

Pakistan's 'Mainstreaming' Jihadis

Vinay Kaura, Aparna Pande

The emergence of the religious right-wing as a formidable political force in Pakistan seems to be an outcome of direct and indirect patronage of the dominant military over the years. Ever since the creation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1947, the military establishment has formed a quasi alliance with the conservative religious elements who define a strongly Islamic identity for the country. The alliance has provided Islamism with regional perspectives and encouraged it to exploit the concept of jihad. This trend found its most obvious manifestation through the Afghan War. Due to the centrality of Islam in Pakistan's national identity, secular leaders and groups find it extremely difficult to create a national consensus against groups that describe themselves as soldiers of Islam. Using two case studies, the article argues that political survival of both the military and the radical Islamist parties is based on their tacit understanding. It contends that without de-radicalisation of jihadis, the efforts to 'mainstream' them through the electoral process have huge implications for Pakistan's political system as well as for prospects of regional peace.

Keywords: Islamist, Jihadist, Red Mosque, Taliban, blasphemy, ISI, TLP, Musharraf, Afghanistan

Introduction

In the last two decades, the relationship between the Islamic faith and political power has emerged as an interesting field of political analysis. Particularly after the revival of the Taliban and the rise of ISIS,

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questions related to Islam's role in Pakistani politics have been frequent in academia. While political Islam is deeply connected to South Asia's geopolitical currents, Pakistan presents ample evidence that the emergence of Islamist parties in conjunction with politics of jihad is an outcome of the Military's patronage. The dominant military and the religious right have strengthened a mutually beneficial alliance partnership while undermining the mainstream political parties in Pakistan. This paper traces the brief history of the Pakistani state's tolerance of politics rooted in religion, while explaining that survival of radical Islamist parties in the country has depended a great deal on the military's complicity through outright support or transactional cooperation or coexistence or turning a blind eye when not directly threatened.

The political use of Islam in terms of the strategy of jihad against the Soviets was a key factor in militarising Pakistani society. The radical Islamist parties have gradually transformed Pakistan's society by promoting the politics of extremism. While giving historical context, this article limits its consideration of the military's patronage of right-wing Islamist parties during the last one and a half decades, particularly with references to two major episodes. The main argument is this: a mutually beneficial relationship, which has evolved between the military and the Islamist parties, has facilitated the emergence of the religious right-wing as a formidable political force in Pakistan. The present manifestation of the military's direct and indirect nexus with the radical Islamist elements is the mainstreaming of jihadists and consequent marginalisation of moderate sections of Pakistani society.

The article has three parts: First, historical background including discussion on the emergence of the Taliban creates the proper context to explore the subject. Then, the article discusses the road toward the Red Mosque crisis, and how the state responded, followed by another case study of the Faizabad episode a decade later. In the final part, it critically explains the challenges of mainstreaming jihadi forces in Pakistan's politics and society. The historical overview presented in the first part of the article has captured the attempts by the Pakistani state, led directly and indirectly by the military, to co-opt Islamic parties for ideological ends. The mainstream academic literature on the military's relationship with the Islamist forces in Pakistan is very rich, and it is not possible to engage with it in its entirety. The research by Husain Haqqani¹ and Hassan Abbas² in the beginning of the cur-

rent century has been popular; it has explained how the tolerance and encouragement of extremist ideologies by security institutions has pushed Pakistan towards extremism and led to the growing influence of jihadis. Ayesha Siddiqi has introduced the new concept of 'Milbus', implying military capital used for the personal benefit of the military and its cronies.³ Ayesha Jalal has contended that domestic ethnic and regional rivalries have created a siege mentality encouraging military domination and Islamist extremism.⁴

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The latest theoretical contribution is also very engaging. It is an accepted wisdom that the military has assigned Islamist militants different political roles as per their ideological affinity with the military. Paul Staniland, Asfandiyar Mir and Sameer Lalwani have wedded instrumental with the ideological motivation to explain the complex interaction between the military and the Islamist militants. Three approaches – collaboration, benign neglect and belligerence – have been used to explain Pakistan's attitude toward Islamist militants.⁵ Stephen Tankel has added another conceptual category of 'coopetition' to explain the dynamic nature of Pakistan military's relationship with Islamic militancy.⁶

While building from the extensive scholarship, this article makes an important contribution by providing further empirical evidence of the fact that Pakistan army's patronage continues to help radical right-wing parties increase their legitimacy in mainstream politics. The article employs a qualitative analysis of official documents, biographies and autobiographies, media reports and public statements with secondary literature providing important sources for understanding the issue.

Historical background

The state of Pakistan, created in the name of Islam in 1947, had to integrate six major ethnic groups – Bengalis, Sindhis, Baloch, Pakhtuns, Punjabis and incoming Mohajirs⁷ from India. Islam was seen by many as the binding force for Pakistan⁸, but ethno-linguistic ties proved to be stronger. Even though Pakistan's founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah had used religion and the difference between the two leading communities – Hindus and Muslims – as the core of his argument for two nations – Pakistan and Hindustan – he understood that such cleavages threatened Pakistan's future, and thus never spoke of Pakistan as an ideological state.⁹

Islam as a defining component of Pakistan's national identity started with the Objectives Resolution of 1949 and strengthened under the era of Pakistan's first military dictator, Field Marshal Ayub Khan. He articulated that Pakistan needed an ideology to define itself and that Islam was that ideology.¹⁰ Ayub had no particular fondness or respect for the religious clerics¹¹: the 1962 Constitution, prepared under Ayub's direction, initially dropped the Islamic label, but under pressure from the religious groups, the Islamic label was restored and the Islamic features of the previous constitution kept intact. By the time Pakistan's first civilian Prime Minister was elected in 1971, the country had gone through three wars with India, lost half its territory and more than half its population in 1971. The first directly elected National Assembly of Pakistan, led by the charismatic Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, adopted the third constitution of Pakistan in April 1973. The 1973 Constitution called for Islamic unity, support for the teaching of Arabic and Islamic Studies and exact printing of the Quran. Moreover, Islam was declared the state religion of the country for the first time in the history of Pakistan.¹² It is interesting to note that the constitutions of 1956 and 1962 had only made it mandatory for the President of the republic to be a Muslim, whereas the 1973 constitution went further by declaring that both the President and the Prime Minister were required to take an oath declaring their belief in the finality of the Prophet Muhammad's prophetic mission. In renaming his ideology 'Islamic socialism', Bhutto assuaged the Islamic and populist forces within the country.¹³

Demands by the Islamic orthodoxy led Bhutto to appease them even further by passing laws banning horseracing and alcohol consumption, and the declaration of Friday as an official holiday in conformity with Islamic ideology. Bhutto also shared with Pakistan's military dictators the belief that India provided an existential threat to Pakistan and sought to undo Partition. For him, the Islamists were another way to stand up to India; he did not see them as a threat, and therein lay his mistake.

Nine anti-Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) parties came together in a marriage of convenience to form the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA), which also included three major Islamist parties – the Jamaat-ei Islami (JI), Jamiatul Ulama-i Pakistan (JUP) and Jamiatul Ulama-i Islam (JUI). The PNA criticised the government for being detrimental to the Islamic cause, and for turning Pakistan into a 'land of sin'.¹⁴ Unwilling or unable to realise that his own policies had resulted in mas-

sive support for the PNA, Bhutto drew the wrong conclusion that the PNA's appeal lay in its Islamic slogan¹⁵, and forced his party to tone down its socialist rhetoric while proving that its own 'Islam' was more enlightened than that of the PNA. Bhutto was overthrown in a military coup in 1977 and subsequently hanged by his chosen army chief, General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq.

Zia was Pakistan's first openly religious leader who believed that 'the ideology of Pakistan is Islam and only Islam... We should in all sincerity accept Islam as Pakistan's basic ideology... otherwise...this country [will] be exposed to secular ideologies'. Biographical accounts of Zia's days in Stephens College in Delhi include such details as that 'he offered his prayers regularly, observed fasts and mobilized the Moslem youth to serve the cause of faith'.¹⁶ One can also see the influence of Maulana Abul A'la Maududi, the founder of Jamaat-e-Islami and first theoretician of an Islamic state, on Zia's thoughts.¹⁷ Zia stated that his 'only ambition in life [was] to complete the process of Islamization so that there were no turning back'.¹⁸ He oversaw the transformation of Pakistan's army into an Islamic-orientated one, as reflected in his changing of its motto from 'Unity, Faith, and Discipline' to 'Faith, Piety, and Struggle in the Path of Allah'. Zia encouraged the Tablighi Jamaat to operate freely within the army and he was the first army chief to attend the Tablighi's annual convention.¹⁹ With Zia's encouragement, Islamic teachings such as those pertaining to the conduct of war were introduced in Pakistan's military academies and integrated into the syllabus of the Staff College.²⁰

More army officers grew beards, and a number of signboards quoting the Quran and the Prophet were placed around the army cantonments.²¹ Zia believed that a truly Islamic Pakistan would have the moral strength to fight India. As a consequence of this pervasive Mullah-Military alliance, many conservative army cadets reached the senior command level and took control of sensitive institutions, including the powerful intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

Bhutto had asserted before his execution: 'We know that Israel and South Africa have full nuclear capability. The Christian, Jewish and Hindu civilizations have the capability. The Communist powers also possess it. Only the Islamic civilization was without it, but that position was about to change'.²² Bhutto's final testimony, Zia-ul-Haq's subsequent drive for Islamisation, and the policies pursued by his successors demonstrate that Islam and Jihad had become major pillars

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of Pakistan's foreign and security policy. Zia's momentous decision to launch 'jihad' against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan had bred Islamist militancy to such an extent that Pakistan is still struggling to deal with its aftershocks. Even those Pakistani intellectuals and policy analysts who warn against using jihad as a foreign policy tool are castigated as agents and tools of foreign powers.

Afghan conflict and emergence of the Taliban

The perceived existential threat from India and the fear that India seeks to undo Pakistan has framed Pakistan's foreign policy.²³ This has led Pakistan to view every country, especially its neighbours, using the same lens with which it views India. The fear that India and Afghanistan would use any irredentist claims (Pashtun, Baloch) against Pakistan meant that Pakistan needed a pro-Pakistan, anti-India Afghan government. Further, the belief that Kashmir is the unfinished business of Partition ensured that it was legitimate to use any means possible – diplomatic or covert – to force India to give up Kashmir. This may partially explain Pakistan's use of jihadist groups as a lever of foreign policy.²⁴

The nature of the relationship between religious parties and the state in Pakistan were permanently changed by the Afghan experience. It was during the anti-Soviet Afghan War that a definitive mullah–military alliance developed into its present manifestation. By the USSR's retreat from Afghanistan in 1989, Pakistan had become home to the largest open arms market in the world.²⁵ An increasing number of jihadist groups became associated with mainstream Islamist parties which enjoyed the explicit support of the Pakistani military. These religious groups remain mainstays in much of Pakistan. The combination of large funds flowing in from America and Saudi Arabia, and the public support for jihad against 'godless' Soviet Communism in Pakistan contributed to the unrestrained expansion of jihadist culture in Pakistan.²⁶ Meanwhile, Pakistani intelligence agencies developed deeply personal contacts with jihadist groups and Islamist parties.

Pakistan has been closely aligned with the Taliban since its birth in the mid-1990s. Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, provided support to the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Omar, when he founded the organisation in Kandahar.²⁷ Olivier Roy has termed the Taliban as a 'joint venture between the Saudis, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-e-Islami put together by the ISI'.²⁸ By 2001, Pakistan was pro-

viding the Taliban in Kabul with scores of advisers to run its administrative and military machine, as well as special commandoes to help in combat with the Northern Alliance.²⁹ Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden's global agenda closely matched that of ISI's many chiefs including Hamid Gul, Javed Nasir and Mahmud Ahmed; with all agreeing that jihad was justified in establishing Islamic states in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Xinjiang, Palestine, the Philippines and other areas.³⁰ According to America's 9/11 Commission, the ISI had brokered the alliance between Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden.³¹ After 9/11, Pakistan was forced to cooperate with the US in dislodging the Taliban from power in Kabul. General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's military dictator from 1999 to 2008, made a U-turn in Pakistan's policy towards the Taliban. In a September 19th 2001 speech, Musharraf justified this policy shift by arguing that, if Pakistan did not side with the United States, its 'strategic assets and the Kashmir cause' could be endangered, and India would 'enter into an alliance with the US and get Pakistan declared a terrorist state.'³²

During the war against the Taliban, Musharraf was presented with a list of non-negotiable demands by the US, including denying al-Qaeda a safe haven in Pakistan, sharing intelligence, granting the US overflight rights and breaking diplomatic ties with the Taliban. Although Musharraf 'faced intense internal pressure [because] turning against the Taliban was unthinkable for hardliners in his government and intelligence service',³³ he differentiated between various jihadist and extremist groups. While many foreign terrorists with links to al-Qaeda were handed over to the US, local jihadists as well as the Afghan Taliban were left alone. Covert support for the Afghan Taliban was Pakistan's insurance policy to deal with the aftermath of America's eventual military withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, blowback from Afghanistan led to Pakistan's 'Talibanization', the disastrous consequences of which are reflected in the Red Mosque or Lal Masjid crisis.

Red Mosque crisis

Extremist and terrorist groups were openly proliferating across Pakistan, which Musharraf used as an excuse to convince Washington that the army was essential in protecting Pakistan from being converted into a Taliban-controlled fundamentalist Islamic state. But Musharraf's reluctance to uproot extremism in Pakistan proved costly

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both for Pakistan and the War on Terror. Islamic radicalism emerged in the nation's capital itself when ferocious battles erupted between Islamic radicals and Pakistan army commandos in the Red Mosque. The Lal Masjid and its adjacent Hafsa madrasa had adopted a Taliban-style system of 'moral policing' with virtually no government intervention or oversight. The Mosque was led by two cleric brothers, sons of the pro-jihad cleric Maulana Abdullah. Maulana Abdul Aziz headed Islamabad's biggest Jamia Fareedia madrasa, for which land had been allotted by General Zia-ul Haq.³⁴ Following the mosque's issuing of a fatwa opposing the military operations in Waziristan and calling for a boycott of the *namaz-i-janaza* of soldiers killed in the fight with Islamic militants³⁵, the government arrested some members. However, Maulana Ghazi escaped arrest, and no concerted efforts were made to apprehend him again.

In January 2007, the government's ordered demolition of some illegal and unauthorised mosques was fiercely opposed by Lal Masjid clerics and students. In protest, hundreds of burqa-clad and baton-wielding women from the Hafsa occupied a small children's library, and increased their radical demands when the government was seen as capitulating.³⁶ The Lal Masjid brigade began to threaten shop-owners with dire consequences if they did not stop selling video or music cassettes. The Human Rights Commission and other women's groups accused the hardline students of 'harassing and terrorizing ordinary citizens in the name of Islam' and urged the government to take strong action against them.³⁷ The authorities remained reluctant to take action on the pretext of avoiding bloodshed, simply ignoring Abdul Rashid Ghazi and Maulana Abdul Aziz's Islamic court.³⁸ This muted state response further emboldened the brainwashed students who believed themselves to be the self-appointed enforcers of Islamic law.

However, when some Chinese citizens, including six women, were abducted from a massage parlor alleged by the students to be a brothel, the government had no option but to take action. The abduction of Chinese nationals within striking distance of government institutions of Pakistan, which was projected as China's closest ally, caused serious difficulties for China's communist government and was a huge diplomatic embarrassment for Musharraf's administration.

Hectic negotiations between the government and the hardline clerics helped secure the release of the Chinese people, with Ghazi stating that despite 'greatly respect[ing] Pakistan-China friendship but it doesn't

mean that foreign women can come here and indulge in such vulgar activities.³⁹ A few days later, in a separate incident, militants killed three Chinese businessmen in Peshawar, the capital city of Pakistan's then North West Frontier Province (NWFP), forcing China to ask Pakistan publicly to protect its citizens.⁴⁰ It needs to be noted that around 5,000 Chinese people lived and worked in Pakistan in various Beijing-funded projects, many of which were opposed by various militant groups.⁴¹ These kidnapping and killings had serious repercussions for Pakistan's ties with China, and Musharraf's subsequent confrontation with the Islamist radicals surprised even the US, whose prior efforts to get Islamabad to crack down on militancy had been outmaneuvered by Pakistan's security establishment.⁴² Before the military raid, a delegation authorised by Musharraf met the Islamic militants as a last-ditch effort to end the siege and release the students and their family members who were being held hostage. The government even brought in the imam of the Holy Mosque in Mecca from Saudi Arabia to appeal to the radicals who remained adamant. Despite the face-saving offer proposed to the Islamists to surrender Abdul Rashid Ghazi and all the weapons inside the mosque to senior clerics⁴³, the talks came to a deadlock when the negotiating team was informed that foreign (Uighar) militants were in the complex.⁴⁴ The talks having failed, Musharraf ordered the military strike on the Red Mosque on July 10, 2007, and defended the raid by arguing that the militants had 'challenged the writ of the government'. He further proclaimed that Pakistan would not allow any mosque or madrasa to be misused like the Red Mosque.⁴⁵

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The eight-day siege at the Red Mosque left more than 100 people dead, including Abdul Rashid Ghazi and a dozen members of the Pakistani Special Forces. The siege was depicted as a crucial conflict between General Musharraf and the Islamic radicals who had grown in Pakistan and whose influence had steadily spread to cities from the remote tribal regions along the border with Afghanistan. Although the government was swift to attribute responsibility for the crisis to Ghazi, the signs of a 'creeping Talibanization' enabled by the Musharraf regime had been visible for long before the Lal Masjid episode erupted.

When after 9/11 these forces came home to roost, the Pakistani army retained its confidence in the possibility of striking a bargain with them, unaware that the attempts to negotiate peace would come to no avail. The Red Mosque became an icon of Islamist militancy that the Pakistani state either tolerated or was incapable of acting against.

When a Frankenstein wreaks havoc, his maker's initial reaction may be shock, accompanied by denial. This was the case of the Pakistani state⁴⁶: its intelligence agencies, having created Frankenstein-esque Islamist elements to fester over the years, underestimated their strength to pose a subsequent challenge to the State. According to Carlotta Gall, who had discussions with the government ministers during the siege, the role played by ISI was 'strangely ineffective' as it had maintained a 'long relationship with the mosque and its leaders'. She further stated that the ISI had two informers inside the Red Mosque during the crisis and received 'accurate intelligence on the number of armed militants inside' but apparently failed to persuade the Ghazi brothers to stop defying the government's writ.⁴⁷ The Musharraf regime had tolerated the behaviour of radical students for years: for instance, failing to cut off the Lal Masjid's electricity or phone connections when its students violently enforced Islamic morality, and allowing its illegal radio station to function. The Lal Masjid was state-run and state-funded, and yet the government did not dismiss the clerics from government service.⁴⁸ Moreover, these activities were never covertly executed, but rather carried out in the full view of the ISI headquarters located in the same neighbourhood as the Lal Masjid.

Maulana Abdul Aziz's fate following the military siege on the Red Mosque is interesting to note here, as it highlights Pakistan's nonchalant attitude towards tackling extremism. Despite his arrest upon fleeing the besieged mosque and two dozen serious indictments, Aziz was eventually granted bail by Pakistan's Supreme Court and acquitted without appeal. His presence in a negotiating team nominated by the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) for peace talks with the Nawaz Sharif government in early 2014 attested to his reputation with the Taliban.⁴⁹ After the TTP's December 2014 attack on the Peshawar Army School, Aziz brazenly refused to condemn the killing of children or consider them martyrs, remaining unapologetic despite outcries from civil society. Many extremist and terrorist groups showed solidarity with Aziz, including a Sunni militant group, Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), a banned anti-Shia militant offshoot of the Sipah-e-Sihaba.⁵⁰ Until December 2014, Aziz led the Friday congregations at the Red Mosque and delivered sermons demanding the implementation of Sharia Law, even as security agencies warned the government of his links with known terror groups and the serious risks to law and order in Islamabad posed by his anti-government rhetoric.⁵¹

Described by Khaled Ahmed as the ‘frontman of al-Qaeda’s policy of Islamic vigilantism in Islamabad, whom the judiciary is too scared to convict in scores of cases of terrorism’⁵², Aziz attempted to take control of the Red Mosque’s microphones several times in 2017. When it was announced that Aziz would lead prayers in May 2018 at Lal Masjid after three years, the government prevented him from delivering his divisive sermons⁵³, but pursued no further action against him. Whether due to his influence among the Pakistani people, or the negligence of the Pakistani security establishment, Aziz managed to remain unscathed despite countless examples of his role in the mobilisation of extremist groups in Pakistan.

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Faizabad episode

It is worth noting here that, while civil society groups and nonviolent movements are unable to hold demonstrations in Pakistan, Islamists are allowed to lay siege to cities and bring life to a standstill. Beginning in November 2017, the radical rightwing Islamists, led by the *Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah* and its Islamist allies, besieged Islamabad for three weeks, disrupting daily life in the Islamabad-Rawalpindi belt. Attempts to negotiate and a judicial order mandating the ending of the siege failed to persuade the clerics, in a clear act of muscle-flexing designed to undermine the authority of the Pakistani government. The violent siege ended only after the government surrendered to anti-blasphemy activists’ demands for the resignation of Zahid Hamid, the Minister for Law and Justice whom they had accused of committing blasphemy. The military-mullah nexus was also evident during this crisis, as the protest leader, Khadim Hussain Rizvi, only suspended the protests after the Army Chief, Qamar Javed Bajwa, assured him of Hamid’s resignation. Thus, the episode, which has been explained subsequently in detail, only confirms Pakistani military’s intervention in domestic politics and the collusion between rightwing militant groups and the military.

While protests by ulemas and Islamists are nothing new in Pakistan, what is new is the emergence of a new group of Islamic clerics united under *Tehreek Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah* (TLY), a religious movement and political party. It is led by an inflexible cleric, Maulvi Khadim Hussain Rizvi, who belongs to the Barelvi school of Sunni Islam.⁵⁴ Rizvi is notorious for his vitriolic sermons as well as his glorification of Mumtaz Qadri, the assassin of Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer. The

TLY announced its appearance in electoral politics by putting up candidates in the National Assembly by-elections in Lahore and Peshawar where its candidates received a significant number of votes, undermining the support base of old mainstream religious parties such as the Jamaat-e-Islami.⁵⁵

In November 2017, the Pakistani government pushed through an amended election bill in the National Assembly. While it allowed Nawaz Sharif to regain his position as head of the PML-N, it made a textual change in the oath, replacing the words 'I solemnly swear' with 'I believe' in a clause relating to a candidate's belief in the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad. This led to anti-blasphemy protests; despite Minister Hamid's defense of the bill, the National Assembly Speaker accepted that a 'clerical error' was responsible for the change in the Khatm-e-Nabuwwat oath⁵⁶, and all political parties agreed to revert to the original declaration.⁵⁷ Here, blasphemy laws in Pakistan were used and continue to be used as a tool for applying pressure by the military and its Islamist allies, by leveraging accusations of blasphemy to intimidate anyone who crosses its path, including politicians.⁵⁸ Even judges and lawyers involved in blasphemy litigation have not been spared, and hundreds of people have been arrested and killed following accusations of committing blasphemy.⁵⁹

In reality, at the core of this issue was the power struggle between the PML-N and the military, and it was no secret that the military wanted to get rid of Sharif.⁶⁰ The military has always been uncomfortable with any popular civilian leader, and no prime minister has ever served a full five-year term in Pakistan. Although the military may have in previous decades staged a coup d'état to forcibly remove a democratically elected government, it is more averse to intervening directly in politics since it has developed more sophisticated methods of removing elected prime ministers who are seen as acting too independently. In a recent research, Ayesha Siddiqi has termed this phenomenon as 'hybrid martial law' in which the army wields the real power and the civilian government functions merely as a junior partner.⁶¹ Over the years, the military has consolidated its power and influence in Pakistan, with the assistance of Islamist parties whose agenda broadly aligns with its own.⁶²

In the Faizabad blasphemy case, when the protestors refused to budge, the government unwittingly sought the assistance of the military, whose subsequent refusal to help could be interpreted either as

being hand-in-glove with the Islamists or as reluctance to use force against its rightwing allies. General Bajwa publicly asked the government to resolve the issue peacefully and maintained that using violence against the people would damage the military's cohesion.

The government was eventually ordered by the Islamabad High Court to employ force to clear the protesters, deploying about 8,500 police and paramilitary troops for this action, but without success. Following the failed police intervention, the military attempted to broker peace with the protesters, but without following the orders of the civilian government. The military's subsequent actions revealed open support for the Islamist agitators against the government, leaving no option for the latter but to surrender. Major General Faiz Hamid, the Director General of the Counterintelligence wing of the ISI, signed the agreement as representative of the Army Chief; Maj. Gen. Azhar Naveed Hayat Khan, the Director General of Pakistan Rangers in Punjab, a paramilitary force which had been ordered to clear the protest site, distributed cash to anti-blasphemy protesters who ostensibly needed it to buy tickets for the trip home; and the final sentence of the agreement thanked General Bajwa for 'saving the nation from a big catastrophe'.⁶³ Such effusive praise for his role as mediator triggered genuine concern among moderate politicians, as conceding to the demands of bigoted protesters could only strengthen the Islamist forces in Pakistan that consider themselves above the law. No independent investigation was conducted into the nexus of Rizvi and Pakistani military officials.

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Challenges of mainstreaming

Pakistan's system of government oscillates between patrimonialism, semi-authoritarianism and quasi-democracy. The military remains Pakistan's most powerful institution, using both populism and democratic cover to legitimise its dominance, while civilians are left with little option but to depend on the military to stay in power. This 'hybrid' form of government brings to the fore the potential contradictions of interactions between authoritarian and democratic elements in Pakistan.⁶⁴ Seen in this context, the military-mullah axis is fundamental to the dominant role of the army in Pakistani politics.

Instead of reversing Pakistan's ideological orientation rooted in Islamism, efforts have been made to 'mainstream' militant Islamist and terrorist organisations by conferring upon them the status of political

parties and allocating them party symbols so that they could contest general elections and be amalgamated into the society. This legitimising of radical Islamist and militant groups has provided them with an oversize nuisance value over the mainstream political parties.⁶⁵

This mainstreaming has gained momentum and the 2018 General Elections witnessed an unparalleled participation of radical Islamist parties, some of which are overtly militarised. The 'good' jihadists belonging to the rabidly anti-Indian terrorist organisations, Lashkar-i-Taiba (LeT) and the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), whose leader Hafiz Saeed had formed a political party known as the Milli Muslim League (MML) in August 2017, have been mainstreamed through the electoral process, in line with the policy of mainstreaming. When the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) prevented the registration of the MML as a political party, its candidates were simply fielded to a registered political party, the Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek (AAT). In November 2017, Musharraf openly declared his support for the LeT and JuD, asserting that the 'LeT and JuD are both very good organizations of Pakistan' because he has 'always been in favour of pressuring the Indian army in Kashmir'. Musharraf even hinted at the possibility of forming a political alliance with the JuD for the 2018 elections, though nothing came out of it.⁶⁶

In order to avoid pressure from the US, the Pakistani military merely pretends to take action against internationally designated terrorist groups, as demonstrated by Saeed's treatment over the years with kid gloves. The LeT has been allowed to continue its activities under multiple guises, and although Saeed was placed under house arrest several times, he was never sentenced due to an alleged lack of evidence. Thus, Nawaz Sharif's disapproval of the Pakistani army's mainstreaming of jihadists can be seen as the cause of his removal by judicial coup.⁶⁷ Referring to the LeT's involvement in the Mumbai terror attack and the failure to prosecute Saeed, Sharif remarked following his removal that 'militant organizations are active. Call them non-state actors, [but] should we allow them to cross the border and kill 150 people in Mumbai? Explain it to me. Why can't we complete the trial?'⁶⁸ That Sharif's government orchestrated operations to cleanse south Punjab⁶⁹ of sectarian terrorist groups under the aegis of the National Action Plan (NAP), and then took up Saeed's case with the military establishment⁷⁰, can be cited as key factors in his ousting, Saeed's release from house arrest and the LeT's permission to contest the general elections. The military threatened many journalists who were considered close to Sharif

and cracked down on some news channels, asking them to reduce their reportage of the military's involvement in politics.⁷¹

Immediately before the general elections, Pakistan's National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA) removed the ban on Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ) and unfroze the assets of its top leader, Ahmad Ludhianvi in the last week of June. The irony of this decision was compounded by the fact that removal of the ban on Ludhianvi was taken immediately following Pakistan's placement on the 'grey list' of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)⁷². The ASWJ's candidates contested the elections under the banner of the Pak Rah-e-Haq Party (PRHP). Even the mainstream candidates could not resist the temptation of soliciting the support of radical extremist parties. The former Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi sought ASWJ's electoral support. And Maulana Fazlur Rehman Khalil, who is linked to the terror group Harkat-ul Mujahideen (HuM), also announced support to the PTI candidate in Islamabad.⁷³

While the political observers are still analysing how the PTI's triumph is going to alter Pakistan's political landscape, there is concern over the strong performance of radical religious parties. Though the MML, which had fielded more than 260 candidates in provincial and state elections under the platform of AAT, did not garner enough votes to win a seat in national or provincial legislatures, however, it would continue to remain politically active. The ASWJ had also fielded many candidates in the elections.⁷⁴ However, the TLP, which fielded over 180 candidates across the country, has been the biggest winner among radical religious parties and has emerged as the fifth largest political party after the elections. Throughout the election campaign, the mainstream segment of Pakistani media termed the TLP as a spoiler. The electoral outcome released backs that theory. The TLP received over two million votes from across the country, and the chunks of votes it received spoiled PML-N's prospects in more than a dozen constituencies.⁷⁵ The rise of the TLP also represents the assertion of the Barelvis. In November 2020, Rizvi, who represents the Barelvis, was again successful in staging a hugely-attended protest near the boundary between the federal capital Islamabad and the garrison city of Rawalpindi against the publication of Prophet Muhammad's cartoons in France forcing the government to sign a humiliating deal.⁷⁶

As argued by Husain Haqqani, Islamic ideology is exploited by both Pakistan's rulers and Islamists as a 'weapon amid weakness' for generating religious frenzy 'through falsehoods and rumors, which are

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systematically deployed as vehicles of policy'. He further notes that 'periodic outbreaks of protest over insults to Prophet Muhammad and Islam are hardly spontaneous...The Islamists first introduce the objectionable material to their audience and then instigate outrage by characterizing it as part of a supposed worldwide conspiracy to denigrate Islam'.⁷⁷ The mullah-military collaborative venture has made it possible for the military to exploit the radical religious constituency in executing its foreign and domestic policies. However, the military's incorporation of the preferences of Islamist radicals into its Kashmir policy has also forced the former to tolerate intense sectarian impulses at the domestic level. The notion that the entrance of radical, militant Islamist forces into electoral politics can be mitigated by anything but de-weaponisation and de-radicalisation is wishful thinking.

The pressing concern in the secular world is with understanding whether Islamic radicals are gaining ascendancy as a result of some socio-cultural changes across the Muslim world or are being merely exploited by the ruling elites as a tool to execute 'realpolitik'. This concern becomes more pronounced in Pakistan's case because the evidence points to the military's historical penchant for using the country's territorial space as a safe haven for Islamic fundamentalists. The ruling elite of Pakistan must, therefore, redefine state institutions in terms which can keep Islamist ideology out of the state affairs. Rather than pursuing a utopian aim of converting Pakistani citizens into pious Muslims, the military-dominated Pakistani state needs to focus its energies on educational reforms, while eliminating hate speech in electoral politics, and withdrawing government patronage from religious parties.

Conclusion

The infrastructure of jihad created by al-Qaeda, encouraged by the Taliban and condoned by Pakistan's security establishment has led to the production of jihadist cadres policing everything considered un-Islamic in Pakistan whose socio-political fabric has been torn apart by this creeping 'Talibanisation'. Whether desirable or not, whatever happens in Pakistan inevitably affects India, and the whole South Asian region.

Attempts are being made in Pakistan to mainstream the Islamist parties, many of them banned, into the political process. Theoretically speaking, there is nothing wrong in all sections of Pakistani society to become involved in the electoral process, but groups that have a long

tendency of undermining the democratic process through sustained violent actions need to give up violence before political doors are opened to them. As the article has argued, the Pakistan army seems keen to give radical elements a larger political role as it has a vested interest in weakening the civilian governments led by mainstream political parties. Keeping the military-mullah nexus in good humor is imperative for all political parties wishing to stay in power.

*Pakistan's
'Mainstreaming'
Jihadis*

With Pakistan's increasing radicalisation, more problems for India and Afghanistan are likely to follow. Having mobilised public opinion against mainstream political parties, Islamist militant groups are beginning to overshadow mainstream political parties and dominate political process in Pakistan, with the military's overt and covert backing. Recent developments are testimony to the fact that Pakistan's military now openly supports the entry of radically religious and militant groups into electoral politics. If groups like the TLY rise in prominence, Pakistan's internal dynamics could dramatically change. Radical Islamist parties may not be able to garner sufficient votes to form a government but their campaigns in cities and towns across Pakistan would spread their ideological agenda based on jihad.

The military's reluctance to dissociate itself from domestic politics, and the sense of impunity among the religious right-wing groups threaten political and social rights of Pakistanis as well as regional peace. Support for extremist and jihadist groups operating in Kashmir and Afghanistan by Pakistan's security establishment is well established; but a military-backed Islamist militant government, with volatile nuclear capabilities, would not only increase internal insecurity but also add to regional tensions. The military would have unprecedented freedom to pursue its dangerous foreign policies and domestic ethnic cleansing in Baluchistan and Pakistan-held Kashmir. If the mullah-military alliance is allowed to fester and further entrench itself in Pakistani politics, there will be greater possibilities for regional tension and religious violence.

It is thus clear that allowing 'good' jihadists and militants to maintain their capacity while bestowing political recognition on them is bound to lead to greater destabilisation and set the stage for future conflicts. The Pakistan Army would be well advised to refrain from looking through a narrow anti-India prism and exclusively pursue military dominance, and instead bear Pakistan's long-term needs for security, stability and economic prosperity in mind.

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