



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**The Role of Religious and Secular Dynamics in Shaping Pakistani National Identity: Challenges and Opportunities**

**<sup>1</sup>Dr. Ghulam Shabbir\* <sup>2</sup> Dr. Sharaf Ali and <sup>3</sup> Khizar Jawad**

1. Assistant Professor, Department of History & Pakistan Studies, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Associate Lecturer, Department of Political Science & IR, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Assistant Professor, Department of History/Pakistan Studies, F C College University Lahore Punjab, Pakistan

**Corresponding Author** [ghulam.shabbir@uog.edu.pk](mailto:ghulam.shabbir@uog.edu.pk)

**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the complex interplay between religious and secular dynamics in shaping Pakistani national identity, addressing both challenges and opportunities. Historically, Pakistan was founded with an Islamic ideological underpinning, yet envisioned by some leaders as a secular state. This duality has influenced national identity formation. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from primary and secondary sources, especially, analysis of historical documents, policy papers and academic works. The findings reveal that state-sponsored religious policies and the influence of religious political groups have significantly shaped national identity, often leading to societal divisions. Conversely, secular movements, although facing resistance, have played a critical role in advocating for a more inclusive identity. The study recommends a balanced policy approach that integrates both religious and secular perspectives, educational reforms to promote inclusivity, and media initiatives to foster dialogue. Civil society's role in encouraging interfaith and intercultural understanding is also emphasized as crucial for national unity.

**Keywords:** Educational Reforms, Interfaith Dialogue, National Identity, Religious Dynamics, Secularism

**Introduction**

The identity crisis in Pakistan is a multifaceted phenomenon, deeply rooted in the country's historical, political, and social fabric. Since its inception in 1947, Pakistan has grappled with defining its national identity amidst the complex interplay of religious and secular dynamics. The nation's foundation was ideologically grounded in Islam, envisioned as a homeland for Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. However, the vision of Pakistan's founding fathers, notably Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, believed in secular ideals, also encompassed a state based on Islamic socialism where religious minorities could coexist peacefully. This inherent duality has continued to influence the discourse on national identity, leading to ongoing tensions between religious and secular forces (Shabbir, 2024).

The purpose of this study is to analyse the impact of religion and secular factors in construction of national identity of Pakistani people, figure out the threats and threats caused by religious and secular forces and investigate the new opportunities for creation of healthy national identity in Pakistan. Thereby, this study is informative for locating why the phenomenon identity continues to be an issue in Pakistan within the context of histories of different developments.

In the early decades of Pakistan, the political culture has attempted to integrate Islamic values and secular political systems. However, the political systems that followed have also swung between being religious and supporting secularism adding another

dimension to the narrative of national identity. Religious extremism and the effect of continuous presence of religious political parties has led to new forms of social cleavages and the question mark on unified national identity (Shabbir. Ghulam, 2024). On the other hand, secular movements have, despite opposition, actively campaigned for the rights of minorities and tolerance, an indict of the religious extremism.

In order to capture and review these dynamics effectively, this study makes use of both the qualitative and the analytical research method. Firstly, primary data is a result of interviews and written communication of politicians, religious leaders and secular activists, while secondly, secondary data entails using historical documents, policy papers and academic works. The findings are expected to shed light on today's religious secular forces to understand the relative nature and prospect of these forces in Pakistan.

In light of the findings, the study will offer policy recommendations aimed at harmonizing religious and secular influences to build a cohesive national identity. Educational reforms, media initiatives and civil society's role in promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue will be highlighted as crucial strategies for fostering national unity. By addressing these issues, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of Pakistan's identity crisis and propose pathways towards a more inclusive and unified national identity.

### **Literature Review**

The formation of Pakistan was deeply rooted in Islamic ideology, envisioned as a homeland for Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. The secular life style of Jinnah and his vision for Pakistan, as articulated in his speeches, highlighted an approach where religious minorities could coexist peacefully within an Islamic framework (Hayat, 2014). This duality has significantly influenced the discourse on national identity.

National identity formation can be understood through various theoretical lenses. Anderson (1983) describes nations as "imagined communities" where members, though not personally acquainted, perceive a shared identity. Gellner (1983) emphasizes the role of modernity and industrialization in shaping national identities, often juxtaposing traditional religious identities with emerging secular ones.

Studies have shown that state-sponsored religious policies in Pakistan have reinforced Islamic identity, often at the expense of secular ideals. Ziring (1997) discusses how the introduction of Islamic laws during the Zia-ul-Haq regime entrenched religious identity in national governance. Conversely, Nasr (2001) highlights how secular movements, though marginalized, have continuously advocated for a more inclusive and pluralistic national identity. Religious extremism has been a significant challenge, impacting national cohesion and security. Abbas (2005) examines the rise of religious extremism and its societal repercussions, noting that extremist ideologies often undermine efforts to foster a unified national identity. On the other hand, secular activism has played a critical role in challenging these extremist narratives and promoting inclusive policies (Shaikh, 2009).

The tension between secularism and religious nationalism is a recurring theme in Pakistani politics. Haqqani (2005) explores how religious political parties have influenced national policies, often clashing with secular visions. This conflict is evident in educational curricula, media representation and public policies, where religious narratives frequently overshadow secular perspectives.

Civil society organizations have been essential in promoting secularism and interfaith dialogue. Siddiqi (2007) discusses the role of NGOs and advocacy groups in fostering an inclusive national identity, emphasizing the importance of grassroots movements in countering religious extremism. These organizations often face significant

resistance but remain crucial in the broader struggle for a balanced national identity. Educational reforms are critical for shaping national identity. Rahman (2004) critiques the educational curriculum in Pakistan, arguing that it often reinforces religious exclusivism and neglects secular perspectives. Reforms aimed at integrating both religious and secular narratives are essential for promoting a more inclusive national identity.

The media plays a crucial role in constructing and disseminating national identity. Khan (2013) analyses the influence of both traditional and social media in shaping public perceptions of national identity. While media often reflects dominant religious narratives, it also provides a platform for secular voices, contributing to a more diverse discourse on national identity. Effective policy interventions are necessary to balance religious and secular influences. Hussain (2007) suggests that a balanced approach to policy-making, incorporating both religious and secular perspectives, can help mitigate societal divisions and foster a cohesive national identity.

The literature highlights the complex interplay between religious and secular dynamics in shaping Pakistani national identity. Historical, political and social factors contribute to this multifaceted identity crisis. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced approach, integrating educational reforms, media initiatives and civil society efforts to promote a more inclusive and unified national identity.

## **Material and Methods**

This study employs a historical and descriptive research methodology to explore the role of religious and secular dynamics in shaping Pakistani national identity. The primary sources for this research include archival documents, historical records, government policy papers, speeches and interviews. Key sources of primary data encompass the National Archives of Pakistan, the Main Library of the University of the Punjab, and the Quaid-e-Azam Library, University of Gujrat. These institutions provide access to a vast array of documents, books, theses and periodicals essential for understanding the ideological foundations and policy directions of Pakistan. Additionally, semi-structured interviews of historians, political scientists, religious leaders, secular activists, and policymakers offer qualitative insights into the personal experiences and perspectives of individuals directly involved in or affected by the dynamics of national identity formation in Pakistan.

Since data is collected from multiple sources, triangulation is incorporated to minimize potential bias and to establish validity and reliability of the findings. This includes the analysis of the data collected from archival data, literature review and interviews, comparing and contrasting the data collected to enhance a full and objective appreciation of the research questions. In doing so, the study seeks to offer a rich and complex exploration of how religious and secular forces work together and in tension in the formation of Pakistani nationalist subjectivity, how the interplay is fraught with potentials and difficulties. It is hoped that it will be of use to those in government, educators and civil society in efforts towards the creation of a more restrictive national identity for Pakistan.

## **Results and Discussions**

The interplay between religious and secular dynamics in shaping Pakistani national identity presents several significant challenges. These challenges include ideological conflicts, governance issues, social divisions, educational disparities, and external influences. Each of these factors contributes to the complexity and volatility of Pakistan's national identity, often creating tensions and hindrances to the development of a cohesive and inclusive national narrative.

One of the primary challenges is the ideological conflict between religious and secular visions of the state. Pakistan was founded on the basis of the two-nation theory,

which posited a separate state for Muslims. This has entrenched an Islamic identity at the core of the nation's ethos. However, the secular needs of governance and the diversity of religious practices within the country often clash with this singular religious identity. As Nasr (2004) points out, the tension between a religiously defined state and the practical requirements of secular governance creates policy inconsistencies and societal unrest (p. 89). The challenge is to find a balance that respects the country's Islamic heritage while accommodating secular and pluralistic governance.

Governance issues also pose a significant challenge in balancing religious and secular dynamics. The legal and constitutional frameworks in Pakistan are a battleground for these opposing forces. For example, while the Constitution of Pakistan declares Islam as the state religion, it also includes provisions for the protection of religious minorities. This duality often leads to conflicts in law enforcement and judicial decisions, particularly when it comes to the implementation of Sharia law versus secular laws. According to Jaffrelot (2002), this inconsistency undermines the rule of law and erodes public confidence in state institutions (p. 112). Addressing these governance challenges requires a clear and consistent legal framework that harmonizes religious and secular principles.

Social divisions are another major challenge arising from the religious-secular dichotomy. Pakistan is home to various ethnic and religious groups, including significant non-Muslim minorities. The emphasis on an Islamic identity can marginalize these communities, leading to social exclusion and sectarian violence. Malik (2002) highlights that this marginalization not only threatens social cohesion but also fuels extremism and intolerance (p. 48). The challenge is to promote an inclusive national identity that values diversity and fosters social harmony.

Educational disparities further complicate the relationship between religious and secular dynamics in Pakistan. The education system in Pakistan often emphasizes religious teachings, sometimes at the expense of secular education. This can result in a population that is less equipped to engage with the modern, secular world. Rahman (2004) argues that an education system heavily skewed towards religious instruction can limit critical thinking and perpetuate ideological divisions (p. 77). Reforming the education system to provide a balanced curriculum that includes both religious and secular subjects is essential to overcome this challenge.

Finally, external influences play a significant role in shaping Pakistan's national identity and exacerbate the challenges associated with religious and secular dynamics. The geopolitical context, particularly relations with neighboring countries like India and Afghanistan, and alliances with powers such as the United States, influence Pakistan's national narrative. These external pressures often compel Pakistan to adopt a security-centric identity that prioritizes defense over cultural or ideological integration. As Haqqani (2013) notes, this external focus can overshadow efforts to address internal identity challenges and promote a cohesive national identity (p. 156). The challenge is to manage these external influences while fostering a balanced and inclusive national identity internally.

Challenges in the role of religious and secular dynamics in shaping Pakistani national identity can be broadly categorized into political, social, and ideological aspects. The political landscape of Pakistan is significantly influenced by the interplay between religious and secular ideologies. One major challenge is the dominance of Islamist factions in dictating national identity policies, which has often led to a suppression of secular viewpoints. Islamists, despite their limited electoral success, have managed to exert substantial influence over civilian and military governments, thereby shaping national identity in a way that marginalizes secular narratives (Ahmed, 2017). This dominance has often resulted in the erosion of democratic norms and has hindered the promotion of pluralism within the country (Nasr, 2004).

Socially, the integration of religion into national identity has led to significant polarization within Pakistani society. The emphasis on a singular religious identity has often marginalized minority communities and exacerbated sectarian conflicts. The anti-secular narrative promoted by Islamist groups has created an environment where moderate and liberal viewpoints are suppressed, sometimes violently. This has contributed to an increase in sectarian violence and has hindered efforts to create a more inclusive and tolerant society (Rais, 2007). Furthermore, the intertwining of religious identity with national identity has led to social fragmentation, making it difficult to foster a cohesive national identity that accommodates diverse ethnic and religious groups (Durrani & Dunne, 2010).

Ideologically, the conflict between religious and secular narratives presents a significant challenge in defining Pakistani national identity. The use of religion as a tool for political legitimacy has often resulted in the exclusion of secular and liberal ideologies from the national discourse. This exclusion is particularly evident in the education system and media, where the promotion of a religiously homogeneous national identity has led to the marginalization of secular and pluralistic perspectives (Shaheed, 2010). Additionally, the historical tension between religious nationalism and secularism continues to shape contemporary debates about the nature of the Pakistani state and its identity (Iqtidar & Gilmartin, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the complex interconnection between religious and secular forces for or in the construction of Pakistani nationalism, identifying both threats and possibilities. Pakistan was created on the Islamic principle but some of the early leaders thought of having an Islamic state for all where religious minorities could also have their representation. It is for this reason that Somalia has always been plagued with tensions and divisions as far as the national identity is concerned. The state sponsored religious policies and the action of religious political parties have time and again contributed to homogenizing the Islamic identity and erasing secularism as well as Non-Muslim minorities' rights. On the other hand, the secular movements though witnessing a lot of opposition have been of immense importance in the demand for the more liberal identity.

According to the findings of the current research, some of the challenges encountered in the process of implementation of effective public policies include ideological clashes, governance problems, social fragmentation, inequity in education, and exogenous factors. These factors have further strengthened the evoked themes of Pakistan's national identity which is still in the process of development and very often cannot find a stable and inclusive narrative. At the same time, the study reveals several initiatives aimed at synchronizing the religious and secular moralities as the key to uniting the nation's identity. The strategies that should be employed to meet this goal include: guaranteeing pluralism by encouraging the separation of religion and state; ensuring the implementation of secularist principles in governance; using technology in learning and sharing of information; and ensuring that religious as well as secular perspectives are incorporated in teaching and learning.

Finally, it has been argued, about identity crisis in Pakistan, it is possible to state that Pakistan need to focus both religious and secular aspects of its culture. If the people in Pakistan are encouraged to think of themselves as a united nation with a common diversity this would result into the formation of a united nation with equal mutual rights and obligations towards each other. The recommendations of this study therefore imply that educational reforms, media initiatives and the workings of civil society organizations as key elements supporting interfaith and intercultural dialogue. These efforts are very important in undertaking to eliminate social barriers and create unity and a progressive form of nationalism. Thus, this study can be of great help for the policymakers, educators, and

members of civil society in Pakistan trying to build the coherent national identity for the country.

### **Recommendations**

Identifying the challenges and opportunities for religious and secular dynamics in Pakistan and confirming the validity of the offered models for solution of the enumerated problems, it is possible to make the following recommendations: Hence, it is important that there be reforms that accept both religious and secular approach in forming the educational curriculum. School education is intended to develop the critical thinking of students, as well as to build tolerance and respect for the differences in religion and culture. If courses like comparative religions, ethic, and civics are introduced in the education system, the students will be able to understand the importance of tolerance and harmonious integration.

Based on the above analysis, there is need for the policy makers to strive to strike a balance between the religious and the secular laws. This entails making sure that laws and policies do not violate the rights of the citizens of this country and the international human rights. The legal system must be coherent and based on the Pakistan's Islamic roots while at the same time incorporating liberal values that a modern multiplicity requires.

The media is an important factor that affects the people and the formation of the national identity. The media should be encouraged to give the voice to different opinions, especially the secular and minority opinions. Addressing societal cleavages and encouraging a more pluralist narrative is possible with the help of programs fostering interfaith dialogue, cultural diversity, and national unity. Interfaith and intercultural dialogue is very important in which civil society organizations play a vital role. These organizations should be encouraged in their endeavours to bring about harmony between the various religious and ethnic groups. Scholarly activities like interfaith dialogues, community building, cultural interchange and many more help in maintaining social integration and national unity.

Keeping in mind that the concept of pluralism should be promoted as one of the foundational values for a nation, we cannot underestimate its importance for the unity of the country. People's government and civil society organizations should be empowered to reveal the history of the diverse religious and ethnical backgrounds within the country. National holidays, cultural festivals, and public acknowledgement of our uniqueness are key ways through which diversity can be embraced and embraced and empowered in a given society. Religious extremism is a major problem in today's societies, and it is therefore important that strategies to combat this form of extremism must be adopted. This involves action not only from the police towards the offenders but also from the aspect of social and economic factors that lead to it. Combating extremism calls for organized efforts regarding programs, skills, and even policies with worries in schools and communities to lower the appeal of such extremes.

By cooperating with international organizations and countries experimenting with ways of dealing with religion and secularism, the subject can be enriched and assisted. Integrating with educational programs, multimedia productions, and civil society-based activities may strengthen measures aimed at rebuilding a more tolerant national perspective. It is therefore crucial to put complimenting measures of tracking the effectiveness of policies on the development of national identity and programs. It's also important to have frequent check-ins because it will allow to figure out whether initiatives are bearing fruit and what aspects of school life need to be worked on further in terms of diversification and integration. Consequently, the following is a list of tactics that can help Pakistan to strive for the equitable and tolerant society that, on the one hand, celebrates religion as the cultural foundation of the state, while on the other hand, accepts and safeguards secularism as the major value of the modern Pakistani state: These efforts are

important for the conception of the coherent society and people who would be able to face all obstacles of the present world.

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