

# Decoding the Radicalization Puzzle: Uncovering the Factors Fueling the Fire in Pakistan

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## Abstract

*Radicalization is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has become increasingly prevalent in societies worldwide. In Pakistan, the emergence of various extreme ideologies and groups has highlighted the pressing need to understand the underlying factors contributing to radicalization. This study aims to comprehensively examine the factors that contribute to radicalization in Pakistan by drawing on the perspectives and insights of experts in the field. It employed qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured, in-depth interviews to gather data from a diverse range of experts in the field, including academics, journalists, policymakers, countering violent extremism experts, and representatives of government and non-government organizations. The study contends that radicalization in Pakistan stems from a complex interplay of factors, including historical context, geography, security considerations, geopolitical influences and foreign involvement. The study identifies specific socioeconomic, political, and religious factors as the most prominent drivers of radicalization in Pakistan, which can have a cascading effect on one another. The interconnected nature of these factors highlights the need for a holistic approach when addressing the issue of radicalization in Pakistan. Policymakers and practitioners need to focus on developing trend-specific deradicalization strategies that consider the unique aspects of radicalization in Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan, Radicalization, Economic Factors, Socio-Political Factors, Extremism, Drivers.

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## **1. Introduction**

The world has recently witnessed a surge in violent extremism, resulting in the loss of innocent lives from various races, religions, and nationalities. Radicalization, a significant precursor to violent extremism, is on the rise globally. Individuals of different age groups, religious beliefs, literacy levels, employment statuses, and genders are all susceptible to radicalization.<sup>1</sup> Radicalization refers to the process by which an individual or group adopts increasingly extreme political, social, or religious beliefs and aspirations that reject or undermine the status quo or modern national conceptions and expressions.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that radicalization may not always lead to violence in its early stages, and therefore, a country may undergo a prolonged process of radicalization without realizing its severity or the seriousness of the situation.<sup>3</sup>

The origins of radicalization are complex and multifaceted, and there is no one-size-fits-all definition or paradigm for it. Nonetheless, there are some recurring themes that can be used to make broad generalizations about the process. Radicalization involves the internalization and reinforcement of extreme ideological beliefs, which can eventually lead to violent actions, although the path is not always linear. Extreme ideologies often justify the use of violence as a means of achieving political or religious goals, and external networks and groups can play a significant role in the radicalization process.<sup>4</sup> Radicalization can be defined as the process by which an individual gradually adopts extremist views and moves

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP, "Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity: A Development Response to Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism," United Nations Development Program, New York, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Alex S. Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz, "Homegrown Terrorism and Transformative Learning: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding Radicalization," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 22, no. 1 (2010): 33-51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781150903487956>

<sup>3</sup> USIP, "Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan." United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC, May 17, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Keiran Hardy, "Comparing Theories of Radicalization with Countering Violent Extremism Policy," *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 15 (June 24, 2018): 76–110, <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1458&context=srhreports>

towards engaging in violent behavior.<sup>5,6</sup> However, predicting who will become radicalized and when they will resort to violence is difficult, as there is no single profile that can be used to anticipate such behavior.<sup>7</sup> This makes the study of radicalization a challenging field.<sup>8</sup>

The number of fatalities caused by hostile and violent behavior has surged in recent years. The Institute for Economics and Peace<sup>9</sup> reported that the number of deaths attributed to such actions increased from 3,329 in 2000 to 32,685 in 2014. This illustrates the devastating impact that extremist ideologies can have on people from diverse backgrounds, nationalities, ethnicities, and religions. These ideologies, whether based on religion, race, or other factors, often glorify the dominance of a particular group and reject more inclusive and accepting social orders. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the root causes of extremism and take action to counter it.<sup>10</sup>

The aftermath of 9/11 saw the emergence of new security threats in the form of individuals and groups that hold or support extremist views on religion and ideology.<sup>11</sup> In Pakistan, these threats manifest in various forms, such as terrorism, violent extremism, and ethnic and sectarian violence. A 2013 study by the Pew Research Center revealed that 93% of Pakistanis consider radicalization and

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Gill, "A multi-dimensional approach to suicide bombing," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 1, no. 2 (2007): 142-159, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1030045>

<sup>6</sup> Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008): 415-433, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550802073367>

<sup>7</sup> Randy Borum, "Assessing Risk for Terrorism Involvement," *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 2, no. 2 (2015): 63, <https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000043>

<sup>8</sup> Sarah L. Desmarais, et al., "The State of Scientific Knowledge Regarding Factors Associated with Terrorism," *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 4, no. 4 (2017): 180, <https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000090>

<sup>9</sup> Global Terrorism Index, "Measuring and understanding the impact of terrorism," Institute for Economics and Peace, Maryland, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> UNDP. "Preventing Violent Extremism."

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Hoskins, Akil Awan, and Ben O'Loughlin, B. *Radicalization and Media: Connectivity and Terrorism in the New Media Ecology* (London: Routledge, 2011)

terrorism to be the country's biggest problems.<sup>12</sup> According to the Global Terrorism Index, Pakistan is the third-most affected country by terrorism, surpassed only by Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> These figures demonstrate the devastating impact of radicalization and extremism on the country and its people. However, it is important to note that these numbers likely underestimate the actual death toll. Furthermore, according to the parliamentary secretary for commerce and investment Pakistan has thus far incurred \$152 billion in economic losses since the beginning of the war on terror 20 years ago.<sup>14</sup>

For a long time, Pakistan, a largely Muslim country, has been struggling with the issue of radicalization. However, the time period following 9/11 has fanned the flames. There has been a rise in anti-American and anti-Western sentiment in the country as a result of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent drone strikes in Pakistan. This situation has been exploited by extremist organizations, resulting in the radicalization of society at large.<sup>15</sup> Among the most tragic incidents was the 2014 Peshawar school massacre, which claimed the lives of 145 people, mostly students. This event served as a wake-up call for the Pakistani government, prompting renewed efforts to tackle extremism and terrorism.<sup>16</sup>

Radicalization has played a significant role in the current state of militancy in Pakistan, making it a crucial issue in the country's fragile security environment.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Pew Research Centre, "Global Attitudes and Trends, High Levels of Concern about Islamic Extremism in Most Countries," PEW Research Centre, Washington D.C., 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Global Terrorism Index, "Measuring and understanding the impact of terrorism," Institute for Economics and Peace, Maryland, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Khurshid Ahmed, "War on terror" has cost Pakistan more than \$150bn in losses since 9/11, officials say," *Arab News*, September 12, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1927131/world>

<sup>15</sup> Fozia Tanoli, Qaim Raza Jaffry and Sardar Ali, "Socio-Economic Factors Behind Radicalization: Evidence from Pakistan," *NDU Journal* 32, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>16</sup> USIP, "Countering Violent Extremism."

<sup>17</sup> USIP, "Countering Violent Extremism."



The impact of radicalization can be seen in various aspects of Pakistan's socio-political and economic environment. Injustice and intolerance toward people of other religions are among the factors that fuel radicalization. The lack of justice for the impoverished and the abuse of the legal system by the privileged class that further contribute to this issue. Radical groups, which frequently encourage violence in society, can easily influence this marginalized group.<sup>18</sup>

Understanding the diverse trends and patterns of radicalization and their underlying causes is particularly challenging in the context of Pakistan. The country is ethnically diverse and divided along ethnolinguistic, ideological, sectarian, and political lines.<sup>19</sup> Radicalization-related behaviors and attitudes vary greatly at subnational levels. Although there may be some striking similarities between extreme trends and patterns in some regions and those elsewhere in the country, it is difficult to describe radicalization in Pakistan using a single approach. It can be seen as a multifaceted issue that is influenced by political, religious, and social contexts.<sup>20</sup> The root causes of radicalization in Pakistan are numerous and complex. Some possible factors include political exclusion, poverty, economic instability, social injustice, sectarian conflicts, illiteracy, the role of madrassas, and the indoctrination strategies of militant organizations.<sup>21</sup>

The phenomenon of radicalization in Pakistan can be viewed from two perspectives: firstly, as part of a larger global trend and exploring regional and international connections; and secondly, by examining potential religious links to radicalization. The impact of radicalization on Pakistan has been severe, fundamentally altering its social structure and political system. Factors such as

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<sup>18</sup> USIP, "Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan."

<sup>19</sup> USIP, "Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan."

<sup>20</sup> Safia Aftab, "Poverty and Militancy," *PIPS Research Journal Conflict and Peace Studies* (2008): 65-86.

<sup>21</sup> International Crisis Group, *A New Era of Sectarian Violence in Pakistan* (South Asia: International Crisis Group, April 18, 2005).

religion, politics, ideology, economics, and social structures play a crucial role in the formation of Islamic militancy and religious radicalization in Pakistan.<sup>22</sup>

Research into the underlying causes of extremism has mostly concentrated on its core challenges, and neither academics and analysts, nor policymakers completely understand the factors that lead to extremism. However, existing research suggest challenges like illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, poor health, etc. are significant contributing factors to radicalization.<sup>23</sup> Access to guns and ammunition, weak governance, marginalization of rural areas, and limited access to justice have also been significant contributors to terrorism and extremism.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, because of the fragile geopolitical climate, the country is vulnerable to a variety of terrorist threats.

Radicalization in Pakistan is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that has been extensively studied in recent years. Most of the researches have focused on areas affected by militancy and terrorism, such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). A more comprehensive understanding of the issue can be gained by studying radicalization at the sub-national level and examining various trends and patterns across different regions and communities in Pakistan. This paper aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the drivers and factors contributing to radicalization in Pakistani society, drawing on the insights and expertise of field experts with extensive experience in researching and addressing this issue.

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<sup>22</sup> Surriya Shahab, Muhammad Idrees, Shaida Rasool, and Samana Mehreen, "Jihad, Extremism and Radicalization in Pakistan," *Journal of Business and Social Review in Emerging Economies* 7, no. 2 (2021): 453-465.

<sup>23</sup> Mujtaba Rathore and Abdul Basit, "Trends and Patterns of Radicalization in Pakistan," *PIPS Research Journal Conflict and Peace Studies* 3, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>24</sup> Muhammad Makki and Syed Ali Akash, "Poverty, Regional Inequality, and the Role of Governance: Tracing Geographies of Violent Extremism In Pakistan," *GeoJournal* 88, no. 3 (October, 2022): 1-16.

**2. Methodology**

The methodology for this study employed a qualitative research design, this enabled the use of flexible data collection methods and facilitated the ongoing evaluation of research methodologies throughout the fieldwork. This approach was deemed appropriate due to the sensitive nature of the research and its stated objectives. The primary data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and using audio recordings and concurrent notetaking methods.

**2.1. Material**

To collect qualitative data and gain detailed information about trends and patterns, 24 in-depth interviews were conducted with experts in the field. The respondents were representatives from the media, academia, and experts in countering violent extremism. The sample size was determined based on the principle of saturation, where data collection continued until no new insights or themes emerged from the analysis. The sample size was deemed adequate to achieve the research objectives and provide a comprehensive understanding. Including participants from various regions, occupations, and areas of expertise ensured the diversity and richness of the data collected.

Profession/Category of Respondents	Number of Participants
Academia	8
Media	8
Countering Violent Extremism Experts	8

Table 1.1. Distribution of Participants by Professions for In-depth Interviews

**2.1.1. Academia**

Eight interviews were conducted from academia. The participants included Associate Professors and Professors of Peace and Conflict Studies, International

Relations, and Media and Communication Studies from Pakistan's leading universities.

### **2.1.2. Media**

Eight interviews were conducted with representatives of the media. The media participants were affiliated with some of the leading newspapers and electronic news channels, including Dawn, The News, Express Tribune, Frontier Post, PTV News, Geo News, Samaa, BBC Urdu, and Express News. In addition, representatives from the Parliament of Pakistan and the Federal Ministry of Information were also interviewed.

### **2.1.3. Countering Violent Extremism Experts**

The eight participants were directors or heads of institutions involved in countering violent extremism in Pakistan. These were the directors, CEOs, or heads of government and non-government organizations working on countering violent extremism in Pakistan. These organizations included the National Counter Terrorism Authority, the United States Institute of Peace, the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, the International Research Council of Religious Affairs, the Council of Islamic Ideology Pakistan, Representatives of Law and Enforcement Agencies/Police, and the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan.

## **2.2. Methods**

During the interviews, open-ended questions guided discussions, encouraging participants to share thoughts and experiences on radicalization. Audio recordings and concurrent notetaking ensured data accuracy and completeness. Participants provided voluntary consent after receiving detailed study information, assuring them of confidentiality and anonymity. Verbal consent was obtained before digitally recording interviews.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze qualitative data obtained from in-depth interviews. This method identified patterns, themes, and meanings,

allowing exploration of participants' perspectives on radicalization factors in Pakistan. Data were coded, organized into themes, and iteratively reviewed and refined until a final set was identified. The analysis uncovered recurrent patterns and meanings within the qualitative data.

Coded data were compared with relevant secondary literature sources like institutional reports, policy reports, newspapers, research articles, and books. This comparative analysis revealed recurrent themes and significant literature gaps, offering a comprehensive understanding of radicalization and violent extremism approaches in Pakistan.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

This section provides a comprehensive examination of the findings from the primary data collected from respondents with diverse backgrounds. The analysis delves into the various factors that contribute to radicalization in Pakistan. The study participants shared their perspectives on the various pull and push factors that contribute to the radicalization in Pakistan. Although not all forms of radicalization are harmful, radicalization can make individuals more susceptible to extremist ideologies and increase the risk of violence and terrorism. In Pakistan, the process of radicalization is complicated and influenced by a variety of factors, including historical background, geography, security dynamics, geopolitics, socio-economic conditions, political instability, and religious or ideological beliefs. Following are the key findings of the research:

#### ***3.1. The Complex History of Radicalization: Factors, Events, and Impacts***

Although Pakistan's priority after independence was to solidify its identity as a Muslim-majority state, nevertheless, a number of elements have combined through time to fuel the nation's growing radicalization. Whether internally or externally, conflicts have always existed within the state of Pakistan. Beginning with Kashmir, there has been a protracted battle between Pakistan and India over the region of

Jammu and Kashmir. Owing to Indian aggression and complete disregard of the Muslim majority of Kashmir, the region has been a source of conflict and instability since its independence from the British colonial rule in 1947. The conflict has resulted in numerous battles and military encounters between the two countries, notably the Kargil War (1997–1998), the Second War (1965), and the First Kashmir War (1947–1948).

During discussions of the significant events that have contributed to or resulted from radicalization in Pakistan, a respondent argued that the Soviet-Afghan War, which lasted from 1979 to 1989, was a notable event that significantly contributed to the spread of extremism in Pakistan. At the time, Pakistan backed Afghan Mujahedeen fighters who were fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan with financing and training by the United States and Saudi Arabia. Many of these fighters became radicalized during the conflict and returned to Pakistan after the Soviet-Afghan war.

According to some key informants, Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan during the 1990s was another significant event that contributed to the rise of radicalization in Pakistan. Intersection of Afghan, US, and Taliban factors has been instrumental in shaping perception towards extremism, just as it highlights the role of external actors in exacerbating domestic radicalization in Pakistan.

During the 1990s Pakistan supported the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, owing to the long-drawn civil war in the country and a lack of viable political alternatives. When US forces invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to overthrow the Taliban, many of the former Afghan battle-hardened combatants escaped to Pakistan, where they came together to create new extremist organizations. Radicalization in Pakistan has also been significantly impacted by the Taliban's presence in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan, as well as the War on Terror that the United States initiated in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. US drone attacks, special

operations and pressure on Pakistan, all led lead to a rise in anti-American sentiments in public which inadvertently caused radicalization of many individuals and groups.

According to a respondent who reported extensively on militant conflicts in Pakistan, the 2007 Lal Masjid operation was a significant turning point in the country's radicalization during the early 2000s. Islamabad's Lal Masjid, also known as the "Red Mosque," has a long history of being a hub of radicalization. The government's decision to storm the mosque and arrest its leaders sparked intense resentment and anger among radical groups in Pakistan. Following the Lal Masjid operation, a number of militant organizations (mostly from Pakistan's tribal areas) emerged, posing serious security threats to the government. The operation also polarized the public and sparked discussions on the use of force against religious institutions, which accelerated radicalization and the dissemination of extremist ideologies. With many incidents of violence and extremism, including suicide bombings, targeted killings, and assaults on religious minorities, radicalization has significantly impacted Pakistani society.

### ***3.2. The Role of Socio-Economic Factors***

For nearly three decades, Pakistan has been in a constant state of turmoil. The rise in extremism and radicalization observed recently can be attributed to various factors. However, the economic drivers have been identified by the majority of respondents as a major contributor to the rise of religious fundamentalism and extremism in Pakistan. The root causes of this phenomenon include poverty, a lack of access to education and employment opportunities, and corruption. This has led to a sense of frustration, desperation, and hopelessness among many Pakistanis, which has been exploited by extremist groups that offer a sense of purpose and belonging.

Economic factors play a significant role in shaping the nature of extremism in Pakistan. The lack of economic opportunities, the disparity in wealth between different classes, and the high levels of unemployment among marginalized communities all contribute to the mindset that can lead individuals to engage in terrorist activities. Inequality and economic instability contribute to a sense of desperation that can make individuals more susceptible to radicalizing ideologies. A key informant noted that poverty and underdevelopment have greatly aided in the radicalization of people. Pakistan currently has a large population of young people, yet the country offers limited opportunities for them. Youth unemployment and a lack of opportunities can lead to frustration and hopelessness, increasing the likelihood of radicalization. Radicalization of youth is the process through which ideological devotion causes sentiments of discontentment, anger, and hatred to progressively develop in a young person or group of young people.<sup>25</sup> Radicalization of young population in Pakistan is highly influenced by socioeconomic variables including poverty, unemployment, and a lack of education.<sup>26</sup>

The findings of this research support Azam and Fatima<sup>27</sup> who analyzed the profiles of 47 former militants undergoing deradicalization program in Swat and found that poverty and a lack of economic opportunities were major factors that led them toward extremism. Participants came from families with low socioeconomic status, lacked formal or informal education, and were often unemployed or working low-wage manual jobs before joining the militants. Their study highlights the importance of addressing underlying socio-economic issues for preventing radicalization in the society.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Makki and Akash, "Poverty, Regional Inequalities."

<sup>26</sup> Tanoli, Jaffry, and Ali, "Socio-Economic Factors."

<sup>27</sup> Zubair Azam, and Syeda Bareeha Fatima, "Mishal: A Case Study of a Deradicalization and Emancipation Program in SWAT Valley, Pakistan," *Journal for Deradicalization* 11, no. 11 (June 23, 2017): 1–29, <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/97>.

<sup>28</sup> Azam and Fatima, "Mishal."



In our study, some key informants described the relationship between economic factors and extremism as "vulnerability". Because of their vulnerability, people who lack basic financial resources and opportunities become more susceptible to radicalization, intolerance, and extremism. While unemployment, poverty and Madrasah education are often cited as causes of radicalization, it is not limited to these groups. Individuals from all backgrounds, including the wealthy, elite university students, and professionals such as doctors and engineers, can also become vulnerable to radicalization.

Vulnerability, rather than any specific factor, is the primary cause of intolerance, extremism, violent extremism, and terrorism. Smith & Nolan for instance argue that a significant number of terrorist attacks have been carried out by individuals who are well-educated and from middle-class backgrounds,<sup>29</sup> which suggests that there is no direct correlation between low socio-economic status and the risk of terrorism. Piazza argues in his study that countries with higher levels of poverty do not necessarily experience higher levels of terrorism.<sup>30</sup> However, socio-economic disadvantages or inequalities can contribute to radicalization by exacerbating perceptions of injustice. Our research supports the "relative deprivation" theory, which argues that when people are aware that others have better material circumstances or higher social standing than they do, then they perceive these disparities as unfair.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Charisse Smith and Mark Nolan, "Post-Sentence Continued Detention of High-Risk Terrorist Offenders in Australia," *Criminal Law Journal* 40, no. 3 (2016): 163-179.

<sup>30</sup> James A. Piazza, "Poverty, Minority Economic Discrimination, and Domestic Terrorism," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 3 (2011): 339-353, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343310397404>.

<sup>31</sup> James J. Chrisman, Jess H. Chua, A. W. Pearson, and Tim Barnett, "Family Involvement, Family Influence, And Family-Centered Non-Economic Goals in Small Firms," *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 36, no. 2 (March 1, 2012): 267-293, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6520.2010.00407.x>

Relationship between socio-economic class and the emergence of extremism has also emerged as a standout theme. One respondent argued that poverty, inequality, and weak government institutions in lower-class communities could lead to religious-based sectarian violence. In contrast, middle-class individuals are often driven by political motivations, with jihadism serving as a manifestation of these factors. Feelings of social alienation and seclusion heavily influence the upper middle class and elite members of society. Researchers have identified socio-economic factors as the most crucial factors in radicalization process in Pakistan.<sup>32</sup> Radicalization process is greatly influenced by important elements such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and a severe sense of deprivation.

A key informant argued that horizontal inequalities and unequal distribution of resources have the power to split nations, which Pakistan has already experienced in the past in the form of East Pakistan separation. Therefore, radicalization and extremism may result from a collective sense of marginalization and lack of inclusion. The respondent stressed that the rising insurgency in Balochistan is a critical issue in Pakistan, highlighting the challenges of political and economic marginalization that certain groups in the country face. Pakistan's largest province, Balochistan, is the most underdeveloped and impoverished province of the country. High levels of poverty and unemployment in the province result from inadequate investment, unequal resource distribution, and a lack of resources overall. This has led to widespread resentment and frustration, which in turn are exploited by the likes of Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), a designated terrorist organization known for extreme violence and sabotage in the province.

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<sup>32</sup> Irfan Tanoli et al., "Detection of Radicalisation and Extremism Online: A Survey," *Research Square* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-1185415/v1>

Findings of this research support the view that income disparities, the breakdown of the social contract (i.e., the government's inability to provide for basic needs), a sense of deprivation and exclusion, differences in regional or provincial economic growth and development, disparities in educational facilities, and in some cases, disparities in the percentage of land ownership, are some of the most significant recurring patterns.<sup>33</sup> These patterns interact to contribute to the rise of extremist ideologies and an increase in violence and terrorism, which can destabilize the country and hinder its economic development.

### **3.3. The Role of Socio-Political Factors**

A key finding of the study is that socio-political elements have greatly influenced the radicalization of Pakistani society. Pakistan, since its inception, faced a multitude of challenges that hindered its development as a nation. These challenges included economic turmoil, high levels of unemployment, the persistence of feudal structures, inter-ethnic tensions, and ongoing conflicts with neighboring countries. Furthermore, political leaders and influential members of the clergy, who had been among the strongest supporters of Pakistan's creation, often found it advantageous to exploit religion as a means of public and political mobilization. Pakistan is diverse, comprising individuals from a wide range of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. Despite this diversity, the State has historically sought to promote a singular national identity based on religion, often at the expense of recognizing and acknowledging the unique cultural identities of different ethnic groups. As a result, the proliferation of extremism within the nation can also be seen as a consequence of the State's inability to celebrate diversity and multi-culturalism.

A respondent also alleged that the composition of the State of Pakistan appears to have a bias towards treating individuals from different ethnicities and

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<sup>33</sup> Hadia Majid and Rashid Memon, "Patronage and Public Goods Provisioning in an Unequal Land," *Social Indicators Research* 145, no. 3 (July 29, 2017): 805-830, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11205-017-1707-0>

regions differently. The most powerful State institutions in the country are primarily composed of Central Punjabi and male members of society. This dominance in power structures leaves people from regions such as Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Southern Punjab and other remote regions of Pakistan feeling economically and politically excluded from the State, making them more susceptible to extremist ideologies and more likely to embrace extremist tendencies.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, socio-economic and political horizontal inequalities push certain communities backward, making them feel excluded from political representation. Political exclusion leads to individuals becoming radicalized as they question the government's legitimacy. Examples of political factors that contribute to radicalization include domestic and international political shifts and the spread of radical narratives by extremist organizations on media. These radicalization cores serve as the foundation for militant groups operating in the country.

A key informant argued that weak judicial systems and a lack of swift reforms were the two main factors contributing to the nation's governance crisis. Real and perceived historical injustices and weak institutions breed mistrust in society, leaving citizens feeling vulnerable and frustrated. Law Enforcement in Pakistan also remains largely inadequate. Pakistan's administrative institutions have been identified as ineffective at implementing laws according to the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index, which ranked the country 130<sup>th</sup> out of 139 nations in regulatory enforcement and among the lowest in upholding the rule of law.<sup>35</sup> The findings of the study supported Makki and Akash who identified

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<sup>34</sup> Public Policy Expert, Interview by the Authors, October 2, 2022, Islamabad.

<sup>35</sup> Ansar Abbasi, "Pakistan Ranks 130 out of 139 Countries in Adherence to Rule of Law," *The News International*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/901483-pakistan-ranks-130-out-of-139-countries-in%20adherence-to-rule-of-law>

ineffective law enforcement as a key contributor to the proliferation of violent extremism in the country.<sup>36</sup>

In a nutshell, findings suggest that socio-political drivers play a significant role in shaping the radicalization of society. For a society to be secure and peaceful, there must be political stability, democratic values, strong institutions and governance, and equal access to resources and representation. Certain individuals or groups may become more vulnerable to radicalization when these factors are not present. According to Philip Edwards, radicalization should be viewed as a process taking place within the political sphere of society rather than just within an individual. He suggests that societies with low levels of accountability, engagement, and accommodation of conflict in their political spheres are highly susceptible to radicalization.<sup>37</sup>

#### **3.4. The Role of Religion: From Unity to Extremism**

Generations of Pakistani leaders have attempted to utilize Islamic ideology to persuade its diversified population to support national unity and fend off external threats since the country was founded in the name of religion. Zia ul-Haq's Islamization effort, resulted in the Islamic radicalization that subsequently continued to thrive, resulting in the promotion of extremism. In addition to internal destabilization, religious militancy and terrorism have negatively impacted Pakistan on the national and international levels.<sup>38</sup>

According to a respondent with expertise in policy, Pakistan is a nation that is deeply divided along ethno-linguistic, ideological, sectarian, and political lines. Instead of embracing this diversity, and undemocratic political elites have sought

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<sup>36</sup> Makki and Akash, "Poverty, Regional Inequality."

<sup>37</sup> Philip Edwards, "Antagonism, Conflictuality and Resilience: A New Model of Societal Radicalization," *Journal for Deradicalization* 21 (2019), <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/624657>

<sup>38</sup> Steven Gan, et al., *Asian Cyberactivism: Freedom of Expression and Media Censorship* (Bangkok: Friedrich Naumann Foundation: Bangkok, 2004).

to create a common identity to unite the nation. This has led to the use of religion as a tool to establish a national narrative and promote national unity.<sup>39</sup>

Following independence, prolonged periods of authoritarian rule allowed widely dispersed Islamist groups to have a stake in the political apparatus, as the dictators relied on the legitimacy of religious parties to maintain power.<sup>40</sup> As a result, religious parties with a confrontational strategy against the West rose to prominence in Pakistan. This strategy had its own repercussions, as religious extremism promoted religious concepts of national identity that politically mobilized people and acted as a benchmark for the legitimacy of governments. Subsequently, democratic actors also contributed to the religious radicalization of society by using religious sentiments for their political gains. Political parties used religious slogans for political rhetoric. This supports Bajoria, who found that in Pakistan, the blending of religion and politics has allowed radical groups to exploit religious feelings and build a narrative that justifies the use of violence to achieve their goals. Due to the State's inability to counter these extreme narratives effectively, extremist groups have been able to attract young people towards their extremist ideologies.<sup>41</sup>

The Islamic-Western Capitalist nexus played a crucial role in shaping global politics during the Cold War. To wage jihad against communism, Islamist movements in the twentieth century formed alliances with the Western Capitalist bloc, which led to the emergence of Islamist militancy as a significant force in world politics. The collaboration involved recruiting, training, and deploying non-state actors in the name of religion for jihad against Soviet Union. This led to the rise of these powerful non-state actors, who developed their own identities and

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<sup>39</sup> Public Policy Expert, Interview by the Authors, September 28, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> H. K. Ullah, *Vying For Allah's Vote: Understanding Islamic Parties, Political Violence, and Extremism in Pakistan* (Washington DC.: Georgetown University Press, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> Jayshree Bajoria, "Islam and Politics in Pakistan." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2011, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/islam-and-politics-pakistan>.

political economies. By raising funds globally in the name of jihad, these groups gained substantial social prestige, funds, authority, and influence, to the point where they began challenging the State's authority.<sup>42</sup>

While discussing the factors of radicalization in Pakistan, Abbas<sup>43</sup> argued that another key factor fueling radicalization in Pakistan is religious extremism, particularly Islamic fundamentalism. Shia-Sunni tensions were stoked, and the sectarian disputes were further radicalized by Zia's divisive religious policies. The utilization of religion as a political tool in State policy has led to the mainstreaming of extremist tendencies within society. During an interview, a CVE expert based in Islamabad stated:

The State has seen an increase in religious fundamentalism, particularly during the Zia era. The religious interpretations used to fulfill political needs were often based on violence. Religious interpretations promoted by states, institutions, and the media have frequently emphasized violence and exclusivity over inclusivity.<sup>44</sup>

Madrasahs and Islamic religious schools are often considered as nurseries of religious radicalization.<sup>45</sup> One of the respondents argued that the State used Madrasahs for its vested interests during the Afghan war, giving them tremendous social power. Handing over control is always easy, but taking it back can be fairly tricky. The State gave these madrasahs so much power that it redefined their role in the society. Another respondent emphasized the crucial role that the educational system, teachers, and curriculum play in fostering extremist ideologies, which furthers the spread of radicalization in society. This highlights the importance of addressing the propagation of intolerance in schools and the curriculum to prevent

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<sup>42</sup> Policy Maker, Interview by the Authors, September 24, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Hassan Abbas, *Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army, and America's War on Terror* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> CVE expert, Interview by the Authors, September 25, 2022.

<sup>45</sup> S. Shahab, et al., "Jihad, Extremism and Radicalization in Pakistan," *Journal of Business and Social Review in Emerging Economies* 7, no. 2 (2021): 453-465, <https://doi.org/10.26710/jbsee.v7i2.1818>

the growth of radicalization in the country. Several researchers, including Christine Fair<sup>46</sup>, argues that Pakistan's intolerance problem extends beyond madrassahs. Fair argues that the public school system in the country, through its curriculum, has the tendency to promote intolerance and encourage resolution of disputes through violence, thereby potentially fostering extremist ideologies.<sup>47</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion**

The phenomenon of radicalization in Pakistan is influenced by a variety of interrelated factors, such as historical background, geography, geopolitical dynamics, and the influence of foreign powers. This research has identified that economic, socio-political, and religious factors as the most critical drivers of radicalization, which contribute to a sense of exclusion, escalating grievances, and the violent mobilization of ethno-religious identities. Economic disparities and political exclusion, including horizontal inequalities, injustice, and a weak justice system, play a significant role in making society prone to radicalization. Religious fanaticism has been a common denominator in all observed trends and patterns of radicalization in Pakistan, highlighting the need for further research to better understand the role of religious factors.

This highlights the urgent need for comprehensive and inclusive policies to address economic inequality and political marginalization, for promoting peace & stability and tolerance in Pakistan. There is a need to collectively consider political, economic, and religious factors to declare trend-specific deradicalization strategies rather than relying on vague approaches. Moreover, addressing economic, socio-political and religious factors are necessary to effectively reduce the risk of radicalization and fragmentation in the Pakistani society.

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<sup>46</sup> C. Christine Fair, "Islamist Militancy in Pakistan: A View from the Provinces," *WorldPublicOpinion.org*, July 10, 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Fair, "Islamist Militancy."