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Expository Essay

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Topic: Religious Extremism as a challenge to Economic Development

Outline

(1) Introduction

Thesis statement: Religious extremism is a major challenge to economic development. It adversely impacts economy by hindering economic innovation and cooperation. Moreover, religiously-motivated terrorism halts developmental projects, reduces tourism, and lowers Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). However, remedial measures can help economy to prosper by reducing religious extremism.

(2) Religion vs. Religious Extremism: Different Approaches towards Economy

(3) Causes of Religious Extremism in Pakistan

(a) Limited awareness among masses about the actual spirit of religion

(b) Lack of modernization and reinterpretation of religious rulings

(c) Lack of opportunities divert the unemployed youth towards Religious extremism

(d) Rising sectarian tensions fuel religious extremism

(4) Impacts of Religious Extremism on Economic Development

(a) Religious extremism opiate people promoting life of self-denial

(b) Hinders women empowerment and financial stability

(c) Distancing from modern education produces unskilled labour - Madrassah system

(d) Usage of charity funds for organizational gains

(e) Religious terrorism proves a setback for developmental projects

(f) Terrorism reduces tourism and lowers FDI

(g) Intolerance towards other religions leaves no room for economic cooperation

(h) Religious extremism results in civil war:
Case study of Yemen

(g) Imposes war on neighboring countries: Burden on Economy

(5) Remedial Measures to Counter Religious Extremism

- (a) Engaging clergy to spread religious awareness and tolerance
- (b) De-radicalization of religiously-motivated people
- (c) Incorporating modern education in Madrasah system
- (d) Re-interpretation of religious rulings as per modern requirements

(6) Conclusion

Lee Kuan Yew, former Prime Minister of Singapore, visited Pakistan in 1988. While he was leaving, a Pakistani journalist asked him if he had any advice for Pakistanis. According to the celebrated journalist Ardshir, he showed his inability to do so in case of a nation who was more worried about afterlife than life on Earth. The ^{reply of} architect of Singapore's economy shows how the religion has been turned into a hindering factor in economic development. In reality, religion ~~gives~~ ^{gives} guidelines to the people to live satisfied in this world and the Hereafter. It is the religious extremism which curtails the economic development and prosperity. Religious extremism is an entrenched problem of Pakistan. The reason behind it are unawareness about the actual spirit of religion and lack of modernization and reinterpretation of religion. Similarly, socio-economic disparities and sectarian tensions fuel the religious extremism. Consequently, this extremism is hindering the Pakistan's economic prosperity in many ways: promoting life of monasticism, curbing financial empowerment of women, and ~~is~~ causing terrorism in the country. The terrorism, in turn, stops developmental projects,

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tourism, and inflow of foreign direct investment. In order to prevent these losses, pragmatic measures should be taken. Hence, religious extremism is a major challenge to economic development. It adversely impacts economy by hindering economic, innovation, and collaboration, and promoting religiously motivated terrorism. However, remedial measures can help to reduce religious extremism and promote economic progress.

Before delving into the causes behind religious extremism and its impacts on economy, it is important to differentiate religion and religious extremism, and their approach to economy. All the religions of the world promote the social and economic well-being of people. Islam is a religion of peace and prosperity. It guides its followers to achieve prosperity and progress in this worldly life and life Hereafter. Allah Almighty says in Quran: "But seek, with what God has given you, the Home of the Hereafter, and do not neglect your share of this world (Al-Qasas: 77)." This verse from Holy Quran beautifully explains the significance of utilizing

the resources given by Almighty Allah for economic prosperity in this world. In contrast, religious extremists cross the limits set by the religion. They are fundamentalists ^{who} reject any innovation and term it as something out of the religion. In short, religion itself does not serve as an obstacle on the way of economic development, it is the religious extremism which do so.

The rise of religious extremism in Pakistan is a result of many factors, chief among them is the limited awareness about the actual spirit of religion among masses. The actual understanding of religion is very important. The lesson religion teaches is to develop peace and prosperity. In Pakistan, there is no institutionalized structure for teaching religion. Children are taught religion by their parents or the local madrassahs. ^{most of} In Madrassahs, students are given the religious knowledge, but they are also radicalized. For instance, Lal Masjid scandal revealed how the ~~at~~ thousands of students were radicalized and prepared to

fight Afghan Jihad. They are taught a limited and restricted version of Islam. Thus, lack of institutionalization results in students of religion getting limited awareness about Islam.

Similarly, resistance towards modernization and reinterpretation of religious teachings is another reason of religious extremism. Extremists are fundamentalists and reject any innovation in the religion. With rapidly changing dynamics, it is imperative to reinterpret the religious rulings as per the modern requirement. Islam ^{proposes} ~~has~~ two methods for this purpose:

Ijtihad and Ijma. However, these both methods are not given due importance. They are only the way through which Muslims can apply and benefit from religion. Abul Ala Maudoodi emphasized the significance of Ijtihad and said that it makes the Islam dynamic. Hence, religious extremism is a result of not doing Ijtihad and Ijma.

Apart from true understanding of Islam, socio-economic factors also play a key role

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in rising religious extremism. Lack of economic opportunities and poverty make youth despair. Religious Terrorist organizations find it as an opportunity and recruit these people in their organization. They completely brainwash their previous ideologies and teach them extremist ideologies. Major organizations such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan recruit people from backward areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. They are more prone to religious extremism. Thus, socio-economic backwardness is another driver of religious extremism.

Along with socio-economic factors, rising sectarian tensions are also fuelling religious extremism. Pakistan is a country with a lot of diversity; apart from ethnic diversity, different sects and subsets of Islam exist in it. All these sects considered themselves infallible while other sects as out of Islam. This result in rising tensions among them. People of one sect cannot pray in the mosque of other sect. This result in disruption of social fabric.

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Islam is a moderate religion and criticizes the extremism. Allah Almighty says in Quran: "Thus we made you a moderate community" (Al-Baqarah 134). This moderate behavior is not found in most of the ~~all~~ religious sects resulting in extremism. Thus, religious extremism is rising due to severe tensions among various sects.

Religious extremism is detrimental for peaceful existence of humanity. One of the major impact of religious extremists is the promotion of life of self-denial. Religious extremists have an ideology that ^{living} leaving a life of self-denial and monasticism will bring happiness and prosperity in the life Hereafter. Resultantly, people do not involve in the economic activities and suffer from extreme poverty. Such people do not utilize their abilities for economic development resulting in stagnation. However, Islam clearly rejects this idea in Chapter Al-Hadeed: As for monasticism it is they who invented it. In short, religious extremists glorify the monastic lifestyle which is an economic setback

for people and country.

Another major concern is hindering the women empowerment and financial stability by religious extremists. They want women to live in houses without involving and participating in economic sphere. They misinterpret the Islamic rulings and put unnecessary restrictions on women. For instance, Taliban government in Afghanistan is notorious for violating the rights of women. Recently, ^{it} they have banned the nursing and other healthcare courses for women. This shows that religious extremism result in financial instability and dependence of women. In contrast, Holy Quran ensures the women economic rights in the following verse: For men is the share of what they have earned; and for women is the share of what they have earned (Chapter Nissa: 32). Hence, extremism also curb the financial independence of women.

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Furthermore, Extremism in religion distances the modern education and focus only on religious education. Modern education is necessary for progress, including economic development, in this rapidly changing era. 21st century is the century of technological advancement where skills are imperative for earning money. But extremists see the technological advancement with colonial lens and consider it as a part of western culture. On these grounds, they reject modern education and focus on madrassah education. The students graduating from madrassah are unskilled having no skill which helps them to get employed. Hence, unemployment is the result of lack of skills, which are not taught in madrassahs.

Not only unemployment, but religious extremism also result in misallocation of charity funds. Zakat and voluntary donations are means of helping the poor and circulation of wealth in the society. However, religious organizations use these means

inappropriately for their own organizational gains. They collect funds on the name of charity and then use them for running the organizations. Al-Furqan Foundation Trust and Al-Rehman Welfare organization are Pakistan-based charitable organization ~~are~~ involved in funding the militant outfits in Afghanistan and Pakistan including Lashkar-e-Taiba (Rakhsanda Iqbal, Sources of Terrorism Financing in Pakistan, 2021). This shows that charity funds are provided to militant organisations which result in economic setback.

Militant organizations, financed by the charitable ^{to} organizations, carry terrorist attacks in Pakistan causing the developmental projects to halt their progress. Terrorist attacks cause physical damage and casualties. Resultantly, the ongoing projects are stopped. In Pakistan, Chinese projects and personnel are at hit list. In the last year, a number of terrorist attacks were conducted by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and other outfits. As a consequence, the projects under China-Pakistan

Economic Corridor (CPEC) are delayed. Dr. Rashid Jamal in his book Pakistan-China: All Weather Strategic Partnership states that Pakistan fails to materialize the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) due to the aftermath of 9/11 and terrorism. If SEZs were ⁱⁿ materialized, it would be a ^{paradigm} paradigm shift for Pakistan's economy. Hence, religiously motivated terrorism halts the economic development.

Along with halting economic infrastructural projects, religiously-motivated terrorism also results in reducing ^{ed} Tourism and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). For Pakistan, tourism is the largest potential source of income having diverse tourist sites. Similarly, FDI is imperatively necessary for economic development of developing economies like Pakistan. But terrorist attacks destroy the country's reputation and label it as an unsafe destination for tourism and business investment. Resultantly, both activities are decreased at large. In the aftermath of

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9/11 and terrorism by religious militant outfits, Pakistan's tourism ~~was~~ ^{is} reduced to a large extent. According to an estimate, tourism in Pakistan was reduced to 97% between 2011 to 2020 (Gallup Pak, Statistical Yearbook, 2022). Hence, reduction in FDI and tourism ~~are~~ ^{is} a direct impact of religious extremism.

Moreover, economic development is also hindered by intolerance caused by religious extremism. Intolerance is the main characteristic of extremism which leaves no space for other ideologies and religions. In absence of tolerance, cooperation and integration are reduced, while economic development depends higher economic integration and collaboration. For instance, Middle East is the richest region in terms of fossil fuel production, which is the most demanding commodity. But the region is not economically developed due to extremist behavior of sunni and shia sects in the region. For instance, Yemen's ^{Houthi Rebels} attacked Saudi Aramco Oil facilities in September 2019.

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Two of the facilities were completely shut down causing loss of 5% global oil supply.

In such situation, neighbor countries cannot collaborate in economic sphere. Resultantly, economic development becomes a distant dream due to lack of cooperation.

Another serious concern of religious extremism is civil war which destroys local industry, agriculture and institutions. Civil wars always bring economic instability and reduces human prosperity. Yemen is the more appropriate example in this case. Yemeni government is Sunni, while Al-Houthi rebels are followers of Zaidi Shi'ite sect. Both are in civil war since many decades, as Houthi rebels are aimed at overthrowing the government and establishing a form of government which aligns with their own religious ideology. Yemen is suffering from humanitarian crisis. It is the most unstable and poorest country in the middle East. Similar is the situation in Somalia, Afghanistan and Nigeria. Hence, religious extremism results in internal instability and poor economic

situation:

Not only ^{civil} war, [&] Religious extremism also spreads war across the borders. Extremist religious leadership imposes war on neighboring countries. Such conflicts result in economic hardships faced by the involved countries. Moreover, global economy is disturbed by ~~disturbed~~ ^{disrupted} international trade. It is clearly visible that Israel's far-right Zionist Government is responsible for widespread destruction and genocide in Gaza and Lebanon. Israel is backed by western countries and provided with military and economic aid, while poor people of Gaza and Lebanon are facing the brunt of Israeli wrath. Such destructions and casualties are the major setbacks to economic development. According to an estimate, globally \$2.4 trillion are spent on the purchase of weapons. This shows how religious extremism is an obstacle on the way of economic development.

Thus, it is established that economic development cannot be achieved without diminishing religious extremism. First and foremost measure, in this situation, required is mobilising clergy and religious leadership to spread awareness about the true spirit of religion. They should be tasked to teach the lesson of tolerance and acceptance towards other religions and sects. As the Quranic verse goes: There is no compulsion in religion (Al-Quran). The life of Holy Prophet (PBUH) was full of tolerance, forgiveness, and collaboration. He established a prosperous welfare state of Madina where along with Muslims, Jews and Christians also got equal rights. Hence, by teaching the real essence of religion, religious leadership can play a significant role in reducing religious extremism.

Similarly, the government should work to de-radicalize the already religious extremist and radicalized youth. De-radicalization of youth is highly necessary because youth is the key to inclusive economic development.

For this purpose, a number of initiatives are required which could teach and rehabilitate the radicalized people. Moreover, addressing the socio-economic grievances is also of utmost importance. When all the citizens would get equal socio-economic opportunities, they would be less prone to religious extremism. In short, the government must take pragmatic measures to prevent the further ~~deradicalization~~^{radicalization} and deradicalize the extremists.

Another significant measure in this regard is incorporation of modern education in madrasah system. Almost 8 to 9% of our Pakistani citizens get their education from madrasah. As the madrasah system does not include modern technology and skill-based education, the graduates from the madrasah would be unskilled. For this purpose, the government should involve the stakeholders to integrate the demand-driven courses in the education system. The problem is that madrasahs are not registered officially due to which government is unable to introduce such initiatives. Therefore,

it is necessary to register the madrasahs first and then introduce modern education in their curriculum. In short, introducing modern education in madrasah is imperative for economic progress of the nation.

Last but not the least, reinterpretation of religious rulings is also of equal importance. According to modern dynamics, there is a demand for expanding the religious commands on the new topics. Ijtihad, Ijma, Analogy, and Istisna are methods through which modern reinterpretation of Islam ^{can be done.} Allama Iqbal in his book Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam emphasizes the significance of Ijtihad and says that muslims must not follow the religious authorities blindly and ponder themselves about the signs of Allah Almighty to find the truth and reality. In short, it is very significant to reinterpret the religion to resolve the modern problems leaving no room for fundamentalism and religious extremism.

In conclusion, it can be said that major obstacle on the way of economic growth and development is religious extremism.

There are many drivers of extremism including lack of actual religious understanding, reinterpretation of religious rulings, and rising sectarian tensions. It adversely impacts the economy of the state, ^{and} region and even global economy. Firstly, it prevents innovation in economy and hinder the women financial instability.

Secondly, religious extremist organizations use charity funds to conduct terrorist attacks. Terrorism, in turn, has multifaceted effects such as delay in infrastructural projects, reduction in tourism, and decline in foreign direct investment.

Thirdly, it leads towards civil war and international conflicts. Such conflicts destroy economy and cause a humanitarian crisis. Therefore, it is necessary to curb the religious extremism.

For this purpose, government must engage clergy, madrassah administrations, and rehabilitation centers. By utilizing the abilities of all the stakeholders, religious extremism can be reduce while prospering the ^{the} economy of country.