

Topic: Rising religious extremism as a challenge to economic development

OUTLINE

1. Introduction

Thesis Statement: There exists a causal relationship between religious extremism and economic development.

The spread of religious extremism through various means poses a daunting challenge to economy of many countries. Nevertheless, by applying some strict preventive measures, the menace can be averted, leading to sustainable economic development.

2. Correlation of religious extremism and economic development

3. Current manifestations of rising religious extremism

a) Forced conversion and violence against minorities

b) The widespread notion of blasphemy accusations

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c) Escalation in terrorist attacks and militant activities

d) Perpetration of mob lynching under the guise of justice

4. The challenge of rising religious extremism to economic development

a) Shift in state's focus from economic development to security concerns

b) Diversion of budgetary resources to combat extremism

c) Impacting negatively on local investment and informal economy

d) Disruption in economic activities stemming from extremists' actions

e) Developing the sense of patriarchy and minimizing the role of women

f) The daunting deterioration of a country's global reputation

g) Looming threats of sanctions and isolation on a country

h) Hindrances to other sectors like tourism especially religious.

5. Recommendations: rooting out religious extremism to ensure sustainable economic development

a) Open and inter-faith dialogue with stakeholders

b) Developing ^{and} disseminating counter narratives to extremist ideologies

c) Combating fundamental grievances like identity crisis

d) Carrying out kinetic actions to steer out religious extremism

6. Conclusion

These violent delights have violent ends / And in their triumph die, like fire and powder, / Which, as they kiss, consume (William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet). These lines can establish a clear relationship between religious extremism and economic development. At first, religious beliefs and teachings act like violent delights and appealing to one's thinking, however, they can lead to violent ends when they reach to their triumph or fullest expression. Moreover, when religious extremism and economic development kiss or consume like fire and powder, the destruction of economy is the only outcome. Similarly, the menace of religious extremism is at its triumph. The current manifestations of rising religious extremism are in the form of forced conversions, increasing rates of terrorist attacks and perpetration of mob lynching. This rise in religious extremism is ~~presenting~~

having some daunting challenges to economy of different countries such as shifting state's focus from economic development to security concerns, diverging budgetary resources to combat extremism and disrupting economic activities. It also minimizes the role of women in economic development, deteriorates global reputation ^{of the countries} and creates hindrances to the promotion of other sectors like tourism. However, these challenges can be averted by incorporating open and inter-faith dialogue, combating fundamental grievances and carrying out kinetic actions. In short, there exists a causal relationship between religious extremism and economic development. The spread of religious extremism through various means poses a daunting challenge to economy of many countries. Nevertheless, by applying some preventive measures, the menace can be averted, leading to sustainable economic development.

Religious extremism and economic development are not two different things, but they have a causal relationship. As the presence of religious extremism overrides the possibility of economic development. William Nester in his book "God's Economy: Religious Extremism and the Economic Development Dilemma", published in 2013, explores with the help of case studies that how religious extremism is a challenge to economic development. He asserted that extremist groups target infrastructure projects, discourage international trade and undermine human capital development which ultimately lead to less economic development. Moreover, a fine example of victim of religious extremism is of Afghanistan having no economic development and is under the rule of Taliban. This shows that how religious extremism and economic development are correlated.

There are several manifestations

of rising religious extremism, chief among which is forced conversion and violence against minorities. Extremism does not ^{only} mean having extreme thoughts about something, it is also the name of imposing those thoughts on someone who is not inclined.

Many people have different rigid religious beliefs and thoughts which they try to impose on others. If others people refrain, they use the methodologies of forced conversion or they start violations against those who are not willing to accept their beliefs.

A prime example is of the incident of Manipur in India in 2023, where the violence erupted between the majority Meitei community and the Kuki tribal groups. Reports indicated instances of forced conversion and violence against minority groups including Christian. Hence, this is evident from this example that religious extremism is surfacing in the form of forced conversion and violence against minorities.

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The other manifestation of religious extremism is the widespread notion of blasphemy accusations. Not only do extremist people impose their ideologies, but they also adopt different means to contain those people who reject their notion. The chief among those notions is blasphemy accusations. Many extremist people adopt these ways to override or subjugate people protesting their views. In the same way, this happens in Pakistan when people have biases towards minority group or to contain them. This is evident from the fact that between 1987 and February 2021, at least 1,855 individuals were charged under Pakistan's blasphemy laws (Pakistan events of 2022, Human Rights Watch, January 2023). This identifies the point that religious extremism is on surge and it is evident from the widespread notion of blasphemy accusations.

Another visible expression of rise in religious extremism is excerpted from the view of escalating terror attacks and that too regularly. When extremist people fail to achieve their desired goals by above mentioned ways, they, at last, perpetrate terror attacks against those who reject their pretense. This they do to threaten those groups which either reject their narrative ~~or~~ or take stern measures to stop them. For example, many extremist groups in Pakistan, out of sectarian intolerance, carry out terrorist attacks against other sects. According to the security report issued by a think tank named the Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) 2024, in the first quarter of current calendar year, Pakistan^{has} witnessed 245 terror-attacks, those too of sectarian nature especially in K.P.K and Baluchistan. Hence, it validates the point that extremist people carry out their designs by terror attacks.

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Besides in escalation of terror attacks, perpetration of mob lynching under the guise of justice substantiates the surge in religious extremism.

Mob lynching reflect a border pattern of vigilante justice fueled by extremist ideologies where accusations alone can lead to lethal consequences.

This is also one of the ways that extremist people have to spread their shadows of fear among minority groups. This way they can instill their nefarious ideologies in their brains either by keeping their mouth silent or by launching a mob strike.

A prime example of mob lynching incident is of Swat that happened in the month of June 2024, where a tourist was lynched after being accused of desecrating the Quran. That is how the current trends of religious extremism are evolving in the form of mob lynching.

This surge in religious extremism is creating multifaceted challenges to economic development of many countries and one of them is shifting state's focus from economic development to security concerns. Many leaders of different countries have to adopt this policy of negating economic development to maintain order in the house (state). This choice creates dilemma for them to choose one side of the two extremes. However, most of them prioritize security concerns. The reason behind prioritizing this is to create an environment for economic development. A quintessential example of this case is Balochistan, where Pakistani government has started multi dollar projects for economic development. Nevertheless, these efforts go in vain when there is no order in Balochistan. Therefore, now the first priority for Pakistani government is to establish peace in the region by the aid of security forces. This shows how a state's focus is shifted.

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As the state's focus shifts from economic development to addressing security concerns, the diversion of budgetary resources to combat rising religious extremism further hinders economic progress, creating a vicious cycle for a country. Combatting religious extremism needs funds to counter all the forms of extremism from grassroots. These funds which are allocated to combat come at the expense of critical sectors like education and health that have capacity to build human resources. A stark example of this can be observed in Pakistan, where the ongoing battle has led to many changes in budgetary resources. For instance, in 2023-24, the defence budget is set at PKR 1.80 trillion reflecting a 19.5% increase from previous year of PKR 1.51 trillion. This allocation of resources has significantly reduced the resources for key sectors. This substantiates how budgetary resources are diversified when combatting extremism.

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Along with diversion of budgetary resources, rising religious extremism impacts local investment and informal economy of the state. Those who invest in other countries hope to get something in return, to this cause, they need friendly environment for their businesses.

Nevertheless, this becomes an insurmountable challenge in the presence of the menace of rising religious extremism that not only hinders local investment, but also creates obstruction in the informal sector of a state. For instance, in regions of Pakistan most affected by religious extremism, such as KPK and Balochistan, local investment has declined by over 35% between 2015 and 2020 (Impact of Extremism on Local Business: A study of Pakistan's Informal Sector by Ali Khan, Asian Economic Review, 2021). Thus, it is rightly pointed out that religious extremism looses major setbacks to local investment.

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Not only does religious extremism impact local investment, but also disrupts economic activities in the state stemming from extremists' actions. Many extremist people choose the path like protest and sit-ins to get their demands fulfilled. Such protests and sit-ins disrupt economic activities by all forms that ultimately results in loss of economy. A prime example in this case would be of Faizabad sit-in by religious extremists in 2017 in Pakistan that led to an estimated loss of PKR 20 billion (approximately \$125 million USD) in economy activity (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2018). Thereupon, this verifies the argument that actions by extremist groups in the form of protests and sit-ins lead to disruption in economic activities and then result in loss of economy of state.

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Building on the idea of disruption in economic activities, the extremist groups also develop the sense of patriarchy and minimize the role of women in economic contribution of a state. This happens because of the very reason that extremist people are so adamant to their ideologies which they excerpt from their holy scriptures. They usually and more often take out these things from their holy books which favour their interest and the sense of patriarchy and limiting^{women} in four walls are among them. The report named "Gender Equality and Religion" published by Pew Research center in 2020, envisages that countries where religious institutions wield significant influence over society, such as Afghanistan and Yemen, rank among the lowest in labour force participation. In these countries, only 15% and 6% of women are part of the formal economy. Hence, it shows that where there is jinx of

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religious extremism, there is the minimized role of women in economy contributions.

On the similar note, the presence of religious extremism deteriorates a country's global reputation in all ways. A country sounds good when everyone has a good perception about it, however, perceptions are built on the basis of what happens in that country. All the actions either kinetic or dynamic determines the global reputation of a country. In the same way, when a country is afflicted with the issues of religious extremism, it is likely to have ^{worse} less global reputation. When there would not be good global reputation, people are less likely to invest and visit, which hampers economic growth of that state. Countries such as Afghanistan, Nigeria and Somalia saw a decline of average 20% in FDI over the past decade (Institute of Economics and Peace, Global Terrorism Index report, 2023). Moreover, country like Pakistan blessed with most beautiful scenery saw an era where foreigners

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were ~~unable~~ ^{reluctant} to visit. That is why, it would be right to say that the presence of religious extremism deteriorates global reputation of a country.

In the same vein, the challenge like religious extremism precipitates the gloomy ~~sha~~ shadows and threats of sanctions and isolations on a country.

All the countries sideline that country which is associated with the extremists groups. Those countries which either promote non-state actors like terrorist groups or entangled with the issues of sectarianism and religious extremism are more likely to sanctions and isolation.

For example, Iran is facing many sanctions of the world not only because of Uranium enrichment but also because of the export of aids to non-state actors in Syria and Iraq.

Moreover, Pakistan has been placed on the FATF "grey list" three times.

This ~~identifies~~ ^{verifies} the cause that religious extremism leads to the threats of sanctions and isolation on a country.

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Last but not least, the way religious extremism hurts economic development is that it creates hindrances to other sectors like tourism especially religious one. The global reputation formed in the presence of religious extremism or the sanctions a country faces because of religious extremism blocks the movement of people from one country and to another. This creates fiasco for other sectors among them the most affected one is ~~to~~ religious tourism. Evidently, countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan ~~are~~ have tourism sites not only for Hindus and Muslims but also for Sikhs and Budhs. But people ~~and~~ follower of these respective religious fear to visit such places because they are afraid of the narratives they listen. This way the tourism sector of such affected countries hinders and does not contribute much to the economic development of the state.

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In the light of challenges and difficulties discussed, it is essential to apply effective solutions to root out the challenge of rising religious extremism to ensure sustainable economic development. The chief among which is having open and inter-faith dialogue with all the stakeholders of all respective cults and religions. This step is somehow difficult to take but when it is get done, it will pave its way to root out religious extremism. It is because of the reasons that it promotes: understanding and tolerance, building alliances and coalition, addressing grievances and misunderstandings, strengthening community bonds, encouraging positive leadership and creating safe spaces. Overall, open and inter faith dialogue can play a crucial role in undermining the foundations of religious extremism.

The other way to override the issue of religious extremism is by developing and disseminating counter

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narratives to extremist ideologies.

This is a principle remedy in the discourse that it wipes out all brain child and all forms of religious extremism. It does so by discrediting extremist ideologies which can reduce their appeal and influence. Moreover, it promotes positive alternatives to engage youths. In the similar fashion, it builds resilience in communities by fostering the sense of belonging. Besides, it also corrects misinformation and facilitates dialogues. Thus, it is the need of hour to develop and disseminate counter narratives to extremist ideologies.

Another pertinent comprehensive approach to resolve the hurdle of religious extremism is by combating fundamental grievance and one of major among them is identity crisis. The situation of crises push many individuals to adopt the path of extremism. #

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Nevertheless, if such fundamental grievances and crisis are resolved, they can have a better path and have a better destiny.^{The} Fundamental grievances and identity crisis can be resolved by developing the dynamic mechanism to ensure transparency in the system and to increase public engagements. Moreover, with the help of aids and opportunities it can be done. As a result, it provides a sense of belonging, promotes social integration and tolerance, reduces vulnerability to exploitation and enhances educational and economic opportunities. This way the surge of religious extremism can be controlled and contained.

Should all previous strategies prove insufficient, the implementation of a decisive and comprehensive solution becomes imperative. This final approach in terms of carrying out kinetic actions represents a critical intervention

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to steer out religious extremism and bring about lasting resolution. This step, even though a harsh measure, it can show results in short span of time. Equipping the armed forces with all the necessary materials and attacking the red zones where extremism in the form of terrorism is wide spread. This would result in eternal destruction of those who disseminate such narratives. Moreover, these kind of activities have shown the results in Pakistan specially in North and South Waziristan and other hotspot regions of the country. The major operations that Pakistan started were Zarb-e-Azb, Radd-ul-Fasad, Operation Khyber and Operation Al-Mizan. These operations were successful in establishing the writ of the state and rooting terrorism and extremism. Thus, this step is harsh in nature but fruitful in results.

To encapsulate the whole discussion, the problem of religious extremism is witnessed to be on surge around the world in multiple forms such as mob lynching, escalation in terror attacks and forced conversion. This rise in religious extremism is becoming a daunting challenge to the economy of many nation-states. This is impacting by decreasing local investment, disrupting economic activities and minimizing the role of women in economic contributions. Moreover, it deteriorates global reputation and creates hindrances to sectors like tourism. Nevertheless, steps like having open and inter-faith dialogue, disseminating counter narratives and carrying out kinetic actions can only root out the challenge of religious extremism. Thus, the absence of religious extremism have positive impacts on economic growth of a nation-state.

⁶⁶ Economic growth and stability require foundation of peace and security, which extremism undermines (Cruise Zbigniew Brzezinski, 2012).