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The Role of Religion in Pakistan's Political System: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Since its very creation, religion has played a critical role in shaping Pakistan's political scene. Based on the premise of a separate Muslim identity, the religion became one of the core components of Pakistan's national and political architecture. From the Objectives Resolution of 1949 to present debates on Islamic laws, the imprint of religion has been ingrained into the governing structures of this country through and through. The present paper studies the historical and contemporary ties between religion and politics in Pakistan and their influence on policymaking, democratic development, and minority rights. Background analysis will be performed within the context of the history of the role of religion in the making of Pakistan and its entrenchment into the state apparatus, affecting the legal systems. Socio-political effects of this religious involvement-sectarianism or interfaith conflicts-will also be discussed, alongside the way this encompasses and challenges religious identity vis-a-vis democratic governance. The study's intention is thus to harmonize an understanding of historical and present trends and to undertake a comprehensive analysis of how the religion continues to play a role in Pakistan's political system while considering the implications it carries for the future.

Keywords: Religion, Pakistan's Political System, Historical, Contemporary Analysis.

Introduction

The intersection of religion with politics is one of the most prominent aspects of Pakistan's national identity and governance structure. Established as a homeland for Muslims in 1947 after the partition of British India, the founding ideology of Pakistan was and is Islamic in its essence. The Two-Nation Theory that justified the demand for Pakistan stressed religious identity as the primary basis for being called a nation. Thus, this ideological grounding produced the basis for the inextricable intertwining of religion in the political and legal system of Pakistan (Chengappa, 2001).

The objectives set out in the 1949 resolution signify the very first step in institutionalizing religion within the governance structure of Pakistan. To that effect, it declared Islam as a guiding principle for state affairs and laid the groundwork for constitutional developments in the future. Over the decades, the influence of religion has had a changing manifestation, the most obvious being constitutional provisions that secure Islamic law and the active

involvement of religious political parties in it. Policies introduced by leaders such as General Zia-ul-Haq further integrated religion into the governing process through extensive Islamization campaigns. But this has not come without problems. Reactions to the issues surrounding minority rights, sectarian tensions, and the place of Sharia within state affairs have emerged within the religion and politics nexus (Zubaida Zafar, 1960).

Pakistan is a modern country, and religion has somehow managed to penetrate its politics and policies. The legal system here is based on Islamic principles, and religious groups play a role in political or electoral politics. Religion has been an organizing principle, at times, serving to bring people together while destroying the socio-political fabric at other times. An important issue facing Pakistan in terms of political stability continues to be balancing religious influence with democratic ideals. The emergence of religious extremism and fundamentalist interpretations of Islamic laws has complicated the already tricky governing situation, sometimes with policies restricting freedoms and aggravating sectarian divides. In addition, the interests of religious minorities clash with those of Islam in all aspects, leading to equal rights and representation concerns (Mohammad Waseem, 2009).

Nonetheless, the challenge, which also stays, continues to be the inextricable part of Pakistan's political identity: the role of religion. From time to time, different regimes have tried to make an effort to negotiate between the positives and the negatives inherent in religious activity within society. Most of the time, however, religious values and democracy have been effective for that. The continuous interaction between the political and the religious in this particular case infuses both the domestic and foreign policies of Pakistan. Future milestones also lie in setting up a governance structure that integrates established religious traditions with modern democratic norms. These things can only be exercised through an extensive policy reform mandate, a semblance of dialogue among various religious and political factions, and the commitment to creating an open political environment (Kausar, 2011).

The role of religion in the political system of Pakistan is a historical phenomenon that has shown marked transformation over the years. This paper would also try to explore the contemporary face of religion and politics, assessing their future challenges and prospects. By analyzing past and present trends, the study would reveal how Pakistan could negotiate this difficult interplay between religion and politics with stability, democratic governance, and national unity (Chengappa, 2001).

1. Historical Context: Religion and the Founding of Pakistan

That was a little less than the Two-Nation Theory, which argued that Hindus and Muslims were two different nations, each with its culture, religion, and social order. One of the few parties to raise this call for a separate Muslim state was the All India Muslim League. It stressed that Muslims should have a political entity where they could practice their religion freely. That was more or less the basis for the creation of Pakistan in 1947 (Dr. Khizar Jawad, 2025).

It was in the aftermath of independence that the Objectives Resolution of 1949 came to serve as the guiding principle behind Pakistan's governance in Islam. This resolution triggered the insertion of Islam in successive constitutions of the country. The 1956 Constitution, for instance, formally declared Pakistan an Islamic Republic with the later constitutions, namely 1962 and 1973, buttressing this status. Also, Islamic provisions such as those requiring the

President and Prime Minister to be Muslims, the creation of institutions like the Council of Islamic Ideology, among others, institutionalized religion in the machinery of the state (Zubaida Zafar, 1960).

One of the important impacts that religious leaders and movements made in state-building was in its formative early years. Leaders like Maulana Maududi, the founder of Jamaat-e-Islami, advocated for a system of governance based on Islamic doctrines. They contributed to the very foundation of Islamic laws and policies that to date mark and shape Pakistan's politics.

2. Religion in Political Institutions and Governance

Religion has infiltrated the heart of Pakistan's political institutions. The constitutional framework has incorporated provisions that identify Islam as the state religion and require that all laws are in accordance with Islamic injunctions. The Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) serves as an advisory body to ensure that laws become Islamic. Though its recommendations do not hold binding force, they exert great influence in the field of law and policy-making (M Usman, 2023).

Religious political parties, Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, have always worked against the progressive and secular image since their inception and have thus far participated in shaping the governance. The two parties participate in elections and often work with larger political parties to exert pressure in policy formulation. They push for Sharia laws first brought about a number of measures reinforcing these religious values.

The important among all the major attempts of Islamization in Pakistan was during the period of General Zia-ul-Haq's rule (1977-1988). His important and far-reaching policies included the institution of the Hudood Ordinances, Sharia Courts, and compulsory zakat and ushr. All these institutionalized the government's religious influences, which affected Pakistan's legal and political systems. As the years went by, this religious influence had also entered into education policies and judgments of the courts and national narratives, further strengthening its hold in governance (Ali Shan Shah, 2016).

3. Religious Influence on Social and Legal Policies

The role of religion in formulating social and legal policies in Pakistan is crucial. Pakistan, being an Islamic republic, has its political and legal structure intertwined with religious teachings, which influence many aspects of policy making-from family law to education to public morality. The Constitution of Pakistan lays down that all laws must be made in accordance with Islam, while the Objectives Resolution, 1949, served as the bedrock for bringing religious principles into state policies. This has, over the years, influenced law concerning marriages, inheritance, and blasphemy, among other things (Mohammad Waseem, 2009).

The most evident influence of religion is in family law. The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961 was legislation enacted to control polygamy, divorce, and custody or guardianship of children under Sharia. The Federal Shariat Court also plays a considerable role in determining whether laws are consistent with Islamic injunction, resulting in fruitful disputes and amendments over time. As religious values also govern the roles of gender as well as the rights of women, a few matters are influenced by them, such as inheritance laws, which, according to Islamic principle, state that a woman will receive half a share of a man in property distribution. The benefactors of such laws would argue that the laws uphold the spiritual

authenticity of these laws, while opponents would raise issues of regard for gender and the need for reform appropriate to contemporary human rights standards (AHMAD, 1993).

Another instance of such influence is the application of blasphemy laws in Pakistan. Largely contained within Sections 295-298 of the Pakistan Penal Code, these laws prescribe terrible punishment for rioting against the Prophet Muhammad, the Quran, or Islamic beliefs. While the original purpose was to promote tolerance among sectarianism, these laws are widely held as instruments to target religious minorities and political opponents resulting in much debate. The human rights group's call of amending blasphemy laws, but it is difficult to do so owing to the strong religious sentiments and political considerations (MI Khan, 2024).

The influence of religion in educational policy is further seen in Pakistan, where Islamic education is taught as compulsory in schools with an Islamic value-based curriculum. That is, the state's effort to bring religious teachings into the mainstream in education has been thought of as reinforcing an Islamic identity. On the downside, however, this issue has opened up discussions on inclusiveness, especially of religious minorities, who would feel alienated in a system dominated by Islam-themed education (Zia, 2003).

Despite the fact that religion has traditionally been the backdrop for the law as well as most of the social policies in Pakistan, there is still mounting debate over the balance between religious principles and modern governance. Some people strongly argue that these laws protect the moral and social order, while others believe much more needs to be done, and that politically a more progressive approach should be taken in order for the policies to comply with international human rights standards and the needs of a changing society. This discussion shows the complexities of accommodating the religious ethos with the legal framework in an increasingly diverse and changing provincial setting in Pakistan.

4. Role of Religious Political Parties

From the moment of their creation, religious political parties have seemed highly influential actors in terms of politics and lawmaking in Pakistan. These parties have based their ideologies on the infusion of Islamic principles into governance and, thus, have attracted parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) to drive them to influence electoral politics, legislation, and public discourse. Although they have never been able to secure a parliamentary majority, they still boast a sizeable influence in coalition politics, mass mobilization, and lobbying (Akhtar, 2011).

Working under this influence and with the support of religious parties, the Objectives Resolution (1949) and the constitutional amendments under General Zia-ul-Haq gave a constitutional framework to the role of Islam in governance. Article 227 of the Constitution orders that all laws made under it shall conform to Islamic injunctions, while Articles 62 and 63 set down moral and religious grounds for the eligibility of public office holders. Established in 1980, the Federal Shariat Court further consolidated the role of religion in law. Religious parties invoked such provisions to thwart progressive reforms concerning the amendment of the blasphemy laws and women's rights legislation (Ali Shan Shah, 2016).

Critically, religious parties exacerbate sectarian fault lines and hinder policy modernization. There is a campaign against reforms pertaining to human rights, education, and gender equality, which shows the tension between religious conservatism and the socio-political requirements of an evolving Pakistan. They argue for the governance of Islamic principles, but

their stringent ideological stance often stands in the way of democracy and institutional development.

5. Sectarianism and Religious Extremism

Pakistan's socio-political setup is heavily influenced by sectarianism and religious extremism, with implications for national stability, governance, and social cohesion. Sectarian divides largely revolve around the Sunni-Shia divide, nurtured by ideological, political, and geopolitical undercurrents. The role of the state in exacerbating the formation of religious identities, interplaying with foreign influences, has acted as a catalyst for sectarian clashes, which extremist groups then exploit to further their agenda (Samina Yasmeen, 2021).

The roots of sectarianism in Pakistan go back in history but soared to the heights of undertaking live experiences in the 1980s. Such policies of General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization have internalized a sect-based identity, which favors Sunni-dominated understandings of the Islamic law in Pakistan. While internally, in Pakistan, the Sunni-Iranian revolution (1979) and Saudi-Iran rivalry had already instigated sectarian polarization, it resulted in the emergence of militant organizations such as Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan and Tehrik-e-Jafaria Pakistan. These outfits fought pitched battles against each other, attacked religious minorities, and hurtled into rival sects, killing thousands upon thousands in decades of cloud bursting over sectarian violence (Alvi, 2023).

Religious fanaticism in Pakistan has also been attributed to jihadist movements. The Afghan jihad of 1979-1989 and the support provided by Pakistan to militant groups during that period have created a culture of extremism in which groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) are now a major threat. These organizations engage in sectarian violence but also defy state authority and attack police and army forces, educational institutions, or religious minorities. The Army Public School tragedy of 2014 in Peshawar killing about 140 children and teachers projected the horrific impact of this extremism in society (Shah, 2018).

6. Religion in Foreign Policy and International Relations

Religion significantly influences the foreign policy of Pakistan as well as its international relations. It profoundly contributes to the diplomatic engagements that Pakistan pursues with its regional allies and the global community. Since it is an Islamic republic, Pakistan has always aligned its foreign policy with Islamic teachings, employing religious solidarity as a tool for its diplomatic activities, yet still navigating the treacherous path of sectarian and geopolitical conflicts. Therefore, a policy for international relations can be said to balance religious identity, national interests, and strategic alliances (Muhammad Murad, 2023).

The most profound and visible reflection of religion in Pakistan is perhaps its role as a leading nation in the Muslim world. As one of the original founder members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Pakistan has consistently advocated for Muslim causes, especially the issue of Palestine and the rights of Muslims in Kashmir. The Islamic identity of the country used to justify developing relations with the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to siphon in economic assistance, energy resources, and political clout. However, given that these relations are also governed by sectarian geopolitics, Pakistan has been forced to balance its Sunni-majority alliances with its diplomatic and economic ties to Iran, a Shia-majority state.

Other things, such as religious factors, have also quite influenced Pakistan's involvement in global strife. During the Afghan Jihad (1979-1989), Pakistan was involved in the recruitment and training of Islamist fighters by the US and Saudi Arabia, and these efforts were brutally placed under religious narratives in the foreign policy of Pakistan. Similarly, it influenced the approach of Pakistan regarding the Taliban during both the history of the 1990s, when it climbed to dominance in Afghanistan, and later in post-9/11 diplomacy. The situation resembles a jigsaw puzzle, as the Taliban's return to power will further challenge the limits of Pakistani foreign policy, which will attempt to balance international pressures with regional stability (Sial, 2013).

In such circumstances, Pakistan has continued to carry or apply within international forums, such as the United Nations for interfaith dialogue or anti-Islam phobia initiatives. The foreign policy of Pakistan remains an exercise of religious ideology, political realities, and economic impositions that has to be handled in a strategic manner to retain its global standing while safeguarding the national interest.

Conclusion

Religion in Pakistan's political system provides the fundamental bases for identity, administration, and law. The newborn Pakistan struggled to harmonize values of democracy and Islam. By laying the foundation for embedding religion in the political and constitutional structure as well as for subsequent policies and legal developments, the Objectives Resolution of 1949 made its contribution to this phenomenon. Institutionalization of religious laws in Pakistan to reshape governance and society came with the violent process of Islamization initiated under General Zia-ul-Haq, including the very identification of Pakistan as an Islamic Republic.

Much has religion that has played an important part in shaping electoral politics, policies, and state institutions. The coming of religious political parties and incorporation of Islamic laws have defined legislation that one can understand from blasphemy to minority rights to gender issues. It has given a stronger Islamic flavor to the identity of Pakistan but also has increased sectarianism and politicization of religion as well as threats to minority rights. Moreover, where the field of religion-politics has opened its ways even to foreign policy, with respect to regional conflicts and ideological alliances.

Hence, Pakistan's political journey requires some nuances, giving space not only to religious identity but also setting down principles of democracy. Long incipient conditions for political stability will demand a progressive legal regime, inter faith harmony, and an inclusive approach to policy-making. The ambience of the future political horizon of Pakistan depends on nurturing a governance model blending religious values with democratic inclusivity to attain justice, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

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