

# Manipulation Of Religion For Political Power And Control In Pakistan

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## Abstract

Pakistan's history has been marked by the exploitation of religion for political and social gains, leading to numerous challenges and conflicts. This phenomenon has been perpetuated by various political and religious groups, resulting in the manipulation of religion for power and control. The consequences of this adaptation have been far-reaching, contributing to sectarianism, extremism, intolerance, human rights violations and political instability. This article examines the way that political legitimization, social control, identity politics, political patronage and social engineering have been employed to exploit religion for political and social gain in Pakistan. This has led to the marginalization of minority groups, restrictions on women's rights and freedom of expression and the imposition of strict laws and regulations. The blurring of lines between religion and politics has resulted in religious leaders becoming political actors, further exacerbating the issue. It is essential to promote a more inclusive and equitable understanding of religion, separating it from political manipulation and emphasizing its role in promoting social justice, compassion and human rights.

**Keywords:** Religion, politics, extremism, intolerance, violations, sectarianism.

## Introduction

The emergence of Pakistan on the world map in 1947 is unparalleled as this historical event was purely based on religion. Walk into an educational institution or a market or a political *jalsa* or a religious gathering in Pakistan and ask the people: “What is the meaning of Pakistan?” The most natural reaction is a chant “la ilaha illallah.” This clearly epitomizes the level to which religion has trickled down into the citizens’ consciousness. But this is not so astonishing for a nation that has emerged on the map of the world mainly for religious reasons. The major reason for the partition of the Indian subcontinent was that the Hindu majority was exploiting Muslims and other minorities. For more than seven decades since the emergence of Pakistan, civil and military governments have resorted to religious populism to harness political support and to legitimize their actions. This has caused the development of religious populism in Pakistan’s sense of identity. (Yilmaz & Saleem, 2021)

The genesis of Pakistan’s troublesome era doesn’t lie only in the circumstances in which the state of Pakistan emerged but also in the countless factors that who fueled the fire, thereby increasing the intensity of the problems facing the new country. Some of the major factors responsible for the deterioration of Pakistani society’s fabric were due to leaders coming to power without going through proving their abilities as good leaders. Moreover, the military and bureaucratic establishment, the *ulema* (scholars, leaders) of religious parties and other groups have appropriated the symbols, institutions, tools of statecraft, and even the diction of Pakistan’s founding father, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, for their own purposes.

Most of the ongoing havoc in the Pakistani state and society dates back to the 1970s, when major events occurred, which paved the way for on-going turbulence. Such events included the unparalleled powers given to Zia ul Haq for the

implementation of his policies of Islamization, the Iranian revolution (1979) and, most significantly, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. (Waseem & Mufti, 2009).

## **Recent Research**

The working paper ‘Religion, Politics and Governance in Pakistan’ (Waseem & Mufti, 2009) focused on the role of religious parties in policy development in Pakistan, particularly during MMA rule in NWFP from 2002 till 2007. The major question raised by the researchers concerned whether religion could really play a role and be a game changer to formulate policies to alleviate poverty. It also focused on the role of religion as a driving force of state and society. It became very evident that religion had been used more often as a source of political gains and also for the legitimization and support for their policies by the public.

Moreover, Zafar and Javaid focused on the period after the independence of Pakistan and investigated the way in which religion and politics became entangled, leading to the Islamization of state and society in Pakistan. Islamization has been the result of a number of factors such as religious-political beliefs, the role of political parties and their leaders, which has remained vital not only during the creation of Pakistan but also in the subsequent events that led to the metamorphosis of society and state. This article argues that the most of the political leadership - both civilian and military - has exploited or misused religion to gain political support and to reap certain benefits. Zia’s era is a specific example of how Islam was used as an instrument to get leverage over constitutional powers (2009).

Yilmaz and Saleem (2021), furthermore, emphasized the role of religion and religious populism in Pakistan. Since the inception of Pakistan, both military and civilian governments in Pakistan have employed religious populism for the amalgamation of support and the legitimization of political purposes. Ever since its earliest days, Pakistan has experienced ‘nascent’ and ‘fragile’ phases. Political leadership has often gained legitimization for their actions. This has not been

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possible without the support from religious political parties and powerful groups. Such groups and individuals gained benefit from the politicians who were their own ‘people’ and had a biased towards ‘others’. These people have used religion to control society despite their incompetent leadership and the political chaos that resulted.

## **Manipulation Of Religion By Political Parties**

The role of religion in Pakistan's political history has been very important, and at various times the political leadership has used religious sentiments for its own interests. This practice falls under the category of religious manipulation, whereby religion is made a means of interfering in political decisions. Its purpose has been to gain popular support, weaken opponents, or to face internal and external challenges. If we examine the various governments in Pakistan's history, especially the PPP, PML-N, PTI, and military governments, we will see examples of the use of religious manipulation in various ways (Dr Hafiz Khubaib ur Rehman, personal communication).

The Jama-e-Islami (JI) was one of the most instrumental religious-political parties before the dawn of Pakistan. It makes public pronouncements regarding the constitutions of Pakistan and has participated in the political alignment of the country. JI's major contribution was its opposition to the Ahmadiya community during 1947 to 1956. (Zafar & Javaid, 2019).

The MMA government managed to stay in office from 2002 to 2007 but it had to face allegations of bad governance including corruption, nepotism and incompetency. It was called a ‘democratic alliance’ because it was able to obtain a mass mandate. The MMA government was able to complete its tenure but it was defeated in the 2008 elections because all the parties left the alliance. This was due to the fact that the parties were ideologically poles apart. Secondly, the government lacked experience and it failed because of its lack of interest in promoting social

change to deal with issues of gender, poverty, individual and collective security, and terrorism. Moreover, election promises were not fulfilled. (Waseem & Mufti, 2009).

### **Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto And the Pakistan People's Party**

Although Bhutto supported a socialist system for society, he declared Islam to be the religion of the state and gave it constitutional status when he introduced the 1973 Constitution. Due to excessive pressure from the religious parties, Bhutto also passed a law declaring Ahmadis as non-Muslims. During his tenure, decisions such as the Friday holiday and the prohibition of alcohol, which were ostensibly introduced as religious reforms, were an attempt to appease the religious classes and gain popular support.

### **The Tenure of General Zia-Ul-Haq**

Religious manipulation reached its peak during the reign of Zia-ul-Haq. He introduced a wide range of religious laws in the name of implementing the Islamic Shari'a. The Hudood Ordinance 1979, the system of *zakat* and *ushr*, and restrictions on prayer times were part of his Islamization agenda. The blasphemy law, which was introduced during Zia-ul-Haq's rule, was later used for religious and political purposes under different governments. Religious parties use this law as political pressure, and governments also try to control public sentiment by supporting this law.

There is evidence that Zia-ul-Haq used religion to consolidate his political power, especially during the Afghan jihad, which he described as an Islamic jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Worldwide religious fervor was aroused for the success of this jihad. Promotion of madrassas, support of jihadist organizations and promotion of religious parties were also part of his policy.

### **Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz**

Furthermore, religion was used for political purposes during Nawaz Sharif's era. In the 1990s, he introduced the Shariah Bill, which aimed to increase the power of Islamic law while its practical application remained limited. Sharif tried to achieve his political goals by forming alliances with religious parties. His party increased its proximity to religious elements so that the government could claim that it had the support of the religious segments of society. (Dr Hafiz Khubaib ur Rehman, personal communication).

### **Pakistan *Tehreek-E-Insaf* (Pti)**

Imran Khan often referred to the state of Medina in his political discourses and presented the concept of a welfare state based on Islamic principles as the ideal to be achieved. The policy of reconciliation and dialogue with the *Tehreek-e-Labbaik* Pakistan (TLP) and other religious groups during his tenure can also be considered as an example of religious manipulation. Khan's government also highlighted the importance of the laws of annulment of prophet-hood and blasphemy and tried to sway religious circles through them.

### **Military Governments and Religious Manipulation**

Pakistan's military governments used religion in favor of their policies, especially under General Zia-ul-Haq, when religious parties gained full support. After Zia-ul-Haq, the army used religious and jihadist groups as strategic assets, especially on the Kashmir front against India. The training and support of mujahideen and jihadist groups in the war in Afghanistan was promoted in a religious spirit.

### **Afghan Jihad and Religious Manipulation**

Jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan was presented as an Islamic obligation. The war was used to stir up religious sentiments in Pakistan and led to

the formation of jihadist organizations. During the Afghan Jihad, people were prepared for *Jihad fi sabeel Allah* through religious manipulation, and Islamic Jihad was promoted globally.

### **The Role of Religious Groups**

Religious parties were used politically to help governments maintain their power or to reduce pressure from religious circles. Various parties have been organizing people on religious grounds through religious fatwas and sermons, thereby using religion in favor of a political point of view. The political use of religion has always been a powerful weapon in Pakistan's history. Various governments and political parties have used religious laws such as the Hudood Ordinance, blasphemy laws, and concepts such as jihad for political purposes. The goal of such religious manipulation has been to gain popular support, weaken opponents, and face internal and external challenges. Dr Hafiz Khubaib ur Rehman has the following view:

As a religious scholar, I believe that religion should not be kept away from politics in order to preserve the true purpose of religion. But using religion for politics is wrong in every sense of the word and is a crime that politicians and the military establishment are guilty of. Religious laws can contribute to social progress if they are applied for public welfare and justice but if they are used for political manipulation, it creates social divisions and problems. (personal communication with the author)

### **The Impact of Religion on Sectarianism**

In Pakistan, Islam has the status of a state ideology in order to unify the nation. The Shi'ite and the Sunni school of thought both exist in Pakistan. However, the Sunni dominance in Pakistan society marginalizes the Shi'a and other sects. The Hudood Ordinance is a part of Islamic jurisprudence but the implementation of this

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Shari'a law institutionalizes sectarian basis. During the Zia-ul-Haq era, the Islamization of education and the support given to various jihadist groups in Afghanistan became the main policy of the government. This led to the promotion of the Sunni centrist narrative and the rise of sectarian militant groups particularly those which were opposed to the Shi'a. (D. Z. Zafar et al., 2023).

### The Impact of Religion on Minority Rights

The constitution of Pakistan includes Islamic values and contains views that favor Muslims. One such view is that the president of Pakistan must be a Muslim. This constitutional article excludes religious minorities from key political representation and roles. Moreover, the blasphemy law affects the religious minority's social and economic exclusion in Pakistan. The blasphemy law in Pakistan increases targeted violence against religious minorities (Z. Zafar & Javaid, 2019).

Table no. 1 shows how different political parties in Pakistan have manipulated religion or used the religion card against the minorities.

***Table no. 1***

Political Parties	Religious Manipulation Examples	Results
<b>Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)</b>	The Pakistan Muslim league Nawaz is reluctant to reform the blasphemy law that is being used against the minorities.	- These policies decreased marginalization and the persecution of religious minorities.
	-PMLN supported different religious parties and made alliances to enforce religious policies.	- But discrimination and violence against minority communities such as Christians and Ahmadis increased in Pakistani society.
<b>Pakistan People's Party (PPP)</b>	Pakistan People's Party always try to make policies which favored minorities but also comprised and	- PPP always had mixed stance and tried to create uncertain environment for minorities.



	<p>make alliances with the religious party for political purpose.</p> <p>-PPP passed some law which favor the minorities and also opposed religious extremism when they were in power.</p>	<p>- Minorities receive support when PPP was in power.</p>
<b>Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)</b>	<p>Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) always tried to establish one state that is Islamic state where Sharia law must be implemented, this policy leaves little room for non-Muslim and minorities to practice their religion.</p>	<p>- It promotes intolerance toward religious minorities reducing their social and legal protection.</p> <p>-Islamic law creates pressure on minorities to conform to Islamic norms.</p>
<b>Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM)</b>	<p>MQM always advocated for secularism and equal rights for minorities, especially in urban centers like Karachi.</p> <p>- MQM also used religious narrative to counter rival political parties from time to time.</p>	<p>- Minority feels safer in controlled area.</p> <p>- Efforts to make alliances with religious parties sometimes undermined its secular stance.</p>
<b>Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)</b>	<p>PTI used religion to appeal the conservative voter by emphasizing Islamic values.</p> <p>Imran Khan has expressed support for minorities but, during his tenure, extremist religious groups directly affected minorities.</p>	<p>- This approach leaves minority vulnerable to social and legal discrimination.</p> <p>- Minorities were supported but also marginalized.</p>
<b>Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI)</b>	<p>JUI always tried to establish an Islamic state and enforce Sharia law and consistently opposed any change to the blasphemy law. They base their view on Islamic principles.</p>	<p>- Minorities further marginalized and restriction of religious freedom increased.</p> <p>- Under conservative religious policies, minorities faced social and legal challenges.</p>

## **The Impact of Religion on Women's Rights**

In Pakistan, political leaders have always used religion to gain political advantage and this has affected women's rights. Islam always emphasizes justice and equality between men and women but various political leaders in Pakistan have exploited a conservative interpretation of religion to increase and maintain their influence. Through religious manipulation, leaders want to exercise an influence on religious groups and appease the conservative sector of Pakistani society (Saleem, 2006).

During the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988), the Hudood Ordinance (1979) was promulgated under which Islamic Sharia laws could be implemented in Pakistan. The purpose of the ordinance was to bring Pakistan's legal system in line with Islamic principles. There were four main laws under Hudood Ordinnace:

1. The law on adultery (sexual offence): For adultery and fornication (rape), severe punishments were prescribed, including stoning or whipping.
2. Alcohol and Drug Act: Strict restrictions were imposed on the consumption of alcohol or any kind of narcotic substance.
3. Law on Theft: Theft is punishable by amputation of the hand according to Islamic Sharia.
4. Qaddafi's Law: A strict law was made to provide witnesses to accuse someone of adultery, and punishment was set for false accusation (Dr Hafiz Khubaib ur Rehman, personal communication).

Zia-ul-Haq enacted this ordinance to promote the Islamic system but these laws were also subject to severe criticism, especially regarding their impact on women's rights. The criticism was that women who reported rape were often arrested for adultery due to insufficient evidence. Human rights groups have called the law unconstitutional. These laws led to a major change in the judicial system of Pakistan,

but their implementation also caused many difficulties and legal complications. The Hudood Ordinance was a major attempt to enforce Islamic law in Pakistan, but its practical application and results presented many challenges (Razzaq, 2021).

In 2006, amendments were made to the Hudood Ordinance through the "Protection of Women Bill" during the tenure of Pervez Musharraf. The cases of adultery (rape) were removed from the statute of limitations and included in the Pakistan Penal Code to soften the standards of various testimonies and evidence for it. The amendments were aimed at ensuring the safety of women and reducing the rigorous of the Limitation Acts (Danica, 2021). However, religious parties like Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam and Jamaat-e-Islami opposed these amendments. (I. Gabol, 2006)

Table no 2 shows how political parties in Pakistan have used the religion card in matters related to women in Pakistan.

*Table no. 2*

Political Parties	Policies	Religious Themes
<b>Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)</b>	- PMLN incorporated Islamic principles to legitimize reforms and to improve woman’s status. Maryam Nawaz became active in politics in order to support women’s reforms in Pakistan.	-Islamic legitimacy for progressive policies.
<b>Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)</b>	Jamaat-e- Islami emphasized women’s role according to traditional Islamic principles. It also advocated for policies that align with the conservative interpretations that affect the public and social roles of women.	Traditional Islamic roles.
<b>Pakistan People’s Party</b>	PPP managed to pass legislation such as the anti-woman practice Act	Islamic Justification

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(PPP)	2011.	for reforms
	<p>-PPP uses Islamic rhetoric to justify modern, pro-women legislation. For example, Benazir Bhutto's advocacy for women as an Islamic point of view.</p>	
<p><b>Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)</b></p>	<p>- Imran Khan has emphasized the Islamic value regarding women's role.</p> <p>- PTI has an ambiguous stance for it encourages women participation yet tries to balance progressive and conservative elements like calling woman's marches non-Islamic.</p>	<p>Modern Islamic rhetoric</p>
<p><b>Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM)</b></p>	<p>- MQM promoted Islamic values and modern views such as advocating for women's rights and supporting women's participation in society and politics.</p>	<p>Balanced Islamic approach</p>
<p><b>Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI)</b></p>	<p>- JUI supported conservative interpretation of Islamic teachings and opposed modern gender equality by reinforcing the traditional gender role.</p>	<p>Islamic conservatism</p>
<p><b>Awami National Party (ANP)</b></p>	<p>Awami National Party supported women's rights within the framework of Islamic principles and also promoted social justice and human rights.</p> <p>- It also promoted women's education.</p>	<p>Islamic support for social justice</p>

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<b>Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT)</b>	- Pakistan Awami Tehreek supported Islamic principle and women’s rights. It has taken measures to limit violence against women and to promote an economic opportunity for women.	Islamic foundation for rights
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**Recommendations**

Reducing religious manipulation at both the political and social levels in Pakistan is crucial for building a more cohesive, tolerant, and just society. Religious manipulation often leads to polarization, sectarianism, and even violence, undermining the country's unity and social progress. In what follows, I make suggestions that could minimize religious manipulation:

1. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) could enforce strict rules prohibiting political parties from using religious rhetoric or sectarian affiliations in their campaigns. Political parties should focus on policy-based platforms rather than manipulating religious sentiments to gain votes.
2. Education plays a pivotal role in shaping societal values, and reforms can help foster tolerance, critical thinking, and a broader understanding of diverse religious perspectives. The government should promote religious tolerance by incorporating tolerance, respect for all religions and awareness about different sects within Islam, as well as other faiths, in school curricula. This would help students understand the importance of co-existence and reduce the manipulation of religion for sectarian or political gains.
3. Introduce courses on critical thinking, civic rights, and constitutionalism. These courses could empower students to think independently rather than falling prey to religiously manipulated narratives in politics and society.

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4. The media in Pakistan often plays a dual role in either fueling religious manipulation or acting as a voice of reason and moderation. Enhancing the responsible use of media is a key issue. PEMRA (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority) should ensure that religious programming, especially in the electronic media, adheres to standards of accuracy and avoids promoting hate speech or sectarianism. Programs promoting interfaith dialogue and religious harmony should be encouraged
5. Promotion of dialogue between different religious communities and sects can foster mutual respect and understanding. Religious leaders, scholars, and community representatives can play a key role in reducing tensions and promoting peace.
6. Civil society organizations can play a crucial role in holding political and religious leaders accountable for manipulating religion. The strengthening of civil society is the need of the time. Civil society organizations should focus on educating the public about their rights, the importance of democratic participation, and the dangers of religious manipulation. Grassroots movements that promote social justice, equality, and human rights can help counter the divisive narratives of political and religious leaders who manipulate religion.
7. The government should enforce laws against hate speech. There are existing laws in Pakistan against hate speech and incitement to violence. The judiciary should strictly enforce these laws, ensuring that political or religious leaders who engage in inflammatory rhetoric are held accountable.
8. Blasphemy laws in Pakistan have often been misused for personal and political gains. Judicial oversight and reforms aimed at preventing misuse of these laws could significantly reduce religious manipulation.
9. The government must focus on economic empowerment and social justice. Religious manipulation thrives in societies which suffer from widespread

poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunity. Addressing these socio-economic issues can reduce the space for religious exploitation. The government should focus on creating jobs, improving education, and providing social services in underdeveloped areas, which are often breeding grounds for religious extremism and manipulation.

10. We should take individual responsibility for reading the Qur'an with translation. This would help people not to be deceived and exploited by politicians who manipulate religion for their own purposes.

Minimizing religious manipulation in Pakistan at both the political and social levels requires a multi-faceted approach. Key solutions include secular governance, education reforms, responsible media practices, interfaith dialogue, and empowering civil society. A commitment to justice, equality, and mutual respect, coupled with strong legal and institutional frameworks will help foster a more tolerant and progressive society, free from religious exploitation.

## **Conclusion**

The common assumption is that Zia has manipulated Islamic teachings for political gains, be it Jihad for geo-political reasons after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan or Zia's referendum over the slogan of Qur'an and Sharia enforcement. But it was not only Zia regime, almost all the other rulers of Pakistan, both civilian and military dictators, have employed this ideology for the legitimization of their actions. Religion has been used to shape public opinion and to dictate social norms. Religious leaders and groups have been instrumental in promoting certain values and beliefs, often perpetuating conservative and patriarchal attitudes. This has led to restrictions on women's rights, minority rights, and freedom of expression. Minimizing religious manipulation in Pakistan at both the political and social levels requires a multi-faceted approach. Key solutions include secular governance, education reforms, responsible media practices, interfaith dialogue, and empowering

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civil society. A commitment to justice, equality, and mutual respect, coupled with strong legal and institutional frameworks, will help foster a more tolerant and progressive society, free from religious exploitation. It is essential to promote a more inclusive and equitable understanding of religion, separating it from political manipulation and emphasizing its role in promoting social justice, compassion, and human rights. Religious exploitation has significant social political consequences for minority groups, women's rights and increased sectarianism in Pakistan. It also increases discrimination, segregation, aggression and affects Pakistan's international reputation.

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