

Topic:

Religious Extremism As a Challenge TO Economic Growth

Outline:

1. Introduction

Rising religious extremism is a major challenge to the economic growth of countries including Pakistan.

This negative tendency is breaking the backbone of the economies, preventing the countries from making progress. However, by implementing effective controlling measures, this menace can be brought under control.

2. Correlation between religious extremism and economic growth

3. What factors are responsible to promote religious extremism

a. Weak implementation of rule of law

b. Social media propaganda of inculcating radical sentiments in youth

c. A majoritarian mindset

provoked by radical religious groups
 d. The madrasah culture fanning the flames of extremism and sectarianism

4. How religious extremism hinders the economic growth

a. Violent activities and sit ins on part of radical groups hamper economic activities

b. A major chunk of GDP is spent for handling security situation

c. Sanctions imposed for exporting extreme ideologies

d. Other countries feel reluctant to invest in such countries for security concerns

e. Local investment decreases under violent circumstances

f. Tourism sector

f. Threat to existing infrastructure due to violent actions

g. Tourism sector is

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badly affected owing to the presence of radical groups.

h. Gender inequality, exacerbated by religious extremists, discourages women participation in economic affairs

i. Lack of scientific development in the country

5. Wayforwards to counter religious extremism for economic development

a. Establishing system of accountability to facilitate and improve investigation

b. Ensuring the ban of spread of hate speech and radical sentiments on social media

c. Engaging youth in productive activities

d. Fostering a culture of tolerance and ^{respect} request through education

6. Conclusion

"Religious extremism leads to political instability, which in turn details the economic development." These words by Ban Ki Moon unleash the potential of religious extremism to instabilise the political system which in turn hampers the economic growth. When the religious extremism prevails in a society, the state machinery is paralyzed and the government fails to perform rightly under such unfavourable circumstances. When the political situation deteriorates, the chances for the economy to flourish terminate and economy cannot thrive under such circumstances. In the recent times, the religious extremism is on its peak worldwide. Several factors are fanning the flames of religious extremism such as a majoritarian mindset promoted by the radical groups, abuse of social media to spread the hate sentiments and weak

weak enforcement of rule of law, social media propoganda and negative role play by religious groups and madressahs. These factors collectively contribute to hinder the economic development. Under such circumstances, violent activities block the economic activities, large sum of money is spent by countries to handle security situations, sanctions are imposed by other countries, foreign direct investment as well as local investment decreases, infrastructure is destroyed, revenue generated by tourism sector comes to an end, work participation in economic development decreases and country lacks in scientific development. However, by adopting workable strategies such as strengthening accountability system, keeping check and balance on ~~misuse~~ use of social media, and creating job opportunities as well as spreading awareness, this menace can be brought under control. In a nutshell, rising religious extremism is a major challenge to the economic

growth of countries including Pakistan. This negative tendency is breaking the backbone of the economies, preventing the countries from making progress. But, by implementing effective controlling measures, this menace can be brought under control.

Religious extremism is directly linked with the economic growth. The more the religious extremism, the lesser the economic growth. It creates political instability, social unrest, disrupts trade and investment and diverts resources toward security rather than development. It undermines human capital through attacks on education. The social fragmentation it causes further erodes trust and cooperation needed for economic progress. According to a study by the Global Terrorism Index, countries heavily affected by terrorism, often linked to religious extremism, experienced an average GDP growth rate that

was 1.5% lower than countries not affected by terrorism, between 2000 and 2015. This data highlights the severe economic consequences that religious extremism can impose on affected regions.

There are several factors responsible to promote religious extremism, one of them is the weak implementation of rule of law. When the laws are not implemented in true spirit, become become less fearful of the state and thus actively engage in violent activities driven by extreme mindsets. The governments being fearful of losing the majority support, hesitates to take strict actions against the radical groups involved in mob justice. - especially is such

Societies where people are least tolerant in case of religious matters. The federal and local governments avoid even commenting on the incidents of religious extremism and leave it to the establishment and local administration (Muhammad Amir, Dangerous Majoritarianism, June 2024). In this way, when the rule of law is not fully implemented, the incidents of religious extremism happen frequently.

When there is weak enforcement of rule of law, the radical groups freely use the social media propaganda of inculcating radical sentiments in youth. Because of lack of knowledge, experience or exposure, the social media users,

especially youths become a victim of such propagandas that aim at fostering radical ideas among youth. On the occasions of religious events like Muharram, the propagandists become more active and such material is intentionally broadcasted that escalates tensions among different religious sects in society. In Pakistan, the form of sectarian division on the ideological occasion of Muharram has always been observed. As a result, a lot of hate speech has been used on social media by the followers of Shia and Sunni sects (Facebook and Hate Speech: Analyzing relationship between consumer's attributes and Islamic sectarian content on social media in Pakistan,

Abid Ali, Spring 2021): In this way, social media is used negatively to promote radical sentiments in youth.

Besides using online platform to create ~~chaos~~ chaos in society, the radical groups also use the religion card to provoke a majoritarian mindset in real time. These radical groups through their hate speeches make their followers think that they are superior to all other religious groups. Their followers eventually start considering the practice of religion by minorities a threat to their own religion. The major target of such radical groups is the youth belonging to the middle class, which is used by them as a tool to spread their propaganda. These radical

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groups draw their core strength from middle class youth, who serves as keyboard warriors, developing political strategies and evolving organizational tactics.

(Muhammad Amir, Dangerous Majoritarianism, June 2024). Hence, the religious radical groups play leading role in spreading hatred among people having different religions.

Another tool used by the radical groups to provoke the majoritarian mindset is the madressah culture which is fanning the flames of extremism and sectarianism. Within the boundaries of the madressah, an exclusive sectarian mindset is nurtured which is the source of extremist tendencies and tunnel vision found in

found in society. Madressahs are masters in dealing with the state as well as local and international dollar. Moreover, the a madressah administration agrees, verbally, to get the Madressah registered, to introduce reforms in curriculum and to inform the concerned state institutions about the sources of funding, but practically they fulfill none of these promises. They agree on registration but still need to make good on their commitments, they agree on reform but resist when the process of implementation gets underway, they accept funding from all sources but do not implement the agreed programmes.

(The Question of reform, M Amir, Aug 2004)

Hence, the madressahs are also used to by the extremists to enhance their circle of influence.

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This religious extremism hinders the economic growth in different ways such as violent activities and sit ins on part of radical groups hamper economic activities. Besides hindering the movement of locals and preventing the completion of development projects, the violent activities abruptly affect the transportation of logistics and raw material essential to run small scale businesses as well as large scale industries. In addition, the governments, under such circumstances, have to spend a large sum of amount to counter the deteriorating law and order situation and to bring the life of the citizens back on track. Even under severe circumstances,

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governments have to deploy the armed forces to deal with the extremists creating social unrest. After three week long Faizabad blockade by religious extremists, the Islamabad police had sought Rs. 146.5 million from the government to meet the sit in expenditure (Arslan Altaf, Tribune, 2014). In this way, the radical groups hinder the economic activities.

When the extremists constantly hamper the economic activities, the affected states have to spend a major chunk of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for handling the security situation in the country. The budget and resources that ought to be allocated for social welfare and development projects are spent to counter the worsened

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circumstances created in the aftermath of violent activities.

The countries where such radically motivated activities occur frequently are left behind in the global arena, become dependent on foreign aids and loans for survival and eventually all other activities necessary for the country's progress are pushed to the back seat.

Everything becomes secondary in the presence of religious extremism for instance, Nigeria due to Boko Haram, Iraq and Syria due to ISIS have maximum extremism and so no other activity (required for countries' progress) is taking place there. In this manner, most of the country's GDP is used to grapple with issues caused by religious extremism.

When the radical groups are active in a region and the

respective governments are having tough time, the extreme ideologies do not remain confined to a region only. and so the other states impose sanctions for exporting the extreme ideologies. Ideology does not know any boundary - the radical mindsets to adopt the extreme ideologies and to spread radicalisation exist everywhere. The global community imposes sanctions to save itself from this menace. The sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union and the United Nations on Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution have had a significant impact on the country's economy and society. These sanctions have caused a wide range of negative macro-economic outcomes including rapid currency devaluation, severe trade

and fiscal deficits, elevated inflation and rising poverty rates which have badly affected the lives of individuals (Understanding Economic Sanctions on Iran: A Survey, Muhammad Reza, June 2023). Therefore, the sanctions imposed for exporting extreme ideologies also prevent the economic development.

When sanctions are imposed on a state for exporting the extreme ideologies, other countries feel reluctant to invest in such countries for security concerns. Despite the strategic importance of a country, when there is absence of fool-proof security in it, the developed countries try to find some safer and better alternatives for investment. In case of CPEC project headed by China, the desired outcomes have not been fully

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achieved yet owing to the security issues being faced by Chinese workers in Pakistan. Consequently, China is not as satisfied and energetic to invest in Pakistan as it used to be in the past. The rise in religious extremism in Hazara, Balochistan and ISIS footprint are a threat to \$46 billion worth CPEC (The Diplomat, 2017). Thus, the higher the security issues in a country, the lower the FDI.

The least Foreign Direct Investment decreases the morale of the local investors and they hesitate to invest in their own country under violent circumstances. For the fear of losing lives and investment, the local investor prioritize to invest in such regions which provides a secure environment for their

investment. This decrease in local investment deprives a great many people of job opportunities as well as the availability of cheaper local products. As a result, unemployment, poverty rate and crime ratio increase exponentially. The economic impact of extremism is the closure of many businesses which increases the ratio of joblessness, various types of crimes and, poverty (Musarat Qadeem, Beyond Violence, 2020). In this way, extremism directly causes a reduction in local investment.

On one hand, religious extremism results in decrease in local investment; on the other hand, it poses a threat to already existing infrastructure. The violent activities and protests on part of radical groups destroy the public and private

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property and building which demands millions of dollars for repairing. Besides, its economic cost, the destruction of infrastructure also serves as a psychological weapon which inculcates fear and insecurity in the minds of the locals as witnessing the collapsed buildings that were once source of livelihood and provided shelters - is really disheartening. The loss of homes and community spaces can lead to feelings of instability and helplessness, exacerbating psychological stress. Those who face such situation become more prone to negative tendencies and can become an easy target of extremists. Thus, and they cannot contribute to the progress of country under such harsh circumstances. Thus, the destruction of

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infrastructure on part of religious extremist damages the economy.

When the radical groups destroy the infrastructure of a country, its tourism sector is badly affected. The blatant violation of human rights in the cases of religious extremism tarnishes the image of the country in front of world and people usually hesitate to risk their lives for the sake of tourism in such countries which are safe havens for religious extremists. As a result, the revenue generation, generated when tourists spend money on accommodation, food, transportation, entertainment and shopping, comes to a halt. France, one of the world's top tourist destinations, saw a sharp

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decline in tourism following the 2015 Paris attacks. Visitor numbers to Paris fell by 1.5 million in 2016, leading to an estimated loss of \$1.1 billion in tourism revenue. In this way, the unfavourable circumstances created by the radical individuals and groups have a substantial economic cost.

The economic development is hindered by decrease in revenue generated through tourism sector on one hand and by gender inequality, exacerbated by religious extremism, discouraging women participation in economic affairs on the other hand. The countries where there are more restrictions on women participation in political and economic affairs are deprived of almost fifty percent talent

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and human resource, which ultimately reduces the chances of their progress to one half. In such countries because of the rule of extremist mindsets which translate religion into strict terms, ^{women} are even deprived of their right of free movement and they are bound to stay at home. Iran and Afghanistan, where religious extremism has been on its peak, ranked 150th out of 156 and 146th out of 146 respectively in Global Gender Gap Index as per World Economic Forum 2021 and 2022 respectively. In this way, the extremists mindsets also discourage the women participation in work field.

Besides undermining the women participation in economic development, the retrogressive and extremist mindsets' activities result in lack of scientific

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development in the country. They believe that scientific development and modern education inculcate such sentiments in the minds of learners that make them revolutionary and secular. History is full of such instances where the censorship or ban on innovative literature and technology push the states economically and socially backward.

The Ottoman's Empire delay in adopting the printing press, because some religious extremists thought it would spread heretical ideas, is one of the factors contributing to its eventual decline relative to the European powers. The lack of widespread printed materials hindered the spread of knowledge and ideas, putting the Ottoman

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Empire at a disadvantage compared to Europe. In this manner, the lack of scientific development owing to the presence of extremists deprives a country of many opportunities.

However, by adopting the effective strategies such as establishing system of accountability to facilitate and improve investigations, this menace can be controlled. In the absence of a strong system of accountability, the offenders are encouraged to decide the cases of sensitive nature - involving religion - at their own, and in most cases they treat the accused in an inhumane manner without any solid proof against him/her. The establishment of district criminal justice coordination committees or a

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statutory committee for dealing cases related to religious extremism involving minorities can prove to be a step in the right direction. According to the recommendations mentioned in the letter written by The National Commission for Human Rights to the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Anwar-ul-Haq Kakkar, the establishment of the system of accountability to enhance investigation might be achieved either through district criminal justice coordination committees formed under the police Act for instance, or a statutory committee that especially monitored cases of religious minorities. Therefore, by empowering the system of accountability, the looming threat of religious extremism

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can be countered.

In addition to strengthening the investigation system, the writ of the government should also be empowered enough to ensure the ban on spread of hate speech and radical sentiments on social media. The propagandists misuse this platform to brain wash those who cannot distinguish between what is real and what is fake, what is right and what is wrong. Since social media is a double-edged sword, by effectively utilizing it by for countering online radicalisation and developing effective counter narratives, the bleak intentions of the radical groups can be made null and void. The internet and social media is a powerful tool for extremists to spread their

message, but it can also be used to counter these narratives - developing effective counter narratives is essential in combating online radicalisation (Countering online radicalisation in the US and Europe: The challenges of interdicting extremist content, Maura Conway). Therefore, the check and balance on use of social media can help in averting the negative implications of religious extremism.

Besides keeping a close eye on radical groups and their activities on social media, the government should also engage youth in productive activities. The emotionally driven youth - especially middle class and lower class - is the first hand tool (mis)used by the extremists to create chaos in

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society. By engaging youth in productive activities and providing job opportunities, the youth can prove to be an asset for a country. Through this step, the youth will also be able to upgrade its living standard as well as to contribute to the economic growth of the country. According to World Bank Report 2015: Mind, Society and Behaviour, providing young people with education and employment opportunities can help to prevent their recruitment into the extremist groups. Thus, youth engagement in productive activities can prove to be a step in the right direction.

Apart from engaging youth in productive activities, the educational system should be so designed and handled that

that is capit^{can} foster a culture of tolerance and respect for humanity through educational the grassroots level. Education is the tool through which the minds of the individuals can be enlightened. A carefully designed curriculum that can instill the spirit of tolerance and respect for humanity in the hearts of the learners might prove to be a step of great assistance. Moreover, the educators can play effective role in eliminating the radical sentiments by engaging the students in such exercises that may help them to learn the effective strategies for resolving the conflicts peacefully, emphasizing the importance of understanding and respecting each other's

differences.

To sum it up, the whole discussion shows that religious extremism is a serious challenge that hampers the economic development. Multiple factors flare up this phenomenon including weak writ of the government before the extremists, negative use of social media and manipulation of young minds by radical groups through different means. The economic growth under such circumstances becomes a distant dream. It hinders the economic development in different ways. The violent activities block the proceeding of economic projects, infrastructure is destroyed, foreign direct investment as well as local investment reduces, the tourism sector becomes unable to generate revenue, women par-

participation in ~~work~~ economic activities is discouraged, and country takes a seat a back seat in the scientific and technological arena. Nonetheless, the perils of religious extremism can be minimized by taking bold steps like strengthening the accountability system, keeping check and balance on use of social media, and creating such environment for youngsters under which they flourish rather than becoming radical.
