jannat Rashid<sup>3</sup>

### **Abstract**

*This research work explores the role of Pirs, spiritual leaders within the ecclesiastic tradition of Pakistan, and their indeterminate role in transforming Pakistan's strategic culture and security dynamics. Pirs have influenced Pakistan's social and political history by being agents of social cohesion and intermediaries between communities and the government in areas where government reach is limited. This study sheds light on how Pirs reinforce domestic stability, serve counter-radicalization functions, while shaping perceptions and narratives around national security issues. Although moderate Pirs advocate principles of tolerance to curb extremism, their influence can complicate governance, posing a risk where excessive reliance on religious authority might undermine secular spaces and marginalize certain sects. This study advocates a nuanced approach that allows counterterrorism partnerships with moderate Pirs, while ensuring the protection of secular governance. Therefore, Pakistan needs to tread carefully around religious influence and utilize local religious networks to keep the country as stable as possible without undermining state power. This investigation urges to broaden the analysis of the role of religious networks in different contexts and calls for appropriate strategies that reconcile religious and state authority to attain sustainable security and effective governance.*

**Keywords:** Pirs, Politics, Strategic Culture, Religious Authority, Security Dynamics

### **Introduction**

In Pakistan, the power of Pirs (spiritual leaders) and shrines runs so deep that it can be seen as inherent to the very core of life for people at all social and political levels. These religious figures carry considerable clout, especially in the rural and semi-urban areas, having influence that seeps into multiple strata of social life. Pirs are religious or spiritual guides that act as local arbiters in disputes, helping people manoeuvre through their existence, often binding the country through tribal, ethnic, and sectarian divides. Their shrines are visited by devotees from diverse backgrounds, they are places of cultural gatherings and sites of religious worship, and thus form an

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<sup>1</sup> MS Scholar, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Management and Technology, Lahore. Irfanfarooq4515@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> MS Scholar, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Management and Technology, Lahore. Manikasur2@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup> MS Scholar, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Management and Technology, Lahore. Jannatrashid303@gmail.com

essential part of the socio-political fabric. These Pirs, who are part of Sufi traditions, occupy a status in society that transcends the traditional realms of the political space as they act as intermediaries between political power and religious authority (Farooq, 2024). This study examines how religious leaders have shaped Pakistan's strategic culture, especially from security perspective.

Pirs are generally regarded as conduits to the supernatural, with pilgrims drawing on their blessings, guidance, or solutions to personal issues. With this position, Pirs have high social capital, enabling them to mediate spiritual as well as socio-political issues. Across many regions of Pakistan, political elites value the endorsement of Pirs when hoping to cement their local legitimacy or rally followers, a dynamic underlining the way in which religious authority can dictate political practices and coalitions. The veneration for Pirs, particularly in rural Pakistan, endows them with unparalleled potential to bind society through social cohesion and address local-level malaise, whilst their affiliations with political bodies grant them considerable influence in matters of governance and security (Ewing 1983).

Strategic culture encompasses the shared experiences, ideas, and assumptions that define a country's identity in relation to its security policy. In a country like Pakistan where identity is inescapably tied with Islam, comprehension of the role of religious authority is indispensable for understanding the triggers and rationale behind its strategic choices. Many Scholars have asserted that Pakistan's strategic culture is incapable to be understood without acknowledging the role of religion in its policy choices, whether it relates to security policy at home or regional conflicts. Drawing upon their social capital and adherence to religious rituals, Pirs continue to propagate a culture of myths surrounding identity, unity, and resistance against the so-called external threats. They can influence popular conceptions of security threats, thus affecting the national strategic priorities indirectly (Fair, 2014).

This research seeks to analyse how the influence of Pirs and shrines interacts with Pakistan's strategic culture, particularly in the realm of security. Given the intricate connection between religious authority and political power in Pakistan.

### **Research Questions:**

1. How do Pirs contribute to promoting social cohesion within Pakistan?
2. What roles do Pirs play in the formation of public opinion regarding national security issues?
3. In what ways does their authority intersect with the strategic decision-making process and the state objectives?

### **Problem Statement**

The nuanced ways in which Pirs and shrines inform the broader security paradigm of Pakistan will be underscored by the responses to these questions, which will provide insight into the extent to which religious authority influences strategic

orientation and socio-political stability. The paper argues that the impact of Pirs on society and collective identity can have repercussions for the state, particularly regarding how it formulates security policies in relation to actors who may either bolster or challenge its strategic ambitions.

The study explores the socio-political relevance of Pirs specifically in the context of their impact on Pakistan's strategic culture, thus making a concerted effort to widen the scope, defining facets through which religious authority can converge or collide with national security concerns. While this paper does not engage in depth with the historical or theoretical background, it lays the groundwork for further exploration of how religious leaders matter to strategic decision-making and the factors that drive Pakistan's security policy and regional posture.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper builds a theoretical framework relating religious influence to Pakistan's strategic culture and national security. This section will discuss three fundamental areas through which the nuances of religious authority, primarily represented by Pirs, can drive Pakistan's security trajectory, i.e., strategic culture, soft power (within a framework of religion), and politics-religion-security interface. This framework helps to comprehend the impact of religious authority, which is entrusted in Pirs, interwoven with cultural and political networks, on Pakistan's strategic outlook and security policy.

### **Strategic Culture and Religious Authority**

Strategic culture helps explain the set beliefs, dispositions and historical experiences that influence a society in shaping its approach to national security and defence. Initially, strategic culture was intended to elucidate the unique strategic conduct of states that has become evolved into a framework to analyse the influence of culture, ideology and identity on the national security (Gray, 1999). Strategic culture ingrains symbols, myths, and collective memories that influence how nations view threats and handle conflicts and establishes the guidelines for the development of military and security strategies (Johnston, 1995).

The national consciousness of Pakistan has a firm basis in religious identity, which is also an inseparable part of the ideological base and foundation of the state. Islam holds a central place in Pakistan's national identity, and this translates into a strategic culture that extols notions of communal solidarity, national defense, and a sense of rivalry, particularly in the matter of regional security. This strategic culture is further ingrained and perpetuated by religious leaders like Pirs, who foster public opinion using religion as a social tool. Their authority often brings in a normative base around national security that tends to solidify or, at the very least, reinforce state-centric ideologies while providing an alternative perspective to such ideologies through religious interpretation (Fair, 2014).

Therefore, the religious authority in Pakistan is inseparable from its strategic culture. Pirs, being revered religious figures, influence perspectives on social solidarity and strength, which are integral to Pakistan's stance on security. The narratives promoted by religious figures, thus, play a crucial role in shaping the strategic outlook of the nation, particularly in terms of rallying public sentiments towards a perceived threat, supporting a framework that religion is not merely a cultural or social factor but one of a strategy (Nasr, 2000).

### **Soft Power and National Security Policy**

Another framework through which the security policy of Pakistan can be analysed is soft power. Soft power, the ability to attract and gain compliance, is a concept that was introduced by Nye in 1990. While hard power achieves similar effects through military or economic force, soft power acts to shape the public perceptions and preferences through culture, ideology, and institutions. In Pakistan, Pirs are generally seen as guardians of some sort of religious authority and hence play a role as soft power through their followers to influence the national security policy.

Pirs wield a special kind of soft power that is defined by religious authority. Due to their respected position in the civil society of Pakistan, Pirs possess the ability to influence public sentiment and command collective identity and social unity. A stable society bestows unity and loyalty, which the state can utilize to achieve its security goals, thus promoting such standards that support social stability. Soft power is more effective and successful in garnering the loyalty of followers than hard power as it draws on deeply ingrained spiritual, religious, and cultural beliefs. So, the soft power exercised by Pirs is positively intertwined with the resilience to internal threats in the context of Pakistan, like sectarian rifts or external ideological tug-of-war that can undermine the very foundation of a society (Shaikh, 2009).

The religious soft power serves the very same purpose as a home-grown power base for Pakistan, but it also indirectly furthers the state's best interests when it comes to its regional ambitions and security priorities in terms of national unity. Pirs' narratives of resistance and solidarity, when endorsed by the public, often reflect the broader strategic vision or orientation pursued by the state in its conflicts with neighbouring countries. The intersection of both religious authority and strategic objectives herein suggests a more active role of religion in Pakistan, since it has the potential to shape public sentiments, which is crucial for a state's national security concerns (Shaikh, 2009).

### **Intersections of Religion and Politics in Security**

Scholarly evidence suggests a strong relationship between the interaction of religion and politics, particularly as it pertains to security. The relevance of religious networks has also been noted for the internal stability, conflict management, and security policies of many states other than Pakistan. Religion can bring stability to a society by reinforcing state authority, but at the same time, if it tends to threaten that

authority or it is used by groups who are seeking self-determination as a means for mobilization, then religion becomes volatile (Huntington, 1996). Pirs flaunt their power since religious leadership and political power are not mutually exclusive in Pakistan, making them an overarching part of the phenomena revolving around security. These people function as influencers in religious networks that mould public thought, the same thought that can either provide backing or create hurdles for state security (Ahmad, 2009).

Pirs, at the center of religious networks, form an informal regime that supplements or challenges the state's formal political structures. In many cases, their influence at the community level takes precedence over that of state authorities, especially in rural areas where government reach is weak. Such networks can provide a stabilizing force that upholds values of peace and unity, which play an important role in social harmony. On the other hand, their influence is significant enough that it can contest and challenge state policies, especially when a state's security strategies are viewed as being at odds with religious norms or harmful for local communities. For instance, if security policies are seen to discriminate against groups or regions, Pirs might use their power to press for reform. This may have repercussions for internal stability and security (Zaman, 2002).

This theoretical framework thus provides a basis for examining how and why religious authority impacts the strategic culture and, hence, the national security of Pakistan. As religious leaders, Pirs are foundational figures in sedimenting cultural attitudes around security and resilience, which are the two key domains of Pakistan's strategic culture. They exercise soft power and carefully manage public sentiments that are critical to national unity. Moreover, their social status in the religious networks enables them to corroborate or contest state security policies, making them critical to understand the intersection of strategic culture and religion and to analyse their impact on Pakistan's security landscape.

### **The Role of Pirs and Shrines in Pakistani Society**

Strong historical foundations and the adaptive nature of Pirs, and shrines to changing socio-political systems in Pakistan provide an ultimate explanation of the overall concept of the spiritual and temporal power exercised by Pirs, and shrines. Pirs and their shrines have played a central role not only in the spiritual life of the country, but also in its political landscape, where they have turned from mere repositories of faith to significant socio-political actors. This investigation sheds light on the socio-political history of Pirs as thriving religious authorities, elucidates their role in promoting principles based on social cooperation and integration, analyses their political influence, as well as presents a detailed case study of a larger set of Punjab districts representing the diverse nature of these religious figures.

Sufism in Pakistan originated in the 11th century as a mystical Islamic order, focused on the purification of the inner soul, instead of the outer appearance. When

Islam came to South Asia, the local Muslim Sufi saints started to integrate their teachings in the customs and beliefs of the people. Such syncretism made Sufism attractive to the local population and paved the way for the rise of Pirs as community leaders who enjoyed huge respect for their spiritual and moral guidance. For centuries, the tombs of these saints became pilgrimage shrines and centres for communal gatherings and spiritual nurture (Schimmel, 1975).

Shrines seem to be an integral part of the social fabric of many Pakistani communities due to their association with Pirs. Shrines of Pirs are used as focal points for communal gatherings, religious rituals, and festivals promoting social cohesion. Shrines observe large gatherings of culturally distinct communities and groups on the annual Urs festivals to commemorate the death of Sufi Saints. In Urs festivals, religious performances and social festivities intersect to overcome the socio-economic divides in different communal groups and to promote social unity. The influence of Pirs extends far beyond the shrines as they actively serve as conflict mediators and negotiators in local conflicts. This is especially significant in rural areas where government activity is limited, and the people rely heavily on shrine custodians or Pirs as their spiritual and moral advisors. This not only strengthens social cohesion but stabilizes communities by embedding traditional models of dispute resolution and social welfare (Werbner, 2003).

Pirs have a significant influence over the political landscapes of Pakistan by extending their roles from religious figures to political influencers. Using their respective position and vast social followings, Pirs have been a driving force in political mobilization, changing voting trends, and affecting popular opinion. For instance, the roles of Pirs in election campaigns are critical as political candidates go to seek the blessings of Pirs, whose endorsements can translate into block votes from entire communities.

Additionally, many Pirs have entered directly into politics and even been members of the legislature. This lack of distinction between the spiritual and political realms underlines the Pirs as both religious leaders and political actors. Their power over political spheres is not monolithic, but it differs widely, depending upon their historical background, regional sway, and socio-economic classes that follow them (Malik, 2006). The numerous shrines of Pirs in Punjab province are encapsulated within the regions of Lahore, Multan, Bahawalpur, Jhang, Rawalpindi, and Faisalabad. Lahore and Multan are considered historical centers for Sufi traditions. Iconic locations like Data Darbar in Lahore and the mausoleum of Bahauddin Zakariya in Multan represent not only significant centres of Sufi tradition but also influential hubs of political authority. Political engagements within these shrines are not unusual, with an endorsement from the custodians of these sacred sites being a highly valued asset for aspiring politicians (Rozehnal, 2007).

In Bahawalpur and Jhang, the influence of the Pirs intersects with tribal and feudal systems. For instance, the Pirs in Bahawalpur have utilized their spiritual power

to maintain unity among tribes, while some have also worked to alleviate sectarian tensions in Jhang, contributing to local peace and security (Lieven, 2011). On the other hand, Rawalpindi and Faisalabad, being more urbanized areas, continue to have active and significant Pir networks. Positioned close to the political centers of Rawalpindi, the Pirs in these regions can act as intermediaries between the state and the populace, guiding residents towards state interests and mediating conflicts that arise politically or along sectarian lines. In industrial hubs like Faisalabad, Pirs wield influence over labour markets by organizing networks of workers through welfare initiatives and facilitating negotiations between industrialists and labour costs (Khan, 2012).

The diverse roles attributed to Pirs in these districts indicate a nuanced influence of these religious figures on political and social cohesion. The organization, mediation, and moderation they can provide reflect the traditional power granted to them because of their spiritual and temporal abilities sustained in the culture of Pakistan.

### **Religious Authority in Pakistan's Strategic Culture**

One of the complexities shaping the strategic culture of Pakistan is the religious authority, particularly the one exercised by Pirs. Pirs, and their shrines, constitute an important spiritual influence, advantageous for strategic decision-making, social stability, and foreign relations, woven from centuries of Sufi tradition and revered by broad sections of society. This section of the analysis explains the role of Pirs in Pakistan's internal security, their influence on the state's strategic preferences and their role in shaping Pakistan's relations with other Islamic countries. This presents a nuanced image of the complex impact that religious power plays in security, which can be a stabilizing factor as well as a potential friction point.

### **Influence on Internal Security**

Pirs are the most important personalities who can, by and large, bring social stability to a society; however, in some cases, add to social turmoil depending upon the socio-political setting of Pakistan. Pirs act as informal legislative bodies in rural and semi-urban areas of Pakistan, mediating disputes, upholding moral and social norms and providing numerous social services. In this way, they replace the limited extent of the government in rural areas and therefore reinforce community stability and cohesion. Through instilling values of tolerance, compassion and unity, Pirs help create local cultures that support the state's strategy of a stable and cohesive society consistent with broader goals of internal security (Ahmed, 1986).

At the same time, not all aspects of the work done by Pirs can be deemed positive, especially when it comes to internal security. Though many of the Pirs seek social harmony and unity, some, depending on differing sectarian loyalties and political affiliations, may at times deepen the societal divisions. Such as in the district of Jhang, which has historically high levels of sectarian tension, certain individuals became attached to sectarian movements that bred rifts between various religious

sects. The consequence of this association has been to make internal security difficult and to promote localized conflicts and this also illustrates the challenges for integrating religious authority within national unity. In such circumstances, instead of stabilizing the system, the religious authority of Pirs may weaken it by reinforcing sectarian identities that have the capacity to fuel security threats against the state (Zaman, 2002).

### **Role in Strategic Decision-Making**

Religious influence through Pirs is also a significant aspect of strategic decision-making in Pakistan as it particularly affects public opinion and hence ideology that translates into state governance policies. As an Islamic republic, a lot of things that the government does requires validation, or at least silent approval from the religious authorities so that it can get the legitimacy from the public. Within this perspective, the state treats Pirs as important intermediaries who can buttress or sway public sentiment on national matters. More recent evidence of this alignment is the way in which Pakistan promotes moderate Islamic narratives and combats radicalism. The government aims to revive moderate Islam by involving prominent Pirs in efforts that promote such interpretations of the religion to challenge radical ideologies and construct an ideological wall against extremism. With mass followings, pirs are viewed as agents of “soft power,” capable of penetrating sectors of a population that may be otherwise resistant to traditional state discourse and thus an asset in the government campaign to promote societal cohesion and curb extremism (Shaikh, 2009).

Pirs also wield their influence at times of political transition or crisis. Particularly when the state embarks on unpopular policies or adopts controversial measures, prominent Pirs can marginalize opposition by providing a sort of religious justification. Thus, at times of constitutional reform or modification of religious laws, the state has tended to negotiate with well-known Pirs for their support or to avoid a backlash from religion. Such calculated employment of religious authority brings to the fore the dual role played by Pirs, as purveyors of spiritual solace alongside being pivotal components in the state strategy at a more macro level (Nasr, 2000).

### **Impact on Pakistan’s Foreign Relations**

The religious orientation of Pakistan, deeply moulded by its Islamic roots, plays a significant role in shaping its interactions with other nations, particularly those with Muslim-majority populations. Pirs, entrusted with the preservation of Islamic customs, embody Pakistan's religious ethos and frequently function as informal representatives of its Islamic principles on regional and global scales. This function is notably prominent in relationships with nations that share similar cultural and religious affiliations, such as; Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. For example, the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relationship is based on a state of similar faith reinforced by Sufi Pirs. While Saudi Arabia maintains formal diplomatic channels with Pakistan’s



government, the informal network of Pakistani Pirs and Saudi religious institutions furthers the two nations' long-term cultural alignment. These relations help reinforce Pakistan's image as a loyal partner of Saudi Arabia and the Muslim world, which in turn brings economic and political backing to Pakistan from its West Asian ally. However, this relationship is rather complicated as Saudi Arabia with its proclivity for Wahhabism has caused friction with Pakistan's Sufi-oriented Islamic Identity manifested by the Pirs. Such ideological differences highlight the dual nature of religion in foreign relations, where close ties can solidify alliances but also expose points of friction (Ahmed, 1992).

Pakistan also has a layer of religious diplomacy with Iran especially considering Iranian Shia culture and the Shia minority in Pakistan who are influenced by Shia Pirs. Pakistan and Iran often cooperate on matters of mutual interests like border security, trade etc., their religious polarities have never been too far to disturb the nuances in the relations. In Pakistan, Shia Pirs function as cultural bridges to Iran and links Pakistani with Iranian Shias. Simultaneously, the Sunni-Shia rift sometimes breeds sectarian conflict that affects both Pakistan's domestic security and foreign relations with Iran (Abou Zahab & Roy, 2004).

In the same way, Turkey has had a traditional bond with Pakistan based on cultural similarities and shared admiration for Sufi tradition. In recent years, there have been an increase in diplomatic and cultural exchange with the help of the symbolic role played by Pakistani Pirs to strengthen this relationship. The relationship of Pakistan with Turkey spotlights the soft power potential embedded in religious authority when building international relations. By embodying the cultural and spiritual connections between Turkey and Pakistan, Pirs operate in alignment with a strategic partnership integrated within Pakistan's broader foreign policy objectives, showcasing the potential of religious networks to bolster diplomatic relations (Bilici, 2012).

### **Religious Networks, Radicalization, and Counterterrorism**

While Religious networks in Pakistan have undeniable sway in the social fabric of the country, they fall under the complexities of the security paradigm by being both a counter and a channel for radicalization. While extremist ideology is promoted by some religious networks, others, headed by moderate spiritual leaders, preach similar messages of social cohesion and tolerance. By improving oversight through moderate religious authorities at the local level along with counterterrorism measures, Pakistan could turn the tide on the influence of these networks. This segment dives into the role Moderate Pirs could possibly play in derailing radicalization, analyses the difficulties in regulating extremist factions, and assesses how Pakistan could leverage faith-based linkages to fulfil its strategic goals.

## **Moderate Religious Authority as Counter-Radicalization**

As spiritual leaders of the Sufi order, it is natural for Pirs to encourage a moderate conception of Islam based on compassion, inclusivity, and unity. Extremism cannot grow in the soil of Sufism because, while radical movements are concerned exclusively with the acquisition of political power, Sufi teachings place internal spirituality over the materialistic and external political objectives. Many modern-day Pirs preach interreligious peace and caution against sectarianism. They accomplish this by promoting a peaceful understanding of Islam, which seeks to challenge the dogmatic and often intolerant interpretations of the faith expounded by violent extremists (Schimmel, 1975).

Perhaps the more insidious part of Pirs' social impact is that they can organize and mobilize a large mass of followers osmotically and have even more influence in areas with little or no government presence. Acting as respected figures, they have significant power to counter radical ideologies that have the potential to use community concerns as leverage. Moderate Pirs have historically provided a barrier against extremism in Pakistan, by way of the sermons they preach, religious gatherings they hold, and social ties they use to promote community cohesion. The teachings shared at Sufi shrines like Data Darbar in Lahore and the shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi in Karachi emphasize notions of acceptance, often carrying an implicit directive to reject the divisive and hateful sentiments propagated by extremist factions (Rozehnal, 2007).

Furthermore, the moderate religious networks offer a more effective and unique way to counter extremist ideologies. By encouraging these networks and promoting the public appearance of moderate Pirs, the state can indirectly promote Islam aligned with broader national interests such as social cohesiveness and stability. They could also strengthen their counter-radicalization outreach efforts by urging governments to include moderate Pirs in education or media campaigns aimed at audiences vulnerable to extremist propaganda. The methodology has already proved its success for Pakistan's *Paigham-e-Pakistan* initiative, by uniting religious scholars to jointly issue a fatwa denouncing terrorism and extremism (Shaikh, 2009).

## **Challenges in Countering Extremism**

Moderate religious networks play a vital role in combating radicalization, yet collaborating with religious authorities poses challenges. Despite the presence of moderate factions, radical factions within Pakistan's religious milieu operate in parallel, utilizing nearly identical network structures to recruit, indoctrinate, and mobilize adherents. This circumstance can complicate the delineation of moderate and radical elements within governance, presenting a particular challenge in regions susceptible to sectarian divisions, such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the border areas of the Punjab.

Radical groups often face a significant challenge when confronted by moderate Pirs speaking out against extremism. The moderate religious characters, perceived as government allies, tend to be targeted by the extremist factions seeking to weaken their influence with threats and attacks. Some extremist groups have even singled out Sufi shrines and targeted them as focal points of terrorism, as seen in the 2010 bombing at Lahore's Data Darbar shrine and the 2017 attack at the Sehwan Sharif shrine. They were tactically aimed to intimidate moderate religious groups and deter them from fighting against extremism (Abou Zahab & Roy, 2004).

One big hurdle is Pakistan's plurality of faiths. Although populist Islamists often preach moderation, significant elements refuse to condemn extremism or are sympathetic to conservative interpretations that make counterterrorism efforts of the government more difficult. A unified religious front against extremism is hard to form due to the absence of clear rationales by all Pirs for counter-radicalization strategies. Besides, due to the decentralized structure of such religious networks, another disadvantage is their leadership fragmentation because every Pir is working individually, uttering different opinions on politics and religion.

### **Potential for Strategic Use of Religious Networks**

Despite all the challenges they pose, religious networks are perhaps the only strategic asset that can arguably be leveraged on behalf of the broader Pakistani counterterrorism effort. Pirs also wield considerable power and have the authority to command local communities, giving the state another front to fight against extremist narratives. In counter-terrorism contexts, especially in the rural and semi-urban parts of Pakistan, where the state institutions are underrepresented and state narratives tend to have a lesser influence, these networks can be utilized constructively by the inclusion of moderate religious figures propagating authentic Islamic beliefs to tackle violent extremist narratives more effectively.

An alternative strategic approach would involve the formal integration of moderate Pirs into the community-level implementation of counterterrorism efforts. Pirs, who hold significant respect within their communities, can play a crucial role in pinpointing individuals vulnerable to radicalization. By offering these individuals spiritual and social guidance, Pirs can act as a preventative measure against extremism. This model has been successfully utilized in various contexts, such as the '*Munasaha*' program in Saudi Arabia, which enlists religious scholars to support the rehabilitation of individuals seeking to leave extremist ideologies behind. Adapting a similar approach in Pakistan would leverage the influential support that Pirs hold and could offer a culturally sensitive and regionally accepted strategy for addressing radicalization (Fair, 2014).

Moreover, the government could take the initiative to develop educational programs in collaboration with moderate religious groups to address extremist ideologies at an early stage. Enhancing public education systems that advocate

diversity, acceptance, and national cohesion can be instrumental in preventing radicalization. This approach could assist Pakistan in shaping an Islamic identity that resonates widely with the youth population, while simultaneously marginalizing radical interpretations with the involvement of religious leaders (Pirs) in both program designing and implementation. The effectiveness of such strategies, however, hinges on safeguarding the autonomy of religious networks to avoid allegations of governmental manipulation, which could erode their credibility.

Ultimately, Pakistan can utilize its moderate religious networks to positively alter the trajectory of regional security dynamics by opposing transnational extremist groups. As shown by the global rabble rousing against ISIS and al-Qaeda, extremist ideologies are not limited by national borders but actively seek followers across multiple nations. Pakistan's religious leadership, especially Pirs, must tap into Islamic networks in adjacent states to lead initiatives that complement counterterrorism measures, as well as promote regional peace from within Pakistan in partnership with moderate Islamic networks from beyond the national borders. Such joint initiatives can send a unified message of tolerance and peace, acting as a counter-ideological bulwark against the spread of transnational extremism. By promoting moderate religious discourses, Pakistan and Afghanistan could not only curb cross-border radicalization but also contribute to strengthening regional stability (Gul, 2018).

### **Challenges and Implications for Security and Governance**

The religious leaders become a source of disruption when they are assimilated into the Pakistani Strategic Culture and Security Apparatus. Although they help in many ways to achieve social stability and accelerate counter-radicalization efforts, the engagement of religious figures at both state and local levels poses risks to the governance, state authority, and creates an imbalance between religious and secular powers. This segment deals with the intricacies the state encounters in combating the assertiveness of religious groups, the dangers of overdependence on religious networks, and broader, structural implications for the emergent strategic culture of Pakistan in a rapidly changing security paradigm.

### **Balance between Religious Influence and State Authority**

Pakistan continues to grapple with how to strike a balance between the powers of the state and the influence of religious figures in the areas of security and governance. Religious figures particularly Pirs, exert significant influence over communities, which is why they are valuable allies for accumulating social capital. But if individual clerics exercise their own decisions rather than obeying state policy, the empowerment of religious networks can undermine the state's monopoly of violence. Thus, the state's governance legitimacy is enhanced because Pirs derive allegiance from the general population that is sometimes more inclined towards the authoritative Pirs than institutions of state, especially in the rural areas, where state's presence is little (Shaikh, 2009).

When a government uses religious authorities to legitimize its policies and secure the support of groups whose views have been influenced by religious teachings. This dependence can create opportunities for religious figures, Pirs and clerics, to exercise political pressure on the government. When a government adopts practices that contradict religious values or traditions such as resisting reforms around women's rights or sectarian reconciliation, religious experts might oppose those decisions. This resistance might generate social conflicts and pose challenges to governance efforts, highlighting the risks of letting religious networks integrate with the secular governance framework without undermining state sovereignty (Nasr, 2000).

### **Risks of Over-Reliance on Religious Authority**

Disproportionate reliance on religious authority in governance and security weakens secular institutions, jeopardizing Pakistan's long-term strategic stability. There are advantages to including religious figures in counter-radicalization programs, but a reliance on such networks threatens to cement the hold of religious authority over those spaces that have primarily been state-controlled. Consequently, secular institutions are less trusted and influential, and the state becomes a play ball of the evolving religious networks. Furthermore, if the state claims to constitute a religious authority for some groups/sects, it may be perceived as biased against others, exacerbating sectarianism and creating security challenges. Given Pakistan's diverse religious landscape encompassing various interpretations of Islam and sects, each with its own leadership and followers, an overemphasis on one group could marginalize others, heightening the potential for sectarian conflicts and undermining national unity. Therefore, accommodating diverse identities within the broader framework of national security could result in the fragmentation of Pakistan's strategic culture (Zaman, 2002). The dangers of excessive dependence on religious authority also include the danger of religious authorities gaining disproportionate political power. Without constraints on their powers, some Pirs might try to step out of only being regarded as religious people, to political persons by exploiting the imprints over followers for political benefits. As this encroachment occurs, a type of "parallel governance" can develop in which leaders make policies and laws or establish social norms that infringe upon the state-controlled sphere, thus adversely affecting its capacity to govern (Malik, 1990).

### **Implications for Pakistan's Future Strategic Culture**

While religious authority will persist as a significant and intricately entwined factor within Pakistan's strategic culture amidst evolving security challenges, the underlying dynamics shaping its geopolitical perspectives in this regard are projected to remain largely entrenched. The enduring presence of religious authority is expected to continue balancing between bolstering social cohesion and confronting governance obstacles, especially as the influence of Pirs remains robust and the state seeks alliances in countering extremism. Pakistan must assert control over religious

authority and foster a symbiotic relationship, where religious frameworks complement the existing secular power structures rather than supplanting them.

One possible outlook on Pakistan's strategic culture involves a structured partnership between the government and moderate religious figures, emphasizing counterterrorism efforts and social welfare initiatives. This approach aims to enhance societal resistance to extremist ideologies while also curtailing the influence of religious leaders over public conduct. It necessitates the implementation of institutional safeguards to prevent any singular religious entity or figure from exerting excessive control and upholding state authority, while concurrently fostering religious alliances in alignment with national security objectives (Fair, 2014).

The second is that of an increasing institutional schism between secular and religious authority. Given the evolving nature of Pakistan's security challenges, the state may want to artificially strengthen secular governance structures with a view toward creating secular bulwarks against religious stridency and over-dependence on Islamists. Such an approach would probably have to rely on reinforcing the judiciary and education system to promote a national identity united yet grounded in secular governance fundamentals. Although this might reduce some of the dangers of leaning too heavily on religious authority, it also would likely incite backlash from those who view religious presence in Pakistan as indispensable to its identity (Ahmed, 1992).

In the long term, Pakistan's future strategic culture will arguably oscillate between an acceptance of religious authority and state control, with both elements factoring into domestic and international security considerations. With national unity and diversity having a role to play together, the challenge for the state will be to ensure this balance without letting religious dominance undermine secularism.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the much nuanced role of Pirs with reference to religious legitimacy and authority in Pakistan's strategic culture in terms of its security, governance, and socio-political stability. This investigation concludes that Pirs are not merely spiritual guides but are embedded deeply in the history and culture of Pakistan. They are crucial bonds that encourage political engagement, promote social cohesion, and combat radical ideologies. Their influence often reinforces the government's efforts to maintain national security. Yet, their influence also poses complex challenges, especially at a time when the state's policies face popular opposition or when religious leaders pursue a sectarian agenda.

This study highlights the necessity of using moderate Pirs to counter extremism as intermediaries who encourage the principles of peace and harmony. While these religious networks can be a useful tool for domestic security and counterterrorism efforts, continued clergy engagement is fraught with risk and may inadvertently amplify or fuel extremist narratives or contribute to the sectarian discourse. Pirs are an integral aspect of Pakistan's cultural environment, which is both

a positive resource for social cohesion and security, but represents a serious challenge to the state's authority over large segments of the population. Building on these insights, this investigation urges to adoption a constructive policy that allows religious networks to integrate with state matters in such a way that they advance state's interests while the authority of the state remains uncompromised. One possible strategy is to formalize the state's relationship with moderate pirs and encourage their participation in community and educational programs to curb extreme ideologies and promote national and social unity. Further, to ensure strong civil-military relations, the state should strengthen secular institutions and implement a centralized governance structure that ensures the rule of law and state authority across all territories.

This work lays the groundwork for many exciting future directions in research. Comparative studies with other states having similar social structures to Pakistan, such as Egypt or Indonesia, could offer insight into ways the state's regulation of religious authority can be rendered secular, and which types of secular oversight strengthen the stability and efficacy of governance. Further research on the changing roles of religious networks in the shifting political environment of Pakistan by examining how Pirs as religious actors respond to new security threats or changing social circumstances could be beneficial for exploring whether they act as social glue or sow the seeds of future alienation.

Thus, this investigation concludes that, given Pakistan's strategic culture, the only fine balancing act between the Pirs and religious authority is to adopt a paradigm in which both are viewed as means of obtaining security rather than threats to it. Pakistan should, therefore, try to evolve specific strategies to engage these religious leaders in a manner that strengthens the strategic culture, focuses on the imperatives of national security, and neutralizes the narrative of our extremist adversaries. Moreover, further studies of these complex dynamics are vital for informing policies that take advantage of the state's capacity to provide security and governance through the effective use of religious networks.

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