

## Extremism in Pakhtun Society

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### **Abstract:**

The deteriorating law and order situation in the NWFP and FATA has some intrinsic causative agents and many more contributing factors. A number of research articles have been published on the issue, but rarely the problem of extremism has been studied and analysed in its socio-economic and historical perspective. This paper critically examines the various extremist trends and policies in the last thirty-five years, with their implications for law-enforcement and administration in the conflict-ridden areas of the NWFP and FATA. A critical evaluation of the past and present counter-terrorism approaches is also presented.

### **Keywords:**

Extremism, FATA, NWFP, PATA, Pukhtun/Pashtun/Pathan, Levies, Khasadar, Frontier Corps, Frontier Constabulary, Police, Pukhtunwali

Since the security situation in Pakistan in general and in the NWFP in particular has deteriorated, there have been a number of analytical studies on why we have reached a stage where people are losing faith in the state and are queuing to leave the country for safer destinations. Due to the waning state writ and absence of state machinery, the state is gradually becoming irrelevant to its citizens.

First, we have to see whether the current situation is a law and order issue or an insurgency. Law and order is generally not a protracted activity and is mainly related to anti social elements. It is at times also a way to express demand for resolution of problems faced by a faction of the society. There is no intent to create alternate governing authority or control of certain territory. Insurgency, on the other hand is a contest by an organized group with the government for support of people and control over resources and territory. It is a protracted political-military activity by organized groups with a view to subvert and displace a government. It seeks control of resources and population by weakening of government power. The methods employed are guerrilla tactics, use of terror and propaganda, recruitment and training, overt and covert party organizations with international linkages.

The current situation prevailing in parts of NWFP and FATA is clearly thus an insurgency and needs a well thought out counter strategy. No counter terrorism strategy can succeed without the active and popular participation and support of the people. This has been clearly manifested by the current gains made by the LEAs in Swat and elsewhere. We have to change the public perception through clear cut policy. Steps taken by the present regime are in a right direction and the public now feels that the state is actually taking on the militants in earnest.



Population NWFP	17.5 Million	Area	74521 Sq KM
Population FATA	3.10 Million	Area	FATA: 27220 Sq KM
Afghan Refugees	0.80 Million		

I look at our predicament from a different angle. The Frontier Province, since ages has been ruled on adhoc basis. The province is administratively ruled in the following five different styles:

- i. **The settled Areas** are those where the normal rules of governance, applicable in the rest of the country, are relevant.
- ii. The region that lies on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is called as the **Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)**. Except Orakzai Agency, all the Agencies share border with Afghanistan. Since the British days, FATA has been acting as a buffer between the two countries and has been under the federal rule. The Governor as the agent of the President exercises administrative control over the seven Agencies through Political Agents. The British had framed a different set of rules for the area, called as the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), giving wide ranging powers to the Political Agent. The tribes are punished for a crime committed by a member of the tribe under the “collective responsibility” clause. These punishments could be in the form of forfeiture of facilities, razing of houses or huge fines imposed on the whole tribe. The Political Agent is the executive and judiciary both at the same time. Development schemes are used to garner support through discretion of the Political Agent.
- iii. **Frontier Regions** are those areas which lie between the settled areas and the FATA. These are contiguous to the Agency and are populated by the same tribe. A grade 17 officer, appointed by the provincial Govt is responsible for running administration of the region. The distinction between the FR and the FATA is completely superfluous as the same laws apply in both the areas.
- iv. **Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA)** are the areas which are considered backwards are thus ruled directly by the Provincial Govt.
- v. **De Facto Tribal Areas** present the best of the above unique governance system. These are the settled areas where the people have declared themselves as tribal areas and do not subject themselves to the normal rules and governance.

Repeated attempts made in the past to amalgamate the diverse setups into a singular system have failed as most of the actors involved like to maintain the status quo for their own interest.

A similar number of diverse forces are employed to maintain law and order in these areas:

- i. **Police** is deployed in the settled areas and in some of the PATA areas.
- ii. In some PATA areas like Malakand Agency, local **Levies** are deployed.

- iii. In the FATA and the FRs, a ***Khasadar*** force is deployed. These are men drawn from the different tribes of the areas. If a crime takes place in an area, the *Khasadar*, whose tribe populates that area is penalised. The force is under the operational and administrative control of the Political Agent. The *Khasadars* are neither well trained nor equipped to fight the current brands of militants and foreign fighters.
- iv. **Frontier Corps** is a paramilitary force and is deployed on the boundary between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The force is drawn from amongst the different tribes where the officers are deployed from the Pakistan Army. Frontier Corps has presence in all the Agencies and is at the beck and call of the Political Agent.
- v. **Frontier Constabulary** is another paramilitary force and is deployed to act as a buffer between the FATA and the settled areas. It is also used to reinforce police to establish writ of the state in troubled areas. Here too, the constabulary is drawn from the tribes and police officers manage the force. Both the Frontier Corps and Frontier Constabulary are under the Ministry of Interior, though the General Headquarters exercise effective control over the Frontier Corps.

With so many complications how would one expect stability in the area? In my opinion, the last 5 years of the 70s have had a profound effect of this region. Some very significant internal and external events took place in a very short span of time. In the following sections, I would divulge upon some of these happenings. However, before I venture into the analysis of the late 70s, I would like to write about the Pashtun society so that those readers, who are not well conversant with the Pashtun code of life, get an overview of the same.

Pashtun society has evolved over centuries. From the numerous different civilisations that have passed over their lands, the Pashtuns have adopted certain mannerisms. These could be very positive like *mailmasty* (playing host) or extremely negative like the practice of *swara* (handing over of a child in marriage to the opponents to settle feuds). Pashtuns in general have more conviction in collective wisdom than individual brilliances. Their society is thus based on communal system. The Pashtun social order can broadly be divided into three factions. It revolves around the *Khan*, who is the most dominant of them all. He is the landholder and the decision maker. He is the leader of the tribe or the clan. *Tenants* manage the lands and are also the major contributor of the *lashkars* in case of armed conflict with other tribes or villages. *Qasabgars* consist of skilled people of the village or tribe. They include the carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, cobblers and the village Maulvi. The tasks of these *qasabgars* are clearly defined. The village Maulvi's assignment was to lead the prayers, conduct birth & death rites, perform his role in the Jirga and teach the Holy Quran to the village children. In short, he had an important role but not a dominating role and had no influence over the society in

general. Keeping this role in mind, it may appear strange that most of the resistance movements in this part of the region were led by religious zealots. The explanation for it is that the Khans could never agree on a single person's leadership. Also, in case of a success of the movement under a single Khan, all the others would have to follow his directions and accept his leadership. They knew that in case of a Maulvi, they could easily wrest the power back from him.

Some of the basic ingredients of the Pashtun society are enumerated below:

*Hujra* constitutes the basic ingredient of the Pashtun life. A hujra is generally owned by the community and not individuals though there may be some hujras that are owned by a single person. A room or two, with a veranda and a courtyard at the centre of the village constitutes a hujra. A larger village will have more such establishments, each owned by different *khels* or families. A hujra will have a few utensils like water pots, some cots, an old design of the modern *sheesha* and a few musical instruments. The whole family or khel are hosts to whoever may be the guest; weddings are community affairs where everyone contributes with pieces of furniture, crockery and cutlery etc. and all the youngsters are engaged in serving the guests. This is the true display of another code of *pukhtuwali* called as the *mailmastya* where guests are treated with utmost respect and reverence. The same spirit is displayed during all the functions including funerals. *Jirga*, (congregations held to decide all matters) are also held in the hujra. Male members, after coming out of their homes gather in the *hujras* to sit around, discuss issues, decide matters or even to do nothing. It is inhibited during the day by the elders and by youngsters at night. While the youngsters avoid entering it during daytime except to serve the guests etc, the elders stay clear of it at night to let the boys enjoy themselves with singing and narrating folk stories. It serves as the nerve in the village or community. In some areas, the hujra also serves as sleeping quarters for the male members.

Village disputes, both civil and criminal are settled through the council of elders, called the *Jirga*. Minor cases are decided within the village whereas major cases after resolution are reported to the local administration for verification and promulgation. The *Jirga* can even award the punishment of *swara* where to settle blood feuds women are given to the rivals. These include girl children as well. This is one of those customs which are extremely negative.

Following are some other features of *pukhtunwali*:

*Nanawatee*, where the guilty party goes to the aggrieved party to seek forgiveness and the opponents are almost bound to grant the same.

Pakhtun society gives utmost respect to their and their enemy's women. *Da khazoo dranaway* means respect for female. Even during blood feuds women are not harmed.

*Jaba* means to promise something in words which are more binding and sacred than a written statement.

*Panah* is to give shelter to someone. Even when the shelter is given to an enemy, he becomes sacred. It is under this code that the Pakhtun in the tribal areas are reluctant to get rid of the foreign fighters who have been given shelter in their areas.

*Nang* is the honour of the pathans, which is considered more sacred than his life.

*Badal* is revenge and the proverb that “revenge is a dish best served cold” is absolutely true in the case of Pakhtuns.

As mentioned earlier, the last five years of the 1970s are of significant importance. Some of the events are as under:

- i. In 1977, General Zia overthrew the elected government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in a bloodless coup. The military dictator, in search of a constituency, owned the religious elements who were opposed to the more liberal and secular Pakistan Peoples Party. The religious parties were inducted into the government, given funds and estates to build mosques and seminaries.
- ii. During the petroleum prices boom as the Middle East underwent an economic explosion and huge construction activity, Pakistan provided cheap labour. Poor segments of the society, specially from the Frontier reaped the rich harvest and changed their lives forever. They not only purchased lands from the landlords but also raised the living standards of their areas. As they had no significant role in the hujra, they built small living rooms or *bhetaks* in their new houses. The hujra thus saw a decline in its pivotal role in the society. To keep up with their lifestyles, the Khans had to sell their lands or took up services in the cities. The hold and power of the Khan started waning and the centre of power started shifting from the hujra to the mosque.
- iii. The Iranian revolution brought the Shia Sunni conflict in the open and a proxy war was started in Pakistan. The Sunni states of Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iraq and the Gulf states were supporting the Sunni militants of Pakistan and Iran was helping the Shia militants. As this war was being fought through the religious elements on both sides, they gained further strength.
- iv. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought the international powers into the region. Instead of taking up the conflict as a war of independence, it was fought as Jihad and the Islamic forces were deployed to battle the Soviet forces. Huge amounts of money and sophisticated weapons were supplied to the religious elements, giving them further strength and significance. The large influx of

Afghan Refugees into the country, specially in the Frontier not only became a strain on the already overstretched resources but also led to a sharp rise in violent crime. With the Afghan Refugees came fighters from the Muslim world mostly from the Arab world. Sophisticated weapons and narcotics was another element that was added to the Pakistani society.

These were some of the significant and visible events taking place in a short span of time. At the same time an invisible revolution in the Pashtun society was taking place. As earlier mentioned, a major shift of power had taken place. Decisions were now taken in the mosques and people were queuing to enter the mosques instead of the hujra. This power shift became more prominent with the Taliban establishing the first sovereign state headed by a Mullah. Afghanistan under the new regime saw stability and peace after years of war. The state thus became a beacon all over the Islamic world in general and to the misguided population of the Frontier and the FATA despite the atrocities and excesses committed by the Taliban.

All these resulted in a paradigm shift in the hitherto moderate and peaceful Pashtun society, adding an element of religious extremism and intolerance. After the US invasion of Afghanistan, the Pakistani fighters started returning back to the country. These men had left their country in their late teens or early 20s to fight the Soviet forces and were now over 40 years of age. They had become outcasts in their own neighbourhood, with resources of sustenance. The only means through which they could support themselves was their weapons or battle training. For a while they stayed engaged in the occupied Jammu and Kashmir but had to return back after mounting international pressure.

These men ultimately spread all over the province and FATA and soon became disillusioned with the society. They had left a backward and a conservative social order which had undergone a very significant change. No longer were people living in mud houses, most had television sets, satellite dish receivers, telephones, computers and even internet. It was difficult for them to stomach such affluence in which they had no role to play. Most of them became reactionaries and revolted against this new culture. In league with other such elements, they formed vigilante groups to fight vulgarity, drugs, gambling dens and other such social evils. In the absence of the state and sick of the growing influence of criminals, their crusade was whole heartedly welcomed by the public. After establishing their credentials through this social reform agenda, they reverted back to violence to implement their own peculiar brand of beliefs. The state looked the other way at the rise and rise of this religious intolerance and militancy, initially in the FATA and then throughout the whole province.

The writ of the state was waning continuously. As the militants gained strength, they embarked on an anti state agenda. Perilous state of Muslims all over the world

added to a wave of sympathy among the general population for these non state actors. Beginning with areas with minimal government control, they paralyzed the govt. machinery by cutting the main routes, by destroying state symbol like schools, Police Stations, communications etc. They established parallel govt. by adjudicating local disputes, collection of taxes etc. They ran a very effective propaganda through violence and visible and quick justice. They terrorized the local population through unheard off means including suicide bombings, attacking *jirgas*, killing women, public beheadings of criminals and other people, attacking mosques, funeral prayers, mutilating dead bodies and target killing of rallying points/ icons. In a short time, they killed over 600 tribal elders in the FATA.

Pukhtuns were at that point entangled by their own code. They could not throw away the foreign fighters from their lands due to the *mailmastya*. The society was already weaponized beyond point of no return. Due to the absence of either the state or other rallying points, the Pakhtuns soon surrendered to the criminals, who gathering strength by the day. Soon they started playing god. The delayed and indiscriminate action by the state led to alienation of the population. Action at Damadola (Bajaur), where over 80 innocent students were killed and Lal Masjid added fuel to the already blazing fire. Added to this were the poor living conditions prevailing in the FATA.

The table below is an ample example of the same:

Item	Pakistan	NWFP	FATA
Pop. Density (Per Sq: Kms)	166.00	238.00	117.00
Irrigated Area as % of Cultivated	82.00	52.00	40.00
Pop. Per Irrigated Hectare (#)	09.00	23.00	44.00
Cultivated Area as % of reported area	37.21	30.09	07.35
Literacy Rate (%) (1998)	45.00	37.30	17.42
Male	56.50	52.80	29.50
Female	32.60	21.10	03.00
Primary Enrolment Rate (%)	86.00	81.00	38.00
Population Per Doctor (#)	1404.00	5054.00	7670.00
Pop. Per Hospital Bed (#)	1737.00	1594.00	2290.00
Roads per Sq. KM of area (Km)	00.32	00.15	00.17

All these factors had devastating and long lasting effects on the Pakhtun life style. Some of these are enumerated below:

- **Social**

The social impact of militancy on life in the province was that the population had to change their life style. They could not hold observance of their rituals like weddings, funerals and other ceremonies in their traditional manner.

Population in the NWFP and FATA started drifting away from the state of Pakistan as they felt that the state had abandoned them and that their plight was of no consequence to the rest of the country.

*Pukhtunwali* was shattered to pieces as the main players were marginalized and new actors had taken their place.

The happy go lucky Pakhtun was replaced by a nervous and frustrated person, who now carried the image of a horrible *Fassadi*. He was hunted both by the security agencies and by the militants. He could not go about selling his dry fruits in the small villages of Punjab or the deserts of Baluchistan.

Faith in religion dwindles when in the name of Islam un-Islamic acts were being perpetrated by the so called religious extremists.

- **Economic**

The situation had ravaged the already fragile economy of the NWFP and FATA. Economic activity came to a standstill due to a number of factors. Owing to the security situation there was no outside investment. People started shifting to the Punjab and to other overseas safe havens, leaving the province to the extremists. Brain Drain to other parts of the country and outside also saw a sharp increase.

Infrastructure of the area was destroyed as Govt buildings, bridges were blown away.

Development funds were diverted to strengthen law enforcing establishments.

Educational system in tatters as hundreds of schools were destroyed- in Swat alone over 300 schools have been destroyed and female education was banned altogether.

In my opinion there are too many players playing the same game. It is like a squash court; where instead of the normal two players over a dozen players are playing at the same time with each either trying to undo efforts of the other or playing against each other. We need to leave only two opponents in the field and withdraw the others.

There is a reverse flow of direction and the policy guidelines are mostly coming from the implementers i.e the military or the Intelligence Agencies with politicians mostly becoming irrelevant. There is no clear cut course of action. As police is busy battling the militants, normal crime has spiraled. There has been an mass desertion of LEAs personnel.

How can we get out of this situation? We will have to identify for the problem before finding a solution. Is the problem a military one or political or a combination of both? The issue problem was initially a political one and ultimately turned into a military one. Both the solutions were unduly delayed. Dialogue with the trouble makers was started late and was half hearted. Similarly, the military action remained half baked for most of the time. Only recently the military action was started sincerely and bore immediate fruits when calm returned to Swat and other parts.

Can we re-establish the *Pukhtunwali* code and bring back the Hujra culture to reverse the power centre? We also have to make the politicians relevant and responsible and should be given due role. Similarly, the ulema have to challenge militants on Islamic issues. It is a fact that the militants are ignorant of the true Islam and Islamic teachings. There is now a serious effort to strengthen the LEAs and build their capacity.

The government's recent attempts to recognise the needs of the Frontier province and FATA are another step in the right direction. Massive development works are required to deny fresh recruitments to militants. A Parliamentary Group (Irrespective of Party affiliations) needs to be setup to give policy guidelines. The policy guidelines and its implementation may be monitored through a group of people which may include retired bureaucrats, former members of judiciary and eminent journalists.

There is light at the end of the tunnel. Pakistan has some very positive scores on its side. It has a very large population and land mass. Its people are hardworking and very knowledgeable. There is still faith in the state of Pakistan. The current conflict is neither sectarian (Shia Sunni), nor ethnic (Punjabi, Pashtun, Sindhi, Baluchi or Muhajir) or provincial. It is a battle between good and evil, where the evil are in a minute minority. The vast majority of Pakistanis and international community are on the side of the good and the good will ultimately prevail, *Insha Allah*.

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