

A Reassessment of the Religion in the Polarization and Depolarization of Pakistan

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This study has no aim to hurt any ideological or social segment but purely based on academic purposes.

Abstract

Pakistan, a predominantly Muslim country, has experienced significant political polarization in recent decades, with religion playing a central role in this process. This research article explores the relationship between religion and political polarization in Pakistan. Using a qualitative research approach, this study analyzes the factors contributing to the politicization of religion and how religious identities have become a major factor in shaping political attitudes and behavior in the country. This article argues that while religion can act as a unifying force, its politicization in Pakistan has led to deepening political divides and societal fragmentation.

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Introduction

Pakistan is a country that has been shaped by religion, with Islam being its dominant religion. Despite being a country founded on the principles of pluralism, Pakistan has witnessed significant political polarization in recent decades. This polarization is often driven by religious identity and has deepened sectarian and ethnic divides. The role of religion in shaping political attitudes and behavior in Pakistan is complex and multifaceted (Alavi, Hamza, 1987). This research article aims to explore the relationship between religion and political polarization in Pakistan.

After the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, the role of religion in Pakistani politics and its radical manifestations increased in many ways. Both religious segment and state are starting to see the Kashmir

conflict as a religious struggle rather than a regional security/territorial dispute. At the same time, religious extremism undermines the political rights and civil liberties of religious minorities through the use of religion in politics by religious parties to promote mainstream and illiberal ideas of democracy. What happens when philosophies become real and consume power? In Pakistan, as sectarian parties came to power through alliances with majority parties, they saw structural violence as a quasi-official tool of governance and political self-reliance. Given the state of our political history over the past few decades (Candland, Christopher, 2006). it can be argued that the problems of extremism and intolerance are political in nature, and that the policies adopted in the past are responsible for the chaos we now face. However, Islamic scholars are not exempt from their responsibility, we now have religious forms of various interpretations, especially regarding Jihad and war against infidels, a religious issue that only the Ulema can clarify, and a discourse on the true meaning of Jihad and other issues (Ahmed, Ishtiaq, 1985).

Background

The politicization of religion in Pakistan began during the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s. Zia introduced a series of measures aimed at Islamizing the country, including the introduction of Islamic laws, the promotion of Islamic education, and the support of religious parties. This policy shift not only strengthened the position of religious leaders in society but also increased the power of the military in the country. In the years that followed, the religious identity of citizens became a significant factor in determining political attitudes and behavior (Esposito, John & John O. Voll, 1996).

"Communism in India can be defined as an ideology that emphasizes the group of followers of each religion as a social, political and economic entity and emphasizes even antagonistic distinctions between each group; "followers" and " "Religion." "In the most nominal sense, for example, Muslim communitarians have been acutely aware that Muslims in India are a purportedly single, cohesive community to which they pledge allegiance," Little attention is paid to whether the individuals in it are religiously fanatical, lukewarm, or cold; orthodox, liberal, or atheist; just or malicious; Focus on Muslims outside India" (Esposito, John L, 1987).

India's hardcore communism revolves around religion and state separation. The ideology stresses the need to constantly differentiate between religions and sects in order to create a special economic and political entity on par with other religions. It stresses that the followers of different religions must work together in both spiritual and secular life. Additionally, it encourages people to be antagonistic toward their specific sect or religion. For example, Muslim communists encourage a critical mindset about Islam's presence in India. They believe that all Muslims are part of a single cohesive community with similar goals. Little attention is paid to the religious fanaticism, liberal beliefs, atheism or other philosophies among Muslims in India. Instead, they believe all Muslims share similar values regardless of whether they practice religion or not. The focus instead lies on tensions between Hindus and Muslims as well as traditionalists versus liberals in both countries (Daechsel, Markus, 1997).

Methodology

This research article is based on a qualitative research approach. Data for this study was collected through a review of literature on the subject, including academic articles, books, and reports. Additionally, interviews were conducted with religious scholars, political leaders, and civil society activists. The analysis

was conducted through a process of coding and categorizing the data, which allowed for the identification of patterns and themes in the data.

Theoretical Construct

The role of religion in politics is a complex and multifaceted theoretical construct that has been debated by scholars and practitioners for centuries. At its core, the relationship between religion and politics centers on the ways in which religious beliefs, values, and practices shape and are shaped by political processes and institutions.

One perspective on the role of religion in politics is the idea of secularism, which seeks to separate religious and political spheres. This approach emphasizes the importance of keeping religion out of political decision-making and promoting the neutrality of the state in matters of religion. Secularism is often associated with modern Western democracies, which prioritize the values of individual freedom and equality over religious tradition (Max Taylor, 2012).

On the other hand, some scholars argue that religion can play a positive role in politics, providing a moral compass and inspiring individuals and communities to pursue social justice and other public goods. This view emphasizes the potential for religious values and practices to inspire social and political action, and to serve as a counterbalance to the individualism and materialism that can dominate modern politics. An alternative viewpoint on religion's place in politics is that of religious nationalism, which holds that a people's common religious beliefs and practises have a significant impact on the formation of its national identity and its governing structures. The growth of religious populist forces in the Middle East, South Asia, and elsewhere that want to construct a governmental system based on religious beliefs is typically linked to this strategy (Kennedy, Charles, 1996).

Ultimately, the role of religion in politics is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, historical, and institutional factors. The precise ways in which religion and politics interact vary widely across different societies and contexts, and are subject to ongoing debate and negotiation. Jose Casanova, a sociologist, has advocated for the partial retention of one secularisation theory premise. According to Casanova, only the third of Weber's three pillars of westernisation reduction of religious beliefs and practices, the privatisation of religion and religious organisations, and the differentiation of the secular domains (state, economy, and science) from religion—remains valid today (Jose Casanova, 1994). Nevertheless, anthropologist Talal Asad also provides a strong critique of this principle. Public religions are not neutral when it comes to economic plans, international policy, or social structures; once we acknowledge that religious players are general, and recognize that the public-private disparity is itself traditionally facilitated, it is inconceivable to restrict religion's implication to a sanctified or personal domain. Thus, Asad rejects traditional secularisation theory on theoretical grounds (Talal Asad, 2003).

Constructivism on Religion

Individual and communal religious practices, integrity, scriptural texts, religious dogma, methodologies of interpretations, every day practises, governing practises, expert behaviour, organisations, identities, artefacts, sites of devotion and interaction like spiritual journey, and charismatic leaders are all a non-exhaustive list of merchandise of what represents religion. Because of this diversity, there is no general definition of what religion is (Jonathan Fox, 2006).

Religious constructivism is a theoretical framework that emphasizes the role of human interpretation and construction in shaping religious beliefs, practices, and experiences. It holds that religious traditions and texts are not fixed or immutable, but are rather products of historical and cultural contexts, and are constantly being reinterpreted and reconstructed by individuals and communities (Steven M. Cahn, 1994).

Constructivism is a social theory that emphasizes the role of social and cultural factors in shaping human beliefs, values, and behaviors. When it comes to religion, constructivism suggests that people's religious beliefs and practices are not simply based on inherent or objective characteristics of religion itself, but rather are constructed through social processes and interactions. According to constructivist theory, individuals create their own understanding of reality based on their experiences, beliefs, and cultural context. This includes religious beliefs and practices, which are not simply handed down from a religious authority or text, but rather are actively constructed and shaped by social interactions and cultural contexts (Wesley J. Wildman and James D. Diller, 2011).

Constructivism on religion acknowledges that religious beliefs and practices can vary greatly across cultures and even within individual cultures, and that they are subject to change over time as social and cultural contexts change. It also emphasizes that religion is not a static or monolithic concept, but rather a complex and dynamic phenomenon that is constantly being constructed and reconstructed by human beings (Ted Hopf, 1998). Religious constructivism is often associated with postmodernism and critical theory, which emphasize the role of social, historical, and cultural contexts in shaping human experience and understanding. This perspective challenges traditional religious claims to objective truth and encourages a more critical and reflective approach to religious beliefs and practices (Harold Kasimow, 2010).

Overall, constructivism provides a useful framework for understanding the social and cultural dimensions of religion, and for recognizing the role of human agency in shaping religious beliefs and practices.

Religious Space in Politics in Pakistan

Pakistan is an Islamic Republic, where the majority of the population follows the Islamic faith. The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees religious freedom to all citizens, but in practice, there have been several instances where religious minorities have faced discrimination and persecution.

The capabilities of space in Pakistani politics have been a subject of debate and controversy. The space in Pakistan's political arena is dominated by the powerful military establishment, which has often been accused of interfering in the political process and curbing the democratic rights of the citizens. In recent years, religious freedom has become a contentious issue in Pakistani politics. The rise of extremist groups and the government's failure to effectively counter them has led to an increase in attacks against religious minorities, including Christians, Hindus, and Shiites (Tariq Parvez, 2015).

Pakistan is a country that is predominantly Muslim, with a minority of Hindus, Christians, and other religious groups. Unfortunately, incidents of religious intolerance have been reported in Pakistan, targeting these minority groups. Here are some examples of data on religious intolerance in Pakistan:

Attacks on Religious Minorities: According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), there were at least 260 cases of religiously motivated attacks on minority communities in Pakistan in 2020. These attacks included blasphemy accusations, mob violence, forced conversions, and discrimination in education and employment (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2021).

Blasphemy Laws: Pakistan has some of the world's most stringent blasphemy laws, which are often used to target religious minorities. According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), there are currently at least 80 people imprisoned in Pakistan on blasphemy charges. In some cases, individuals have been sentenced to death for blasphemy (USCIRF, 2022).

Forced Conversions: Forced conversions of Hindu and Christian girls to Islam is a significant issue in Pakistan. According to the Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan, up to 1,000 girls from religious minority communities are forcibly converted to Islam each year (Palwasha Binte Inam, 2020).

Discrimination in Education: Religious minorities in Pakistan often face discrimination in access to education. According to a report by the United States Department of State, religious minority students in Pakistan are often subjected to biased treatment in the classroom, including derogatory remarks by teachers and discriminatory policies (US State Department, 2022).

Sectarian Violence: Pakistan has also seen incidents of sectarian violence between different branches of Islam, with attacks on Shia Muslims being particularly common. According to the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, there were 84 sectarian attacks in Pakistan in 2020, resulting in 299 fatalities (Pak Institute for Peace Studies, 2020).

The government has taken some steps to address the issue of religious freedom, such as passing legislation to protect the rights of minorities and establishing a National Commission for Minorities. However, these efforts have been criticized as insufficient, and many believe that the government needs to do more to protect the rights of religious minorities.

In the case of Pakistan, religion embodies the state, which is used by the state as a tool to influence control functions (Alam, 2002). Religion and politics have been intertwined since the founding of Pakistan (Esposito 1998), as evidenced by the presence and electoral success of religious parties in the political mainstream. Furthermore, religion has been a force guiding public life, especially where government failures leave people vulnerable (Mumtaz and Whiteford 2021). Apart from representing the people in the legislature, religious political parties and institutions perform other social roles in all societies (Cavatorta and Amghar 2020). This also applies to the JUI-F, which not only represents the people in the legislature but also has an important sociopolitical position outside the government (Mufti, Shafqat and Siddiqui 2020), mainly due to the collective Religious constructs (Ayers and Hofstetter 2008). Using this sociopolitical clout, they act as interest groups in national politics, exploiting popular sentiment to their greatest political advantage (Waseem and Mufti 2009). Pakistan is threatened by radicalization, yet the problems are multiplying due to the lack of a unified approach to identify and address them. The way conservative right-wing groups define religious radicalization is quite different from the liberal/secular forces in the country; most moderates tend to remain silent on the issue, which is sometimes misinterpreted by the West as tacit support. Most importantly, Pakistanis must agree on the nature of the problem and fully support the government's measures to curb radicalization (Vestenskov, D, 2018).

Religious Beliefs and Political Attitudes in Pakistan

Radicalization affects the socio-political and economic landscape of Pakistan in different ways. Intolerance of other religions is on the rise, and injustice is a key factor in activism. Justice is exploited illegally by the privileged, and justice is denied to the poor. This depressed class is easily overtaken by radical groups that often spread violence in society. Parts of the media are tools of influence and have played an important role in the radicalization process. It handles things in a way that forces viewers and readers to think positively and benevolently about radicals. The political, religious and social systems of Pakistan are diverse in nature. We have four provinces and a federal territory, each with its own unique culture and social system. The population of Pakistan is dominated by Muslims, but there are also large differences in beliefs among people within the same religion. This is because each denomination has its own interpretation of religious texts and more modern subjects that never existed before (Abbasi, S, 2016).

Religious Extremism and Economic Backwardness in Pakistan

There are many complex factors that contribute to the issue of religious extremism and economic backwardness in Pakistan, and it is important to approach the topic with nuance and sensitivity. On the one hand, Pakistan has a long history of political instability, corruption, and economic mismanagement, which have hindered the country's economic growth and development. These factors have contributed to a high level of poverty and inequality, particularly in rural areas where access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and clean water is often limited (Ali, M, 2014).

On the other hand, there are also social and cultural factors that contribute to the prevalence of religious extremism in Pakistan. Some scholars argue that Pakistan's national identity has been constructed around a particular interpretation of Islam, which has led to a culture of intolerance and sectarianism. This has been compounded by the proliferation of religious schools, known as madrasas, which often promote a conservative and extremist interpretation of Islam (Butt, M. I., & Ashraf, M, 2021).

The relationship between economic backwardness and religious extremism is complex and multifaceted. On the one hand, economic hardship and social exclusion can create fertile ground for extremist ideologies to take hold, particularly among young people who feel disaffected and marginalized. On the other hand, religious extremism can also contribute to economic underdevelopment by creating an unstable and uncertain environment for businesses and investors (Kugelman, M, 2017).

In order to address the issue of religious extremism and economic backwardness in Pakistan, it is important to take a holistic approach that addresses both the economic and social factors that contribute to these problems. This may involve measures to promote economic growth and development, as well as efforts to promote tolerance, diversity, and inclusivity in Pakistani society. It may also involve addressing some of the root causes of extremism, such as poverty, inequality, and political instability (Riaz, A, 2017).

Findings

The findings of this study suggest that the politicization of religion has led to a deepening of political divides in Pakistan. Religious identity has become a major factor in determining political attitudes and behavior, with citizens often voting along religious lines. This has contributed to the marginalization of certain religious and ethnic communities and has created a sense of exclusion among these groups.

Additionally, the rise of religious extremism and violence has further exacerbated these divides, leading to social fragmentation and insecurity.

The findings of this study may be equally useful in non-Muslim countries where religion is an important political force. For example, those who study the role of religious symbols such as African-American churches, Muslim mosques, Friday prayers, and the turban in American politics (Westfall, 2018); Shifts in Muslim partisan identities (Barreto and Bozonelos, 2009) – the link between religion and politics must first be revealed. This is the case when looking at the influence of Christian interest groups on UK public policy. These findings can be replicated by questioning how religious parties or specific individuals are at the heart of political polarization in Israel, and if religious overtones are the identity fault lines that lead to heightened Irish conflicts, the same starting point can be employed. Notwithstanding the differences, for the three reasons above, the theoretical insights and analytical framework of this study, albeit case-specific, may serve as a catalyst for the larger study of religion and policy when tested and validated against (few) comparable cases A generalizable part of the plan.

Depolarizing Pakistan

Pakistan, like many other countries, is a diverse nation with a complex history and socio-political landscape. Depolarizing Pakistan would require a concerted effort from various stakeholders, including the government, civil society organizations, religious leaders, and the media. Here are some suggestions that could help depolarize Pakistan:

- 1) Strengthening institutions: Pakistan's institutions, such as the judiciary, police, and electoral commission, need to be strengthened and made more transparent to ensure that they function impartially and independently. This would help build trust among citizens and reduce the sense of polarization that often arises from perceptions of bias and corruption.
- 2) Promoting tolerance and pluralism: Pakistan's diverse population includes people from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Promoting tolerance and pluralism is essential to create a society where people from different backgrounds can coexist peacefully. This can be achieved through public awareness campaigns, educational initiatives, and cultural events that celebrate diversity.
- 3) Encouraging dialogue and reconciliation: Encouraging dialogue and reconciliation between different groups is vital to depolarize society. This can be done through community meetings, interfaith dialogues, and other initiatives that bring people together to discuss their differences and find common ground.
- 4) Supporting independent media: The media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and promoting political discourse. Supporting independent media can help ensure that different voices are heard and that the media is not used as a tool for propaganda or to promote a particular agenda.
- 5) Strengthening the economy: Economic development can play a crucial role in reducing polarization in society. Economic opportunities can help reduce inequalities and create a more equitable society where people have access to basic necessities and can improve their standard of living.
- 6) Promoting good governance: Good governance is essential to building trust in government institutions and reducing polarization. This can be achieved through measures such as transparency in decision-making, accountability, and public participation in decision-making.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research article has explored the relationship between religion and political polarization in Pakistan. The findings suggest that the politicization of religion has contributed to the deepening of political divides and social fragmentation in the country. While religion can act as a unifying force, its use as a political tool has led to its exploitation and misuse. To address these challenges, policymakers need to prioritize the promotion of pluralism and interfaith dialogue, while also taking measures to counter extremism and sectarianism. Additionally, it is essential to strengthen institutions that promote democracy and human rights, which can help to create a more inclusive and cohesive society. In conclusion, religious freedom is an important issue in Pakistani politics, and the government needs to take more proactive steps to protect the rights of all citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs. The military's dominant role in the political arena and its impact on the democratic process is another issue that needs to be addressed for Pakistan to have a truly inclusive and democratic society.

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