EXTREMISM AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN SOUTH ASIA

SANCTION TO OR SANCTION AGAINST? CROWDED CONTINUUMS AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN PAKISTAN

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SANCTION TO OR SANCTION AGAINST? CROWDED CONTINUUMS AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN PAKISTAN

Nazish Brohi

I have been researching and writing on issues of violence, conflict and extremism for nearly two decades. Writing this paper should have been a straightforward, open-and-shut recap. I didn't expect to be stumped at assessing the impact of extremism on women in Pakistan.

But everything has refracted. This impasse may be related to timing. My previous work has either been during the conflict itself, where the change is too rapid and the proximity too immediate to do anything but report, narrate, outrage, implore and hope. Or right after, when detecting patterns and retrospective extrapolation constitutes analysis. But now, in Pakistan, we are in the after-after.

The tidal waves of violent extremism have receded, at least for now. While we pick through its debris, we find another mess underneath it, that of extremism which is not violent and not particularly extreme either. Extremism/extremists connote a continuum of ideas and practices and urge attention towards attacks lobbed by those on its fringes. But what to do about the miasma in the middle?

This makes me think about how time lapses change perspectives, the truism about time's healing properties, misleading assumptions about linearity, how neat categories of before, during and after don't bear up against scrutiny.

I wonder how to unravel Pakistan's mesh of intolerance, proliferation of extremist thought and action—and the increasing, mutating forms of violence against women—and trace back causality. The country has experienced multiple, varied actors who have generated and perpetuated extremism, at times in sync, at times at odds with their approaches to women's rights. How to isolate the effect of each? And if I don't need to, then how do I evade a homogenising approach that blurs difference, distorting corrective strategies?

In this paper, I'll attempt this unravelling by reflecting at three particular surges of extremism by three separate actors who were antagonistic to women's rights: 1) the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a now-banned violent, militant organisation which for a limited time asserted a brutal rule by force, 2) political parties (specifically religio-political parties) which bridge citizens and governance and 3) the state of Pakistan in the 1980s military regime led by President-General Zia-ul-Haq.

By the end of this paper, I hope it will be evident that extremists wield power over gendered discourses not just by physical and rhetorical attacks from the margins, but by influencing and compelling mainstream actors to right shift. Actions of political actors situated in the mid-stream/mainstream have more staying power than those at the extreme of the continuum. Because of their positioning, they are able to bring

about systemic change through legislation, policies, curriculum and by influencing political culture. In contrast, challenges issued by antagonists at the fringes tend to have shock value and brutality, but not as much longevity.

SWAT—IN THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR

I will draw on my previous work on extremism based in Swat, a mountainous district in north-western Pakistan. This was a relatively easy context to study since it was a bookended conflict with a discernible start and end. Swat made headlines across the world when it was captured by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), who instituted a rigid, violent, brutal and misogynist rule before the Pakistan army fought intense battles to reclaim the area and bring it back into state control. The TTP passed decrees forcibly confining women to their homes, declared a prohibition on women's jobs (including health workers) and banned girls from attending school.

Since the 1990s, the world witnessed the Taliban grow in Pakistan. In the aftermath of the War on Terror and US-led bombing of Afghanistan and the Pak-Afghan border, the Taliban took on a virulent incarnation as TTP. In the mid-2000s TTP took over swathes of the country, inflicting unspeakable brutality, suicide attacks and terrorist bombings which killed thousands of people. The militants self-identified as a religious movement and justified their actions by invoking Islam and Jihad.

The plot line had a linear trajectory. Military action rose as TTP terror attacks became weekly occurrences 2007 onwards. Every attempt at negotiation deepened the crisis and upped the stakes, finally resulting in a climax where repeated military operations and mass displacement of civilians led to high-grade TTP leaders being killed or fleeing to Afghanistan. As denouement, the "grey grade" militants considered redeemable were sent to deradicalization camps, while most displaced people made their way back to rebuild their destroyed homes and livelihoods. A reductive, sanitised account of recent religious militancy in Pakistan, but at least a coherent one.

In the aftermath of the Swat conflict while I was collecting survivor testimonies in 2009 and 2010, people were deeply scarred witnesses to extreme brutality, and it seemed like nothing in their world could be righted again. Now, over a decade later, individual traumas and fears linger, but apart from a vigilant security apparatus, the social systems and governance structures seem to have moved out of the shadows of TTP.

Reflecting on gender dynamics was straightforward when my interviews had quotes such as:

> My sister was an elected councillor but left it all and stayed home after the Taliban banned women from working. I was braver, I kept on doing my job as a health worker even after they threatened me. But then they threatened my husband. They threatened to kill him and burn his crops. Then he made me stop. I kept arguing, we needed the money I earned, but he

> sent me and the kids to his brother's place in Mardan.
>
> —A 33-year-old LHW[1] from Mingora, Swat

> My neighbour was with the Taliban so they burnt his house. The fire spread because it was a wooden house so even my house burnt down, along with furniture and all assets. My husband's younger brother took the compensation money from the government and ran away to the Gulf. My parents-in-law died and my husband cannot find a job. I have daughters. The Taliban stopped their schooling. Now what should I do?
>
> —A 45-year-old middle-class woman from Matta, Swat

> We supported them (the TTP) because we thought they were genuine. I went along with others. I did not have reservations but I was not as excited as the others were either. Yet I did not want them to think I was any less devout. It's age; we older people don't get that excited about anything. The young people thought everything would change, like it would start raining gold coins when Shariat comes.
>
> —An aged woman from Charbagh, Swat, who didn't know how old she was

The TTP has now been flushed out through military operations and normalcy largely restored, albeit with higher insecurity and fear and lower public trust, as is the usual aftermath of conflict. Beyond the individual trauma, in what form do collective scars persist, now that the immediacy of the conflict has passed?

Women in Swat now say they have more work opportunities than ever before, many are allowed to live away from home or stay in university residences and face less strictures overall. In 2021, I conducted a study on Swat commissioned by United Nations Development Program, focusing on young women who were children during the Taliban takeover and military operations in the area. They spoke of the long-term impacts of mental health issues and lingering fears. Yet they also highlighted improved security, economic boost, better salaries, better opportunities and more freedoms for women than before.[1]

[1] LHW stands for Lady Health Worker. LHWs are frontline employees of Pakistan's National Programme for Family Planning (1994), a door-to-door home service health coverage programme for low-income demographic groups.

Is this it then? The military operations in Swat ended in 2010. Now in 2022, 12 years later, has Swat overcome its encounter with extremism? While people's personal traumas persist, the Taliban years are no longer in public discourse. "Things are normal now," many people in Swat assure me. But as my many interviews with women in Swat show, "normality" was problematic to begin with. The "before" of the conflict in Swat was already the "after" of prior conflicts.

Much has been written on terrorism and extremism in Pakistan—I will not recap it. Instead, in the next section of this essay I revisit my previous work in and about Swat (much of which was done alongside Dr Saba Gul Khattak) to rethink long-term effects, and to interrogate the notions of normality preceding the conflict—which now, ostensibly, have been reverted to.

Background to the Conflict in Swat

In 2001, in wake of the US-led Coalition's aerial bombardment in Afghanistan, a local cleric from Swat, Sufi Muhammad, recruited and sent men from Swat to fight alongside the Taliban. Consequently, he was arrested by the Pakistani government and his organisation banned, leading to violent protests in his support. He was shifted into house arrest and his son-in-law, Fazlullah was appointed leader of his movement. Fazlullah set up an illegal FM radio station which advocated imposition of *Shari'a* law to address all ills of society. Initially focusing on public piety, he demanded people renounce certain forms of modernity by destroying television sets, stop listening to music, grow beards and wear burqas, join the movement for imposing *Shari'a* and raise funds for it.

In 2006, there was a showdown between security forces and Lal Masjid in the federal capital, Islamabad. The mosque has been known for historic links with militants and played a key role during the Afghan jihad of the 1980s. Until the time of the raid, the mosque maintained direct ties with Al Qaeda. The main cleric and some of his followers were killed in the operation, though all the women in the mosque and its madrassah were evacuated beforehand. Subsequently, militants declared the representatives, institutions, and premises of the state to be legitimate targets, and over the following three years, Pakistan reeled from attacks of unparalleled intensity: 40 suicide bombings, 3,000 casualties and over 8,000 injured.

Fazlullah openly sided with extremists and urged a war against state institutions. The Lal Masjid incident became a battle cry for Fazlullah as he swore revenge against the state and announced the merger of his militant group with the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Fazlullah then unleashed a radical, violent campaign against state institutions and brutal rule in the territory he controlled in Swat. Over 200 schools were destroyed—majority of them girls' schools—1,20,000 female students banned from attending classes and *Shari'a* courts instituted to dispense the TTP's version of Islamic justice which ran parallel to the state's judicial system.

The first set of low-intensity military operations (*Rah-e-Haq*) were unsuccessful in dislodging militants in Swat. The provincial government then tried negotiating and signed a six-point accord for instituting a *Shari'a*-based judicial system in the area. In a previous study on Swat, Saba Khattak tracked the lead-up to army operations and observed:

> With the establishment of such a legal framework, most national laws including those protecting women were no longer operative in Swat. This step emboldened the militants, who soon after declared state institutions to be un-Islamic and western impositions. Their onslaught against women, especially the public flogging of a woman in Swat and the bombing of a revered Sufi shrine, prompted increased public calls for action against militants in Swat and consolidated a political consensus against the TTP. Subsequently, the elected government asked the army to conduct military operations against the TTP in Swat.[2]

Operation *Rah-e-Haq* III recaptured all territory held by the TTP, while displacing approximately three million people. In early 2010, the army announced victory against the militants. In October 2018, the army handed over full control of Swat to the civil administration, including security functions.

Reflecting on Taliban in a Post-Taliban Swat

It is well-known in Pakistan that initially, women of Swat ideologically and financially supported religious clerics Fazlullah and Shah Dauran when they were sermonising through radio broadcasts, before they went on to form the TTP. I'll cite here Bibi Tehmina Muhammad, once an elected councillor, who spoke about how the movements and its demands on women mutated:

> I donated money. But that was much earlier. See, he first started by saying you women will save Swat. Then he changed and said he and his men would save women. Later, it became something else; that we had to listen to them to save ourselves from Hell. In the end, it was if we disobeyed him, we could do nothing to save ourselves from them.[3]

In my previous studies I have tried to explore public support for the Taliban, and what it excavated about women's status and aspirations in society. They did not aspire to study Islamic exegesis themselves; they only wanted to improve their quality of life. Their support for *Shari'a* was underpinned by their wishes and hopes for social justice, economic prosperity, physical well-being and autonomy. The women later collectively reflected on their own actions, and while rueing their support, collectively diagnosed that the radio sermons, in effect, offered them agency:

> Women pointed out that the injustice they faced was because they were powerless within their homes and had no spaces within their communities. Earlier, women rarely voted, and many did not have identity cards; women never approached the police or judiciary/courts, never interacted with elected representatives, and did not access any news media. This history demonstrates that women's initial support of the Taliban represented their frustration with the absence of a sense of citizenship and control over their lives.[4]

There is an ostensible return to normality, or at least to the way things were prior to the conflict. But embedded within the prior normality were social codes which enabled the locally-assisted rise of the TTP in Swat. In my recent study on young women's perspectives[5] in Swat, they drew attention towards the overlaps:

> Half the respondents iterated that the TTP and the fear of TTP after army operations was used by men to hold women back, as the Taliban's outlook for women dovetailed with local patriarchies. As an example, they pointed to the university dress code requiring them to wear an abaya, a head to toe cover garment, a new addition where traditionally women only wore chadors. Half of the Malakand respondents emphasised that traditionalist conservative cultural codes and patriarchy were strengthened and compounded by the conflict, and that patriarchy and religion were used interchangeably against women. One respondent from Malakand explained, "Many local men agreed with Taliban on stopping girls' education after primary, early marriages and Jihad". Another one qualified it, "Men drew the line at physical violence. Other men were not allowed to be violent to their women. But they were willing to accept the rest [of the restrictions imposed on women].

This draws attention to the "normality" that preceded and seeded the takeover by extremists. The usual narrative on Swat is of a liberal tourist haven, part of the Asian hippie trail, welcoming to foreign and local tourists, but with a festering problem of bureaucratic delays in judicial processes where courts take too long to give judgments. In this telling, this scenic idyll was destroyed by one man (Fazlullah) who exploited people through a radio channel—initially favoured by women—exploited judicial weakness by exhorting people to band together for *Shari'a* which would ensure speedy justice, and once he secured a large following, declared his group as a part of the Taliban and went on a rampage of death and destruction.

This reductive narrative ignores the many complex factors of governance anomalies, historical exclusions and collateral damage of clashing domestic and regional strategic imperatives which led to the cataclysmic TTP rule. To understand this, it is important to illustrate the political and governance context preceding the Taliban takeover of Swat.

PRECEDING/SEEDING THE CONFLICT

This section will attempt to show that the TTP years in Swat were more of a continuity and acceleration of pre-existing trends rather than an anomaly, and how such impulses continue to manifest as tamed, non-violent political articulations.

A year after the War on Terror started in 2001, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)— a coalition of religious right-wing parties—swept into power to form the provincial government of the then-named North West Frontier Province (NWFP) in which Swat is located. They crested the wave of anti-West sentiment in protest against the bombing of Afghanistan, and tapped into the anger of Pashtuns dominant in NWFP who straddled both sides of the Pakistan-Afghan border. It was the first time in Pakistan's history that religio-political parties were able to poll enough votes to form a government.

The MMA contested elections on the promise of bringing *Shari'a* as a governance model (*Allah ki dharti par Allah ka nizam*). The general secretary of MMA and head of his own religio-political party, JUI-F, Maulana Fazlur Rehman announced, "All those who oppose imposition of an Islamic system are terrorists," and once in power:[6]

- Closed down the only women's crisis shelter in the province for victims of violence on the charges that it promoted vulgarity, obscenity and that NGO staffers running it were "home breakers". Its premises were taken over and turned into a drug rehabilitation centre
- Instituted an unelected National Shariat Council in the Chief Minister's Secretariat with the stated aim of determining the province's political and moral direction
- Declared family planning was against Islam, prohibited health workers from implementing family planning programmes and instructed male medical technicians to not perform ultrasounds and ECGs on women
- Confiscated and publicly torched condoms, family planning literature and music CDs in a purity drive to "flush out obscenity"
- Endorsed vigilante groups which cropped up across the province to implement their vision and policies such as youth groups blackening women's faces on advertisement billboards

There are many more such examples, all of which illustrate that the edicts of the TTP in Swat differed from the MMA in degree and method, not in intent and content. Judged against the metric of violence and destruction, the TTP takeover of Swat was a terrible episode of terror: locals were intimidated, killed—including by hanging and beheading in public areas—chased off their lands, harassed into behavioural changes on dress and deportment, personal liberties such as listening or playing music curtailed and so on. Seen against the vision, worldview and moral compass avowed by the preceding MMA government, the TTP in Swat brought a

change in tactics by using violence instead of law and policy. However, they were also a continuity of a socio-political diagnosis and corrective vision.

There are no violent extremists actively operating in Swat anymore, though young women respondents in the UNDP study said there are still remnants, and locals know who and where they are, even if they are no longer active. Women pointed to the overt and active presence of religio-political parties and socio-cultural networks which had the same outlook and worldview as the militant organisations, with disagreements on means of attainment and how to actualise their aims. The study encapsulates this dilemma:[7]

> The violence is gone but the radicalism remains. One of the experts interviewed for the study held that non-violent groups are more dangerous because they cannot legally be stopped. According to his close study, they provide ideological training, moral support and legitimacy to violent groups. "They make the narrative and set up the discourse for them. And they discredit all oppositional voices," he explained.
>
> There is no Pakistan-specific model which establishes the relationship between violent extremism and radicalism. Those working to protect minorities or those engaging with women's rights issues hold that radicalism also constitutes a problem in and of itself because it results in oppression, control, censorship and disempowerment, whether it results in mass, physical violence and terrorism or not. The difference is that violence is first and primarily a security problem and requires law enforcement solutions, whereas radicalism (when violence is absent) is a socio-political problem and requires social and political solutions.

Religio-political parties are not the only actors who invoke religion in service of their politics; they are simply the most blatant and aggressive about it. Many mainstream political parties which do not identify as religious have done the same in the past. This brings to attention how they are able to carry on the discourse against progressive women's rights from the fringes into the mainstream. Consider the following illustration.

The MMA government proposed a law for Islamization, the Hisba Act, which proposed—among other things—the institutionalising of morality monitoring squads for the "Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice" (*Amar bil maroof wa nahan anil munkar*), semantically and conceptually similar to what the Taliban instituted in Afghanistan. The law was successfully passed in the assembly but blocked by the provincial governor on instruction of the then President, General Pervaiz Musharraf.

But prior to the MMA, the same vice control, virtue promotion squads had already been proposed by a mainstream, ostensibly non-faith based national political party—the PML-N—under the leadership of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. In 1999, he proposed the *Shari'a* Law for the whole of the country, including a provision to declare himself *Amir ul Momineen* (Leader of the Faithful). The law was passed by parliament since he had two-thirds majority but was blocked by political opposition in the Senate.

And some two decades after the MMA government, more recently, ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan, when ousted from power through a vote of no confidence, raised the same "*Amar bil maroof wa nahan anil munkar*" as a slogan for his campaign and protest rallies. Each party had their own ideas for what this vice control, virtue promotion vision would look like and result in.

Before the TTP in Swat, the MMA and before the MMA, PML-N had already experimented with *Shari'a* Law. For neat linear analytic categories of "before, during and after" to understand the impact of extremism, how far back should the before-before go? Back to the 1980s military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq.

The following section of this paper summarises why the politics of the Zia era is positioned as an inflection point for extremism and its impact on women, and why subsequent developments are in various ways, consequent trajectories.

BEFORE THE BEFORE: THE ZIA YEARS

The long-term impact of state-sponsored fundamentalism continues to sear into the national consciousness many decades after the country experienced what we call "The Zia Years". The phrase refers to the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq which ruled through the 1980s and entrenched social conservatism and religio-political radicalism in Pakistan.

General Zia ul Haq seized power in a military coup in 1977. The elected Prime Minister Z. A. Bhutto was put on trial and hanged to death in 1979. It became a watershed year for global developments, all of which positioned Pakistan and its ruling military regime as critical for stabilising the region.

Competing imperialisms of USA and the Soviet Union were recast as the Cold War held on to a precarious balance, threatened by the Soviet Union invading Afghanistan in 1979. Pakistan's 2,671-kilometre-long shared border, common tribal populations, familiarity with language, customs and historic ties became pivotal to the US effort to thwart its enemy. The military regime worked closely with America, using Islam as a rallying cry against communism.

In 1979, Islam's holiest site, the Kaaba in Mecca was attacked and people taken hostage by an Islamist extremist group agitating against the Saudi monarchy. The siege resulted in hundreds of casualties and raised global alarm. The Saudi monarchy reacted with a muscular assertion of state-led articulation of Islam, increased the

power of *ulema* and religious conservatives and encouraged the export of its ideas, including to Pakistan.

Meanwhile, also in 1979, the Islamic Revolution in Iran led to the state transforming into a Shia theocratic regime, the leaders of which declared the West in general and America in particular as its greatest enemy and threat. The old theological Shia-Sunni schism revitalised into geo-politics and standoffs between Saudi and Iranian iterations.

Amid the global strategic chaos, religion became the framework which allowed the Zia regime and Pakistan state to converge its aspirations for geo-strategic importance, foreign policy, security imperatives, financial windfall, international legitimacy for a dictatorship, suppress local dissent against an elected prime minister's hanging and manufacture domestic consent by invoking Islam as the raison d'etre for the military regime.

For a glimpse of what the dictatorship's governance looked like at the national level, the following is excerpted from Dr Rubina Saigol's publication *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Pakistan: Actors, Debates and Strategies*[8] [9]

> Radical changes were made in the school curricula, educational policies, the media and the judiciary to strengthen the tenuous Islamic credentials of the regime. Harsh punishments, such as flogging and stoning to death, were borrowed from the Saudi model and journalists as well as lawyers were not spared in the drive to 'cleanse' society of all the evils…
>
> With a relentless focus on piety in the private sphere and control over the personal lives of citizens, an inordinate amount of attention fell upon women who were seen as the repositories of culture, religion and tradition. The veil and the four walls were emphasized, piety in dress codes was imposed by vigilantes operating in the public sphere, and violence was used to ensure compliance with official measures.
>
> The Ansari Report of the Council of Islamic Ideology recommended that women's participation in politics should be limited to nominated women over the age of fifty. The entire legal structure was reconstructed to institutionalize discrimination against women and non-Muslim citizens. The Zina Ordinance of 1979 conflated adultery with rape and erased the distinction between them. The punishment for adultery was stoning to death. Following the year of its promulgation, a large number of rural and urban women from the economically marginalized groups were booked under false cases of Hudood and languished in jails for years.

> From that point on, the relationship between women and the state transformed radically from the mutual accommodation of the earlier decades to conflict, confrontation and contestation.

To understand the way religion was used by the military regime, consider the question poised in the referendum to legitimise military rule: "Do you endorse the process initiated by General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, the President of Pakistan, to bring in laws in conformity with the injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and for the preservation of the ideology of Pakistan?" In a televised address, General Zia said that a "yes" vote would be a public call for him to stay in office. A government decree stated that advocating a boycott of the referendum would be a crime punishable by three years in prison—98% of the people who voted polled "yes".

"The Zia Years" are now regarded as a critical inflection point which changed Pakistan's trajectory, rendered secular progression unattainable, made faith-based politics pivotal and social conservatism definitive, and entrenched religio-political right-wing groups.

Extremist organisations, viewpoints and networks existed even prior to the Zia regime. As fringe groups, they challenged women's rights such as the contestation around the Muslim Family Personal laws in the 1960s. The Zia regime's Islamisation drive was not the first time the Pakistani state had invoked religion either. Religion was critical to the very conception of the country—to create a separate homeland for the majority of Muslims of the Indian subcontinent at the moment of the British Empire's rollback. The Objectives Resolution adopted by the first Constituent Assembly cemented the place of ideology and faith of Islam in the polity. The 1973 Constitution declared it the "Islamic Republic of Pakistan". Why then should the Zia regime be seen as an inflection point and not as a continuation of prior patterns?

The Zia regime created two phenomena which outlasted the regime and continue to reverberate across Pakistan's socio-political landscape half a century later. It created a strong, mutually beneficial nexus between the military and religio-political groups. And it showed religio-political groups they could wield power and influence without the usual route of electoral power. It registered on the army's thinking that such groups could aid and abet their political, strategic, regional and domestic ambitions. And it registered on such groups that the ballot box was a limited and limiting conduit; whether they polled votes or not, they could set the terms of the political discourse.

Since then, every time the religio-political right-wing surges into political prominence, it is generally understood to have done so with the military establishment's support. And irrespective of which backdoor to power they use, positioning women's rights as one the main threats to religion and religiosity remain crucial for these groups to rally public support.

The religio-political right-wing had discovered the Overton Window and positioned themselves as its sentinels. This heuristic window, a descriptive tool, refers to a horizon which captures the spectrum of acceptable political possibilities at any given time, allowing politicians to support any one such possibility but foreclosing others that lie outside the window's scope. Real change would then require changing the position or size of the window to enlarge the horizon of possibilities, making previously impractical options doable and desirable.

Religio-political parties have not just monitored and guarded political discourse by censoring moves towards secular rights and frameworks. They have upped the ante so that all systemic reform and reformers must first assert their religious credibility.

It is important to note the difference between religio-political parties and extremists. Religio-political parties are (mostly) non-violent. They are registered with the Election Commission, therefore accept the authority of the state and Constitution and follow democratic procedures.

One of them, Jamat-i-Islami, remains one of the only prominent political parties to practise intra-party democracy and regularly hold elections. Till now, they have never mobilised, campaigned against or persecuted Hindu and Christian religious minorities in Pakistan, though many of them have virulently targeted the Ahmedi sect in their rhetoric. While many of them opposed reserving seats for women, they include women in their cadres and have actually sent women representatives into Parliament on reserved seats. They have been proactive in advocating that women be given their due inheritance rights in accordance with Islamic laws. They abide by parliamentary norms and procedures and engage in democratic processes.

They are not extremists. In fact, they have been targeted by violent extremists. Leaders of other religio-political parties have also been targeted, such as Maulana Fazlur Rehman (head of religio-political party JUI-F) who survived terrorist attacks by the TTP whereas others in his party were killed.

There are also significant differences within religio-political parties. Even under the Zia regime for example, the JUI-F was opposed to military dictatorship and participated in the anti-Zia Movement for Restoration of Democracy, whereas Jamat-i-Islami imbricated and was embedded with the regime. Despite these differences, they have repeatedly entered into political alliances, of which the MMA was one iteration which has disintegrated since. Others have included Pakistan Islamic Front, Milli Yakjehti Council and the Islami Muttahida Inqilabi Mahaz.

The MMA was an aberration in that it brought religio-political parties into direct power, presented an illustration of their direct governance and ended up paving the way to the rise of the TTP in Swat. But from the Zia era onwards, the religio-political discourse requires scrutiny irrespective of the parties' electoral performance because they wield power disproportionate to their usually emaciated polling strength. A better indicator of their power is the extent to which they are able to influence the discourse and actions of other mainstream political actors. The following

section illustrates how the "Zia years" still cast a long shadow over Pakistan, primarily through political leadership nurtured during the Zia regime and their subsequent formations.

ROLLING BACK AND ROLLING FORWARD

It took two decades for Pakistan to even begin undoing the damage wrought by the dictatorship of the 1980s. The next military regime led by General Pervaiz Musharraf marketed its progressive credentials. It bid for legitimacy through its slogan of "Enlightened Moderation" to distance itself from the previous Zia regime. His government accepted the demand of the women's movement to undo the Zina Ordinance.

The Zina Ordinance was part of the introduction of Quranic punishments into criminal law. It criminalized all forms of adultery and fornication outside of marriage, blurring the line between rape and consensual sex, bringing in punishments like whipping and stoning to death. Even though such a punishment was never carried out, hundreds of women were incarcerated for years as undertrial prisoners. Religio-political parties strenuously fought against any attempt to undo the law, claiming removal of any Islamic law from the legal system was tantamount to defying Islam and Constitution, that its removal would defy the purpose and identity of the nation and make the country a "free sex zone".

The introduction of the Women's Protection Act 2006 moved the crime of rape back into criminal law under the Pakistan Penal Code. Unlike the past, the inability of proving a rape charge can no longer be converted into an admission of adultery or fornication. To prove an adultery allegation, high evidentiary requirements have been introduced and difficult to enact provisions added. For instance, the actor must admit to having committed the act before a sessions court. Further, a penalty has been introduced for making false accusations. While these changes have almost eliminated adultery accusations in the formal legal system and have rendered the Zina Ordinance unlikely to be used in the future, it still remains present on statutes.

The most significant political rollback was through a process of constitutional amendment by combined democratic political parties, culminating in its unanimous passage in 2010. Known as the 18th Amendment, it rewrote over half of the 1973 Constitution, undoing many of the anomalies introduced by the Zia regime. Among other things, it removed General Zia's name from the Constitution, declared military takeovers and full and partial abrogation of the Constitution as high treason, handed powers arrogated by the presidency back to the Prime Minister, steered the country back towards parliamentary democracy and made the rule by ordinances—the favoured *modus operandi* of military dictators—unviable, by confining the life of presidential decrees to three months.

However, the Zia regime's imprints remain. He introduced "Sadiq and Ameen" (righteous, devoted and trustworthy) as a criterion for membership of Parliament, bringing in subjective requirements of good character, knowledge of Islamic teachings

and not being involved in "moral turpitude". Courts continue to use this, and it has been used to disqualify and dismiss two elected prime ministers from office. Election Commission officers use it to disqualify candidates by testing them on recitation of Islamic verses and proving loyalty to the ideology of Pakistan.

Beyond legislation, the inclination of the military to ally with religio-political parties to counter mainstream political parties remains intact. The Tehrik-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), a religio-political party founded in 2015 took to the streets and blocked off the federal capital for three weeks in a violent protest against the elected government, which was already under pressure from the military establishment. The army refused to come in aid of the government, which finally had to accede to their demands including resignation of ministers. Army officials were seen on live television openly distributing money to violent TLP protestors as their compensation. This happened in 2017, three decades after the General Zia dictatorship ended.

There is a difference in the staying power of extremist narratives and actions. The TTP imprint on current governance and gender dynamics seems to be weak, a decade after its reign of terror ended. The MMA and its constituent religio-political parties make similar arguments through tempered, moderate, political means that have the legitimacy that TTP never did. They have longer staying power; as seen in this paper, the TTP in Swat was enabled by and strengthened in the aftermath of the MMA.

The Zia regime and its stalwarts seem to have the strongest and longest lasting impact which has lingered on and infused into capillaries of power. The main difference is the nature of the generator and its proximity to the state.

It is not analytically viable to juxtaposition a military regime with either an on-again, off-again alliance of electorally feeble religious parties, or with a banned, brutal militant organisation. The purpose is not to draw similarities and dissimilarities for a comparative analysis. Instead, it is to belabour what is perhaps an obvious point—the closer the source of extremist discourse gets to the state, the stronger its impact, and the harder it is to exorcise.

Conclusion

To understand the dynamic between extremism and gender-based violence, I have tried to show the cumulative impact of religio-political narratives. The knock-on effect creates a symbiosis where each iteration of radical rhetoric builds on its genealogy but also virulently mutates. I suggest latent continuity has more explicatory strength than actions of specific violent extremist actors.

While violent extremists cause havoc and terror in the short term, the violent challenge such non-state actors present to the state compels it to act against them. The longevity of their political impact can and does get curtailed—the TTP is a case in point.

In contrast, actions of political actors situated in the mid-stream or mainstream have more staying power than those at the extreme of the continuum. Because of their positioning as legitimate political actors, they are able to wield influence over legislation, policies and political culture. By invoking religion as the raison d'etre of the Pakistani state and asserting themselves as arbiters of others' religious credentials, they have entrenched a callout culture based on their standards for public piety, compelling other actors to shift right.

The deepest impact and most difficult to undo happens when extreme rhetoric and action finds sanction within the state and its institutions. The change then becomes systemic, through "ideological state apparatus" such as changes in curriculum and media. When those in positions of leadership, authority and state power generate radical views, people's interests become aligned with those views.

Through the case of the Zia regime, this essay illustrates the creation of a mutually dependent and beneficial nexus between the military and religio-political groups which—despite slips and dips on the graph—persists to date. The security apparatus learned to "deploy" piety to sync domestic and international strategic ambitions. Sheltered by centres of political power, radical groups found a way of circumventing constraints of electoral unpopularity by focusing on political discourse-setting. This builds a case for heightened vigilance on the state even when non-state actors tend to grab attention by spectacular forms of gender-based violence. State capture by those with radical ideologies can make deeper inroads than non-state actors.

The tenets of religion and their interpretation have been debated for centuries, but their political invocation explains more about politics than about religious texts. But irrespective of who generates these discourses and how, the fallout on women—and on gender-based violence in particular—remains starkly present. Through personalised reflections in this paper, I have attempted to draw out how the latent corrosiveness of gender regimes becomes blatant in conflict, how it remains important to address women's rights during conflict—and crucially—to map the configurations of latency.

Discourse on women's rights, responsibilities and bodily autonomy remain a lynchpin of right-wing politics. The seeds of discord and structural asymmetries are embedded in "normality". The continuum then cannot simply be ideological—ranging from progressive to centrist to extremist—but an axis that plots gender-based violence contextually, from normal conditions to extreme conditions.

End Notes

[1] Nazish Brohi, Sadaf Khan and Noreen Naseer, Hindsight as Foresight: Young Women's Retrospective on Violent Extremism in Swat and Malakand, UNDP Pakistan, 2020

[2] Saba Khattak and Nazish Brohi, Pakistan: Gender and Governance in Swat, in Gender and Governance: Studies from South Asia, (ed.) Seema Kazi, Zubaan Books, New Delhi, 2019

[3] Saba Khattak and Nazish Brohi, Exploring Women's Voices: Community Conversations in Balochistan and Swat, Women's Regional Network (undated)

[4] Saba Khattak and Nazish Brohi, Pakistan: Gender and Governance in Swat, in Gender and Governance: Studies from South Asia, (ed.) Seema Kazi, Zubaan Books, New Delhi, 2019

[5] Nazish Brohi, Sadaf Khan and Noreen Naseer, Hindsight as Foresight: Young Women's Retrospective on Violent Extremism in Swat and Malakand, UNDP Pakistan, 2020

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[7] Nazish Brohi, Sadaf Khan and Noreen Naseer, Hindsight as Foresight: Young Women's Retrospective on Violent Extremism in Swat and Malakand, UNDP Pakistan, 2020

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