Social Media and Violent Extremism in Sindh: Trends, Drivers, and Policy Responses

Sharafuddin Abro
Lecturer, College Education Department, Government of Sindh
abrosharf@gmail.com
Abdul Sattar Soomro
Section Officer, PMS
asattarsoomro001@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The speedy spread of social media led to foundation of various means of communication across the country. Sindh province is not exception to it. These platforms are famous for increased participation of public, on-line accountability, advertisement and social mobilization. This research paper will be an effort to explore the role of social media with regard to the spread of extremism in the province of Sindh. This paper will provide insights for the key issues related to extremism via social media. The paper makes an important argument that unchecked use digital spaces, weak enforcement mechanisms and over aggravated mechanism of extremism have contributed to extremist activities in Sindh.

Keywords*: Extremism, Social Media, Digital, State, Policies, Threat, Violent, Sectarian, Challenge.*

Introduction

Sindh is a province in Pakistan. The province comprises more than 70 million people. The province is second largest in terms of population. Due to large population, it poses a great challenge for the digital space management. There is a diverse population. The people belong to various politic-religious and social groups. Increased use of smartphones have enhanced the use of social media platforms in the province. Inheritably designed for positive purposes, social media has become a great threat to national security as it spreads misinformation, propaganda and wrong news. The problems of extremism is derived by socio Economic deprivation, sectarian and religious polarization, political polarization, weak digital regulations and to name a few. The mechanism of radicalization works in different ways such as online propaganda, echo chambers, and recruitment, fundraising and disinformation campaigns. The successive governments have tried their best to cope with the curse but they have not been successful in doing so.

Conceptual Framework: Social Media and Violent Extremism

Extremism refers to radical beliefs or ideas. These ideas run beyond accepted moderate social, political, and religious norms. It rejects flexibility, compromise, tolerance, and patience. It often advocates, supports, and takes extreme measures to achieve their ends or suppress opposite beliefs or ideas.

Extremism has various facets including but not limited to religious, political, social, and ethnic. Extremists generally view the world in a way of "us vs them." It dehumanizes opposite views. This mindset not only creates disturbances for society but also threatens the very concept of democracy. Extremism goes through various stages including pre-radicalization, self-identification, indoctrination, action, and violent actions.

Social media includes online platforms. These platforms are aimed at creating content, sharing the same and making interaction with the content. These platforms have grown in

the 21st century. They have grown and out-performed all other platforms of media and communication. From Facebook to TikTok, these platforms give users opportunities.

Digital Landscape of Sindh

Karachi, being the largest city of the country, has the largest users of digital media and social networks. Despite facing lots of problems, interior Sindh has largely improved in the adoption of digital technology especially smart phone.

Youth whose age ranges from 15 to 29 are the most important users of smartphones in the province. There is limited digital information and literacy especially with regard to its misuse. This leads to vulnerability of users to propaganda, misinformation and problems.

Literature Review

Research clearly shows that social media is an important and critical factor in spreading widespread extremist ideas and beliefs. As per Khan and Yousuf (2023), social media provides users with an opportunity to propagate their ideologies without being regulated. The research of Khan and Yousuf concludes that hate speech results in societal fragmentation. Ahmad and Mehmood (2021) have taken the view that young users are more vulnerable as they use social media platforms extensively.

The most alarming research was that algorithmic amplification also caused an increase in extremist ideologies. It has also been found that interaction with political and religious content resulted in extremism (2020). Recent research on cyber extremism also found that extremist and terrorist groups use social media for recruitment and training of militant groups (Ali and Rehman, 2019).

Methodology:

This research is based on mixed-methods approach. It includes quantitative content analysis, qualitative interviews and policy review of government documents. It makes qualitative analysis of social media posts which were widely circulated in the province especially in Sindh-based users and groups. This was aimed at identifying the extremist themes. Furthermore, qualitative interviews were conducted. Interviews included cross-age groups. Nevertheless, young users were preferred as they are the most important users of the tool. Further, news reports, cases and then material was also used to reach an objective conclusion.

Findings and Analysis:

Preliminary evidence leads the conclusion that social media results in extremism. It not only spread religious and sectarian extremist ideologies, but also disseminate ethnic, political and racial extremism. It also caused a great deal of extreme ideologies based on gender.

Digital Extremism Patterns:

Social networks are misused for spreading hate speech and sectarian based messages. These messages are widely circulated as several inclinations towards sensitive material. Sindh province has a smaller number of extreme incidents physically. Nevertheless, social media patterns are surely different from physical realities.

Youth and vulnerability:

Youth is vulnerable to extreme ideologies. A number of factors contribute to the menace. Firstly, the youth have extensive time for using social media. Furthermore, unemployed youth also have more vulnerability to extreme ideologies. Charisma and misinformation also increase vulnerability.

Government Law enforcement Mechanism:

Weak Government law enforcement mechanism is based on monitoring which the mark. The mechanism is based on monitoring. The institutions or related agencies have relatively limited

access, untrained HR and widespread challenges. There is difficulty in deciding between rights and enforcements.

Organized activities: The research found that extremism is spreading in an organized way. Unlike spontaneous and unplanned spread of information, the activities of extremist groups are seen to be well organized and co-ordinated. They seem to show a great deal of problems.

Predominantly male visitors: The research also found that the male population of the province gets more affected by extremist narratives. They are extensive users of social media. Furthermore, their ideas are also shaped by peers' groups and official working groups.

Indirect Impact on female users: Female users are not directly involved in such menace. They are involved indirectly by appealing moral obligations, historical issues, story-based ideas and victimhood.

Area wise Findings: The spread of extremism is more frequent and intense in urban areas of the province, such as: Karachi, Hyderabad and Sukkur. Urban areas are largely affected as there live diverse groups. Furthermore, they can understand communication in a better way as compared to rural areas

State and Institutional Responses

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016

Peca was passed and enacted by the Parliament of Pakistan in 2016. This was perhaps the most important effort towards the criminalization of Online Extremism. This law is comprehensive enough to cover almost all kinds of extremism and terrorism. This act clearly and openly asserted that glorification of banned organizations was illegal in the eyes of law.

National Prevention of Violent Extremism

Policy 2024–2025

The Government of Pakistan approved this policy in 2024. This policy envisages a "whole-of-society approach." These include security, socioeconomic measures, and efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate individuals. This approach clearly means that extremism shall be uprooted.

It says that it not only focuses the symptoms but also maintains that its roots shall be removed once and for all. This policy is being criticized for its rhetorical steps rather than practical efforts. Besides, there are many issues with regard to the implementation and execution of the policy.

Operation Zarb-e-Azb

The government resolved to take efforts to end extremism not only physically but also virtually by taking efforts online. This operation could not bring the desired results due to limited expertise, underdeveloped platforms, and human resource constraints.

Digital Media Crackdown

The government took further efforts to deal with the problem. The NACTA portal was activated, cyber counter-terrorism units were established, and extremist websites were permanently blocked.

Sindh Centre for Countering Violent Extremism Act, 2018

The Sindh Assembly enacted the Sindh Centre for Countering Violent Extremism Act, 2018 to deal with the issue. This act created many research-based centres. These centres were coordinated in such a way that they took synchronized efforts and synergized strategies to stop militancy and social intolerance in various spheres.

Critical Analytical Assessment

The efforts provide certain opportunities but fail widely to root out the menace of extremism. The NPVE Policy 2014 is based on holistic and research-based facts. Nevertheless, there are issues of poor coordination and funding.

Digital crackdowns helped disrupt extremist views, but they also posed a serious threat to free speech and led to the increased use of encrypted spaces. Azm-e-Istehkam shows state-based resolve, but it lacks consensus.

The Sindh Centre for Excellence of Countering Violent Extremism Act, 2018 shows resolve of the government to eliminate extremism, but it also lacks proper planning, effective organization, merit-based staffing, and efficient coordination. Hence, there is a need for taking concrete policy measures and sustained efforts to root out extremism.

Policy Recommendations

1. Awareness among Masses

Social Media platforms can also be used as tools to create awareness among masses. These platforms can be used properly engaged to fight the dangers and risks of extremist ideologies and issues. There is need for understanding the positive use of social media for sharing and disseminating educational videos which must throw light on the negative impacts of extremism on social fabric as well as on individuals. This can be well explained by the fact that videos are shared with regard to positive sides of any issue. Such sharing soothes and helps in reducing problems.

2. Strengthen Digital Monitoring

Monitoring mechanism should be enhanced to counter violent extremism. Digital monitoring should include multiple institutions coordinated efforts. They must monitor sensitive information while protecting personal freedom and autonomy. FIA monitoring cell should be empowered to access more platforms. Furthermore, civil society-based teams shall also be constituted which shall monitor all efforts.

3. Legal Actions and Penalties

Legal actions and penalties are cardinal in the reduction of violent extremism on social media platforms. It has been observed that weak deterrence creates immunity for violators. Furthermore, without legal action, free speech is exploited. Further, there are issues due to delayed prosecution and legal loopholes. In this regard, there is need for the enforcement of cyber laws, imposition of fines, suspension of accounts, prosecution, and review of legal actions. For the purpose of legal action and penalties, parliament must frame laws, courts should decide matters timely, and FIA and other law enforcement agencies should enforce laws.

4. Community Engagement

No other actions can help more than community engagement. Community engagement helps in reducing misuse of online, decreasing social alienation, increasing trust, and making effective law enforcement. Community engagement can be started from Mosque programs. Furthermore, community dialogues increase community reach. Youth centers shall be established for proper training and engagement. Local mentors shall be recruited who must provide guidance and proper suggestion to deal with the anathema of extremism.

5. Identification of Online Extremism

Online extremism needs to be identified to deal with the matter properly. This is important to identify the reasons for the spread of extremism among youth. This can be done by AI-controlled scanning, keyword monitoring, social media scraping, flagging suspicious accounts, and collaborating with tech firms to deal with the matter properly. These efforts cannot be

done without support of Ministry of Information & Technology, FIA, and social media platforms.

6. Promote Positive Content

Promotion of positive content is essential to cope with the menace of extremism. Promotion of positive ideas is necessary to dominate negative perspective, reduce speed of negativity, and create counter narratives. As per available data, promotion of positive content reduces online hate speech and extremism by 30%. Promotion of positive content needs to be done by peace campaigns, influencing partnership, storytelling, providing incentives to content, and making coordinated efforts.

7. Data Research and Early Warning System

Data research must be in [the] field to reduce extremism. The research shall focus on the ways and reasons of radicalization by use of social media. It must have special contents such as age, content type, interaction pattern, and language and psychological signals. In addition to this, research must pay attention towards behavioral changes in terms of social media. Research [by] CeMAS of Germany can be a good model. CeMAS works on early warnings and detection. In this regard, Moonshot CVE was developed by the UK, and partners whereby persons are redirected towards positive material even if they search negative material online.

8. Multi-sectoral Strategy

The government shall adopt multisectoral strategy. The problem of extremism cannot be dealt without making multifaceted strategy. For this purpose, creativity and cohesion needs be maintained. This shall be maintained by promoting scientific development, providing innovative environment, encouraging art and research.

9. Protect Freedom of Expression While Countering Extremism

Reducing extremism can have negative impacts on freedom of expression. It has been widely seen that, in the guise of countering extremism activities, legitimate dissent, academic criticism, and religious debates are banned. Over-broad restrictions result in grievances, problems, dissent, and anger, which ultimately cause more problems.

To this end, there should be clear definitions of extremism, dissent, and other related terms. Furthermore, content-based material must be assessed by keeping in view intent, context, and audience impact. Additionally, clarity, oversight, transparency, rights to appeal, accountability, and the protection of rights must be ensured.

10. Role of Social Media Companies

Social media companies can play their pivotal role in reducing online extremism. Social media principles shall be properly enforced and executed. They must follow country-specific guidelines. In addition to these, they must use their algorithm-based monitoring. As per reports, effective efforts by social media companies can help reduce extremism up 70%. It has been reported that developed countries have enforced extremism eradication efforts. Such efforts have positively impacted the reduction efforts.

Conclusion

Social media is a double-edged sword which may be utilized positively as well as negatively. Social media has been largely misused to spread extremist ideas and beliefs. The paper clearly explains that multiple factors were involved in everlasting and increasing extremism in province of Sindh. It has been established that socio-economic factors coupled with political polarization were important key drivers behind extremism. Furthermore, weak digital regulations, lack of awareness and weak enforcement mechanism are other key drivers behind the curse. The state of Pakistan has taken various steps including PECA-2016, Extremism Policy and Sindh Centre for Countering Violent Extremism Act 2018. Despite their

contributions, those actions have not yielded fruitful results. Various policy recommendations are suggested to deal with the risk of extremism: awareness among masses, strengthening digital monitoring, enforcing legal actions and penalties, engaging communities, identifying online extremism, providing early detection mechanism are important policy recommendations to prevent and cure the disease of extremism on social media.

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