ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

RELIGION IN PAKISTAN'S INTERNAL CONFLICTS

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INTRODUCTION

Pakistan became the epicenter of extremist violence and the war against it following the attacks of September 11, 2001, when 19 militants hijacked four planes and attacked targets in the United States (US), killing almost 3,000 people and injuring many more. Al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, claimed the attacks in the name of Islam. In response, the US and its allies, including Pakistan, initiated a military offensive against al-Qaeda, and demanded the Taliban government of Afghanistan hand bin Laden over to the US. The Taliban government had, however, given refuge to al-Qaeda prior to the attacks and refused to surrender bin Laden.

Taliban soldiers and leaders in Afghanistan were originally recruited from refugee camps in Pakistan at a young age and were sent to Deobandi madrasas, where they were indoctrinated with the idea of jihad (Malik 2008; Rahman 2008; Looney 2003; Ali 2009). These madrasas and mosques continued to spread a radical interpretation of jihad that targeted local and international “enemies” and contributed to sectarian violence. Although using religion to justify violence is neither unique to Islam nor a recent phenomenon, Islam, which is derived from the word *slm* (peace), and jihad (struggle), has come to be associated with violence and terrorism. As a result,

religion and politics in Pakistan have gained international attention and Pakistan's madrasa system of Islamic education has come under intense scrutiny (International Crisis Group (ICG) 2002, 2003).

This case study explores the role religion played in the rise of extremist violence in Pakistan. The discussion will first explore how religion as community contributed to the construction of Pakistani identity during and after its establishment as a nation-state in 1947. It will then explain how religion as a set of teachings was influential in the emergence of a particular interpretation of Islamic understanding of jihad in madrasas and mosques. Finally, it will investigate how religion as a discourse has caused tensions amongst various interpretations of jihad and how groups such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda have tried to justify their interpretation of the term.

PAKISTAN AND VIOLENCE IN THE NAME OF ISLAM

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan was founded on August 14, 1947, when the country gained independence from the British Commonwealth. At the time of its establishment, it consisted of West Pakistan and East Pakistan. East Pakistan seceded to establish Bangladesh in 1971 after a civil war. Pakistan continued to have territorial conflicts on the Afghan–Pakistan border and in the disputed Kashmir region. Today, Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world with a dynamic and emerging economy (World Bank 2019). As the only Muslim-majority country with nuclear weapons it is also considered a regional power.

Since its emergence, Pakistan has had a complicated relationship with Islam, which has been used as a source of legitimacy by both governments and militant groups. There are a number of different militant organizations operating in Pakistan with al-Qaeda being the most recognized one. The origins of al-Qaeda date back to the Afghan–Soviet war (1979–1989) when global Muslim fighters known as *Mujahedeen*—supported by the CIA, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Pakistani Intelligence Agency—initiated an insurgency to fight the Soviet invasion. During this period, many al-Qaeda leaders and fighters received training in madrasas in Pakistan and as a result of their collaboration in the

Afghan war developed close bonds with other Pakistani extremist groups, particularly the Taliban.

“Taliban”, which means “students” in Pashto, is the main umbrella group for the Afghan insurgency as well as the name of a number of different radical Deobandi Sunni groups in Pakistan. The Taliban emerged following the Afghan war in the mid-1990s. In Pakistan, different groups operating under the name Taliban came together in 2007 to form a political coalition of militias called Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP). While they are distinct groups with a different history and leadership, Afghani and Pakistani Taliban often fight alongside each other. Each control different areas and have different agendas and political objectives but are directly supported by al-Qaeda and share a similar ideology. Other extremist groups in Pakistan include Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which focus mainly on jihad in Kashmir, and anti-Shiite groups such as Lashkar-Jhangvi and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, which aim to establish Pakistan as a mainly Deobandi-Sunni state.

While each of these organizations has different goals and focus, and do not adhere to the same Sunni interpretative tradition, they all seek their legitimacy within an Islamic framework, and want to enforce Sharia (Islamic Law). What differs is their geographical focus, targets, and military tactics. For example, al-Qaeda and its affiliates are responsible for atrocities around the world including the 1988 bombings of the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, the 2003 and 2005 bombings in Madrid and London, and others. Additionally, they target governments of Muslim-majority countries because they consider them illegitimate for being corrupt, impotent, and in collaboration with Western governments. Groups like LeT target India in Kashmir (Afzal 2018: 8). The government of Pakistan treats each of these groups differently: Pakistan is engaged in military operations against TTP but continues to provide sanctuary to Afghan Taliban and groups that fight against Indian forces in Kashmir (Afzal 2018: 6).

RELIGION AS COMMUNITY: ISLAM AND PAKISTANI IDENTITY

The rise of militant Islam in Pakistan cannot be understood without exploring the role religion played in the construction of Pakistani

identity. Religion has been an important source of identity and a tool for political legitimacy in Pakistan since its foundation in 1947, although the founders of Pakistan, such as Mohammed Ali Jinnah, conceived of a secular, pluralistic state, and not a theocratic one. Religious traditions often play an important role in defining group identity, defining who belongs to the group and who does not, and legitimating particular national objectives. Islam, similar to other religious traditions, holds reservoirs of meaning that shape Muslim identities and incorporate values, texts, and symbols that give expression to collective needs and desires. Islam, both as a religion and a cultural framework, informs the identities of Muslims as individuals and as Muslim communities (*ummah*), and it offers a set of vocabulary and meanings that legitimize various socio-political projects. Islam provides believers with a moral framework that guides their actions and plays a profound role in the molding of social structures and the justification of the social and political order. Muslim leaders often resort to the inimitable power of religion to mobilize the population towards their goals, especially at times of conflict and war. Paradoxically, religion is often used as a legitimizing force both for governments and those who oppose them.

In Pakistan, both political leaders and leaders of militant Islamic groups have sought legitimacy for their policies by framing them within an Islamic framework. The emotional resonance that extremists manage to generate in their Pakistani audiences has roots in the narratives that were developed and deployed in the establishment of Pakistan and in subsequent historical events (Khan 2013: 2). “Religion has always been described as the single most important basis of Muslim nationhood, and Islam was employed as a means of fostering group identity to mobilize the masses in the pre-independence period” (Islam 1981: 56).

Islam as an integrative force was critical in defining Pakistani national identity (Saqib 1983: 194) and was successfully utilized to mobilize mass support for Pakistan during its establishment (Islam 1981: 57). The idea of Pakistani nationhood separate from India was based on the perceived ethnic religious differences between Hindu and Muslim communities. For Muhammed Ali Jinnah, founder and first governor of Pakistan, being a Muslim in India was a “matter of identity, a form of ethno-cultural distinction”; therefore, Muslims in

India were a distinct nation from Hindus (Afzal 2018: 34). Muslim League leaders, such as Jinnah, needed a framework for legitimacy to build the identity of a new state, and often invoked the idea that Islam and Muslims in India were in danger and used Muslim identity as a glue to hold together different Muslims' ethnicities in Pakistan. Muslims in India consisted of various ethnic groups and spoke different languages. Poet and philosopher Allama Iqbal (1875–1938), often credited with being the father of Pakistani Islamic identity (Islam 1981: 55), believed that Islamic identity could bring these different ethnic and linguistic groups together as an *ummah* (the Muslim community), connect them with the wider Muslim world, and preserve the Islamic way of life.

Over the course of its history, multiple leaders have resorted to Islam to legitimize their policies and seek public support. Still, the rise of General Zia ul-Haq to power in 1977 was a turning point in the Islamization of Pakistan, especially as he started his intensive Islamization policies. General Haq, a practicing Muslim himself, used Islam to legitimize his domestic power and to undermine opposition. He took both a legal and cultural attitude to Islamicize the country by first enforcing Islamic laws and establishing Sharia courts and then by using madrasas and other Islamic institutions to increase support. With his education policy in 1979, he facilitated the integration of madrasas into the Pakistani education system. This policy resulted in “Islamic” elements being added to the curricula at all educational levels. The basic aim of this policy was to create a new generation of Muslims imbued with Islam.

War against the Soviets in the 1980s provided a new opportunity for Pakistan's Islamization. While the military regime used Islam internally to gain political legitimacy, the concept of jihad was used externally to arouse religious sentiments and mobilize guerilla bands of *mujahideen* (fighters) against the Soviets in Afghanistan (Shah 2012: 310).

The Pakistani establishment, including its armed forces and intelligence agencies, strongly supported conservative Sunni radicals and the Taliban movement to gain putative strategic depth through a subordinated Afghanistan and by preempting the formation of a hostile Indian–Afghanistan consortium.

(Simon and Stevenson 2009: 47)

When the war in Afghanistan ended, Kashmir became the new arena of jihad for Islamic militants, supported by the Pakistani Government (Lamb and Mufti 2012: 18).

Taliban and al-Qaeda also frame their objectives and strategies within the Islamic framework to justify them and use Islamic identity to mobilize followers. Brian Fisherman and Assaf Moghadam (2010: 6) argue that the ideology of the global jihadi movement aims to make Muslims aware that Islam is in a state of decline relative to its past glory, and identify the reasons for this decline in the attacks by anti-Islamic Crusaders, Zionists, and apostates. In order to respond to this threat, this ideology aims to create a new Muslim identity by offering them membership of the globalized community of believers and to present jihad as program of action (Fishman and Moghdam 2016). This form of Muslim identity is closely tied to practicing a particular interpretation of Islamic law and lifestyle that is rooted in the Sunni Wahhabi tradition. To mobilize support, these groups invoke the concept of *ummah* to create solidarity and unity amongst Muslims and to urge them to take responsibility for issues involving Muslims globally. An Islamic framework is used to define the contours of relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims. Those who do not follow this interpretation are considered to be living in ignorance and, therefore, are not true Muslims. For example, Zawahiri, in his articulation of Muslim identity, points out that those not residing in Islamic land and not living according to Wahhabi interpretation and application of Sharia Law, including fellow Muslims, are regarded as apostate infidels who must be purged (Rogan 2010: 409). Also, in his treatise “The Foundations of Loyalty and Enmity in Islam”, he describes friends and enemies of Muslims, and urges Muslims to not to take “infidels” as friends or allies (Ibrahim 2007). Using the *takfiri* doctrine (the process of ex-communicating Muslims for not being pious enough) these groups argue that Pakistani Government’s collaboration with the US makes them justifiable targets for jihad (Lamb and Mufti 2012: 19–20).

RELIGION AS A SET OF TEACHINGS: MADRASAS AND JIHAD

Religion as a set of ideas refers to a shared set of teachings, doctrines, norms, values, and narratives that provide a framework

for understanding and acting in the world. These religious ideas and teachings can be used to support peace and tolerance or justify violence and conflict. An ideology and doctrine of jihad that justified attacks on local and international enemies were often promoted at some of the Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan based on their interpretation of religious verses, teachings, and stories. Madrasas, or Islamic schools, have come under scrutiny following the 9/11 attacks because many of the Taliban soldiers and leaders in Afghanistan, including Mullah Omar (who was recognized as the Commander of the Faithful or the Supreme Leader by Taliban), were originally recruited from refugee camps in Pakistan at a young age and were sent to madrasas, where they were indoctrinated with the idea of jihad (Malik 2008). Rashid (2000: 4) states that, "Taliban interpretation of sharia was influenced by extremist Deobandi teachings in Pakistan, a perversion of Pashtunwali [the traditional Pashtun code of conduct], and its harsh enforcement all over Afghanistan". The Taliban's ideology was influenced by Deobandi teachings in Pakistan (Lamb and Mufti 2013: 23). Consequently, Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan came to be associated with fundamentalist institutions that breed Islamic terrorists.

Madrasas have been a major source of religious and scientific learning throughout much of Islamic history. Since the emergence of Islam, madrasas have been part of the Islamic education system. Not all madrasas are pro-violence or preach aggression; however, in Pakistan, prior to British colonization, madrasas were unstructured and served the educational needs of both Muslims and non-Muslims (Zaman 1999). Deobandi religious leaders institutionalized the madrasa system as a reaction to British colonization and imposition of the British education system. During this era, the main purpose of madrasas was to promote Islam and Islamic ethics, while preserving knowledge about the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet. Madrasas became an important tool for Islamization during General Zia's presidency. In order to secure his legitimacy and undermine his mainly secular political opposition, Zia required the support of religious seminaries. His 1979 education policy established a Committee for Dini Madaris to transform the madrasas into an integral part of the Pakistani educational system, and called for 5,000 madrasas to be built (ICG 2002: 11).

Today, many of these institutions are a part of the normal life in Pakistan, and play a key role within the society by educating students from poorer areas in particular. There are five distinct schools of thought within the madrasas in Pakistan today: Wahhabi, Deobandi, Bareilvi, Jamat-i-Islami, and Jafria-Shia. In addition to providing Islamic education, madrasas also serve other functions in Pakistani society such as providing shelter, food, and safety for many rural immigrants into urban areas, especially to those poor families who cannot afford to care for their children. These madrasas provide, for the most part, free Islamic education and teach impoverished populations how to read and write (Moosa 2015). They also house thousands of poor people who otherwise lack access to formal education and the fulfillment of basic needs. Thus, the most vulnerable, economically depressed, and impressionable youth of Pakistan end up in the madrasas. Because the very limited education they receive leaves them without any real chance of taking part in the socio-economic growth of their country, many of these young people see their best option as returning to the madrasa as a teacher or joining various groups dissatisfied with their own government or the West, which they view as anti-Islamic.

Texts supporting offensive jihad were not part of the traditional madrasa curriculum, but were developed and included in the madrasa education during the war in Afghanistan, when madrasas started to play an important role in providing the ideological basis of war against the Soviets. Two types of madrasas were particularly active. The first included those madrasas such as Jamaat-e Islami's (JI) *Rabita madrasas*, created specifically to produce jihadi literature to mobilize public opinion and recruit and train military forces (ICG 2002: 11). The second group of madrasas included independent madrasas such as the Jamiat-e Ulama Islam (JUI), which opposed Zia politically but partnered with him during the Afghan war (ICG 2002: 11). These madrasas were supported by the Pakistani military, US, and Arab countries financially, as well as by publishing textbooks in local languages. After the end of the war in Afghanistan these Deobandi madrasas and mosques continued to spread a radical interpretation of jihad that targeted local and international "enemies" and contributed to sectarian violence as well as attacks on the West.

RELIGION AS DISCOURSE: CONTESTED INTERPRETATIONS OF JIHAD

Radicalization of Islamist groups in Pakistan goes back to the early 20th century when Maududi, the founder of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), articulated his offensive jihad doctrine and elevated it above all other interpretations of jihad within the broader Islamic discourse. Islam as a discourse refers here to the body of thought and writing that is united by having a common object of study, a common methodology used by Islamic scholars, and a set of common terms and ideas it incorporates which is linguistically and culturally specific. It is possible for all Muslims who have been socialized under its authority to speak and act together. Within this discourse, there are different interpretations or narratives. Islamic narratives of jihad are all based on the Islamic discourse rooted in the Quranic verses, sunna, and the hadith. These texts are often filled with ambiguities, contradicting statements, and are written down in a distant time, usually in a language that is different from the ones used by the current communities and must go through human interpretation. Islamic doctrine of jihad is no different, and there are a variety of different interpretations when jihad is permissible and how it should be conducted.

The Arabic word “jihad” literally means “striving” or “struggle”, rather than war, as the Quranic verse “strive in the cause of God” (Q22:78) indicates. More specifically, jihad is often understood as a struggle for the cause of God by means of speech, property, wealth, or life. Historically, Muslim scholars differentiated jihad according to its direction (inner and outer) and method (violent and non-violent) (Kadayifci-Orellana, Abu-Nimer, and Mohamed-Saleem 2013). The inner jihad is fought within the individual whereas the outer jihad is seen as a struggle to eliminate evil within the *ummah*. It refers to efforts an individual must make towards self-improvement and self-purification, as well as to the duty of Muslims, both at the individual and collective level, to struggle against all forms of evil, corruption, injustice, tyranny, and oppression. The term “jihad” also refers to use of force to repel an enemy and to fight against injustice and oppression. Scholars of Islamic jurisprudence and law have usually been more concerned with the military form of jihad,

as this requires more jurisprudential elaboration and legal regulation (*fiqh*), and Islamic law that deals with war and peace are often included under the title of jihad. In the modern era (19th and 20th centuries), jihad acquired a new momentum and initially took the form of resistance to Western invasion of Islamic lands. Challenged by colonialism, modernization, and globalization, many Islamic thinkers blamed the decline of Muslim power on a deviation from the *right path of Islam* and called for the reinstitution of Islamic rule. Within this context all kinds of resistance movements and leaders adopted jihad as an ideological framework, and as a political rhetoric to justify their policies and conduct.

Multiple interpretations of jihad are a result of the dynamic interaction between the religious texts and changing contextual factors, such as social, political, and cultural contexts, as well as particular historical events. The way religious texts are understood and acted upon during a violent conflict always involves a tension between the fixed text, the word of God, and the particular context of interpretation. However, when leaders use a religious narrative they tend to take them out of a specific context and treat them as if they are fixed, identical, and self-sufficient origins of meaning. They present their interpretation of the religious texts, myths, and symbols as the ultimate truth applicable, regardless of time and place.

There are a variety of possible reasons as to why people choose one interpretation over another. Some of these explanations are related to cognitive and emotional needs that may be met by particular religious imagery, symbolism, and text. Social motivations and personal experiences also play a critical role in determining affiliations with a group that espouses a certain interpretation of religious texts. According to Gopin (2000: 11), the way sacred texts are used to foster peace or promote violence and destruction

seems to depend on the complex ways in which the psychological and sociological circumstances and the economic and cultural constructs of a particular group interact with the ceaseless human drive to hermeneutically develop religious meaning systems, texts, rituals, symbols, and laws.

Deep fears and concerns also play a significant role in the way religious texts are understood and interpreted, especially at times of war. In return, religious values and texts shape the way individuals

view their conflict, perceive their enemies, and make sense of their suffering and ways to address them.

Al-Qaeda and Taliban argue that the current global economic-political system only breeds oppression, injustice, and exploitation; therefore, it must be removed and replaced by God's governance. Framing their jihad as a retaliation to injustice, oppression, and aggression of the West and its secular allies in the Muslim world, they invoke military jihad as an obligation of every Muslim. In order to increase popular support, they explain that jihad today is a global revolutionary struggle, which must be fought by any means, including violence, political action, and propaganda against the Western powers as well as secular Muslim regimes. In this, "jihad" attacks against civilian targets are necessary evils to bring God's rule to earth (Ibrahim 2007).

Islamic symbols, language, imagery, as well as Islamic texts are used to spread this ideology through mosques, madrasas, videos, and propaganda on social media. Most Deobandi literature traces the history of how Muslims have repeatedly been subjugated by the "Zionist occupation of Palestine, Indian occupation of Kashmir, Russian occupation of Chechnya, and subjugation of Muslim States in the Philippines" (Haqqani 2005: 22). Framing the conflict within a religious framework, these extremist groups aim to provide an ideology which conceives of the world in a coherent and manageable way, and to offer explanations for worldly events, including human suffering, and the response to it. Using Quranic verses such as "You are obligated to fight even though it is something you do not like" (Q2:216) as well as religious imagery and vocabulary, they legitimize their interpretation of jihad, and construct negative enemy images such as "the Crusaders" linking current conflict to historical ones. With the aid of religious imagery and vocabulary, with which the population is familiar, they provide a cosmology, history, and eschatology of the war and simplify the world into good and evil. They link the past, present, and future in the minds of their followers and invoke emotions such as heroism and vengeance.

CONCLUSION

This chapter showed that the religion of Islam has been instrumentalized to legitimize political objectives both by militant groups and by the government in Pakistan. Islam as a discourse has

been utilized to craft the ideology of these groups and this ideology was spread via madrasas, mosques, and other media, using Islamic symbols and texts. However, as it will be shown in the second part of this case study, various Muslim groups and organizations are resorting to the Islamic principles of peace, tolerance, and justice to respond to extremist violence and to build sustainable peace in Pakistan.

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