

Growth of religious fundamentalism in Pakistan: challenges and the fight back

Sunday 1 June 2014, by [TARIQ Farooq](#) (Date first published: 1 June 2014).

Pakistan is witnessing an increase in fanaticism. Ever since the 2013 electoral victory of the right-wing Muslim League and Pakistan Tehreek -Insaaf, right-wing ideas are more popular. Banned terrorists networks are able to work publicly using different names or sometimes even under their own name. There is no state control of their activities.

With this right-wing turn, the mosques are full of worshipers. More and more young men grow beards to show their identity as Muslims. Religion is used to silence arguments. Violence has become a norm.

Target killings of radical journalists and human rights activists have already occurred. This is a dangerous situation for the Left, social democrats, radical liberals, trade unions and peasants, women, minority rights and youth organizations.

But Pakistan is not an exception. The whole of South Asia is in the grip of right-wing ideas. As the so-called progressive and democratic parties in government have failed to solve any of the basic issues confronting the working masses, extreme right-wing political trends have taken hold. This is happening despite the fact when conservative ideas have been tested in the past, they have failed miserably to address issues of human development.

The latest example is the landslide victory in the May 2014 general election of the conservative Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of Narendra Damodardas Modi. During 2002 Modi presided over a government in Gujrat that was responsible for the mass murder of Muslims in Ahmadabad. In fact, as part of an orchestrated campaign to create communal polarization, the BJP promoted communal violence in different parts of the country to seal Modi's recent victory.

Narender Modi's victory has boasted Pakistani religious fundamentalists. The traditional Mullah Military Alliance (MMA) is becoming more and more publicly visible. When Hamid Mir accused the ISI of orchestrating the attack that wounded him, the MMA and most of the extreme right religious groups, including the Jamaat Dawa, organized demonstrations to defend the country's "institutions."

In Pakistan, Islamic religious fundamentalism exploits every opportunity to promote its anti-Indian sentiments. As a direct result of this growth of extreme neo-fascist ideas, religious minorities are fleeing the country. Rather than waiting to be victimized by fanatics, members of the Ahmadies, Christians and Hindu communities feel compelled to leave.

As far back as 2006, the spread of religious fundamentalism was foreseen by world-known radical intellectual Noam Chomsky, who told interviewer Stephen Shalom: "In the past 25 years, fundamentalism has been turned for the first time into a major political force. It's a conscious effort, I think, to try to undermine progressive social policies. Not radical policies but rather the mild social democratic policies of the preceding period are under serious attack."

The most prestigious radical intellectual was absolutely on target. Religious fundamentalism has become the most serious challenge for the whole South Asian region in particular and the world in general. It is gripping one country after another.

What is religious fundamentalism? Essentially the term fundamentalism suggests going back to the basic texts and reproducing as closely as possible the laws and institutions found there. It has also come to mean a dogmatic adherence to tradition. Its orthodoxy breeds inflexibility and a rejection of modern society. It holds up a “golden era” as the model to which society must return. Islamic fundamentalists have exploited the dream of the “golden era of Islam” as a way out of the poverty and social problems we face.

In Pakistan the main tool for the growth of Islamic religious fundamentalism is the madrassa. According to conservative estimates, there are approximately 20,000 madrassas (USCIRF 2011). There are five main types, which are divided along sectarian and political lines: Deobandi, Barelvi, Shia, Ale-Hadith/Salafi (a minority sect which is close to the Saudi brand of Wahabi Islam) and Jamaat-e-Islami. Eighty-two percent of those belonging to Deobandi madrassas view the Taliban as their model (Ali, 2010).

Most of the terrorist activities carried out in Pakistan are linked to these madrassas. These have been an alternative to public schools in a country where less than two percent of the total government budget is spent on education.

Almost all donations to religious charities ends up in the coffers of these madrassas. They have become rich. The most expensive of vehicles are used by the leaders of the Islamic parties and extreme religious fanatic groups.

What can be done?

Should we just comment and watch the growth of extreme dangerous groups? NO, it will not save our lives, our class or our society. Such inaction would only help our most dangerous enemies.

There are some who pin their hopes on American imperialism and its allies to eliminate the fundamentalist threat. But this has not worked, and cannot work. Despite all the U.S. military solutions, combined with its “development agenda,” fundamentalism has grown, and will continue to grow.

Others may see religious fundamentalists as an anti-imperialist force. But they are not. Their authoritarianism and violence cannot be a force to free workers and peasants.

Still others—such as the PMLN and PTI—opt for talks with Tehreek Taliban Pakistan, the most brutal of all fanatic groups. But this has only legitimized terrorist activities against the Pakistan army, police, intelligence agencies and ordinary people.

Fundamentalism is a political challenge that has to be dismantled by arguments and organization. An immediate response should be a united and broad-based alliance of trade unions, radical social and political movements and organizations with an understanding of the danger religious fundamentalism represents. A clear political program would include opposition to it and its terrorist attacks. Key to this alliance would be organizing mass actions across Pakistan to oppose fanaticism and to defend those whom fundamentalism terrorizes. The alliance needs to defend progressive laws that secure the safety of all who live and work in the country. There should be no common action with the fanatics on any issue.

Institutions of the state must break all links with any form of religious fundamentalist organizations.

This is the real source of the fundamentalist's growth and power; these links must be severed. State institutions can no longer turn a blind eye to terrorism. Instead terrorist actions must be halted—and can be when the army and ISI cuts its ties with religious fundamentalism. No area of Pakistan should be under the control of the fanatics.

Education must be the state's top priority. All citizens need to be provided with an equal opportunity for an education without fees. As a start, the federal education budget should be immediately increased to 10 percent of the GDP. Subsidies for religious madrassas should cease and all major madrassas nationalized.

In order to end feudalism, land must be distributed to the landless peasantry free of cost. Along with this massive land reform, wages of the working class need to be increased from minimum of 10,000 to at least 20,000 a month and a state-sponsored unemployment allowance instituted for all adult unemployed. These reforms would undercut fundamentalist propaganda.

A religious state cannot deal effectively with religious fanatics. Religion should be separated from the affairs of the state.

A strong regional and international base of solidarity and comradeship of like-minded groups and political parties would strengthen the work. An effective response to religious fundamentalists approaches is not state-to-state relationships but people-to-people contact.

Farooq Tariq

General Secretary

Awami Workers Party
