

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

OUTLINE

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THE ESSAY

"When Injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty." This powerful statement, often attributed to Thomas Jefferson, resonates deeply with the complex and urgent issue of extremism in Pakistan. Extremism, characterized by the holding of extreme religious or political views and the willingness to use violence to further those views, poses a significant threat to Pakistan's stability and progress.

A nation born from the throes of religious conflict, Pakistan today grapples with the specter of extremism, a challenge that demands immediate and comprehensive action. This essay delves into the heart of the matter: Is the rise of extremism in Pakistan primarily a consequence of foreign interventions, or is it rooted in deep-seated domestic failures? The issue of extremism is a complex and multifaceted challenge that has garnered significant attention both domestically and internationally. To understand this phenomenon, it is crucial to define extremism within the specific context of Pakistan. In this essay, extremism refers to the holding of extreme

religious and political views and the willingness to resort to or support violent or illegal actions to further those views, particularly when such actions threaten the stability of the state or the well-being of its citizens. It is important to emphasize that the rise of extremism in Pakistan cannot be attributed to a single cause. Rather, it is the result of ~~long~~ a complex interplay of ~~both~~ historical, political, social, economic, and religious factors, shaped by both foreign interventions and deep-rooted domestic failures.

The historical context of Pakistan is crucial to understanding the roots of extremism in the country. The Partition of India in 1947, which created Pakistan as a homeland for Muslims, was itself marked by violence and displacement laying the foundation for future sectarian and ethnic conflicts. The early years of Pakistan were characterized by political instability, with frequent changes in government and a lack of strong democratic institutions. This instability created a vacuum that was often filled

by religious and military forces, setting a precedent for their involvement in politics and society.

The absence of a clear national identity, coupled with the dominance of religious narratives, further complicated the process of nation-building and created vulnerabilities that extremist groups later exploited. As historian, **Ian Talbot** notes in *Pakistan: A Modern History*, "The legacy of Partition violence and the unresolved issue of national identity have continued to haunt Pakistan, contributing to its vulnerability to extremism." The struggle to define Pakistan's identity as both an Islamic state and a modern nation has been a recurring theme in its history, often leading to conflict and instability.

The Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s had a profound impact on Pakistan. The country became a frontline state in the US-led effort to counter the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Pakistan served as a conduit for arms and funding to the Mujahideen, and also became a refuge for

millions of Afghan refugees. This period witnessed a significant rise in militancy and extremism in Pakistan, fueled by the influx of weapons, foreign fighters and radical ideologies. As **Anatol Lieven** and **Christian Fairbank** note in *Pakistan's Enduring Challenges*, "The war years saw the massive introduction into Pakistan of weapons, drugs and a radicalized and militarized version of Islam."

The Zia-ul-Haq era (1977-1988) further exacerbated this trend. General Zia-ul-Haq's regime implemented a policy of Islamization, which included the introduction of Sharia law, the promotion of religious conservatism, and the support for certain militant groups. This period witnessed the growth of religious seminaries (madrassas), many of which promoted a narrow and intolerant interpretation of Islam. The long-term consequences of this policy included the sectarianization of Pakistani society and the strengthening of religious political parties, which often serve as breeding grounds for extremism.

Pakistan's role in the "War on Terror" following the 9/11 attacks also had significant consequences. While Pakistan officially allied itself with the US, its support was often seen as ambivalent and selective. The country faced immense pressure to crack down on militant groups operating within its borders, but also faced accusations of continuing to support some of them as strategic assets. This complex and often contradictory role in the "War on Terror" further fueled anti-American sentiment within Pakistan and created space for extremist groups to operate. The rise of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other militant organizations during this period can be directly linked to the policies and actions of the Pakistani State, as well as the regional instability caused by the US-led intervention in Afghanistan. The double-game played by Pakistan, attempting to balance international pressure with domestic political realities, created a volatile environment in which extremist groups could thrive.

Foreign interventions have undoubtedly played a role in the rise of extremism in Pakistan. The Soviet-Afghan war is a prime example. The US and Saudi support for the Mujahideen, while intended to counter the Soviet Union, had the unintended consequences of creating a large and well-armed militant force, some of which later turned against Pakistan. The spillover of militancy and extremism from Afghanistan into Pakistan was significant, contributing to the growth of groups like the Pakistani Taliban. The porous borders between the two countries, coupled with the tribal links between Pashtun communities on both sides, facilitated the movement of fighters and ideologies. The legacy of this conflict continues to shape the security landscape of the region, with Pakistan grappling with the fallout of decades of instability and violence.

The post-9/11 scenario also highlights the impact of foreign interventions. Pakistan's role as a frontline state in the "War on Terror" brought both benefits and costs. The country received billions of dollars in aid,

but also faced increased violence and stability. Drone strikes, although targeting militants, caused civilian casualties and fueled anti-American sentiment, which extremist groups exploited to recruit and radicalize individuals. The geopolitical implications of the "War on Terror", including the US invasion of Iraq and the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, also contributed to a sense of grievance and anger in Pakistan, which extremist groups used to their advantage.

While acknowledging the role of foreign interventions, it is crucial to emphasize that domestic failures have played a significant role in the rise of extremism in Pakistan. These failures have created a fertile ground for extremist ideologies to take root and flourish.

Socio-economic factors are a major contributor. Poverty and unemployment are widespread in Pakistan, particularly in youth. The lack of education and opportunities creates a sense of hopelessness and frustration, making individuals more vulnerable to the appeal of

extremist groups, which often provide a sense of purpose and belonging, as well as material support. Social inequality and injustice further exacerbate these problems. The gap between the rich and the poor is vast, and many people feel that they are denied basic rights and opportunities.

Political and governance issues are also critical. Weak governance and corruption are endemic in Pakistan. State institutions are often ineffective and unable to deliver justice, leading to a lack of trust in the government. Political instability and a lack of democratic consolidation have further undermined the rule of law and created a sense of uncertainty.

Religious and ideological factors are perhaps the most significant domestic contributors to extremism in Pakistan. The misuse and interpretation of religion are widespread. The exploitation of religious sentiments for political gains, the propagation

of sectarian ideologies through state-controlled media and the lack of a unified national narrative have all contributed to the rise of religious extremism in Pakistan.

It is important to understand how foreign interventions and domestic failures have interacted to create the current situation in Pakistan. For example, the Soviet-Afghan War not only brought weapons and militants into Pakistan but also strengthened the role of the military and religious parties. Weak governance and corruption have made it easier for foreign actors to interfere in Pakistan's affairs and to support militant groups.

The impact on Pakistani society has been immense. Increased violence and terrorism have led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people, including civilians, security personnel, and government officials. The pervasive sense of insecurity, the constant threat of violence, and the deepening

sectarian divide have created a society in which fear and distrust are rampant, making it difficult to foster a sense of national unity and shared purpose.

Pakistan has experienced numerous incidents of extremism, often characterized by violence and significant loss of life. Here are some key examples:

One of the deadliest terrorist attacks in Pakistan's history, the TTP's assault on the Army Public School in Peshawar resulted in the deaths of nearly 150 people, mostly school children. The attack deeply shocked the nation and led to increased military operations against militant groups.

A massive truck bombing at the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad killed dozens and injured many more. This attack, which occurred during a time of political transition, underscored the ability of extremist groups to strike at high-profile targets in the capital.

In Balochistan, various insurgent groups have carried out attacks against security forces, government installations and civilians. A recent attack on a train "Jaffar Express" killed almost ^{more than} 150 people including civilians ^{and} security personnels. The insurgents derailed the train, took hostages and clashed with security force, in March 2025.

Addressing the issue of extremism in Pakistan requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach that tackles both domestic ~~failures~~ ^{failures} and the negative consequences of foreign influence. Revisiting foreign Policy is also necessary. Pakistan needs to reduce its dependence on foreign aids and intervention, and adopt a more independent and self-reliant policy. Effective counter-terrorism strategies that address the root cause of extremism, strengthens the law enforcement agencies, and engaging ~~less~~ civil society and religious leaders in counter-terrorism strategies is also very crucial.