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Is Pakistan Lost to the Extremists?

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IN PAKISTAN, the rise of radical Islamic parties and groups since the 2002 elections has been a subject of discussion and contention. Many scholars have argued that the rise of these parties and groups could be attributed to the support they get from the Pakistani military. It has been argued that the military regime under President Pervez Musharraf had utilized the Islamists to counter the secular opposition led by the former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. However, recent developments in Pakistan seem to point to the fact that it is the military regime that is now beholden to the Islamists. In recent times, the Islamists have successfully increased their influence by penetrating the Pakistani army by brokering peace deals between the military factions. Moreover, Muslim extremists in the troubled region of Waziristan have successfully pushed for greater radicalization of the country along the lines of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. The recent standoff between the Pakistani government and Islamic militants at the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad is perhaps the most daring show of power by Islamists in Pakistan

Islamization of the Military

Since the late 1970s, both the Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Islam Fazlul Rehman (JUI-F) have built strong links with the military. The Zia-ul-Haq regime, known for starting an Islamization programme in Pakistan, was quick in recognizing the radical position of these parties. As a result, his government developed strong linkages with these parties to aid the Inter-Service Intelligence's (ISI) anti-India cause, and to provide support to the intelligence activities within the country. In addition, these linkages also helped coordinate the global jihad in Afghanistan. For the Islamists, religious indoctrination of the army is part of a long-term strategy to gain control of the country through a soft Islamic Revolution. During the 1970s, many officers within the army began to express their fascination for the Jamaat-e-Islami's ideology and the teachings of its founder Maulana Maududi. The Islamization of the military is especially evident in the ISI. Officers such as Hamid Gul and Javed Nasir, both of whom headed the ISI, supported the Islamization of the army. To date, new recruits swear an oath on the Quran. Pakistani army personnel are also regularly subjected to religious tests based on the tenets of Islam. These tests are intended to raise the level of religious awareness among Pakistani troops and ensure indoctrination.

The rank and file of the Pakistani military have become radicalized due to the indoctrination process they have undergone over the years. Such steady indoctrination also provided a fertile ground for radical Islamists to extend their influence over armed forces personnel. The degree to which Islamists have penetrated the military is exemplified by the threat General Musharraf faced from extremists within the military who were angered by his close cooperation with the United States in the war on terrorism. This threat manifested in 2003, when a group of Air Force officers and Islamists from the Chaklala Air Base made an attempt on General Musharraf's life.

Talibanization of Pakistan?

Extremist Muslim groups have, in recent times, imposed control over areas in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), leading to clashes between the Pakistani military and extremists groups. These clashes began when tensions rooted in the Pakistan army's search for al Qaeda members in the area escalated into armed resistance by local tribesmen supported by the Taliban. To resolve the conflict through negotiations, the government sought the assistance of JUI-F parliamentarian Maulana Merajuddin Qureshi – a man known to be a supporter of both the Taliban and extremist Muslim groups. Through these negotiations, a deal was struck. Through this deal, the local militants were offered amnesty and financial incentives in return for pledges to renounce violence. They were also asked to surrender al Qaeda and other foreign militants and ensure that foreign militants would not use Pakistani territory for cross-border attacks. In return, the government agreed to recognize and support the demands of the militants to impose Shariah laws in the area.

However, this Talibanization has not limited itself to the FATA region. It is, in fact, extending itself to the urban centers now as is evident from the recent tension created by the Red Mosque clerics in Islamabad. Since March 2007, these clerics have launched an anti-vice campaign, demanding that the government imposes Shariah laws and Islamic rule in Islamabad. As part of their strategy in this anti-vice campaign, the mosque's students have launched anti-vice squads, taking upon themselves the responsibility of vandalizing music and CD stores and also threatening their owners to switch to alternative businesses. In an attempt to embarrass the Pakistani government, which the Red Mosque clerics consider too secular and pro-US, in June 2007, one such anti-vice squad captured five Chinese masseuses on the grounds that these masseuses were running a brothel in the name of a massage parlor in Islamabad. Although these masseuses were released after being held hostage for a couple of days, their seizure clearly signifies a great leap in the movement's attempts at challenging the writ of the Pakistani state.

Prospects for the Future

The rising influence of the Islamists could lead to lasting domestic and international consequences. On the domestic front, these radical Islamists will continue to wield their influence in the military and in the tribal areas. The on-going negotiations – as opposed to the customary violent crackdown to challenges to its authority by the military government – with the Red Mosque clerics are indicative of the fact that the government recognizes the power wielded by the radical Islamists in the country. In addition, this recognition can potentially encourage future politicization of extremist groups who are not currently part of mainstream political activity in Pakistan. Moreover, due to their importance in contemporary Pakistani politics, these radicals will remain poised to steer any future government towards a more extreme form of Islamization that will have an impact on international politics owing to Pakistan's status as a nuclear power. Other knock-on effects at the international level from this development would be the derailment of peace talks with India and worsening relations with Afghanistan. More importantly, domestic radicalization compromises Pakistan's key role in helping the United States combat terrorism, and hence, has an impact on Pakistan-US relations.

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