



RESEARCH PAPER

Religious Radicalization in Swat (2001-2010): Political Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Swat valley is in rift of religious radicalization after 9/11. To find the root cause of religious radicalization in Swat after 9/11 researcher holds that poor governance, political instability and weak administration were the main causes. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM) took advantage of this political vacuum and establish parallel political structures. Rotberg's 'Failed State Theory' is applied because nations fall when they are unable to fulfill fundamental duties of governance. It includes maintaining political stability, law enforcement, and security. The study finds that Pakistani government was more prone to military operations like Rah-e-Rast than to address the root cause of religious radicalization in Swat. Furthermore, religious scholars remained silent to terrorism and denounce only selective acts of radical groups. Thus allows the radical and extremist narratives to thrive. Conflict-prone areas like Swat needs a comprehensive governance approach to restore political stability and cure radical approach.

Keywords: Religious Radicalization, Swat, Weak Governance, Taliban, Political Vacuum

Introduction

The Swat Valley which is also known as the "Switzerland of Pakistan", because of its ravishing sceneries, turned into breeding ground for religious radicalization in the name of Islam after 9/11. Tehreek e Taliban (TTP) under the leadership of Maulana Fazaullah, turned this beautiful valley of Pakistan into a battlefield for the conflict between Pakistani military and terrorist forces. The root cause of religious radicalization in Swat was not just ideological indoctrination or socio-economic hardship rather there were multiple other reasons. The weak administration, poor governance and political instability allow the radical groups to exploit the local inhabitants. The radical and militant groups use the name of Islam to provoke them against State authority in the name of Islamic Jihad. Thus the incapacity of the state to establish strong political authority resulted in the creation of a political vacuum, which ultimately led to radicalization in the region.

After 9/11, the political turmoil in Afghanistan evolved, and a large number of Taliban militants were compelled to seek sanctuary in the tribal regions of Pakistan, particularly Swat. The Taliban formed their political structures in parallel to state institutions. They established their own courts as Sharia Courts and took the plea that Government of Pakistan has failed to enforce Sharia laws. The people of Swat, who were suffering from delayed justice, trusted on Taliban's Sharia Court and get quick decisions as well. So trust deficit on government allowed the Taliban's to operate there freely. In 2007, Maulana Fazlullah, the commander of the TTP, used FM radio broadcasting as a means of propagating radical narratives and rallying popular support against the federal government. It was not an innate religious tendency toward extremism and terrorism that enabled the Taliban to obtain legitimacy among the population rather it was the breakdown of governmental institutions that made this phenomenon possible (Yaseen & Muzaffar, 2018).

The lack of a political system in Swat was the result of decades of political failure and historical neglect and not due to a single event. Swat was already suffering from ineffective legal systems and a weak state presence prior to the rise of militancy. It lacks political cohesion. The political vacuum was thus filled by radical and extremist groups who were able to establish themselves as de facto rulers. Therefore, the study not only challenges the widely held belief that religious radicalization was the only factor contributing to terrorism in the area, but it also clarifies how poor governance and weak administration created the conditions necessary for radical groups to thrive (Batool, et. al., 2023).

Literature Review

Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, which is now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has the Swat Valley, which has a distinct cultural and historical identity. The area was particularly susceptible to the War on Terror's repercussions because of its closeness to Afghanistan and its ethnic links to Pashtun people. Many militants who had been displaced by the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan sought safety in Pakistan's tribal areas, such as Swat. Grievances of local inhabitants and this migration fostered a climate that was conducive to radicalization (Nawab, et. al., 2021; Muzaffar, et.al., 2021; Ahmed, 2007). Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM) and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) are two groups that have emerged as a result of the region's historical significance of Islamic jihad in Pashtun society. To further their "Shariatization" mission, these groups took advantage of grievances of local inhabitants, such as economic hardship and a lax judicial system (Akhtar, 2010). These organizations gained popularity by taking advantage of the geopolitical landscape, which included the US-led War on Terror. The TTP and TNSM justified their conduct by citing resistance to foreign occupation and corruption. Their extremist interpretation of Islam served as the foundation of their ideology, which they employed to rally support from disgruntled groups (Mulcahy et al., 2013). Zahid Hussain discusses the involvement of Pakistan's intelligence agencies and military in fostering specific militant groups for strategic objectives. He examines how this approach has ultimately resulted in internal instability and garnered international condemnation. The lenient strategy towards radicals, rooted in the Afghan Jihad period, has influenced Pakistan's management of extremist factions. The state's hesitance to implement laws against individuals such as Maulana Sufi Mohammad and Zakir ur Rehman Lakhvi, who are accused of terrorism and supporting Jihad respectively, illustrates state's leniency. (Hussain, 2008)

It is important to take into account additional causes like economic hardship, global politics, and the absence of a thorough counter-insurgency strategy, even if the political vacuum and governance shortcomings were major drivers to the emergence of radicalization and terrorism in Swat. These factors, along with the deliberate manipulation of religious feelings, produced conducive environment for the propagation of radical narratives, throughout the area (Muzaffar, Khan & Karamat, 2017; Rafi, 2017)

Material and Methods

Qualitative research approach is adopted. Secondary sources are used to analyze the root cause of religious radicalization in Swat after 9/11. The research is descriptive and historical in nature. These techniques are used to provide an in-depth understanding of political failure and its role in fostering religious radicalization.

Rotberg's Failed State Theory is applied to understand the root cause of religious radicalization in Swat after 9/11. The theory holds that countries disintegrate because they are unable to carry out their basic governing duties. These duties include ensuring economic stability, law enforcement, and security. He defines a "failed state" as one that is incapable of administering its people, preserving its territory, or enforcing law and order,

which eventually leads to the emergence of non-state actors, conflicts, and other types of administration. He believes that state's collapse when institutions erode over time and resulted in chaos, violence, and other forms of authority. It's a gradual process. He discussed the case studies of Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia in his book. Rotberg asserts that when state institutions are unable to operate effectively, non-state actors get the space and took the charge. Radicalization thrives in countries that are unable to provide the basic necessities of life. Even while some argue that Pakistan is not considered a failed state overall, between 2001 and 2009, several regions of Pakistan, most notably Swat, showed indications of a failed state. Political instability, ineffective law enforcement, and poor administration in Swat created political vacuum that the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was able to fill.

Weak Governance and Religious Radicalization in Swat (2001-2010)

Between 2001 and 2010, the whole Pakistan was facing political turmoil. However there was clear stamp of religious radicalization in Swat because of weak administration and a lingering political vacuum. Pakistan As per Robert I. Rotberg Failed State Theory, it was governance failure in Swat that created conducive environment for radical narratives to thrive. The establishment of Sufi Muhammad's Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM) and the following emergence of Maulana Fazlullah showed how the weakened government created vacuum for the radical minds. The transitional period from military governance of General Pervaiz Musharraf to fragile civilian government, widened the political vacuum. There was lack of coordination between civilian government and the military thus led to delays in addressing the cause of radicalization in Swat. There were inconsistencies in counterterrorism policies. Government held diplomatic negotiations on one hand while started military interventions as well which sabotaged the negotiations with Taliban's in Swat. It inadvertently reinforced radical groups. (Muzaffar, et. al., 2023; Tahir, 2023)

Sufi Muhammad created Tehrik Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM) in 1989 to implement Sharia rule in Swat and Malakand that later contributed to the radicalization of Swat. Though it was peaceful movement initially, later TNSM openly opposed the government in the 1990s and turned militant. Sufi Muhammad led a militant group in 1994 calling for the implementation of Sharia law. On his pressure, the government enacted the Nizam-i-Adal Regulation. Extremist groups were further empowered by this capitulation, which reinforced the idea that violence could affect governmental decisions. The problem was further worsened by Maulana Fazlullah's ascent to power. He had no academic education, in contrast to typical religious scholars, yet he was a powerful orator who successfully influenced public opinion. Because the government failed to control religious discourse and suppress radical narratives, his influence grew. He started an illegal FM radio station in 2006 with the goal of promoting radical Islam, criticizing the Pakistani government, and advocating for the rigid application of Sharia. (Shah et al., 2020) His terrorist network also grew as a result of the delayed action taken against him, who was rapidly gaining power. Taxation, courts, and a militant police force were all part of the administration structure that Fazlullah had established by 2007. His campaign, which finally banned entertainment, enforced strict social norms, and punished dissenters, won support from residents fed up with the state's inefficiencies. This alternative system grew because the state failed to provide a clear response, an administrative vacuum, which Fazlullah filled with his own version of Sharia law. By encouraging people to fight against the State apparatus in the name of Allah, he began radicalizing the local inhabitants. (Rasool & Khan, 2022)

In his book *Religious Extremism and the Rise of Talibanization in Swat*, Sajid Anwar argues that religious political parties, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) helped to foster the rise of extremism in Swat. (Anwar, 2019) These parties used religion as a political tool to increase their power rather

than adhering to true Islamic principles. A coalition of religious political parties called the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) was accused of subtly supporting Fazlullah's movement, underscoring the function of political organizations. Their ambivalence in dealing with the growing militancy and their ambiguous stance on extremism made the situation worse. Furthermore, the successive governments have failed to provide effective governance in these areas thus made it easier for extreme groups to emerge. (Malik, 2015)

The Failed State Theory states that a state is said to be collapsing when its political institutions lose their efficacy, its judiciary disintegrates, and its geographical authority is lost all of which Swat demonstrated at this time. The Taliban were able to solidify their hold on power as the military was unable to act quickly due to political unpredictability in state. Swat saw a political vacuum that was not only a lack of governmental capability but a multifaceted collapse in governance. Religious radicalization was exacerbated by weakened law enforcement, disintegrating judicial systems, unchecked radical propaganda, instability brought on by dislocation, and popular disenchantment with state leadership. One of the most visible manifestations of this governance vacuum was the severe inadequacy in law enforcement infrastructure. Swat had just one police officer for every 1,500 citizens in 2007, which was far less than the 1:450 ratios that the UNODC recommends. The radicals gained even more influence when other police officers gave up without protest. The inability of security forces to combat the insurgency due to a lack of resources and training caused the government of Pakistan to lose control. (UNODC, 2007) The police force was unable to maintain law and order due to this severe deficit, particularly in rural and mountainous areas where terrorists were free to operate. Radical and militant organizations took advantage of the state's inability to protect its area by positioning themselves as substitute authorities who could impose their own version of justice. Between 2007 and 2009, more than 200 government employees and judges were targeted for murder, further exposing the police's incapacity to protect local authorities and maintain public safety. The local administration ability was severely damaged by these killings, and state representatives were compelled to leave the area, leaving a power vacuum that was quickly occupied by radical organizations. (Khan & Khan, 2021)

The collapse of the judiciary was equally important in promoting religious radicalization in Swat after 9/11. Around 70% of Swat was ruled by Taliban-style Sharia courts by 2008, which functioned outside of Pakistan's official legal system. The public supported these courts, which were created by TTP and TNSM, because they were quick, effective, and culturally appropriate in a setting where state legal institutions were unreliable, dishonest, and closed. (Malik, et. al., 2023). The radicals' transition from state institutions to militant governance structures was not simply a tactical advantage; it was also a psychological and ideological triumph, since the local populace started to view militant rule as more responsive and equitable. (N°178 , 2009)

The lack of efficient governmental communication and media regulation was another aspect of this political vacuum. In Swat, insurgents ran more than 24 unlicensed FM radio stations between 2007 and 2009. These forums were used to disseminate extremist information, issue fatwas, intimidate dissidents, and utilize religious justifications to defend militant acts. Radical ideas were able to spread uncontrolled because the state did not regulate this information realm or offer counter-narratives, particularly in rural areas where access to official media was limited. Thus the monopoly of militants over public discourse grew in power due to weak communication by the state. (Malik, 2013)

The data presented in the table highlights how political vacuum in Swat following 9/11, created a fertile ground for religious radicalization.

Political Vacuum Indicator	Statistic / Data	Radicalization Outcome
Weak police presence	1 police officer per 1,500 people (2007) (UNODC, 2007)	Militants imposed own laws and justice
Collapse of state judiciary	70% of Swat under Taliban courts (2008) (N°178, 2009)	Public turned to extremist courts for quick justice
Lack of media control	24+ militant FM radio stations (2007–2009) (Maher, 2012)	Spread of radical ideology unchecked
Displacement from military operations	2.5 Million people displaced during Rah-e-Rast (2009) (Sanaullah et al., 2022)	Families destabilized, youth recruited by militants
Youth recruitment by TTP	1,500+ boys recruited (2007–2010), mostly from displaced/marginalized families (Khan et al., 2020)	Militants built loyal followers and future fighters

It became evident in 2009 that the Taliban's rule over Swat posed a serious risk to national security. Operation Rahe-i-Rast was a full-scale operation launched by the Pakistani military with the goal of retaking the area. The operation included airstrikes, heavy artillery, and troop's forces to target Taliban positions. The Taliban were effectively driven out of Swat by the military, but more than two million civilians were temporarily forced to leave their homes as a result of the operation. (Rafi, 2017) Significant militant commanders, like Fazlullah, were able to escape to Afghanistan even after the military regained control, which once again raised many questions about the governance, administration and effectiveness of the state's counterterrorism measures. However after the military operation, the government bought political and judicial reforms to minimize the risk of religious radicalization in future. Efforts were made to restore civilian governance in Swat, improve the court system, and strengthen local law enforcement. Economic rebuilding initiatives were also put into place to repair educational systems, rehabilitate infrastructure, and create jobs for young people who may otherwise be recruited by militants. However, these efforts fell short because they failed to address the root reasons of religious radicalization. The weak governance raises concerns over the long-term sustainability of these measures (Muzaffar, Yaseen, & Afzal, 2021; Sanaullah et al., 2022).

Results and Discussion

The study finds that poor governance and a persistent lack of political leadership were the main causes of religious radicalization in Swat between 2001 and 2022. Militant organizations such as Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM) and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) exploited the state's incapacity to establish efficient political institutions, maintain peace, and provide security.

The analysis supports up the notion that Pakistan's political instability encouraged radicalization. Scholars and authors claim that Pakistani political parties are corrupt, nepotistic, patronage-based, feudal, and take advantage of state institutions for their own political and personal gain. The ability of the state to thwart radical narratives and stop militant groups from seizing power has been steadily undermined by these conditions. Furthermore, the data shows that Pakistan's leadership was often more concerned with political disputes than with security. But in doing so, it overlooked the good governance and addressing the socioeconomic issues that were plaguing FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Muzaffar, et. al., 2024). Locals were left vulnerable to the recruitment of militants. Radical organizations exploited their grievances in their recruitment campaigns.

This supports the hypothesis that the political will rather than state's capacities are at the heart of Pakistan's terrorism dispute.

The study also revealed that Pakistan's participation in the War on Terror with the United States has significant ramifications, including the influx of extremist organizations into tribal areas. Since the incident at the Lal Masjid was widely perceived as a state-sponsored attack on Islam, it further polarized public sentiment and encouraged the recruitment of radicals (Karamat, Muzaffar & Shah, 2019). The administration made political concessions to extremist groups in order to win elections and form political alliances. Radical ideologies were further reinforced by these agreements, which in turn permitted the growth of militant networks without interference. One of the study's most important conclusions is that clerics and religious scholars are unable to categorically condemn terrorist acts. Instead of publicly denouncing specific terrorist organizations, many religious leaders have issued generic statements against violence in order to avoid direct conflict with radical and militant groups. The study's conclusions indicate that one significant factor fueling the rise of Islamist militancy is the state's ignorance of significant militant bases. Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann have noted that North Waziristan has become a major hub for radicalization and terrorist activity since the Pakistani government has given it little attention. The government launched military operations in a few locations, but it ignored the extremists in North Waziristan, which allowed them to maintain their hold on power.

Although the research found that Operation Rahe-i-Rast and other short-term military operations were successful in driving the Taliban out of Swat yet they failed to address the root causes of radicalization. When the operation destroyed much of it and displaced about two million people, Maulana Fazlullah and other terrorist leaders escaped to Afghanistan. Military actions in the absence of political and economic changes merely brought about short-term stability and failed to de-radicalize the society. Religious radicalization will continue to endanger Pakistan's peace and security in the absence of structural adjustments, political institutions, judicial accountability, and effective administrative machinery.

Conclusion

The Pakistani government failed to control religious and sectarian narratives, which resulted in the unfettered spread of extreme ideology. These radical ideas shaped electoral politics as well as societal structures. There was no institutional framework to ensure religious and political responsibility. Many organizations and people were able to use religious discourse to achieve their own agendas thus widening gaps and fostering radicalization on many fronts.

Because Pakistan relied too heavily on military fixes rather than long-term changes in the political, judicial, and socioeconomic spheres, he was unable to effectively counteract Islamic radicalism among the populace. On its own, military might is insufficient to solve structural and ideological issues. Pakistan remains vulnerable to repeated cycles of radicalization and terrorism because the country expresses little concern about its crudeness. The implementation of a comprehensive plan that prioritizes education, judicial transparency, and the development of democratic institutions is essential to addressing the political void and thwarting religious radicalism.

Recommendations

- In conflict-prone areas, the government should place a high priority on establishing robust, transparent and accountable governance systems to avoid political vacuum.

- Short-term military operations should abandon in favor of long-term conflict resolution techniques that tackle the underlying causes of religious radicalization, such as political marginalization, socio-economic grievances.
- Use counter-narrative strategies to oppose radical ideologies and urge religious leaders to adopt a strong and unified stand against religious radicalization, terrorism and extremism in all its manifestations.
- Engage local communities in development, peacebuilding, and governance initiatives to guarantee their involvement in decision-making and to strengthen their resistance to radical influences.
- Initiate civic education programs to raise understanding of the rights and obligations of citizens, the importance of democratic procedures, and the perils of radical ideologies.
- Judicial reforms should be carried out to guarantee timely justice, ensure the rule of law, and restore public confidence in state institutions. This will lessen the allure of alternative legal systems provided by extremist organizations.

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