

## Religious Extremism and Sindh's Resilience

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### Abstract

The study aims to highlight the scourge of religious extremism in Sindh, uncovers its root causes, suggests some remedies, and investigates province's resilience to protect its tolerant roots. Sindh has remained the land of Sufi saints and is rich in pluralistic cultural ethos, but the recent rise of violent religious extremism is eroding these values. External Shocks such as Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, 9/11, and subsequent War against Terror sown the seeds of extremism in Sindh. Religious parties with the support of Pakistan's powerful elite, through repression and persuasion, have supported violent religious extremism, which serves their political, economic and social interests. Poverty and inequality, social injustices, ignorance, and intolerance in society are providing breeding ground for extremism. Introducing Sufis' message of love, peace, and tolerance through reviewing syllabi, and improving governance and institutional capacity of the provincial and district governments by enhancing accountability, transparency, rule of law, swift prosecution through fair trials and accessible and affordable justice are a few remedies to safeguard against and combat violent religious extremism.

**Keywords:** Violent religious extremism, intolerance, resilience, pluralism, inclusive culture

### Introduction

The scourge of violent religious extremism, which had taken roots in Sindh in the late 1980s and, after two decades of fierce sectarian competition in urban cities, especially in Karachi, has now penetrated and spread in far-flung areas of the Province. The power corridors in Sindh have seemingly applied the theory of 'elite manipulation of religion'. The powerful elite — religious and political — have exploited the religion in their own favor, when and where needed. For the vested interests of a few, the larger societal growth and development has been compromised.

Violent religious extremism — a seed sowed by the elite — started taking its roots in the very beginning of the creation of Pakistan when the political elite encouraged violent action against their opponents. It was started with arsenal attacks on Hindus' and Sikh's properties in order to harass and compel them for forced migration from Pakistan. In Sindh, socio-economic and political developments since the era of General Zia Ul Haq had dented the pluralistic cultural ethos, leading to the emergence of the pockets of religious fanatics and sectarianism in different areas of the province. Zia ul Haq's Islamization policy, support for Afghan War, and militarization of state dented the pluralistic socio-cultural values of Pakistan. Sindh suffered a lot from those controversial policies too. As Sindh had been a hub of anti-Zia political movement, state elite by design introduced religious factor into the politics of Sindh. Religio-political organizations were created to counter the nationalistic and secular political parties of the province. Sectarian and ethnic warfare in 1990s was a direct outcome of those misleading state policies. When War against Terrorism came into the region in 2001, Karachi — the capital of Sindh and economic hub of Pakistan — became the hot spot of Al-Qaeda militants, the Taliban, and their local supporters.<sup>1</sup> They established a stronghold over the suburb of city and executed some high profile terrorist attacks, such as the attack on French Naval Engineers in front of the Sheraton hotel in 2002, murder of US journalist Denial Pearl, attack on US Consulate Karachi, PNS Mehran attack, Karachi Airport attack, and Safoora goth bus carnage are considered some high profile terrorist attacks. Normalcy returned to city in the result of Operation Zarb-Azab, which was launched after the terrorist attack on the Army Public School Peshawar in 2014. The phenomenal rise of Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), the new face of Bareilvi politics whose politics evolved around Blasphemy Laws, badly disrupted peace of the city in 2017's protests. For three days, Karachi was held hostage in the hands of violent protesters. In the 2018 elections, the TLP surprised all political parties, especially PPP, when it won two Provincial Assembly seats, one from PPP's stronghold Liyari which is widely considered a secular town. Now, the TLP is a major stockholder in Karachi's power politics through its mosques' network, which is widely spread throughout the city, inculcating its radical agenda into masses.

The evolving security situation in Karachi is very likely to have had an impact on security and stability in Sindh and to have broader

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<sup>1</sup> Jaffer Rizvi, 'Pakistan', 11 September 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/urdu/pakistan-58511899>

implication for the national economy, and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> Extremism penetrated Central and Northern Sindh right after 9/11. When pressure was mounting on Al-Qaeda and other militant groups in Karachi, they relocated into other parts of Sindh. Amjad Farooqi, an Al-Qaeda kingpin, was killed in an encounter with law-enforcement agencies in September 2004 in Nawabshah, a district in Central Sindh. Farooqi was allegedly the mastermind behind an assassination attempt on then President Pervez Musharraf and indicted in the kidnaping and brutal murder of the US journalist, Daniel Pearl.<sup>3</sup> The super floods of 2010-11 had destroyed the right bank of the Indus, and millions of people relocated into temporary relief camps that were run by the human welfare arms of religious sectarian groups. Besides relief and rehabilitations work, they propagated specific sectarian brands of religion and recruited thousands of young boys for their madrassahs in Punjab, Kashmir and KPK. Later, these radical seminary graduates became the tools of extremism and sectarianism in Sindh. The late Khalid Mehmood Soomro, former senator and Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam Fazl's provincial head, who can be allegedly called the key player behind the rise of religious politics in Northern Sindh, was himself assassinated in a sectarian attack in Sukkur. His murder further triggered an intense sectarian divide in Northern Sindh.

Recently reported cases of terrorism and extremism show that the educated youth of Sindh from well-off families, both male and female, are involved in extremist activities. Noreen Lighari, from an educated family of Hyderabad, was intercepted and caught in Lahore on her way to join the Islamic State (IS). The story of Saad Aziz, a graduate of an elite business school in Karachi, radicalized on campus through social media propaganda, reflects how extremism was penetrated into the youth. Saad and his group were influenced by the Islamic State's extremist ideology via social media, and were then involved in the Safoora goth carnage, in which around 45 Ismaili Shia, a tiny minority, were brutally killed.<sup>4</sup> Karachi dockyard's attackers were also highly educated but radicalized while serving in the Pakistan Navy. These examples show the complexity of the problem. From the highly trained

<sup>2</sup> Huma Yusuf and Syed Shoaib Hasan, *Conflict Dynamics in Sindh* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2015), 01 September 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/01/conflict-dynamics-sindh>.

<sup>3</sup> Dawn.Com, 'Pakistan', 27 September 2004, accessed 21 May 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/371810/security-forces-kill-amjad-farooqi>

<sup>4</sup> M. Ilyas Khan, 'Asia', 13 May 2015, accessed 21 May 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32717321>

and well-disciplined Pakistan armed forces cadres to the country's elite academic institutions and their students, to educated middle-class families, madrasa students, and Sindh's poor masses, all have been facing the threat of radicalization and extremism.

TLP's electoral victory in the 2018 elections and its recent show of muscle power on the streets of Islamabad, Karachi, Hyderabad, Mirpurkhaas and Sukkur, serve as a wakeup-call for policy makers that the threat of Barelvi extremism is more imminent, genuine, and lethal.<sup>5</sup> If it is not countered with a proper coordination of security agencies, a well-defined national narrative against extremism and community based countering violent extremism (CVE) measures, Pakistan's economic, social and political growth would be at stake.

Sindh's extremism, is a mutli-pronged problem. It is creating chaos and uncertainty in cities, as the case of TLP's protests. Entering new plyers in political chessboard, like TLP in Karachi and JUI-F in Larkana, making electoral competition fierce and bloody. Harboring of international terrorists such as member of Al-Qaeda and ISIS by the local militants, developing a new nexus between local and international terrorists. Alarmingly, after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, there are fears of resurgence and regrouping of local militants in Pakistan and Afghanistan's tribal areas. Since Karachi is considered ultimate destiny of Afghan refugees, it is highly likely that under the guise of these refugees, militants will be entering into the city and hard won success against terrorism is on stack.

Given the complexity and severity of the problem, it is high time to resist against religious extremism. Reviving Sindh's pluralistic socio-cultural values will be the first line of defense against extremism. Promoting Sufis' message of love, tolerance, interfaith harmony and acceptability can impede spreading fanaticism in every form. Community oriented local actions, for instance, community mobilization, social guidance, technical training, support of small loans, especially to women, and involvement of communities in their own development can be game changer to countering violent extremism. Inclusive education, performing art, music, drama, film, melas, resistance through poetry, and art work are some of the remedies against religious extremism. Evidences suggest that Sindh is full of all these tools of resilience and resisting to protect its diverse ethos.

<sup>5</sup> Tahir Kamran, 'Unpacking the Myth of Barelvi Eclecticism: A Historical Appraisal', In *Rethinking Pakistan: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Perspective*, (Lahore, Folio Books, 2019), 65.

Against this background, the paper analyzes and identifies immediate and underlying causes of religious extremism in Sindh. There is adequate evidence that Sindh was groped into religious extremism in the last two decades, attracting external influence post 9/11. The un-account inflow of Afghan refugees, the Kashmir conflict, and intra-sectarian rifts within the country leveled the grounds for religious extremism. The last two decades have witnessed a score of violent extremism and terrorism incidents in Sindh. These hard hitting terrorist attacks were not only just brutal occurrence of physical violence but also led to the institutionalization and deepening of the rigid and extremist tendencies in the roots of Sindh. Therefore, there has been a huge dearth of in-depth investigative study which is academic in nature for the Southern province of Sindh in the country. It is hoped this study would pave the way for future scholarship, furthering new dimensions of Sindh's resilience to counter violent extremism.

### Methodology

The research methodology used in this study is qualitative. Both, primary and secondary methods of data collection are applied. Such instruments of data collection include—Key Informant Interviews (KII)—interviews of victims and their families, Police officers, custodians of Sufi Shrines, folk singers who perform at religious and cultural festivals such as 'Melas', members of civil society, journalists who have experience to cover violent extremism incidents, academicians and human rights activists, are significant part of the study. Documents' review and analysis, like, review of National Action Plan and its provisions to fight against violent religious extremism, analysis of honorable Supreme Court of Pakistan's verdict regarding the definition of terrorism, analysis of justice Qazi Faiz Isa's report on Quetta Carnage, a critical analysis of charter of National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) and its mandate to coordinate efforts to fight violent extremism in the country, books and research papers and news articles have been reviewed by the author.

### Transition of Secular Sindh to Extremism

For centuries, Sindh had been under the influence of Buddhism. When Muslim Sufis came in 1000s and 1100s AD, they preached Islam in Sindh's cultural flavor that was inclusive and tolerant. Sindh accepted Islam with its cultural tolerance and pluralism. The modern history of religious extremism in Sindh is post-colonial.<sup>6</sup> In post-colonial times,

<sup>6</sup> Masroor Shah, interview by author, Karachi, 13 January 2021.

Deobandi and Wahabism, like elsewhere, was instrumentally and politically used, which changed the dynamics of Sindhi society. Colonialism spread religious tensions through communalism. In 1939, British administration's decision to force eviction of Muslims from Masjid Manzilgah, instilled communal riots and religious hatred in local communities of Sindh. That was a decisive and breakaway point between Hindu and Muslims of Sindh from where they parted their political and socio-cultural ways and chose opposite directions.<sup>7</sup>

Sindh's British Governor Francis Mudie reported in 1947 that most of the Hindus of Sindh were likely to stay behind (in Pakistan) because there was no chance of communal violence in the province (Sindh) that had exhibited 'great communal harmony.'<sup>8</sup> It indeed raises the question about what were the underlying conditions and causes that triggered religious extremism in Sindh, following the partition.

Karachi, the capital of Sindh, was known as a secular city in the subcontinent. That identity diminished with the passage of time. In 1970s and 80s, the situation worsened. Alleged state patronage of religious groups further deteriorated the situation. Dr. Riaz Shaikh puts the argument that we cannot solely blame the Zia's military regime for the patronage of religious sectarian parties. Islamization of the state had started early in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's democratic government. 'You can't call PPP a revolutionary party, it was Bhutto's government, when Ahmadiis were declared Non-Muslims, it was his government when Friday was made a holiday, it was his government when alcohol was banned and there are so many things'.<sup>9</sup> But, Shaikh further argues, it was the 'establishment' that used religion as a tool to suppress the Sindhi nationalism in Sindh. Shaikh further adds that after the Babri Masjid attack, religious extremism increased in Sindh and it happened due to the involvement of the establishment.

Researcher Laurent Gayer points out that Karachi's middle classes have supported religious parties and that was demonstrated in the 1950s anti-Ahmadi movement.<sup>10</sup> Karachi, since partition, has constantly been the tipping point of religious politics. 'Thus, the first Pakistani Jihadist organization, the Jamiat-ul-Ansar (society of the partisans) was

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad Ali Shaikh, 'History: A Turning Point in the History of Sindh', accessed 21 September 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1628983>

<sup>8</sup> Michal Boivin and Mathew Cook, *Interpreting the Sindhi World: Essays on Society and History* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 300-310

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Riaz Shaikh, interview by author, Karachi, 31 March 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Gayer Laurent, *Karachi Ordered Disordered and the Struggle for the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 165.

formed in Kabul in 1980s by a group of madrasa students from Karachi'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, along with religious seminaries like Jamia Banuri Town, the city's progressive academic institutions, such as University of Karachi and NED, have also become breeding grounds for religious extremists. This argument has a merit as during the 1980s, besides madrasas, the religious elite also used the university campuses to recruit Jihadis for the Afghan war. Later, Karachi became a crossroad of militants when Pakistan entered into the War against Terrorism as a frontline state.

When Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) brought their version of 'Jihad' to Karachi and started indiscriminate target killings and suicide attacks on civilian and law-enforcement agencies, especially from 2010 to 2014, it devastated the socio-economic foundations of Pakistan's commercial capital, which also enjoys the reputation of Pakistan's secular city. The electoral campaign of 2013 general elections provided the Taliban space and opportunity to demonstrate their abilities to disrupt political process in Karachi, as they targeted three major secular political parties in the city, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan (MQM Pakistan), the Awami National Party (ANP), and the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), killing dozens of political workers and common people in a series of bomb blasts.<sup>12</sup>

The story is not different in rest of Sindh. Jamshoro, a small town near Hyderabad, is considered a hub of intellectual and academic activities. Three major universities – University of Sindh, Mehran University of Engineering and Technology and Liaquat University of Medical and Health Sciences — are located there, and thousands of students from different areas of Sindh study in these universities. Due to these universities and students' politics, this small town had been dominantly progressive in the past. But, now, as the progressive and nationalist voices are silenced and religious parties have started entering into universities under state patronage, the secular dynamics of this small town are changing. A student wing, State Youth Parliament of TLP is operating in Sindh University—typically and traditionally considered a nationalist university—and hundreds of students are its members who threaten and abuse dissenting and progressive voices through WhatsApp and on social media. This could not even be imagined before as progressive politics was so strong that religious parties were unable to do their politics in universities. It is a fact that when the student unions are

<sup>11</sup> Mariam Abou Zohab and Olivier Roy, *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 60-68.

<sup>12</sup> Zia ur Rehman, interview by author, Karachi, 25 March 2021.

banned, which are supposed to be backbone of a democratic society, there is no doubt that extremism takes its place.

Religious extremists have deeply penetrated in Sindh and are striking at its progressive and liberal roots. Intellectuals, scholars, scientists, poets, writers, and philosophers are the brain of society, but they are being victimized by extremists. The recent issue of Amar Jaleel, a public intellectual and fiction writer, who was accused of disrespect of religion and blasphemy, after criticizing 'deep state' for its policies of forced disappearance through a short story in Sindh Literature Festival which was held in Arts Council Karachi in March 2021, is yet another example of the growing extremism in Sindh. It happened when his years old short story was translated into Urdu. Interestingly, the story did not cause anger when it was published in Sindhi language.

A more serious incident happened when Sindh University Jamshoro's Professor Dr. Arfana Mallah was harassed and being accused of blasphemy. This seems like a reaction from a leader of prominent religious political party. She challenged theocracy and extremism in its epicenter, that was Sukkur, and organized a successful Aurat March in 2020. Clerics have been threatening her life since the Aurat March 2020. Finally, they accused her of blasphemy. For this study, Arfana Mallah narrated with a heavy heart what happened to her. 'In my incident, when I was accused of alleged blasphemy, I found everyone so weak and powerless against these religious forces. Even police officers who had to provide me with security were asking to apologize. You will get astonished by looking at the strength of their network that within hours my number was sent into different WhatsApp groups and people from Iraq and Afghanistan and different countries were abusing and threatening me so badly and it was terrible. And even a senior minister from Sindh cabinet advised me to apologize. If someone talked in my favor they were also threatened. And, lawyers and the Bar Council of Sindh were passing a resolution for a blasphemy case against me. Lawyers who were supposed to be progressive were against me. Every institution is radicalized'.<sup>13</sup>

Minorities are an integral part of the social fabric of Pakistan, and Sindh's in particular. Since the Partition, they are serving the nation like any other Pakistani. Hindus are Pakistan's largest minority group and the majority of them are residing in Sindh's Northern and Southern districts. In recent years, they complained of 'forced conversions' and religious, social and economic harassment. Mian Abdul Khaliq, commonly known as Mian Mitho, a radical Pir (custodian of the

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Arfana Mallah, interview by author, Jamshoro, 13 April 2021.

Bharchundi Sharif Shrine) from Ghotki, who is allegedly involved in forced conversions of minor Hindu girls in Northern Sindh, enjoys good relations and political backing of mainstream political parties.

Additionally, Karachi has a significant population of Christians. They also have the same grievances. Dr. Sabir Michael, member of National Commission for Justice and Peace—an—advocacy organization—said that the Christian minority is constantly living in fear, either because of misuse of blasphemy laws against their community or 'forced conversions'. 'The conversions are glorified, and this hurts the minority communities'.<sup>14</sup> The latest prominent case of forced conversion in the province came from a Christian family, with 14-year-old Huma Masih having been kidnapped on October 10, 2019. The abduction of Huma, an 8th grade student at a private school in Karachi's Zia Colony, was brought into the limelight when Sindh Governor Imran Ismail took notice of the case. Despite the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint (amendment) act, 2016, the formulation of parliamentary panel against forced conversion, and Prime Minister Imran Khan's election promise, wherein before being elected to power he had vowed to prevent forced marriages, maintaining that he had personally received complaints from the Hindu community, forced conversions have remained unabated. According to Faisal Edhi, 'we have seen cases where the girls—been converted from Hindu religion to Islam to get married with Muslim boys—are not treated fairly in their in-laws. The girls have communicated this to us, Pakistan Hindu Council, and their friends back at home but nothing can be done since there is no legal provision or law to address this issue'.<sup>15</sup>

Religious extremism in Sindh is indeed an external force, getting stronger through controversial state policies. Realistically speaking, like Pakistan, Sindh has also become the victim of the menace of violent religious extremism because of the Afghan War during 1980s and then during 2000s after the 9/11 incident. The War on Terror exposed to Pakistan as well Sindh a very dangerous and furious type of religious extremism with international dimension. The international terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, having links with local terrorist groups, have changed the whole dynamics of the nature of the society of Pakistan in general and Sindh in particular. Kashmir issue

<sup>14</sup> Sabir Michael, in conference 'Fundamental Rights of Religious Minorities in Constitution of Pakistan and Forced Conversions of Religious Minorities Women in Pakistan', Karachi, 20 March 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Faisal Edhi, interview by author, Karachi, 01 March 2021.

also provides the same kind of inspiration to the rising extremism in Sindh.<sup>16</sup>

The influx of the Pashtuns in Sindh, as a result of military operations in former FATA, deeply influenced the Sindhi culture.<sup>17</sup> The choice of Karachi was a natural one for these victims of war; with some four million Pashtuns living in this megacity, many of the internally displaced people (IDPs) had kin they could count on, and with whom they could shelter until they returned home.<sup>18</sup> Karachi is the largest city of Pashtuns and indeed, the Taliban came to the city in the guise of IDPs. They built safe heavens and from there they controlled the criminal economy of the city.

Other parts of Sindh were also affected by the demographic changes. For instance, Northern districts of Sindh such as Larkana, Shikarpur, Jacobabad, Khairpur, Ghotki, and Sukkur have close proximity with Southern Punjab and Balochistan. Due to military operations in Balochistan, thousands of people from different Baloch tribes took shelter in these areas, and a good number of these migrants had turned towards religious parties, such as JUI-F. So, here in Sindh, they became active members of religious organizations. It happened because of two reasons, firstly, they wanted social security and acceptance; secondly, economic incentives. Following their example, native Sindhi tribes also converted into Wahabi and Deobandi sects, thereby strengthening the political position of JUI-F in Northern Sindh. Rashid Mehmood Soomro's close contest against PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto was a clear manifestation of how successfully religious parties built their political support base in Northern Sindh.

This political influence of religious parties translated into ideological support for extremists. Offshoots of Al-Qaeda, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi capitalized that ideological support into sectarian wars. They established local networks and recruited Jihadis. The Hafeez Brohi Group is considered the most notorious group that was responsible for major terrorist attacks in Northern Sindh. The terrorist attack on the headquarters of the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) in Sukkur in July 2013 was an open challenge to Pakistan's law-enforcement agencies.<sup>19</sup> This group also targeted rival

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Naeem Ahmad, interview by author, Karachi, 21 May 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Dr. Riaz Shaikh, interview by author, Karachi, 31 March 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Zia ur Rehman, interview by author, Karachi, 25 March 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Sarfaraz Memon, Tribune.Com, accessed 22 May 2021. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/581678/unprecedented-attack-coordinated-assault-on-isi-sukkur-office>.

Shia and Bareilvi politicians and religious scholars too. On February 20, 2013, spiritual leader Peer Ghulam Hussain Shah Bukhari's grandson was killed in a bomb blast near Jacobabad, he himself injured in the blast.<sup>20</sup> This attack triggered fierce sectarian tension between Bareilvis and Deobandis in Larkana and Qambar-Shahdadkot districts.

Some terrorist attacks were designed purely in the line of IS ideology. For instance, in 2015, the suicide bombing during Friday prayers inside Shikarpur's Lakhi Dar Imambargah, killed 61 innocent people and injured almost 50, was sponsored by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan with the help of local collaborators.<sup>21</sup> For centuries, Lal Shehbaz Qalandar Shrine is considered as an inclusive place of religious and sectarian harmony where, without any religious and sectarian prejudice, people from all over Pakistan pay tribute. An attack on such a place was a horrible act of terrorism. Once again, IS claimed responsibility of the attack, but it could not be executed without local support. After that attack, the civil society of Sindh realized the transition of secular Sindh towards extremism. Later, it was established through investigation by law enforcement agencies that Hafeez Brohi Group was involved in the attack.<sup>22</sup>

The mushrooming growth of madrassas in Southern Sindh, especially, from Mirpurkhas to Tharparkar, remained another issue of concern for Sindh's civil society. 'If there were three seminaries in a city before, now there are tens of seminaries in just one neighborhood'.<sup>23</sup> It is the state's policy to counter nationalists through religious thought and these madrassas are a primary source of it and are playing a very important role in that policy.<sup>24</sup> Some have arguments that this policy of madrasa promotion on border-districts is because of Indian threat. The majority population has been the Hindu. Madrassas are playing a dual role in the case of Tharparkar. Besides converting the Hindu population, in case of war, these madrassas can provide a well-trained first line of defense against India.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> M.B. Kalhor and Waseem Shamsi, Dawn.Com, accessed 22 May 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/787590/spiritual-leaders-grandson-killed-in-sectarian-attack>.

<sup>21</sup> Ubaidullah Shaikh, dawn.com, accessed 22 May 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1160444>.

<sup>22</sup> Zia ur Rehman, interview by author, Karachi, 25 March 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Declan Walsh and Saba Imtiaz, 'Asia Pacific', accessed 23 May 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/16/world/asia/militants-in-pakistan-make-inroads-in-the-diverse-and-tolerant-south.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Asghar Soomro, interview by author, Karachi, 17 May 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Riaz Sohail, interview by author, Karachi, 27 March 2021.

It seems that the politics of faith plays a vital role in Pakistan's electoral system. Former Ambassador Hussain Haqqani highlights three interconnected problems that have affected Pakistan's domestic policies since the inception of the country: first, Pakistan's use of religion and orthodox religious groups for political purpose; second, the ineptness of government to rein religious zeal after unleashing it; and lastly, the military's negligence to address the root causes of this chaos, addressing only the symptoms. He argues that with taking control of power by Gen. Zia ul Haq in 1977, the armed forces and Islam in Pakistan composed an even stronger loop.<sup>26</sup> He further adds that while Gen. Zia's quest to use Islam as the main governing force in Pakistan may not have had an immediate negative effect on ordinary Pakistani citizens, but it 'brought the relationship between Pakistani state and Islamic groups to a new level' and sought to create an all-powerful force that civilian governments could not control.<sup>27</sup> Until today, the state's confused policies are the main hurdle to creating a strong counter mechanism against extremism. In one way, the state is trying hard to meet the policy guidelines of Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to curb the terror financing, while on the other hand, we see the alleged patronage of the TLP and Afghan Taliban. Civil society has serious concern for current Pakistani government's unconditional support to Afghan Taliban.

Socio-economic paradoxes such as persistent poverty and inequality, mounting inflation and steep unemployment, a plagued governance system, rampant corruption, overworked and underfunded judiciary, and the mismanagement of resources are some very important contributing factors in Sindh's drift into extremism. Studies have revealed that 4 out of 10 people live in multidimensional poverty in Sindh, home to six of the ten worst performing districts in terms of human development in Pakistan, which also have the highest proportion of the poor.<sup>28</sup> The rural areas of Sindh have among the highest incidence of poverty in Pakistan—around 70 percent of the population in rural Sindh live below the poverty line.<sup>29</sup> Sindh's poverty provides a ripe breeding ground for extremists. Governance gaps in Sindh and the

<sup>26</sup> Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military* (Washington DC, Carnegie, 2005), 310-30.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ishrat Husain, Aijaz Qureshi and Nadeem Hussain, *The Economy of Modern Sindh: Opportunities Lost and Lessons for the Future* (Karachi, Oxford University Press, 2019), 134-40

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

government's failure to provide means to a respectable livelihood cause the masses to turn towards the umbrella of extremist organizations.

Social connectivity through physical and virtual infrastructure has brought significant changes in Sindhi society. People are getting violent religious influence through media and social networks too. Rigid religion thoughts have affected the indigenous people, and thus the new generation is becoming sensitive towards religion.

A well-educated society also provides foundations for tolerance, inclusiveness and respect for other religions, nations, societies, and minority groups. Unfortunately, due to corruption and disturbed democratic process, a well-functioning system of inclusive, tolerant, and quality education remains one of the major challenges facing Pakistan generally, and Sindh particularly, even after seventy-two years of its inception. Article 25A of the Constitutions of Pakistan says that the state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children aged 5 to 16. However, after the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment, education has become a provincial subject. So, Sindh was the first province to enact the Free and Compulsory Education Act 2013. Despite all that legislation, there are 66 million children out of school in Sindh today. They are easy prey for extremists. That happened in Sindh after the super floods of 2010-11. Extremist organizations inducted thousands displaced young boys into their madrassa, radicalized them, trained them and then used them as a fuel in bloody sectarian religious conflicts outside and inside the province.

### **Sindh's Resistance to Religious Extremism**

The transformation of society and culture in Sindh started evolving after the partition of the Indian sub-continent, with the influx of Muslim migrants, mainly from the central provinces of present-day India. A good number of Sindhi Hindus also migrated from Sindh. This changed the overall social fabric of the province but resisted the wider waves of communal violence. The social values and societal principles helped the incoming migrants in their settling in Sindh. The outgoing non-Muslim population and those who chose to stay were not discriminated against and no communal violence from the local Sindhi population was reported. While in the neighboring province of Punjab, bloodshed was witnessed on both sides of the border. This strong historical evidence depicts Sindh's resilience in the face of religiosity.

Despite TLP's recent electoral victory from Karachi, citizens of Sindh have repeatedly and consistently rejected fundamentalists. This has been attested to in each one of the elections held in the years, 1937, 1946, 1951, 1962, 1964, 1970, 1977, 1985, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1996,

2002, 2008 and 2013.<sup>30</sup> In each of these elections, the fundamentalist religious parties have been completely routed. People of Sindh have unwaveringly discarded those who have denied their traditions of tolerance and egalitarianism. So, the tolerant and democratic nature of the people is the biggest credential of Sindh in the fight against religious extremism and fundamentalism.

The progressive literature in the national and provincial languages has played a huge role in actually developing resilient minds and has been paving a way for values like acceptance, despite being surrounded by regions with extreme tendencies. Most of the literature in Sindhi language has always promoted peace and co-existence with other human beings, this has been a de-facto resilience against religious extremism and violence in the province. Sindh's performing arts, influenced from Sindhi poetry—largely feminine in nature, have not allowed the projection of religious ideas in theater and Sindhi dramas.

Sindh's Sufi Islam is another strong shield against bigotry and barbarism. The diverse crowd at shrines of Sufi Saints shows that Sindh's people are religious but they shun fundamentalism. For instance, at the Shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalander, you will find women along with men perform 'Dhamal' and their men do not say anything. This happens because Sufis are there.<sup>31</sup> People of Sindh readily give their soul to an unorthodox Sufi but resist the influence of the dogmatic and inflexible Maulvi. Scholars and writers constantly demand that these pluralistic teachings of Sindh's culture should be introduced in the form of educational curricula.

Music at large, and Sindhi Sufi music particularly, since ages, has been panacea against dogmatic religious views. The 'Kalaam' of Shah Latif and Sachal Sarmast is full of resistance against religious extremism. Sachal Sarmast, in his poetry criticized orthodoxy and fundamentalism in society. He saw nexus between rigid molvi and then establishment and described it as an impediment for the progress of society.<sup>32</sup> This centuries' old tradition of mediation with music in Sindhi society evolved with the passage of time. The society at large has always remained inclusive of Sufi music—from the dawn rendition in shrines to cultural melas. This very genre of music has kept Sindhi society's romance with love, peace, and respect going.

<sup>30</sup> Aitazaz Ahsan, *Indus Saga and The Making of Pakistan* (Lahore: Jumhoori Publications, 2013), 380-90.

<sup>31</sup> Javed Qazi, interview by author, Karachi, 30 March 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Anita M. Weiss, *Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan: Local Actions Local Voices* (Karachi, OUP, 2020), 45-47

In Pakistan, especially in Sindh, although there is lack of coordination and funding, civil society organizations are playing an important role to educate and mobilize citizens against violent extremism. In 2020, at Sukkur Aurat March, civil society showed the finest example of Sindh's resilience where political parties, progressive voices, secular forces, academics, and intellectuals, men and women alike, participated and challenged orthodox extremist elements.

Amidst political chaos in Sindh's capital, Karachi, and the peak of terrorist attacks in the country, Sabeen Mahmud, a National College of Arts (NCA) graduate, came up with a platform for public discourse, dialogue, fine arts, and music. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor (T2F) was started in 2007, and soon became part of city's life. It was seen as a beacon by not only the residents of Karachi but people at large as well. Pakistanis living in and outside the country started supporting the T2F mission and it became an institution. T2F has been a voice of the voiceless, a breathing space for the ones who were resisting religious and political terrorism.<sup>33</sup> T2F attracted country's top scholars, academics, opinion makers, lawyers, and activists—all working for enduring peace. This shared platform was cherished by the progressive people and it worked for the overall intellectual development of the society. Being homed in Sindh's capital, the T2F has been plying its part in resisting religious extremism and violence in the province.

### Conclusion

Violent religious extremism has largely affected the pluralistic socio-economic and cultural values of Sindh, a region which has been known for its peaceful Sufi culture and ethos. The people of Sindh have never practiced an extremist form of religion. Over the centuries, the land and its natives have remained peaceful. However, today, the Sindhi society has become more intolerant and extremist to a certain degree. Not only have various minority groups been victimized on the basis of their religious beliefs, but also the Muslims themselves have been targeting each other. Recently, intellectuals, writers and academics have become victims of religious extremism. Alarming, in recent years, several cases of blasphemy have been registered not only against the members of Hindu and Christian minorities, but members of Shia community and Muslims from other sects also have become victims. Despite all these growing issues of concern, Sindh is not lowering its guard against religious extremism. Sindh has resisted the extremism with its pluralistic and inclusive values, message of Sufis and its tolerant nature. Sindh's

<sup>33</sup> Nadeem Hussain, interview by author, Karachi, 20 March 2021.

civil society, its progressive culture, and literature are guards against fanatics. Revival of progressive and inclusive political movements can affectively counter the threat of extremism. These tools of soft powers can be applied with proper understanding of the society's political, cultural, and socio-economic ethos. The will to countering extremism comes from political support and stability. Extremism can be combated if we draw our support from the constitution—tolerant tents and inclusive socio-ideological forms of our state and society. Firm political will, belief in the constitution and in democracy, the balanced role of institutions, a united nation and a uniformed narrative against violent religious extremism are the basic guidelines to defeat the menace of militancy and the scourge of extremism.

### Policy Recommendations

Some of the action-oriented policy recommendations that may help policy makers to elicit administrative actions are outlined below:

- For successful countering violent extremism (CVE) measures, understanding of the terms terrorism and extremism have pivotal significance. Therefore, parliament and government should develop a comprehensive legal definition of terrorism and extremism in the context of Pakistan.
- Terrorism and extremism anywhere is a threat to peace everywhere. So, national narrative against terrorism and extremism should be cleared. At state and societal level both, no justification be accepted about religious extremism, either it happens inside or outside the country.
- Parliament is the place to build national narrative and public discourse against violent religious extremism.
- The government of Sindh needs to develop text books which instill values of acceptance and pluralism.
- Evidences suggest that there has been a rising demand for education, especially primary education. The public schools, along with the schools run by the Sindh Educations Foundation (SEF), and organizations like The Citizens Foundation (TCF) are catering to the grass root needs of education in the province. Therefore, it is imperative that this need is catered in a manner that more and more children and youth become part of mainstream, and can be saved from extremist elements.
- The Karachi Action Committee is mandated with the implementation of National Action Plan (NAP) and its composition has yielded

results to restore law and order in the city. Such structure should continue and be replicated at the provincial level.

- The regularization of Madrassa—formal and informal—is a huge challenge. Provincial and federal authorities need to come together to sync the data collected by the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), and the Local Government, Town Planning and Housing Department of the Government of Sindh—through the Union Councils/Committees.
- The Culture, Archives and Antiquate department should focus on road shows at the grass roots level, and through its network of district libraries, shall organize and host dialogue covering religious and social issues.
- Economic activity has multi-pronged benefits for the society. The Annual Development Programs (ADP) need to be conceived in a way that they do not only help the growth of provincial economy but also keep the youth and local population engaged.
- Proper nutrition is one attraction for the marginalized population to send their kids to Madrassas. Schools need programs that can be an equal substitute to this.
- For a wider message of peace, the Provincial Press and Information Department (PID) needs to leverage on Sindhi as well as Urdu media—both print and electronic—to build a society which values peace most.
- The chief executive of the province shall engage with the social media influencers, to discourage extremism and violence behavior.
- Political and Non-political religious leaders shall be engaged by the media in continuous dialogue. Anti-extremist and non-violent discourse needs to be institutionalized in every aspect.
- Religious harmony can be sustained through broader political discourse, and for that special task forces and steering committees at national and provincial levels should be created.
- The country has developed and promulgated Single National Curriculum (SNC) even when minorities have raised serious concerns, and the present PPP government in Sindh has not adopted it. The SNC was initiative with respect to class harmony but tolerance for other religions should have been incorporated as well.
- The Sindh HEC needs to encourage research for a more tolerant and inclusive society and to form a humane outlook.
- The religious madrassas' curricula should integrate respect for other faiths, and preach and practice the same.

- Private sector should frame and design the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects that resist extremism in the province.
- Common grounds or values that bring communities together should be leveraged.
- After the resurgence of Taliban, a new civil war in Afghanistan is imminent. Therefore, Pakistan should be taken precautionary measures to face the challenge of refugees. Special camps should be prepared at border areas of Pakistan to cater and rehabilitate the refugees over there. Free movement and intermingling of Afghan refugees in settled areas of Pakistan, especially in Karachi, will create an opportunity for extremist elements to recruit new militants and sabotage law and order in Sindh.