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## Socioeconomic Inequalities as Catalysts for Radicalization and Extremism in Pakistan: Implications for National Security

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### ABSTRACT

National security and a country's socioeconomic pattern are deeply intertwined. A state faces an imminent threat from its existing socio-political structure if it is not aligned with an appropriate level of providing and facilitating its individuals with basic needs and opportunities. As national security promises the survival and well-being of its citizens and the state, it is employed through an integrated socio-political and economic strategies approach. This paper examines the socio-political pattern, the embedded inequalities, and the consequent rise of radicalization and extremism in Pakistan. Pakistan is facing persistent economic disparities of poverty, unemployment, and limited access to health and education. These inequalities and injustices are providing breeding conditions for extremist ideologies and groups to flourish. This disparity also brings alienation in disfranchised individuals who can easily fall prey to the groups selling offended and rebellious narratives within the state and from outside entities. This study investigates mixed-method research that combines qualitative insights and quantitative data, using statistical figures from governmental and non-governmental sources to examine the correlation between socioeconomic factors and radicalization trends. The theoretical framework has been carried out from a constructivist perspective that works on the constructed identities and the narratives causing extremism. Constructivism not only addresses the symptoms of radicalization but also focuses on the underlying causes in Pakistan. It also helps the state to build inclusive narratives to satisfy marginalized communities with the desired identity and opportunities. The study suggests actionable policy recommendations to provide educational facilities and economic development in underprivileged areas by bringing them into the mainstream socio-political structure. The study



contributes to a deep understanding of the security threats that Pakistan has been facing through extremism and points out the strategies for establishing a safe and secure state.

## INTRODUCTION

National security is a comprehensive attribute for a state as it ensures the protection of the state and its individuals from external threats but also guarantees the safeguarding of citizens from internal challenges, including unrest, injustice, and inequality. For securing external challenges, national security deals with the international system and its influential actors, while for assuring internal challenges, it focuses on the socio-economic pattern of the state. Radicalization and extremism pose significant challenges to the embedded socio-political structure of a status quo society. Radicalization is related to an individual or a group holding radical views against the already established social and political norms in a traditional society. Terrorism refers to a process where an individual or a group of individuals uses acts of violence and terror to create fear and bring about change according to their will. Radicalization is a process of gradually shifting towards extreme ideologies, and in contrast, extremism is a belief itself. Radicalization and extremism are frequently dominating the national discourse of Pakistan and affecting every segment of society and state (Fayyaz 2019). This study is an effort to elucidate the economic and social determinants of Pakistani society, which directly and indirectly contribute to the phenomenon of radicalization. The key economic drivers that are becoming the cause of radicalization in Pakistan are unemployment, inequality and economic disparities, uneven development among provinces and also between rural and urban areas, corruption, and mismanagement. These factors are creating a situation of frustration, alienation, injustice, and marginalization among naive individuals and groups, to become more susceptible to radical ideologies. Certain societal determinants also contribute to social radicalization, consisting of social injustice, repression, insecurity, marginalization of ethnic groups, cultural alienation, and identity crises thriving the extremism and radicalization in society. The study reveals that when such socioeconomic factors align with the psychological, religious, and political dimensions of a society, a multifaceted complex mobilization arises in the affected area. In KPK and Punjab, psychological and religious dimensions, while in Baluchistan, political and economic dimensions are creating the most radical and extremist challenges in society. This is a serious issue that can lead to collective unrest, discontent, and extremism, posing serious challenges to the national security of Pakistan. (Azam 2024, 98-99).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative methodology has been employed in this study to understand the refined understanding of the complex socioeconomic disparities and their impact on the prevailing radicalization in Pakistan. The in-depth content and discourse analysis have been carried out from scholarly articles, books, media reports, radical narratives from speeches, and government policy documents. This study is an effort to unfold the accounts and plots constructed and propagated from the ideological and religious discourses and political and socioeconomic inequalities. This analysis tries to uncover the psychological impact of ideas and beliefs on individual perceptions by keeping a view of their social and economic status.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Socioeconomic pattern of Pakistan is linked with the issues of identity and economic deprivation. In this scenario, the constructivist school of thought provides valuable insights to understand and address the radicalization and extremism in Pakistan. The traditional schools of thought, like liberalism and realism, essentially focus on the material facts and objective forces of the matter. In contrast, constructivism stresses focus on the significance of ideas, narratives, and identities in understanding and satisfying human behavior. Material gains or incentives are not the only reason for an individual or a group to take severe actions. (Theys 2018, 1-4). According to the constructivist school of thought, the extremist and radical



elements use the marginalized group of society based on their exploitation, which they are facing on account of social structures and marginalized identities. The extremist elements operate on tactics of making disruptive plots to portray defenders in a bid to achieve justice and equality for the disfranchised groups. (Fosnot and Perry 2005, 5-7). A constructive approach not only helps to check the rise of extremism but can also help in constructing counter-narratives for bringing national unity, social cohesion, and equitable development. Constructivism can help as a problem-solving approach to deal with the complex, layered set of identities (religious, ethnic, and regional) of Pakistani society, which is colliding with the deep-rooted socio-economic disparity.

### **Socioeconomic Disparities in Pakistan: A Breeding Ground for Radicalization**

Radicalization and extremism have taken deep roots in Pakistan, and there are several factors for these challenges, including bad governance, socioeconomic injustice, and marginalization of rural and peripheral areas. Pakistan's geopolitical situation becomes vulnerable to radical elements in the presence of such factors. It works like a mechanism in Pakistani society. When a certain portion of the population continuously faces hurdles in the acquisition of basic needs, rights, and justice, then radical ideological and religious elements use this situation as a tool for bringing solidarity among such disfranchised communities towards an uprising movement against the state. The common man in Pakistan is struggling hard to live under the current economic, legal, and administrative system. There have been long military regimes and a disrupted civilian era, but the situation for the common man is constant, irrespective of any type of government. In the era of the 1970s and 1980s, religion was used as a tool to safeguard the interests of the political and military elite of Pakistan. Islamization was the main tool of Pakistan's foreign policy as well as its internal policy. Externally, the right wing of Pakistan was receiving support from the United States and the West against the Soviet Union, China, and socialist Islamic countries, while internally against the left wing. Consequently, an authoritative system led the institutions of Pakistan for a long time and became the reason for the reason of weakening of these institutions. The inefficient and weak institutions became unable to handle the sectarian and ethno-lingual issues of Pakistan, resulting in socioeconomic instability (Ali 2011, 91-92).

The socioeconomic structure of a state is linked with the socioeconomic status of that state. The states with an upsetting status are embedded with unstable socioeconomic patterns. The factors that contribute to the weak stature of socioeconomic patterns are approximately the same across the world. Generally, these factors can be classified into primary and secondary factors. Primary factors include unemployment, low income, illiteracy, and the unavailability of health facilities. Secondary factors include wealth inequality and social stratification based on the caste system, which limit the opportunities and geographical location. These factors, if they continue to persist in a society for a long time, become the reasons for socioeconomic distress. This distress is usually addressed through appropriate public policy measures. Effective public policy is associated with the stable political environment of a state. But in the case of Pakistan, political instability and fluctuating public policies couldn't reduce the level of socioeconomic distress and became the cause of radical elements in the society. Moreover, the external policy, particularly under the Zia Regime for the Afghan war and the refugees' influx in the 1970s and 80s, contributed to breeding the elements of radicalization in Pakistan. Pakistan's internal policy, weak strategies towards sectarianism, and the role of the establishment and intelligence agencies have also been considered problematic during all the military regimes. The civilian era, followed by the Zia regime, is characterized as a power exchange game between Benazir and Nawaz Shareef with recurring economic and political policies, IMF loans, weak economic structure, and military operations against certain political and radical groups. ( Qadri, Qadri and Shakir 2015). All these unjust socioeconomic factors and the use of religion as an instrument to keep the privileges of the elite class intact were contributing to increasing instability in terms of ideological and socioeconomic perspectives in Pakistani society, particularly in provinces of Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) ( Aslam 2014).

In today's scenario, when the world is digitalized, highly competitive, and polarized, people are more aware of their sociopolitical, economic, and identity rights. In the absence of basic needs, social and economic injustice, limited access to education, increasing poverty, and unemployment bring frustration and, consequently, mass outrage against the state. This situation makes the environment favorable for people with frustration and weak mindsets who fall prey to religious and political agendas run by extremist organizations at a lower level. (Ali 2011). Radicalization is a complex process, and in the case of Pakistan, it can be analyzed in two contexts: the factors related to the global process and the internal socioeconomic and religious factors. Externally, the phenomenon of radicalization consists of regional and global linkages, and internally, these are social and religious identities.

### **Key Determinants of Radicalization in Pakistan**

Pakistan is among those states that are marked by sharp socioeconomic divides. This divide is getting deeper and wider in the absence of appropriate public policy and true political representation. Key determinants of radicalization are linked with key areas of inequality.

#### **• Poverty and Unemployment**

Poverty, unemployment, and shortage of basic needs of life collectively come under the sphere of economic inequality, and if it persists for a long time, it becomes the reason for social injustice. People are very sensitive about economic inequality and social injustice. If these issues are not addressed properly, they can create a sense of social exclusion among the masses and also a source of encouragement among groups and individuals to join hands with extremist elements to get their rights. In Pakistan, millions of people live below the poverty line. According to a World Bank report, more than two-thirds of the population of Pakistan lives in rural areas, and a large portion of this population is suffering from bad sanitation, dirty water, shortage of health and education facilities. The adult population is 60. 19 percent are living under the poverty line and facing the hurdle of earning 2 US \$ per day. Poverty is a serious issue because it not only brings deprivation of basic needs of life for the affected individuals but also creates certain social and psychological problems. The case study of FATA reveals a strong connection between the absence of basic needs of life and poverty, with the alarming ratio of militancy. In the 3 million population of FATA, almost 60 % of the population lives below the poverty line. If the individuals are suffering in getting food, clothes, shelter, health services, and education. It will bring elements of chaos, restlessness, mistrust, disappointment, apathy, and a sense of deprivation. Government policies towards FATA in the provision of basic needs and uplifting the overall economic development of the area are not sufficient compared to other regions. In such a situation, only illegal tactics are left for the helpless people to achieve economic prosperity. In FATA, the militancy rate is alarming on account of prevailing poverty and lack of opportunities (Tanoli, Jaffry and Ali 2018, 83-85). In today's digital world, the element of comparison has made the situation more complicated. It's easy for a community or a group to make comparisons of their lifestyles and the level of access to basic needs within a state and beyond. It creates a sense of relative deprivation, which is more dangerous than absolute deprivation. Globalization is making people aware by making comparisons with their available limited opportunities and those elsewhere in the world. It brings humiliation and frustration among unemployed and marginalized segments of society (Taşpınar 2009, 77-80).

#### **• Limited Access to Education**

Education is an essential element for a well-run society. It is the process of gaining knowledge, developing ideas, knowing facts, and acquiring skills through a formal way of instruction. Education is the most effective tool to eliminate radical, extremist, ethno-religious, and social fault lines of a polarized society. According to Pakistan's education statistics, there is a notable disparity in the availability of educational institutes and their essential facilities across the regions of Pakistan. In Punjab, the Federal area, and urban areas of KPK, the situation is better, but in the periphery of KPK and most of Baluchistan province, the situation is challenging. The Gross Intake Ratio (GIR) at the primary level of Punjab is 74% and of Baluchistan is 35 % (Pakistan Education Statistics 2021-22). Moreover, there is a gender-wise disparity

also. Female education is facing serious challenges in terms of enrollment and expenditure. Social and ideological factors give preference to sons over daughters. Poverty is a main source of illiteracy in Pakistan across the population, but women are facing discrimination on two bases. First is poverty, and second is being a woman (BURK, MEMON and MIR 2015, 45). This study examines how unequal access to education provides the basis of tension and anxiety, which further converts to radicalization, conflict, and violence. When an increased number of adults or young individuals are away from the learning process, getting skills, and securing employment, then different forms of violence increase in that area. The case study of developing countries revealed that the countries that have a high rate of radical beliefs and violence are those where there is unequal access to education. The ongoing civil war in Sudan points out the main reason for its extremist society (Sas , et al. 2020, 5). Radicalization is the result of the ongoing social and psychological process of an individual in a society, and the data from developing states reveal the fact that unequal opportunities in the education system are the same reason for all the affected societies.

### • **Regional Disparities**

Regional disparities in Pakistan are a result of historical and geographical factors. Regional inequalities consisted of uneven development, weak resource endowment, poor infrastructure of roads and transportation, and long distances from markets, slowing down the speed of development in lagging areas. In Pakistan, socioeconomic inequalities are the result of varying levels of development among provinces. It also gives birth to unequal power relations between mainstream and lagging areas. Regions like Baluchistan, FATA, and South Punjab significantly lack economic development compared to urban areas like Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad. The rate of extremist elements in low economic development areas is also higher than in the urban developed areas. Pakistan is considered a middle-income country, but there is a huge difference in development across sub-national levels. Pakistan's two provinces, Punjab and Sindh, are relatively more developed than KPK and Balochistan. In Punjab, some regions lag in development from the northern and central Punjab because of socioeconomic inequalities, but a high ratio of extremism has been observed in these areas. ( Akhtar 2008, 206). A balance and sustainable development minimizes the risk of conflict and radicalization in society and state, and it can be achieved through policy, planning, and implementation to reduce the level of disparity between urban and rural, developed and underdeveloped regions.

### **Socioeconomic Inequality and Challenges to Pakistan's National Security**

Socioeconomic inequalities can no longer be ignored. These are not merely internal social issues that a state should overlook. These are the factors that provide significant threats to the national security and stability of a state. Pakistan's socioeconomic inequalities have deep roots in its complex, multifaceted society. Pakistan is facing serious threats to its national security because of struggling with the deep-rooted ethno-religious, economic, and social structure of society for a long time. Radicalization and extremism are not only creating severe internal security issues but are also halting economic opportunities and foreign investment. Pakistan is facing terrorism in the form of sectarianism, ethno-religious clashes, threats to minorities, suicide bombings, and mob attacks. Formulating a Counter-terrorism strategy requires a public policy to address the social inequalities. Otherwise, it will be a futile effort to secure stability without sorting out the root causes of instability. Pakistan devised its national security policy to address these issues, and its first national security policy was documented in 2022 from 2022 to 2026 ( Niaz 2022, 99). National security is a collective term, and it is used for a comprehensive concept of security. According to the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, national security refers to the ability of a nation or state to protect its internal values from external threats and challenges. These challenges include traditional and non-traditional security threats (National Security 1968). The threats relating to the defense or military of a state are called traditional, while the threats to national unity, political independence, internal stability, and territorial integrity are called non-traditional in nature. There are certain factors that directly or indirectly affect the national security of a state, which are the environment, health, demographic details, science and technology, the world economy, and governance. There is another aspect of national security

that revolves around the security of an individual rather than revolving around the security of a state. From all the above concepts of national security, it can be concluded that a national security policy should encompass all the factors of society and state, which can become the cause of increasing strength of the state and a fact of inciting conflict or violence in a society. In this way, socioeconomic inequalities are factual challenges to national security and should be addressed in national security policy and also in counter-terrorism approaches of a state to be tackled effectively ( Niaz 2022, 101-103). The socioeconomic status of a state points out the difference in the economy of the state. It is primarily classified into three socioeconomic levels, which are high, middle, and low. Generally, individuals or groups who fall into low levels of socioeconomic status tend to fall prey to radicalization. At low levels of socioeconomic status, individuals face challenges in terms of income, health, education, and employment. In a perpetual economic cycle, when individuals and groups of individuals are systematically excluded, then socioeconomic inequality arises. If this socioeconomic disparity is not addressed properly through public policies and reforms, then it may convert into radical and extremist movements and begin to threaten national security. The current National Security Policy (NSP) of Pakistan is an attempt to formulate a comprehensive national security framework. It is a citizen-centric approach by placing economic security at its core to ensure inclusive economic growth for all levels of socioeconomic status. However, NSP is facing several challenges in achieving its goals of achieving national harmony and reducing socioeconomic disparity, including internal national security challenges. Here are the challenges faced by the National Security Policy of Pakistan in achieving its internal and external security challenges.

- Challenges consisting of mistrust and harmony among the federation and provinces, and also inter-provincial differences.
- Good governance is the key to reducing the socioeconomic gaps, but Pakistan is persistently facing governance challenges. The governance in Pakistan is riddled with corruption, lack of accountability, and large-scale social injustice.
- Good governance ensures the rule of law. In Pakistan, the rule of law is compromised due to a weak judicial system and a lack of an independent judiciary and fair trial practices.
- Lack of resources and inadequate training within law enforcement agencies in the implementation of laws is increasing crime rates and violence in society.
- Political instability is the main cause of prevailing socioeconomic inequality in Pakistan. Long martial law regimes, political repression, and a lack of transparency and accountability in Pakistan's political system suppress the needs and voices of the population. A true representative democracy guarantees even human development across the regions (Husain 2018).

Pakistan National Security Policy 2022-26, with a more citizen-centric approach, seems promising while addressing the above-mentioned socioeconomic disparities and challenges in the wake of attaining cohesion and harmony among people. It emphasizes attaining economic security, which is the central point of national security. Along with the provision of fundamental rights, true representation, and social justice, removing alienation among the masses towards inclusive human development (Ashraf, Mustafa and Ali 2023, 170-173).

### Steps to Counter Radicalization

Socioeconomic inequality is a worldwide issue. In the same way, radicalization and extremism are present worldwide, but the importance lies in the level of intensity and the serious challenges to a state and society. Pakistan has long been the victim of socioeconomic inequalities, which are alarming. The intensity of these inequalities is threatening the security and stability of the state. The water disputes among provinces, the Baluchistan issue, and radicalization in FATA and southern Punjab are examples of long-term inequalities and their extreme response. The recent threats to Pakistan's national security demand urgent steps and measures to mitigate the disparity and slow down the intensity of radicalization.

### **The Way Forward, National Cohesion and Harmony**

In Pakistan, the public and governmental policies should focus on bringing harmony and national cohesion by valuing the diversity of each culture, ethnicity, language, and religion. The government should promote civic nationalism by ensuring the wholesome participation of all segments of society in socioeconomic opportunities and the democratic process of the state. Inter and intra-regional disparity among provinces, the rural-urban divide, and resource distribution among the masses should be avoided through legislation. All the fundamental rights should be granted without any discrimination.

#### **Educational Reforms**

Educational reforms are decisive for Pakistani society, which is suffering from exploitation by the elite masses for having separate curricula and better opportunities to equip themselves with the knowledge and control the administrative structure of the state. There should be a single curriculum policy from the state with basic infrastructure and access to every individual with quality education for every individual. It will be a more effective strategy to remove the deep-rooted socioeconomic disparity. The educated and skilled adults will deny the impact of extreme ideology and the agendas of radical elements. Awareness and knowledge generally improve the behavior of individuals with constructive thinking to avoid violence in every situation.

#### **Economic Reforms**

The economy of a state can be judged through the employment ratio of that state. In any society where poverty, inflation, and unemployment coincide, the intensity of inequality becomes increasingly harmful. If the youth is skilled, it will create a self-help mechanism to generate the opportunity to earn and contribute to society. There should be a proper educational policy to ensure maximum enrollment of children in educational institutes without gender discrimination. The government should facilitate the youth with entrepreneurship skills, vocational training, and digital skills for better income opportunities within or outside the state. In the globalized digital world, the sector of information and technology can uplift the economy if it is facilitated and owned by the state. (Bashir 2022).

#### **Health and Social Reforms**

In Pakistan, the health sector needs special attention. There should be a health policy ensuring two important objectives: first, to develop the health centers with basic infrastructure in access to every community, and second, with standard health facilities. Imran Khan's government's health card facility was a landmark initiative for all masses without discrimination. It was a revolutionary strategy in the field of health care to minimize socioeconomic inequality. In the social sector, all cultures, languages, ethnicities, minorities, and castes, irrespective of the region, should be valued and treated equally and with equal opportunities. A prosperous and healthy society makes an inclusive and even development for all the segments of society and rejects radicalization. (Niaz 2022).

### **CONCLUSION**

Radicalization and extremism worldwide issues are undermining not only the national security of states but also endangering the international security environment. In developing states where socioeconomic status contains larger gaps, radical and extremist movements are weakening the security and survival of states. In Pakistan, a long-term and deep socioeconomic gap is creating a chaotic and sturdy environment for radical groups to penetrate, spread, and implement their radical agendas and ideologies. Pakistan needs intensive and diverse counter-extremism and counter-terrorism measures to slow down the process of radicalization. A human development approach consisting of the rule of law, truly representative democracy, law and order, and equal opportunities to education, health, and economic opportunities is crucial for the elimination of radicalization in Pakistan..

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