

Chapter 17

Violent Extremism and the Politics of Education in Pakistan: An Analysis of the Links Between Anti-Terror Laws, the Curriculum, and the Islamised Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan is depicted as a victim as well as a sponsor of terrorism. The reason behind this characterisation is that Pakistan, since its inception in 1947, has experienced multifaceted violence, ranging from ethnic insurgencies to sectarian violence. At the same time, it has been blamed for fomenting violence in its neighbours. On the one hand, there have been anti-terrorism laws in place since the late 1990s; on the other, there is an Islamised public sphere that provides fecund soil for violent extremists to thrive. The questions to be addressed here are: What kinds of anti-terrorism laws exist in Pakistan and how effective are they against terrorism? What is the role of the state-managed curriculum in providing a conducive environment for the growth of violent extremism? This research appeals to the “garrison state” theory, which explains how “the specialists on violence” control every aspect of the state, complemented by the concept of “fragmented hegemony,” which explains how the seemingly corrupt multiple sites of power help the state maintain its hegemony over society.

INTRODUCTION

They will abandon, nay, they will slay, a parent, if the prince so commands, but he cannot oblige them to drink wine. The laws of religion are of a superior nature, because they bind the sovereign as well as the subject. Baron D. Montesquieu (Montesquieu, 1949, p. 27)

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Before moving on to discuss the role of religion in the creation of Pakistan and the post-independence religionisation of politics and “statisation” of religion, it is helpful to clarify how the term, ‘public sphere’ is being deployed. According to Juergen Habermas public sphere is “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens.” He adds that public sphere is different from political public sphere where “state authority is so to speak the executor of the political public sphere” (Habermas, 1974, p. 49). The issue of the political public sphere is more acute in South Asia. According to the expert on South Asia Ainslee T Embree, “the issue is the rights and responsibilities of religious institutions in public space, that is, the areas of civil life that a modern political authority regards as vital to its concerns and is not willing to cede to other entities” (Embree, 2002, p. 53). This phenomenon – to dominate the political sphere by not ceding to other actors – is discernible in Pakistan, and its roots can be traced to its creation which left it “uncompleted” – both territorially as well as ideationally. In short, in Pakistan, public sphere and political public sphere are conflated.

This sense – that Pakistan is an “uncompleted” state – has links with the notion that partition is an unfinished project. The “uncompleted” status of the state can be explained along two axes: one, it is territorially unfinished, as part of Kashmir was left outside its territorial jurisdiction. In turn, this has led to the “political currency of jihad” – to win back Kashmir from Hindu India and merge it with Muslim Pakistan. Second, the state is ideationally “uncompleted” as the idea of Pakistan has not yet translated into an Islamic state (Humphry, 2012, p. 145). One can see that a common denominator in both explanations is Islam. That in turn has led to a religionised public sphere, what former senator Javed Jabbar referred to as a “steady retreat into showy religiosity and visible piety in the public domain and in most media” (Jabbar, 2021, np.). Also, this emphasis on religion as an abstract ideal, and an unending journey towards its attainment, has turned Pakistan “into a breeding ground of extremist Islamists, and an anti-secular and anti-West extremist Islamic doctrine has dominated public discourse and politics” (Shams, 2013, np.). That is why the word secularism (usually synonymised with liberalism) is not only “contentious” (Cohen, 2002, p. 116), but has also become “one of the most hated words” in Pakistan (Hoodbhoy, 2018, p. 42). The permanent elites – the security establishment – thus think that only Islam, not secularism, can make Pakistan a complete state.

So, the public sphere is used in the sense of the political public sphere as the state (authority), i.e., the permanent institutions of the state such as the civil and military bureaucracies are the real sites of power in Pakistan. What follows is a discussion on how and why the public sphere is so heavily religionised in Pakistan.

PAKISTAN: THE CONTESTED INTERFACE BETWEEN ISLAM AND THE STATE

Debate about the role of Islam in Pakistan has been raging fiercely since the country’s inception in 1947. This debate falls along two axes: one is whether Pakistan was meant to be a democratic, progressive state for Muslims; and the second axis is whether Pakistan was to be an Islamic, read theocratic, state (Sayeed, 1957, p. 59). The advocates of each line of argument include, on the one hand, religious and centre-right political parties that think that the very idea of wanting a state for Muslims meant an Islamic state. On the other hand, there are “moderates,” “liberal intelligentsia” who argue that Jinnah was not in favour of theocracy. Rather, what he is said to have wanted is a state where the Muslim “majority is driven by a modern, progressive, and democratic interpretation of their faith,” and where all citizens

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