

The Rise of Extremism in Pakistan: A Consequence of Foreign Interventions or Domestic Failures?

* Outline

1) Introduction

2) The current state of extremism in Pakistan

3) Domestic failures ^{is} ~~are~~ the primary cause of the rise of extremism in Pakistan (Thesis)

3a) Weak state governance and policy inconsistency.

- (i- Shifting alliances with militant groups
- ii- Out of 70,000 hate speeches, 5% resulted in conviction - Punjab CTD data, 2022)

3b) Politicization and mainstreaming of extremism.

(TLP secured 2.9 million votes (25.1%, 4th largest party) in 2024 national elections - The New International, Dec 2024)

3c) Failure to reform the Education system

(out of 35000 madrasahs only 18000 are registered - Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2023)

3d) Socio-Economic inequality and youth unemployment

(Youth unemployment rate in Pak = 29%, highest in Balochistan (34.9%) and KP (29%))

— Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023 Census

3e) Lack of Counter-Narrative and Civil Society engagement

("Pakistan lacks a structural approach to counter-radical narratives" — National Internal Security Policy, 2018-23)

4) Foreign Intervention: A catalyst for rise of extremism in Pakistan

(Anti-thesis)

4a) US involvement in Afghanistan, turned Pakistan a launchpad for Jihad

(During Soviet-Afghan war, The US and Saudi Arabia funneled \$3 billion in weapon and funds to Afghan mujahiddin in Pakistan — Steve Coll — "Ghost wars")

4b) Radical groups gained popularity by exploiting anti-west narratives

("Anti-western sentiment is instrumental in jihadist group survival and growth in Pak and Afghanistan" — RAND, 2021)

4c) Foreign Funding of Extremist Madrassas

(Report by ICG, Pakistan: Madrassa, Extremism and Militancy, 2004)

4d) Indian influence in Balochistan and KP
(2016, Kulbhushan Jadhav case)

4e) Influence of foreign media on Pakistani society.

(Foreign media portrays Pakistan in an unfairly negative light, leading to higher sympathy for groups resisting 'western aggression' — Gallup Pakistan (2018))

5) Domestic failures as the Primary cause of Extremism Despite Foreign Intervention
(Synthesis)

5a) Pakistan allowed foreign supported terrorists grow unchecked after war
(TTP attacks rose by 60% after Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in Aug 2021 — PIPS, 22)

5b) Radical groups rose on foreign narrative, thrived through local legitimacy
(Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamaat-ud-Dawa rose on Kashmir narrative, later legitimized via open charities & rallies)

5c) Pakistan's failure to regulate madrassas, allowed foreign funded extremist teachings flourish.

(TTP and Afghan Taliban actively recruit from madrassa networks in FIP, Balochistan and South Punjab — UNSC Monitoring Team, 2023)

5d) Poor opportunities pushed youth to militancy.

(Areas with highest militant activity have Pakistan lowest HDI - South Waziristan (0.449), Dera Bugti (0.285))

5e) Unfulfilled role of Pakistani Media in Countering Extremism

("Less than 10% of national media coverage focuses on Balochistan, South Waziristan and Gilgit Baltistan" -

Media Matters for Democracy, Report 2021)

6) Conclusion

Over 40% of Pakistan's population lives in poverty and nearly 23 million children are out of school. In this vacuum of opportunity, extremism has not just survived - it has thrived. When the state fails to educate, employ and engage its youth, someone else will - and in Pak, that someone was extremist. The rise of extremism in Pakistan is primarily the result of domestic failure - namely poor governance, an unreformed education system and deep rooted social inequalities - while foreign interventions have acted as contributing

factors. Weak State governance and policy inconsistency, politicisation of extremism and lack of counter-narrative and civil society engagement — are the issues that paved the way for the rise of extremism in Pakistan. Although, foreign interventions, such as: US involvement in Afghanistan, foreign funding of extremist madrassas and foreign media influence, played the role of catalyst for the rise of extremism in Pakistan, but it is domestic failure that sustained the terrorism. When Pakistan allows foreign supported terrorists grow unchecked, gives legitimacy to radical groups, and does not provide youth with desired opportunities — extremism will be the result.

The current terrorism situation in Pakistan is severe and worsening. Pakistan is ranked 2nd on the Global Terrorism Index 2025. Terrorism related activities in Pakistan rose by 45% with 1081 deaths in 2024 up from 748 in 2023. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) remains Pakistan's deadliest terrorist faction. In 2024, this

group carried out 482 attacks, resulting in 558 deaths. Baloch Insurgency (BLA, BLF etc) has ^{also} sharply intensified. The Jaffar Express hijacking in March 2025 killed 64 people. Islamic State - Khorasan Province (ISKP) carried out a suicide bombing in February at Darul Uloom Haqqania seminary in KPK, killing 8 people. Groups like Tehreek-e-Labbait Pakistan (TLP) have fostered ~~have~~ violent ~~fast~~ mob activity especially toward ^{minority} groups. April 2025, an Ahmadi man was beaten to death & during a protest linked to TLP (Dawn, Punjab's belated countering violent Extremism Act step, June 29, 2025). Along with this, some proxy groups are also operating. The Resistance Front (TRF) - perceived as a rebrand of LeT - underscores its ongoing operations in Jammu and Kashmir, coordinated from Pakistani territory. Hence, terrorism in Pakistan is not just continuing - it is evolving and spreading with deadliest attacks.

The primary cause of the rise of extremism in Pakistan is domestic failure. Weak state governance

and policy inconsistency played the role in this regard. Shifting alliances with militant group, resulted in ~~resent~~ resentment and revenge driven radicalization (e.g. TTP). Pakistan's weak governance system also helped such groups to grow. National Action Plan 2014, was framed after APS Peshawar attack. Many of its clauses (such as: curb hate speeches, regulating madrassas) are still not completed. Out of 70,000+ hate speeches, fewer than 5% resulted in conviction. (Punjab CTD data, 2022). Hence, domestic failure caused terrorism to rise in Pakistan.

Politicization and mainstreaming of extremism also promotes intolerance in society. Incidents like Jaranwala, Punjab (2023), ~~where~~ where mobs burned churches and homes of Christians after a false blasphemy rumor - are the result of intolerant feelings in the society towards minorities. Groups like Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) entered mainstream politics through popular religious slogans. Electoral legitimacy gave extremist ~~voices~~ public credibility.

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TLP secured nearly 2.9 million votes (25.1%) in 2024 national elections, became the 4th largest party in the National Assembly (**The News International, Dec 2024**). So, extremist and intolerant feelings in society, protected by electoral legitimacy are completely harmful to social cohesion.

The failure of Pakistan to reform the education system is also one of the reasons for the rise of extremism in Pakistan. During the Afghan war, madrassas were founded by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait to propagate jihadist ideology. Pakistan has over 35000 madrassas, only 18000 are registered (**Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2023**). ^{some of} The unregulated madrassas are promoting extremist ideologies in Pakistan.

Socio-economic inequalities and youth unemployment inculcate frustration in youth. This frustration ^{was} is exploited by many extremist groups. 64% of Pakistan's population is under 30 (**UNDP, 2021**). Youth (15-24 years) unemployment rate in Pakistan is 29%, highest in Balochistan (34.9%) and KP (29.1%) (**Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023 Census**).

Balochistan and KP are the areas with highest extremist activities.

Lack of counter-narrative and civil society engagement make extremist narratives flourish in Pakistani society. Violent extremist narratives go uncontested in public and media spaces. "Pakistan lacks a structural approach to counter-radical narratives" (National Internal Security Policy, 2018-23). Over 80% of radicalized youth in recent CTD cases were influenced via social media or YouTube sermons.

Foreign intervention also played the role of catalyst for rise of extremism in Pakistan. US involvement in Afghan war turned Pakistan as launchpad for jihad. "During Soviet-Afghan war, The US and Saudi Arabia funneled \$3 billion in weapons and funds to Afghan mujahideen in Pakistan". (Steve Coll, "Ghost wars"). This ~~lead~~ led to the militarization of Pakistani society and the proliferation of jihadi madrassas near Afghan border.

Many
Some radical groups gained

popularity by exploiting anti-west narratives. Most of Pakistanis viewed the US unfavourably post drone strikes - this helped extremists appear as 'defenders' - "Anti-western narrative sentiment is instrumental in jihadist group survival and growth in Pakistan and Afghanistan". (RANS, 2021). This shows that groups in Pakistan exploit anti-US / Israel sentiment in propaganda.

Unregulated madrassas, backed with foreign funding is another factor that fueled the rise of extremism in Pakistan. During Afghan war, madrassas were funded by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait to propagate jihadist ideology. "10-15% of madrassas promote jihadist or extremist ideologies, and many of these are directly or indirectly funded by foreign donors, especially Saudi Arabia and the Gulf" (Pakistan's Madrassas: The Need for Reform, Brookings Institute Report (2016)). Hence, foreign intervention is playing a vital role in escalating terrorism in Pakistan.

Many incidents of extremism in Balochistan and KP are linked with the

Indian involvement in the region. Groups like BLA and BLF have claimed external help in their urban operations (attack on Karachi Stock Exchange, 2020). In 2016, **Kulbhushan Jadhav**, an Indian national was arrested in Balochistan. He confessed to support Baloch insurgents ~~finances~~ in order to destabilize Pakistan via terrorism and threaten CPEC.

Foreign media has always portrayed Pakistan negatively by linking terrorism with Pakistan. This has created the anti-west sentiments among Pakistanis. "over 40% of respondents ~~said~~ said foreign media portrays Pakistan in an unfairly negative light, leading to mistrust in govt and higher sympathy for groups resisting 'western aggression'." (**Gallup Pakistan, 2018**). Foreign media unfair depiction of Pakistan, increased support for anti-west extremist groups in Pakistan.

Despite foreign interventions, it is Pakistan's domestic failures that caused extremism to evolve, escalate and spread in country. Pakistan allowed foreign supported terrorists grow unchecked after war, "TTP attacks

rose by 60% after Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in August, 2021".

(PIPS, 2022) • Afghan Taliban and TTP have safe havens in Afghanistan and border impurities are making their ~~easy~~ ^{easy in} access to Pakistan.

It is true that many extremist narratives rose on foreign narratives, but they thrived through local legitimacy. Selective crackdowns and renaming of banned groups are loopholes in the system. Last one - Taiba and Jamat - ud - Dawar rose on Kashmir narrative, later legitimized via open charities, and rallies. Such acts question the credibility of Pakistan efforts to counter-extremism.

Although foreign powers funded madrasahs to promote their ideologies, but it is Pakistan's duty to properly regulate madrasah system. Implementation of Madrasah Registration Ordinance repeatedly failed due to political appeasement. "TTP and Afghan Taliban actively recruit from madrasah network in KP, Balochistan and South Punjab". (UNSC Monitoring Team, 2023). Many

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of arrested militants have madrasah background - 'over 33% of militants arrested (2001-2015) had madrasah background, mainly from Punjab and KP seminaries, (Pakistan Interior Ministry). Hence, regulation of madrasah is unavoidable in order to counter-extremism in Pakistan and can only be done by the collective will of the state.

Poor opportunities and social inequalities pushed youth to militancy. When young people feel disconnected from political system, militancy offers a sense of power or revenge for state neglect. Pakistan ranks 168th out of 193 countries in Human Development Index (HDI Report, 2025). Areas with highest militant activity have Pakistan's lowest HDI - South Waziristan with 0.449^{HDI} and literacy rate 32%, Dera Bugti with 0.285 HDI and literacy rate 34%, and Bajaur with 0.449 HDI and literacy rate 36%. Alienation due to poverty and lack of development contributed to youth recruitment in extremist groups.

Media plays an important role in countering - extremist narratives and in making people aware of what is right and what is wrong. Unfortunately, Pakistan media failed to ~~to~~ play its role in countering extremism. "Less than 10% of national media coverage focuses on Balochistan, South Waziristan and Gilgit Baltistan" (**Media Matters for Democracy, Report 2021**). Poor representation of marginalized regions created a vacuum that allows foreign outlets (like BBC, VoA) to dominate narratives in these regions.

In conclusion, it can be logically claimed that the rise of extremism in Pakistan is primarily due to domestic failures. Policy inconsistency, unregulated education system and social inequality are some of the ills that contributed to the rise of extremism in Pakistan. However, foreign intervention is acted as catalyst to intensify extremism in Pakistan, but it is country's domestic failures that lie at the core of the problem.

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When ideology is married
to economic desperation, militancy
becomes an attractive career option.

— Mohammad Hanif
(journalist and author)

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