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Sustainable Prevention Pathways, Policy Gaps, And Drivers Of Countering Violent Extremism In Pakistan

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Abstract

Violent extremism has always been a challenge to the national security of Pakistan, social cohesion, and development of the country. Years of various manifestations of extremism have been experienced in the country that has led to substantial loss of life and displacement as well as a breakdown of trust in society. This paper is a critical analysis of the socio-economic, political and psychological factors leading to violent extremism in Pakistan and assesses the efficiency of their respective counter-policies namely the National Action Plan (NAP) and Paigham-e-Pakistan. Though such initiatives have been valuable in policy frames, their tendency [1]of being more security based oriented has restricted their ability to deal with root causes especially those that are marginalized. By using purposive sampling with workers and leaders to collect information in a qualitative study based on an interpretivist research design, the study will use semi-structured interviews, focus groups, field observations, and document analysis as methods of studying the phenomenon. Thematic analysis is used to reveal frequent patterns and situational processes that contribute to radicalization as the context. Results show that poverty, unemployment, lack of access to quality education, political instability, and poor governance still form the major facilitators of extremism that are often augmented by sectarianism and feelings of alienation. The paper reveals the necessity of integrated, grass-root measures that integrate social-economic growth, education, and community dialogue to establish long-term resiliency to extremist groups.

Keywords: *CVE, Digital radicalization, the development of socio-economic well-being, deradicalization initiatives, community resiliency.*

Introduction

Violent extremism is an issue of significant concern to the world today and has been witnessed in countries in different regions posing threat to international peace, security, and stability. The increase of extremist ideologies through influence of other factors like socio-political instability, marginalization, and grievances has threatened the security systems of the countries, mainly in the regions that are prone to conflicts and under development. Global extremism has been associated with a set of factors such as socio-economic frustration, political oppression and manipulative use of religious or ideological discourse. Violent extremism has caused

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devastating effects in countries like Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq among others, therefore underlining the necessity to have comprehensive and multi faceted counter-extremism strategies which are proactive as well as localized. At a regional level, South Asia and especially Pakistan has been severely affected by the curse of violent extremism and the country has been the source and target of terrorist events. Extremism groups have destabilized social fabric and development of Pakistan as most are taking advantage of religious and ethnic differences. The contribution in Afghan conflict together with geo-political location of Pakistan has exposed the country to the growth of extremism groups and this has as a consequence enabled the spread of radical ideology. Moreover, the sophisticated social and political scenario of Pakistan encompassing ethnic conflicts, sectarian conflicts, financial inequality, and political unrest has also contributed to the increase of extremism which makes Pakistan one of the most hit nations regionally. In the Pakistani setting, the factors that contribute to violent extremism are bedded within the Pakistani socio-economic organizational system. The factors that create such environment include poverty, high degrees of unemployment and inability to access quality education, which become a breeding ground to the extremist ideologies, particularly among the disenfranchised youth. Moreover, sectarian and political instability whilst having poor modes of governance contributes to a situation in which the extremists can enlist disaffected grievances. Although, Pakistan has taken some progress in designing national counter-extremism measures, i.e. like the National Action Plan (NAP) and the creation of institutions such as the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Centre of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism (KPCVE), the problem is that it is fragmented. These have been mostly of top-down nature, security-based, and have not adequately dealt with the source causes of the extremism by the community. The contemporary issue in Pakistan is how it manages to seek a balanced approach between grassroots-based schemes and the national security system so that the local population, the people who are the most likely affected by the extremist propaganda, participates in the actual process of resilience formation. Although campaigns like that of Paigham-e-Pakistan have tried to create an atmosphere of religious tolerance to some extent, it has found its way restricted in the absence of proper coverage by society and support. Also, the political and security environment usually hinders the creation of the inclusive dialogue and platforms where communities, religious scholars, civil society, and state organs can collaborate in a bid to address the extremist rhetoric and ideologies. This paper seeks to explore the complex issue of violent extremism in Pakistan, its socio-economic, political, and psychological contributors, and how the causes persist. Throughout the study of the existing extremism response strategies in Pakistan, the research intends to gauge the efficacy of these forms and find out the viability of community-based methods of countering extremism including multi-stakeholder partnerships that can effectively curb the transmission of violent ideologies. The research assessed the applicability of these strategies in combining with the overall strategies in national security, and the aim of the research is to provide workable suggestions that can enhance the effort by Pakistan in establishing long term resilience against violent extremism. With the help of the given analysis, the work helped to shape this better, more inclusive, and culturally appropriate framework of preventing and combating violent extremism in Pakistan.

Problem Statement

The violent extremism problem in Pakistan has thus persisted over a long period of time due to a combination of socio-economic, political, and even psychological reasons that present a complicated imbroglio only subject to the different cultural and geographic coverage of the country. In spite of the attempts to counter this menace, violent extremism still keeps welling because of the existence of a mixture of drivers, which comprise poverty, loss of jobs, and lack of access to education, sectarianism, and bad governance systems. All this leads to a breeding

ground to extremist ideologies that in most cases are fuelled by regional inequalities and exploitation of vulnerable groups.

Research Objectives

i. To establish and determine the root causes that lead to violent extremism in Pakistan.
ii. To evaluate the policies and programs employed by Pakistan as part of the counter violent extremism.
iii. To assess the means with which Pakistan is building community resilience to extremist ideologies.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical construct of the present study addresses a wide range of perspectives to provide an explanation to socio-economic, psychological, political, and governance-related causes of violent extremism in Pakistan. Relative Deprivation Theory (Gurr, 1970) attributes the state of prolonged poverty, joblessness and disenfranchisement to the cause of radicalization, whereas Strain Theory (Merton, 1938) underscores how the deprivation imparted by the structural disparity forces the individuals to resort to the deviance. The Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) elucidates the nature of in-group versus out-group processes that are seen as encouraging extremist ideologies, and the Social Bond Theory (Hirschi, 1969) highlights how individuals (who have been involved in deviance) have weaker family, educational, and community attachments. The Religious Identity Framework also demonstrates the way in which the selective religious interpretations are used in view of legitimizing violence as well as enhancing cohesion among the extremists. Together, these theories present the complete picture to comprehend the combined dynamics that has caused extremism in Pakistan.

Methodology

The research design that was adopted in this study was targeted at the qualitative research design under an interpretivist research paradigm studying the cause of violent extremism and analyzing the counter-extremism measures of Pakistan. The study participants were purposively sampled; they include policymakers, security officials, community leaders, educators, and civil leaders. The data were gathered using the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, field observations, and document research of the applicable policies, reports, and scholarly literature. The prevalent tendencies and crucial themes have been established using thematic analysis based on the conceptualization of the study. This method allowed developing a comprehensive picture of socio-economic, political, psychological and ideological considerations which contribute to developing violent extremism and the strengths and weaknesses of the existing preventative strategies and interventions against violent extremism in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Adaptive solutions to the struggle against extremism are required due to the new mechanics of radicalization in the online environment (Khan et al., 2023). Extremist organizations are recruiting through the internet, even to the female gender; therefore, gendered CVE approaches are necessary to empower the female leaders and provide peace building in the communities. Legal institutions, nevertheless, including the operation of the criminal law to create the threat of punishment, have failed inpreventing ideologically based violence since in the majority of such attacks, there is no correlation to the threat of punishment but on intensive grievances that

might be in conflict injustice and affliction, economics ligation, and political exclusion (Mahmood, 2022).

According to Hafez (2020), religion as such is both the cause and the cure to violent extremism. The extremist groups tend to distort the religion to justify their actions of violence, and Hafez states the reality that the religious leaders and institutions are the respective authorities to combat these narratives. Some religious leaders are sending a message of peace, tolerance, and co-existence hence with these messages, they are in a position to be able to deconstruct the extremist ideologies and redirect the exposed people facing the risk of radicalization to other options.

It is no secret that social media contributes to radicalization in some way or another, with Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube being the recruitment and propaganda centers of extremist factions (Conway, 2018). The ability of extremist organizations to attract a global audience via the digital network transformed the landscape of classic counterterrorism efforts, as was mentioned by Daines et al. (2021). Governments and civil society organization should thus establish the digital counter-narratives to curb this ideology of extremism on online spaces.

The correlation between socioeconomic aspects in radicalization is one of the relationships that were significantly researched. It has been established that factors such as economic instability, high rates of unemployment and unavailability of academic opportunities have shown that they are significant factors that drive radicalization-based on studies by Krieger and Meierrieks (2016). Persons, in this instance, youth in the low status groups, can select extremist ideologies as a result of frustrations in their attempts to belong. The underlying causes therefore, require a multidimensional approach towards making education more accessible, unemployment a reality, and towards improving social integration in these de facto marginalized regions.

In a similar study by Bliuc et al. (2020), the authors suggest that the importance of economic factors needs to be studied regardless of the latter being viewed in isolation. Radicalization is also important due to psychological and ideological reasons, which could include identity crises and perceived injustices. Hence, any policies to prevent violent extremism should focus on changing the material factors of individuals as well as the ideology that underlies people to extremism.

Psychological radicalization process is one of the research interests that have emerged in the context of CVE. According to McCauley and Moskalenko (2017), radicalization was identified as a psychological process that is complicated and covers the identity transformation, socialization with the extremist ideologies, and grievance or injustice. Individuals who feel alienation, victimized and require revenge or justice to be administered are the typical individuals who turn out to be vulnerable to radicalization. The psychological radicalization theories are founded on cognitive distortions and building abilities of critical thinking and resistance to extremist ideology development. With greater social and community based approaches, mental health interventions can substantially prevent violent extremism through counseling and supportive services offered to the individuals at-risk of radicalization.

The radicalization by the youth is a very important area of interest of CVE work since it is the youth who become the primary targets of the extremist groups since they seek to find someone into whom they would invest their identity finding, attaining a sense of belonging, and purpose in their existence. Preventing radicalization needs to empower the causal factor that can lead to disillusionment of the youth-socio-economic marginalization, illiteracy, and political apathy.

The appropriate measures must include youth empowerment, critical thinking skills, and positive alternatives to vicious ideologies (Simi & Futrell, 2018; Bakker, 2019; Van San & De Graaf, 2021).

Extremism also spreads because of the significant role of media, particularly social media. These digital spaces are used to conduct propaganda, recruit members and incite violence by extremist groups. In turn, CVE efforts have to be counter-messaging; the creation of alternative narratives that would oppose extremist ideas and advance the concepts of tolerance, peace, and cooperation should be made. The only way to weaken extremist propaganda is to promote effective counter-narratives, which are emotional, credible, culturally, and contextually meaningful, and provide alternatives (Matusitz, 2020; Carter & Shepherd, 2019; Gartenstein-Ross & Grossman, 2021).

Discussion

In the findings of this study, although Pakistan is shown to have some tactical successes in its Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts, notably through the use of military action within the framework of the National Action Plan (NAP); the approach taken down to date utilizes far more security-oriented means and does not have a prevalent robust set of soft measures to target the causes of radicalization. Governance reforms, economic stability, community participation, ideological counter-narratives, gender enclusion, digital resilience and family empowerment are essential in regard to sustainable CVE, stressed the respondents in all thematic areas. The theoretical expertise of the research combines the approaches of the Relative Deprivation Theory, Social Cohesion Theory, Conflict Transformation Theory, Social Contract Theory, Social Learning Theory, Social Bond Theory, Systems Theory, Gender Theory, Digital Radicalization Theory, and Ideological Radicalization Theory. Collectively, the frameworks elucidate the interaction between socio-economic inequalities, lack of governance, grievances based on identity, ideological inculcation, and poor social fusedness in prompting extremism. Quality governance and inclusion were among the key factors recognized by the respondents as engineered in the development of resilience with the threats that the lack of balance between security measures and civil liberties may encourage alienation. The matter of radicalization was many times connected with economic deprivation, lack of employment, and educational possibilities, which indicates the importance of socio-economic factors. It was also confirmed in the study that the use of digital space in extremist recruitment and spreading propaganda continues to grow making it essential to create proactive, community-based counter-arguments and also enhance digital regulation. Gender as a topic became another repetitive issue, and participants emphasized that women are not only vulnerable yet are agents of change in CVE. Nevertheless, their engagement is usually limited by social norms and structural forms that act as barriers hence the need to strategize by employing specific interventions e.g. leadership skills, safe spaces, and inclusive decision making. Focus on the role of families was also given, where good family relationships, open communication, and critical thinking were claimed to be among the protective factors against radicalisation. Although NAP has achieved success in breaking the linkage of the militant networks and alleviating such incidences in some regions, its small-scale approach to preventing, deradicalization, and ideological engagement has left space to leave an ideology-laden narrative. The respondents suggested regulation changes to religious education, similar to that of Singapore on Asatizah Recognition Scheme, to regulate theological alignment towards peace and tolerance. On the whole, the research shows that Pakistan needs to shift toward the proactive, multi-sectoral approach to CVE instead of the reactive, military-centered approach. This involves ensuring the incorporation of governance reforms, the establishment of economic opportunities, modernization of education, regulation

of religious discourses, establishing digital literacy and gender inclusive policies. Through a structural and ideological focus, Pakistan will be able to devise a holistic sustainable approach to preventing violent extremism by maintaining social coherence and institutionalizing social stability to generate good long-term outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that the multi-faceted, holistic and context-specific approach is needed to counter violent extremism (CVE) in Pakistan, as it needs to be shifted toward proactive interventions and resiliency enhancements instead of reactive, security-focused ones. The key pillars became governance reforms, economic stability, education modernization, engagement of the family, inclusion of the genders, and digital resilience to deal with the structural, ideological, and psychological motivators of the radicalization. Whereas the short-term results of the National Action Plan (NAP) were security-wise fruitful, its lack of capabilities in terms of focusing on prevention, deradicalization, and addressing extremist beliefs head-on, has left room to continue with the ideology. The discoveries highlight the outstanding importance of socio-economic development in minimizing exposure to extremism especially among the marginalized youth who are unemployed, have poor access to education and are shunned by the society. Taking place mainly among vulnerable women and other sub-populations, digital radicalization has changed the extremist landscape, rendering adaptive counter-narratives, media literacy, and proportional regulation that preserve constitutionally guaranteed freedoms. The need to engage women and families to be key participants in CVE processes as part of developing sustainable resilience in the community is essential as is the fact that religious leaders must be part of singing or promoting peaceful interpretations of religion. The research also points out the shortcoming of current deradicalization efforts and in particular the poor monitoring and evaluation systems, which prevent an effective understanding on long term success. Experience suggests that combined regimes involving ideology re-education, psychological counseling, social re-integration and community support are much better alternatives in curbing the root cause of radicalization as exemplified by the successful international models. On the whole, the CVE framework in Pakistan has to transform into a multi-sectoral, inclusive, and coordinated approach that targets not only material realities but also ideological forces. Through enhancing the building of trust by state and communities, enhancing socio-economic and education opportunities, fostering gender and digital inclusion and institutionalising long-term reintegration mechanisms, Pakistan can establish an effective societal base that can be resilient to prevent and addressing violent extremism in the long-run.

Recommendations

- Pakistan must combine a multifaceted, human rights–oriented CVE approach that integrates digital governance, socio-economic change, active communities, and successful deradicalization. It is a strategy that will see the recognition of the causes of extremism and may accommodate fundamental freedoms in the process of abating extremism. An integrated system will establish long terms immunity towards violent ideologies.
- Moderate online controls should also be erected to help track the extremist contents but not to restrict free expression. Interaction with tech sector can lead to improvements in recognizing and removing abusive content and mass digital literacy-promoting efforts on a national level are a potential means of empowering people to recognize and discard extremist rhetoric. Such actions have to be supported with powerful counter-messages, which are locally relevant.

- It is necessary to expand availability of quality education, vocational training which increases employment opportunities in the marginalized regions to minimize structural vulnerabilities. These efforts need to be enhanced with available mental health services and inclusive community-based development programs. In tandem, those measures will provide alternatives to radicalization.
- Economic, psychological and ideological interventions should intersect in the community-centered approaches to not only find a solution to radicalization issues but also overcome it. Positive goals like interfaith and intercultural dialogue, messaging to the masses, and programs on family resilience are some initiatives that can promote inclusion and shared identity. This builds societal unity and decreases acceptance of the extremist views.
- Deradicalization approaches need to be based on other successful forms abroad, to combine psychological counseling, ideological re-education, training on vocational skills and systematic reintegration. Cultural relevance is guaranteed through the empowerment of local mentors and community leaders to provide direction to the process. These holistic programs lower recidivism and positive re-entry in the society.
- There needs to be effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that are headed by independent organs to measure the outcome of the CVE programs in the long run. The reasons are that data-driven insights can be used to make strategies more effective. Women, youth, and minorities engagement into CVE top leadership promotes trust, inclusion, and social stability on a sustainable basis.

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