

ROOTING OUT RADICALISM: EMPOWERING COMMUNITY RESISTANCE TO CVE IN PAKISTAN THROUGH RELIGION, EDUCATION AND POLICY IN CVE INTERVENTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Violent extremism remains a dynamic problem and societies in many parts of the world have suffered and will require effective early interventions implemented on a community basis. This paper conducts research on the Pakistani P/CVE multidimensional approaches to preventing and countering violent extremism and the role of religion, education, public policy, and gender inclusion in the context of considering the roots and helping communities to become stronger. Religious leaders and institutions are playing an important role in ensuring religious tolerance, inter-faith harmony, and peace especially in areas where extremist ideologies tend to be covered in a religious jargon. Such actors are perfectly placed to give viable truth-based arguments to destroy the ideological justifications of the violence. On socio-economic level, poverty, unemployment and social alienation often become causes of radicalization. To respond to these weaknesses, specific activities need to be conducted to ensure access to education, establish the potential of livelihoods, and establish the marginalized groups in the mainstream of the nation. Nevertheless, only economic solutions are not enough. Some psychological aspects as well, including identity crisis, sense of injustice, social alienation become an important part of the radicalization process. It is therefore necessary to use a multidimensional strategy where economic, educational and psychosocial strategies are used together. Another aspect about the study is that women are becoming central players in post-radicalizing and prevention as well. The empowerment of women based on education and their roles as leaders have also been identified to boost resilience at the grassroots level based on gender-inclusive approaches. Moreover, education, especially civic education and values-based education is an effective tool in the development of pluralism and long-term social cohesion. The policy frameworks in Pakistan such as the Paigham-e-Pakistan declaration are also showing a positive step towards tackling the extremist ideologies. The application of digital resources and artificial intelligence is already becoming a crucial area of this battle, especially the surveillance and disruption of online radicalization. The study ends with policy recommendations that are compatible with the international best practices of realizing sustainable peace and resilient societies.

INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism has been a major threat to peace, security and development in the world. The manifestations of it have however, in recent

decades been grappled with by both state and non-state actors and operations can take the form of transnational terrorist networks, or even local

extremist movements. Such groups tend to take advantage of political and economic imbalances, ideological emptiness and even social imbalances to recruit and brain-wash people and destabilize entire regions. According to the United Nations, violent extremism compromises human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, which not only impact current security but also slows down achievement of long term objectives (UN, 2015). The spread (and strength) of extremist ideologies has been expanded by technological developments especially communication and social media and are now increasingly becoming decentralized and transnational in nature. It is against this background that the development of resilient societies that are able to deal with the causes of extremism has become an imperative world necessity. Preventing the occurrence of violence is not the only aspect of resilience but rather is the ability to enable communities to be resistant and resurgent to ideological manipulation, social dividing lines and economic great powers. UNESCO (2017) confirms that to prevent radicalization driving into violence, there is a need to have preventive measures specific prevention strategies, especially taking place in the education field and through an inclusive governance and community empowerment. In the current paper, we examine the process of how Pakistan as a nation on the boundaries of geopolitical strained conflict and internal instabilities has been dealing with the issue of violent extremism. It emphasizes on religion, education, policy and engagement at community level as prime points in the counter-extremism strategy in Pakistan. The research uses a qualitative approach to analysis as a secondary source since it involves multiple sources of information such as government policy, scholarly literature, and the international framework to identify the strengths and gap in preventing violent extremism in Pakistan. Pakistani context is especially interesting because of the fact that the country has a complex socio-political background, history of religious militancy, as well as attempts in the past years to make ideological and institutional changes. The evidence can be seen in the Paigham-e-Pakistan declaration, investment into educational reform, and greater involvement of women in peacebuilding, which are just steps towards the new direction that Pakistan is taking. Nevertheless, a set of structural issues, such as social and economic disparities, poor civic education, and politicization

of religion, still cause obstacles to the sustainability of such efforts. The experience of Pakistan is worth learning to help other countries that struggle to achieve resilient pluralistic and peaceful societies.

Literature Review

The Way to the Proactive CVE Policy in Pakistan

The historical course of violent extremism manifests itself in terms of genocide, mass killings, etc. in the whole world. Modern agents are the digitalization, illegal financial outflows, and weak borders, as well as the exploitation of religious and ethnic identity. A strategy with the accent on the state sovereignty and territorial integrity would frequently lead counterterrorism and, in its turn, host the War on Terror (WOT) as a military intervention. In contrast to CVE, more non-kinetic, policy-oriented approaches are more substantial within CVE, which also necessitates both the state and the society. Complicated patterns of violent extremism in Pakistan need an active and comprehensive policy of CVE (Fayyaz, 2024).

Religion as an Evil Twin

Hafez (2020) discloses that religion is both a source and remedy of violent extremism. Most organizations that practice extremism tend to distort religion to justify their wrongful deeds but Hafez indicate the truth that religious leaders and institutions are in the most appropriate position to oppose this kind of narrative. It is through such messages about peace, tolerance and coexistence as suggested by religious leaders can dismantle extremist ideologies thus guiding individuals facing the risk of being radicalized to other paths.

Social Economic and Psychological Forces

The socioeconomic conditions relationship in radicalization was an object of the extensive study. It is a well-developed fact and evidence that there are major determinants that are driven by economic instability, a high rate of unemployment and absence of academic opportunities, which affect radicalization- according to the study by Krieger and Meierrieks (2016). People here in marginalized groups can opt to follow extremist ideologies as a result of their frustration at their circumstances of belonging. Therefore, the underlying causes require a complex solution to intensify accessibility of education, generate jobs,

and ensure social unity in such de facto isolated neighborhoods.

Countering Violent Extremism and Gender

Brown, K. E. (2023) notes that it is eminently true that the level of focus on women as part of the counterterrorism (CT) approach in general and dealing with countering violent extremism (CVE) in particular has grown considerably, especially at the policy and research level. This can partly be attributed to the significant rise in the figures of women in both violent extremism and acts of terrorism (made apparent by the targeted recruitment aims of so-called Islamic State); to the intellectual shift in thinking on the subject whereby emphasis has now changed towards understanding the terrorist action on the one hand and radicalization on the other; and the much-hyped policy relative to the prevention and deterrence measures of terrorist violence as opposed to the disruption of the actual violent act. This has come hand in hand with state-based and centric efforts of fighting terrorist groups being replaced by defuse and nudge based social technologies of avoiding, deterring, and deterring terrorism and expanded conceptualization of preventing extremism in society. The thinking is that, had security been made in a woman-friendly manner then it would be different in terms of operation and prioritizing from the current scenario. Based on such international legal decisions, international security strategies and practices on women aim at empowering women as a preventive against war and terrorism, or to achieve more lasting settlements to peace in the event of war and in post conflict settings.

Prevention as an Education Tool

According to Rehman, A., and Behlol, M. G. (2022), it can be stated that a reform of the Pakistani education system was advised. Polarizing content and the absence of human rights and civic education in curriculum and textbook throughout school levels and in higher education. In order to have a successful CVE, the curriculum and social system should be transformed to enhance the civic sense and tolerance as well as instill an attitude of human friendliness. Through the use of the BRAVE Scale, the study detected that culture, ethnic background, and high social support provided by the family and community contributed immensely to instilling the resilient behaviour of

extremism in students of the university. When it comes to violence and extremism, cultural identity as well as socio-cultural capital is an important factor that determines behaviour and beliefs that students have towards violence. Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) therefore need to contribute to preventing the extreme behaviour among the youth by facilitating students to be tolerant and peaceful through human rights based curriculum and teachings without segregating on ethnicity and race.

The Interventions made by Legislation and Policy

By highlighting and outlining the problems associated with the enforcement of current anti-extremist legislation, Shaikh (2023), therefore, offers the critical analysis of the legal response by Pakistan to violent religious extremism. Though the study does not ignore the formative character of Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) of 1997 and other laws, it is argued that these laws cannot be used without their efficient implementation. The author indicates the major problems associated with circulation of ambiguous legal definitions, poor institutional coordination, and politicization of law enforcement as well as absence of capacity in police and judicial organizations. Notably, Shaikh emphasizes that the enforcement gap is one of the most significant barriers to any serious steps, since the laws are frequently not enforced and may only be selectively applied. The author of the article suggests a rights-based approach to enforcement, which involves a balance between the security requirements and civil liberties, as well as proposes the active involvement of law enforcement agencies into community surveillance, monitoring via digital channels and early warning systems. By providing both criticism and policy-related suggestions, the work produced by Shaikh can be viewed as a significant contribution to the improvement of the practical implementation of the existing legislative regulation in Pakistan to create a more efficient countermeasure to violent extremism.

CVE in Pakistan

1. Development of National CVE Strategy and Institutions

The countering violent extremism (CVE) environment in Pakistan has taken various forms since the last twenty years due to internal threats to security, insurgency and ideological extremism. Although in its earlier times the state mainly relied

on kinetic counterterrorism with the government assumed leadership of operations (which include Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad), the state did develop an appreciation of a preventive, more of a community-based approach. In 2015, the government launched the National Action Plan (NAP) a 20 points agenda that seek to takedown terrorist infrastructure, madrassa reform, crackdown on hate speech and the empowerment of civilian law-enforcement. NAP was a guiding plan of action document which missed the mechanism of implementation of soft approaches. To counter this change, in 2018, Pakistan mandated the development of a comprehensive counter-extremism policy called National Counter Extremism Policy (NCEP) by National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) to move forward with the strategies associated with the prevention, rehabilitation, and community outreach. The focal agency, NACTA, brings together the thrust on federal and provincial levels, where motions to mainstream the practices of CVE are carried forward in collaboration with law enforcement agencies at both levels, the education department, the media regulatory bodies, and the religious institutions.

2. Paigham-e-Pakistan and Ideological Countermeasures Role of Paigham-e-Pakistan and Ideological Countermeasures

Among ideological countermoves in Pakistan as a component of CVE strategy, special attention should be paid to Paigham-e-Pakistan, which began in 2018. This is a national fatwa developed by the International Islamic University Islamabad and supported by more than 1,800 religious scholars representing all schools of thought and condemning terrorism and suicide bombings, and sectarian causes as nothing but un-Islamic. This statement provides a counter-narrative to extremist views, in an indigenous, religiously credible format that can be included in university courses as well as the general awareness strategy. The first point is that displaying religious consensus on the condemnation of violence, the Paigham-e-Pakistan will strive to deny the theological foundations of (religious) terrorism and introduce the narrative of peacemaking, tolerance, and coexistence.

3. Robotized Online Measures to Survey Extreme Material

With the understanding that online radicalization can be a significant threat, Pakistan has embarked on the use of artificial intelligence and digital monitoring mechanisms to identify and foil extremist developments on the net. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and other law enforcement agencies currently use AI-powered systems to mark hate speech, incitement and extremist recruiting on social media sites like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. By partnering with other tech giants and the creation of the Cyber Vigilance Division, digital surveillance has grown. All of these are further facilitated by the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 that allows the removal of extremism materials and persecution of cyber criminals. Transparency, privacy and possible abuse however are still matters of concern.

4. The Job of Religious Boards, Police and the Civil Society

It has religious boards, clerical councils like the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) and Muttahida Ulema Board that offer important services by controlling the sermons, madrassa Curriculum review, and spread messages compatible with tranquility through religion. These institutes facilitate endorsement of anti-extremism campaigns and inter faith dialogues as well. Law enforcement actors, especially police in Punjab or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, have designed the local models of community policing, as well as deradicalization programs, like Sabaoon or Mishal Centers, that include psychosocial support and job training opportunities to the ex-extremists. The civil society bodies (CSOs) play an important role in CVE, particularly in building pluralism, human rights training as well as gender empowerment. Other NGOs such as Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), PAIMAN Alumni Trust and Peace Education and Development Foundation (PEAD) also reach out to communities in the form of dialogue forums, arts-based interventions and youth leadership projects.

Community-Level Interventions

Interventions implemented at the community level are important in terms of preventing and countering violent extremism because of their ability to disrupt the pathways to extremist violence

by responding to its causes and drivers in community-specific, culturally contextualized, and participatory fashion. A particularly high rate of heteronormativity is found in Pakistan, where the organization of ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian groups has resulted in a range of daily experiences lived by people, and in policy formulations made by the state. The solutions to the disjuncture have become dependent on the concerted efforts of grassroots resilience-building practices around the country.

Case Studies Community CVE Project Success

The Sabaoon Rehabilitation Centre is a community friendly CVE project in Swat that is operated by the Pakistan Army with support of Hum Pakistani Foundation and psychologists. The centre was set up to reform young people who had joined the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and groups it and includes a combination of education, psychological counseling and religious re-education and on-the-job training. It has been praised because it succeeded in bringing more than 200 former militants back into the society. The other example is the Strengthening participatory organization (SPO), which has launched peace and tolerance programs in the conflictive regions such as South Punjab and Karachi. SPO presents communities with dialogue, conflict resolution workshops, and awareness sessions so that the local population understands early signs of radicalization and acts jointly.

The Role of NGOs, Youth Networks and Female-led Projects

Many NGOs in Pakistan like PAIMAN Alumni Trust have made a revolutionary contribution to community CVE. This is because peace groups (TOLANA) model by PAIMAN is training local youths and women to be peace ambassadors. These communities form part of the deradicalization discussions, social awareness programs, and the formation of counter-narrative. Some youth-led networks like Youth Advocacy Network (YAN) and Shaoor Foundation have organised digital literacy campaigns, youth peacebuilding forums, social media counter-narrative programs that focus on vulnerable groups prone to online radicalization. The participation of women in CVE has been especially successful. Women peacebuilders in PAIMAN do such things as so-called mother-to-mother talks to intercept radicalization at the

household level. In such a way, one of the NGOs working in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Blue Veins, employs group work with women in the tribal belt, and in it, focuses to empower gender-sensitive community relationships and confront patriarchal discourse, which are congruent with the extremist ideology.

Interfaith Harmony Projects and local Peace Committees

Such locally based solutions to communal violence such as the local peace committees (Masalehat Anjumans) supported by national programs like Punjab Peace and Interfaith Harmony Policy and district-based CVE strategies have been found in Pakistan. Such committees usually comprise cleric, teachers young people and civil society, mediators of conflicts and inter-sectarian cohesion. Such interfaith initiative projects as Peace by Youth (PbY) funded by organizations such as Search for Common Ground have operated in cities such as Lahore, Quetta, and Multan to unite the Muslims, Christian, and Hindu youth. These programs create a dialogue between the two nations through art, sport and cultural events decreasing stereotypes and creating tolerance.

Policy recommendations and suggestions

Although several measures in the area of counter-extremism have been taken in Pakistan, there still persist severe areas of gaps in the policy particularly when it comes to synchronization of the national strategies in the context of the needs of the local community. In order to establish genuinely resilient communities, there is no alternative to inclusive bottom-up approach, which must support top-down policies. The following are areas that must be given attention:

- Central policy frameworks that are not aligned with local implementation should be regarded as a significant problem in the Pakistani CVE system. Deliberations conducted at a national level tend to be insensitive of cultural, ethnic, and regional differences that define communities at risk of radicalization. Trust and sustainability is rather destroyed by the fact that local actors, such as religious leaders, educators, civil society groups or local governments are often not part of planning and decision making. This gap should be filled by decentralization of CVE policymaking, empowerment of individual provinces to pursue the policy-making role in security and education

issues, and inviting national actors to participate profoundly in the discussions with grassroots stakeholders.

- Gender-blind measures have traditionally overlooked how women have been involved in extremism and how they can be used to prevent extremism. Women are also mostly the key decision makers in the family and community and therefore empowering women through education, leadership and economic support are very crucial. Moreover, curriculum changes, which seek to enhance civic values, tolerance and pluralism have not spread far and wide yet. Economics is still a big cause of radicalization, especially among young people by virtue of unemployment and absences in vocational training. There is therefore a need to have integrated changes in these sectors that would deal with both the push and pull factors of extremism.

- Due to the rising availability of extremist propaganda in digitalized forms, the Artificial Intelligence (AI) use to track, analyze, and combat online radicalization has become a popular topic. Development and implementation of AI tools should however be ethically developed, privacy heterogeneous, and community aware. In Pakistan, the absence of a regulatory body on AI in CVE apprehends misuse, abuse of surveillance, and civil rights infringement. Transparency and increased effectiveness of these tools can be achieved by introducing AI governance mechanisms, involving the tech experts, civil society, digital rights advocates.

- Short term CVE campaigns are not always sustainable in the community, especially where there have been a history of state disregard or brutal security services. Resilience will have to be built with a long-term investment in relationship with communities, which can be done through participation mechanism whereby citizens can also give inputs into CVE strategies. Religious sanctioned leaders, teachers, women leadership, and the youth activists are to be trained and endowed to become credible messengers of peace. Moreover, the combination of peace education, interreligious dialogues and community reconciliation initiatives can lead to the formation of long-term social connections and the neutralization of the problem of extremist ideology attractiveness.

Conclusion

Violent extremism today remains an almighty threat to the social order and integrity of the societies across the world. Decades of counter-terrorism experience in the example of Pakistan supports a major lesson that the war on extremism cannot be won through military means only. Rather than that, long-term solutions are to be found in tackling the causes that underlie the emergence of radicalization proactively which include socioeconomic disparity, ideological manipulation, political marginalization, and fragile community strength. As it is reaffirmed in this study, a root-cause solution to preventing extremism should be initiated by first reinforcing the communities using the three main foundations of religion, education, and policy changes. Religious discourses can be a very effective antidote, provided it is diluted by extremists and preached by valid religious figures who propagate the message of tolerance, pluralism and peace. Projects such as Paigham-e-Pakistan help show the significance of theological authenticity in destroying the extremist ideology and reclaiming theological peace. Education, particularly, civic, moral and peace education is the changing agent as far as it goes in defining a resilient future generation. Fair treatment in education, especially of burdened populations and those of women will lead to the growth of inclusive national identity and critical thinking and to the reduced vulnerability to recruitment by extremists. Additionally, it is also necessary to integrate policies. Stopping violent extremism requires an entire-of-society effort that entails a harmony of efforts among the various sectors of the government, the civil society, and local communities. To bridge the gap between the citizen and the state, the required changes in the legislation should be the protection of human rights, achievement of social justice, and involvement of the youth generation. To conclude, it is not possible to build sustainable peace and inclusive development without addressing factors that are structural to the propagation of violent extremist ideology. The way out of the Pakistan carnage is to entrench the anti-extremism with the wider context of social justice, inter-community harmony, gender equity, and accountable governance. Only under that condition should resilient societies be created who will be able not just to stand against radical ideologies but also to prosper in diversity.

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