

The Phenomenon of Far-Right Extremism in Pakistan: A Myth or Reality?

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Abstract

The world has witnessed an increase in far-right extremism, particularly in Poland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, India, and the U.S, where far-right political parties have assumed power. However, the term ‘far-right extremism’ is not frequently used in Pakistan and is generally considered synonymous with religious extremism or radicalization. This study explores the applicability of the term in the context of Pakistan to determine which political entities in Pakistan can be labeled as far-right political parties. The study observes increasing electoral support for far-right political parties in Pakistan, especially in the last general election held in 2018. Though the support increased, it failed to materialize in a tangible form as the far-right political parties could not win any National Assembly seat in the election. The paper concludes by arguing that the increase in the vote bank of far-right political parties in the last general elections was a temporary and politically-motivated phenomenon that capitalized on people’s disillusionment towards the mainstream political parties. Nonetheless, the phenomenon has seriously disrupted the socio-political order in Pakistan, as witnessed in the recent violent standoff between the Government of Pakistan and the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) protesters.

Keywords

Nationalism, electoral politics, religious militancy, Islamophobia, Hindutva

Introduction

In recent years, the world has witnessed a global wave of far-right extremism in many European and Asian countries, i.e., Poland, Austria, Hungary, India, the Philippines, and the U.S. In the recent attack in the Eastern German town of Halle (Saale, 2019), a 27 years old Stephan Balliet attacked the Jewish synagogue and executed a mass shooting. The shooting was live-streamed on social media. This incident was considered an expression of far-right extremism striking Europe (Ehmsen & Scharenberg, 2018; Smith, 2019). Furthermore, the incident was considered to be

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stimulated by similarly organized violent extremism, such as the homicides in Christchurch, New Zealand (March 2019), Poway, California (April 2019), and El Paso, Texas (August 2019). Growing diversity, rising unemployment, the economic recession, and mounting distrust against the mainstream political parties are cited as the underlying reasons for a rise in far-right extremism in Europe (e.g., Koeler, 2019; Caiani, 2017; Jackman & Volpert, 1996), leading to increasing nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiments, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and racism (Othon, 2000; Hainsworth & Robin, 2012).

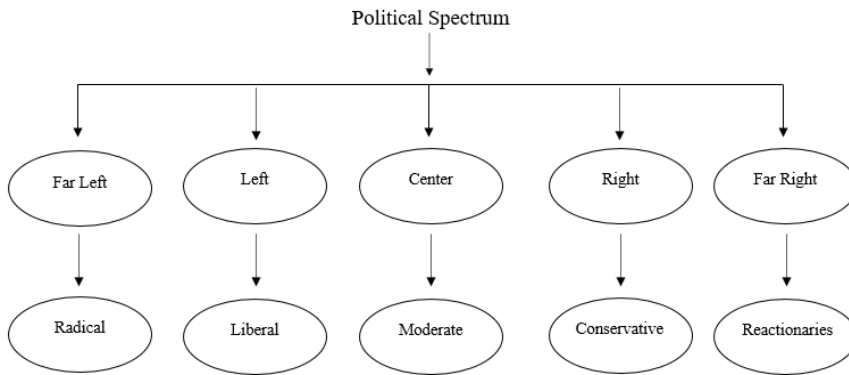
In Pakistan, extremism or radicalism is not a new phenomenon. However, the term far-right has not been used in general public or policy discourse. Since its inception, religious parties in Pakistan (such as Jammāt-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind) have remained dominant on the political horizon and contributed significantly to the Islamization of the state and society. The Islamic provisions included in the 1956, 1962, and 1973 constitutions manifested the active involvement of religious parties in politics (Roy, 1994). Such mobilization, however, has never been categorized as far-right extremist (political) parties. Later, the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan (during the late 1970s) and the subsequent developments ushered in a new era in the politics of Pakistan. The period was marked by extremism and radicalization, with new religious parties (such as Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Sipah-e-Sahaba, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan etc.). These organizations were alleged to be involved in violent activities inside and outside Pakistan (Nolan, Ahmed, & Baue, 2016).

In 2014, the terrorist attack on Army Public School (Peshawar) that killed 150 children and their teachers forced the government and its Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) to take stringent actions against violent extremism and terrorism (under National Action Plan) (e.g., Makki & Yamin, 2021; Johnston, 2016). Nevertheless, the aforementioned religiously-oriented political entities were not understood through the lens of far-right extremism. Therefore, this paper applies the phenomenon of far-right extremism on three political parties (and affiliated groups) to explicate the level of support in the electoral process. With regards, the paper presents three main arguments. Firstly, how can the term 'far-right' be explained in Pakistan? Secondly, which parties in Pakistan can be labeled far-right political parties, and can they threaten Pakistan's internal and external security? The paper also attempts to ascertain the extent of their electoral presence, i.e. are they increasing or decreasing? Thirdly, what measures are required to control the hate-mongering rhetoric of the far-right parties? In doing so, the following section conceptualizes the term 'far-right extremism'. It also provides an overview of far-right extremism in Europe, the United States, and India. The subsequent section provides details concerning the methodological underpinnings, followed by the history of far-right political parties in Pakistan and their electoral presence. Overall, the discussion will help understand the extent to which the far-right political parties have become a national security threat. The last section of the article concludes the discussion by emphasizing a pro-active role for the LEAs and civil society towards countering violent extremism.

Defining and Contextualizing Far-Right Extremism

To define the 'far-right' or 'extreme right', we must understand the political spectrum (i.e., left, right and center positions). The spectrum locates a person's political views, beliefs, and positions from both extremes i.e., extreme left and extreme right (Heywood, 2007).

Figure 1. Political spectrum based on left, right and center positions



Source: (Jefferson, 2010)

Figure 1 provides an overview of the political spectrum based on five broad categories: i.e., Liberal, Radical, Moderate, Conservative, and Reactionary. ‘Moderates’ are placed at the center. They adopt moderate behavior towards any social issue and repel extreme views regarding changes in the existing socio-political order. In addition, moderates manage erroneous tendencies of society through peaceful means. ‘Conservatives’ are plotted on the right-hand side of the spectrum and prefer traditional values and practices. They accept the existing order and tend to work peacefully in the prevailing order of society. ‘Liberals’, however, are located on the left-hand side and are those people who accept the values of equality, intelligence, and competency of the people. They are generally less discontented with the prevailing order of society and demand change that supports individual welfare. ‘Radicals’ are positioned at the far or extreme left; they mostly feel exceedingly dissatisfied with the existing conditions of society and seek a rapid change in the current order. Moreover, on the far-right position of the spectrum are the reactionaries (Jefferson, 2010).

Speaking in a similar vein, Jones (2018) referred to far-right extremism as the possible use or threat of use of violence by a specific group of the community to achieve racial, religious, or ethical supremacy, or aims to end certain practices of the community by challenging the authority of the government. Eller (2017), however, argued that there is no proper definition of the term ‘far-right’. According to Eller, the term serves to broadly indicate groups or identities that seem to be more intolerant, aggressive, and rigid in their stance through their actions and speeches; hence, it is considered a collective term for the radical or extreme right, covering a diverse range of ideologies such as nationalism, racism, xenophobia.

During the 1990s, several international developments — such as the flare-up of Neo-Nazi violence in Germany, the growing strength of the National Front in France, the electoral success of Zhirinovskiy in Russia, the inclusion of *Allianza Nazionale* in Italy, the participation of the Slovak National Party in the government of Slovakia, the electoral victories of the Freedom Party in Austria, the People’s Party in Switzerland and the *Vlaams Bloc* in Belgium — renewed academic interest in the politics of the extreme right (e.g., Hainsworth, 2008). Furthermore, the nationalist

conflicts, ethnic cleansing, and concentration camps in the former Yugoslavia were viewed as an aggressive manifestation of extremism and ultra-nationalism in 1990s Europe (Lazaridis, Campani, & Benveniste, 2016).

At the beginning of this century, the extreme right seemed to be acquiring increasing momentum, with the participation of the Freedom Party in the government of Austria. This was an unusual experience, as it was the first time in the post-war period that an extreme right party participated as an equal 'partner' in a government of a European country. It came as a realization for European citizens that the extreme right is not to be regarded as an entirely marginal phenomenon but as a *force* that can penetrate mainstream democratic politics (Othon, 2000). Although still a vague idea based on muddled political and ideological views, far-right extremism has become a challenge for the European political system and is being used by some groups as an instrument to achieve socio-political goals (Seredenko & Sergei, 2015). Similarly, In the post 9/11 period, Muslims became the chief target of far-right extremism in Europe, especially the dress code (Hijab and veiling), and the far-right political parties targeted places of worship (e.g., Ahmed, 2018; Lambert & Githens-Mazer, 2010).

Historically, the right-wing extremism in the U.S was motivated by different ideologies like racism, nationalism, and Christianity. But one form of extremism that has dominated others is 'white supremacy'. It is perceived as an inclusive condition whereby the interests and discernments of white people are continually placed at center stage and assumed as 'normal' (Gillborn, 2006). It is manifested in the emergence of racial politics (the slavery era), with the formation of the 'Klu Klux Klan' (white supremacy hate group), and the rise of anti-communist sentiments in America (Gambel, 2015; Piazza, 2017). In the report published by the Centre of Strategic and International Relations, Jone (2018) has discussed that far-right extremism in the United States has been increasing. He highlighted that between 2007 and 2011, there were almost 5-7 attacks per year, but from 2012 to 2016, this rose to 14; and 31 in 2017. In the U.S, an increase in far-right extremism was inspired by three trends, i.e. racism, anti-federalism, and fundamentalism, which correspondingly reflects white supremacy, anti-state sentiments, and a strong sense of identity, particularly Christianity.

In India, far-right extremism can be traced back to the British colonial period, when in the 1920s, the Hindu Nationalist movement, 'Sangh Parivar', emerged against the colonial power. It was formed to secure Hindu dominance in Indian society and drive out religious minorities from the state, claiming that the growing Muslim and Christian population in the country was a threat to their religious identity. Other nationalist organizations later joined this movement. These organizations also had educational wings and propaganda groups which operated across the country to disseminate the message of Hindu Nationalism, using hate campaigns and violent tactics against minorities (Marshall, 2004). More recently, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) have emerged as far-right political parties with overlapping ideologies. RSS, however, operates on cultural, VHP on religion, and BJP on political grounds (Venkatesh, 2019). Under the premiership of current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, an active member of RSS, Hindutva, or Hindu Nationalism, arose as a leading political ideology of India (Kronstadt, 2018).

It is believed that the military wing of RSS provides military training to young girls and boys who are involved in a series of brutal incidents, particularly

towards Muslims in India. Golwalkar, who was the second supreme leader of RSS, restated that their objective was to make India a Hindu state and the best way to achieve that goal was to adopt resources that included violent militants (Venkatesh, 2019). The revocation of the constitution on Jammu and Kashmir and the cancellation of citizenship of Muslims from other states living in India can be considered a clear manifestation of the current government's far-right approach towards minorities in India. Several incidents have occurred where extreme nationalist supporters used violence against minorities (including Muslims and Christians). Since the 2014 general elections in India, there has been a steady increase in violence against the Christian community (Werleman, 2021; Gittinger, 2020).

In the context of Pakistan, extremism is an outcome of both internal and external factors (Ali et al., 2021). The feelings of deprivation, religious intolerance, lack of trust between the public and the government, and its failure in resolving their social and economic problems, eventually compel people to take extreme actions (Javaid, 2011; Saigol, 2015; Yousaf, 2015; Makki & Yamin, 2021). In most cases, it has also been observed that extremist groups are outgrowths of religio-political parties (Ispahani, 2017).

Methodology

While acknowledging the utility of qualitative data in understanding the social construction of reality, this research employs the qualitative technique of data collection — i.e., documentary analysis and elite interviewing. The documentary analysis helped analyze key individuals and political parties (Fitzgerald, 2012). The analysis also assisted in the contextualization of the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, the research further relied on elite interviewing to understand different contextual perspectives, as it is appropriate for the study of recent historical change, political process-tracing, the role of memory, and perception in political or social activity (Natow, 2020). For this purpose, policymakers, representatives from political parties, and religious leaders were interviewed to understand the dynamics behind the emergence of the far-right political parties in Pakistan. The 'snowball' or 'referral' sampling technique (Burnham et al., 2008) was used to approach 15 interviewees. The year 2018-2019 was when the primary data was collected and analyzed. The interviews were guided by semi-structured questions, which allowed the interviewer and interviewees enough space to consider new themes without imposing any rigid framework (Burnham et al., 2008). The research used the narrative approach for the qualitative data with a preference for interpretation, which is a post-positivist and post-modernist approach (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020).

Far-Right Political Parties in Pakistan and their Electoral Presence

Since its inception, religio-political parties in Pakistan have had a dominant role in mainstream politics. It was primarily due to the political activism of the religious parties like Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan that the first constitution of Pakistan in 1956 declared Pakistan an 'Islamic Republic', and Islamic provisions were added in the 1962 and 1973 constitutions (Ahmad & Sajjad, 2017); however, the electoral success of these parties was negligible (Shah, 2014). Nonetheless, religion was used not only by religious parties but also by mainstream political parties to accomplish and legitimize the political objectives (Khalid, 2020).

As discussed earlier, the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan brought a wave of extremism and religious militancy to Pakistan, leading to the formation of several

sectarian-based organizations such as Sipah-e-Sahaba, Lashkar-e-Jhnagvi, Sipah-e-Muhammad (Nasr, 2000). According to Weinbaum (2017), the underlying reasons behind the upsurge of these sectarian organizations were the marginalization of moderate-democratic political parties by the military governments, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Iranian revolution in 1979. As discussed earlier, the terrorist attack on Peshawar’s Army Public School (APS) in 2014, killing 150 children and their teachers, forced the government and its LEAs to take stringent actions against these extremist groups under the National Action Plan, leading to a significant decrease in the extremism in the country (Makki & Akash, 2020; Johnston, 2016, p. 10).

In 2017, two political parties, the Milli Muslim League (MML) and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), emerged and participated in the electoral process (Ghani, 2018), and to the surprise of most, they secured a considerable number of votes from the masses; consequently, reducing the vote bank of the moderate political parties such as Pakistan Muslim League N (PMLN), Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), Awami National Party (ANP).

Milli Muslim League (MML)

The MML, formed in 2017, is believed to be the political wing of Jammat-ud-Dawa (JuD), earlier known as Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT). Let, a radical Islamic group was organized by Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi in 1984 at Muridike (Punjab) to wage ‘Jihad’ against the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. In 1985, Hafiz Saeed and Zafar Iqbal established a missionary group titled JuD. In 1986, Lakhvi merged his group, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, with Hafiz Saeed’s JuD to form Markaz-al-Dawa-wal-Irshad, which Hafiz Saeed led himself. The purpose of this organization was social welfare and armed struggle. As introduced earlier, LeT is the militant wing of this organization (Pakistan Militant Groups, 2013).

JuD is known for its alleged involvement in various terrorist attacks on NATO and the American forces in Afghanistan (Sajjad & Jawad, 2011). Consequently, it was declared a terrorist organization by the U.S. In 2017, JuD established its political wing, named the MML, which Safiullah Khalid headed. Since the wing had an affiliation with JuD, the Election Commission of Pakistan banned the organization from registration (as a political party). Subsequently, the MML’s candidate participated in the by-election as an independent candidate in a seat vacated by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Muhammad Yaqoob Sheikh, the MML candidate, scored 5822 votes, four times higher than the mainstream left-wing Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) (e.g., Fair, 2018; “JuD Fields Candidate”, 2017).

Table 1. Evolution of Milli Muslim League

1984	1985	1986	2017
Lashkar-e-Tayyiba	Jammat-ud-Dawa	Markaz al Dawa-wal-Irshad	Milli Muslim League
<i>Radical</i>	<i>Missionary</i>	<i>Welfare and Jihad</i>	<i>Political</i>

In March 2018, the Islamabad High Court discharged the objections placed by the Election Commission of Pakistan on the MML, as the party leadership had proven that they were not affiliated with JuD (Ghani, 2018). After the verdict of the Supreme Court, the party leadership announced its manifesto, which promised the supremacy of the Quran and Sunnah, i.e. the protection of Pakistan’s ideological,

cultural, and moral values. It also guaranteed to safeguard the fundamental rights of minorities and women in Pakistan. The party further endorsed the struggle for Kashmir’s freedom and vowed to fight against extremist ideologies and sectarianism (“Jammatud Dawa Enters Political”, 2017). Despite the Islamabad High Court verdict, the Election Commission of Pakistan did not register the MML as a political party because of the opposition from the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Foreign affairs. It was reasoned that the JuD and the Faleh-e-Insaniyat Foundations were banned organizations under the United Nations (Security Council) Act, 1948 (Hashim, 2017).

Nevertheless, the organization participated in the 2018 general elections under the banner of Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek, which was registered as a political party in 2016, chaired by Dr. Mian Ihsan Bari. The MML filed 260 candidates for the national and provisional assemblies under its banner in the 2018 elections. The list of candidates also included the son and son-in-law of Hafiz Saeed, nominated for NA-91 and PP-167 seats in Pakistan’s national and provincial assemblies (Rasheed, 2018). The Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek also designated ten female candidates, out of which three were nominated for reserved seats. Table 2 below highlights the vote bank for the MML. It stood at the thirteenth position in the National Assembly (172120 votes), at the eighth position in the Punjab assembly (237766 votes), a twelfth position in the KPK assembly (12060 votes), and at a twentieth position in the Baluchistan assembly (1659 votes).

Table 2. Vote bank of Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek (MML) in 2018 Elections

<i>Assembly</i>	<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Seats</i>
National Assembly	172120	13 th	0
Punjab	237766	8 th	0
Sindh	16238	16 th	0
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	12060	12 th	0
Baluchistan	1659	20 th	0

Source: (Statistical Reports, Election Commission of Pakistan)

Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP)

Haq Nawaz Jhangvi formed SSP in 1985. Known as a sectarian organization, SSP was involved in militant activities against the Shia sect within Pakistan (Shah, 2014). In addition, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi is considered a military wing of Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan and is alleged to be involved in the targeting of people from the Shia sect; one of the examples was the attack on the Shia Leader Malik Mukhtar Hussain in Chiniot leading to an outbreak of fierce sectarian violence in 2006 (Grare, 2007; Ahmar, 2005). This organization is considered the most influential extremist organization in Pakistan, with almost 500 offices, 100,000 workers, 3000-6000 trained cadres, and 17 branches in foreign states. Apart from targeting people on a sectarian basis, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi is responsible for the attack on Christian communities in Gojra, Punjab, in which eight Christians were killed, and around 100 houses were burned. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi is also alleged to have foreign linkages and had received funding from Saudi Coffers and the United Arab Emirates (Pakistan Militant Groups, 2013; Behera & Sharma, 2014).

SSP Pakistan also participated in the politics of Pakistan. For instance, it aligned itself with other mainstream political parties and remained in the coalition government in Punjab during 1993. In 2002, Pervez Musharaf banned SSP, but it re-

emerged with a new name i.e., Millat-e-Islamia, which was later prohibited. The organization later renamed itself Ahle Sunnat Wal Jammāt (ASWJ), with a slightly moderated approach to avoid a ban by the government (Basit, 2013).

In addition, SSP also contested under the banner of Pakistan’s Rah-e-Haq Party, founded by Hakeem Muhammad Ibrahim Qasmi in February 2012 (Peshawar). Reports also emerged that Pakistan’s Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) supported the independent candidates of ASWJ, and the party released a list of almost 70 candidates, which supported PTI in nearly 45 constituencies. PTI denied any such collaboration, claiming that their support was not party-based (Altaf, 2018; “PTI slams PML-N”, 2013).

Table 3. Vote Bank of Pakistan Rah-e-Haq Party (ASWJ) in 2018 Elections

<i>Assembly</i>	<i>Number of Votes</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Seats</i>
National Assembly	55859	21 st	0
Sindh	18771	15 th	0
Punjab	4191	21 st	0
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	53472	9 th	0
Balochistan	1167	21 st	0

Source: (Statistical Reports, Election Commission of Pakistan)

This table shows the vote bank of the Pakistan Rah-e-Haq Party in the general elections of 2018. After gaining 55859 votes, the party stood at the twenty-first position in the National Assembly. It got 18771 votes in the Sindh Assembly, attaining the fifteenth position. With 4191 votes, it came at the twenty-first position in the Punjab Assembly. In the KPK Assembly, the party stood at ninth position, with 53472 votes; in the Baluchistan Assembly, the party stood at the twenty-first position with 1167 votes. Pakistan Rah-e-Haq, however, could not win any seat, but the number of votes shows their popularity among the people.

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP)

TLP is relatively a new participant in the contemporary politics of Pakistan. Khadim Hussain Rizvi founded the party in August 2015. The formation of the party was the result of protests carried out for the release of Mumtaz Qadri (Sabat, Shoaib, & Qadar, 2020). Mumtaz Qadri was sentenced to death after he was convicted of killing the former Governor Punjab, Mr. Salman Taseer, in January 2011, as he had supported Asia Bibi, a Christian woman charged with blasphemy in 2009. She was sentenced to death after a lengthy trial, but the Supreme Court of Pakistan reversed her conviction and declared her not guilty. TLP opposed this decision and protested against it through violent demonstrations (Akbar, 2019).

In the manifesto of TLP Pakistan for the 2018 general elections, the strict imposition of Shariah Law with Berelvi Interpretations and laws related to ‘Namoos e Rasalat’ (the Honour of the Prophet) were the key objectives. TLP was also involved in violent demonstrations in Lahore, Islamabad, and many other cities (“Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan unveils manifesto”, 2018; Sabat, Shoaib, & Qadar, 2020), against change in blasphemy law and the Election Act, 2017. In 2018, TLP contested in the general elections by filing 178 candidates (Alam, 2018). However, TLP failed to secure seats in the National Assembly but won two seats in the Sindh Assembly (“TLP secures two seats”, 2018). The details of the votes they gained in each province is given in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Vote Bank of TLP in 2018 Elections

<i>Assembly</i>	<i>Number of votes</i>	<i>Positions</i>	<i>Winning Seats</i>
National Assembly	2234316	6 th	0
Punjab	18,67,625	4 th	0
Sindh	4,14,635	7 th	2
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	78,125	8 th	0
Balochistan	10,999	16 th	0

Source: (Statistical Reports- Election Commission of Pakistan)

This research focuses on determining whether the phenomena of far-right extremism have risen in Pakistan or not. For this purpose, the electoral presence of the three parties discussed above has been studied. According to Jamal (2021), far-right politics in Pakistan is gaining strength. The most recent elections of 2018 gained a significant number of votes (see table 5), which shows the increasing support of the public for these parties. Although they did not win National Assembly seats, the number of votes they gained might threaten the vote banks of the moderate democratic parties of Pakistan like PPP, PMLN, and PTI in future politics. Besides the National Assembly, they hold strong positions in provincial assemblies. The table below shows the number of votes each party gained for the National Assembly and clearly demonstrates the progress the far-right parties have made recently at a national and provincial level.

Table 5. Vote Bank of New Far-Right Parties in the Last Four Elections in the National Assembly of Pakistan

<i>Parties</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2018</i>
Tehreek-e-Labbaik	—	—	—	2234316
Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek	—	—	—	172120
Pakistan Rah-e-Haq Party	—	—	—	55859

Source: (Statistical Reports- Election Commission of Pakistan)

Discussion

Given the increasing popularity of far-right political parties in Pakistan, it is important to assess them through the lens of ‘far-right extremist’ mobilization. Furthermore, it is necessary to understand the nature of the threat being posed to the moderate and liberal political parties or social-political order in general. Such an elucidation will enable us to identify necessary measures required to counter the violent and hate-instigating elements embedded in the ideology of far-right extremism.

Since this term ‘far-right’ is alien in Pakistan, the participants envisioned it as a western construct that might not be applicable in Pakistan. It was emphasized that the scale and degree of far-right extremism in the form of white supremacy in the U.S and Europe and Hindutva in India is not the case with Pakistan. Hafeez ur Rehman, a member of TLP, acknowledges an increase in the vote bank of religious parties of Pakistan in the recent elections and pronounced that if TLP comes to power, far-right extremism will probably increase:

We cannot apply western parameters to define the far-right specifically in Pakistan because religion is the most prominent trend in Pakistan, and people feel attached to religion and respect our party. As a member

of a religious party, I totally reject, deny, and condemn the use of any type of violence that Western academia uses as an eminent and renowned characteristic of the far-right (Hafeez ur Rehman, personal communication, October 2019).

Most of the participants believed that religious parties with extremist ideas like SSP Pakistan, Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Fiqahe-Jaferia, Sipah-e-Muhammad, and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, used to be very active in the past, particularly in the 1990s. But in the current political environment, only a few parties can be seen playing an active role so far, such as JuD, TLP, and others. However, they are not involved in any violent activities, owing to the shift in the state's policy concerning strict countering violent extremism and terrorism. Hence, according to a few respondents, such political (extremist) organizations do not threaten the other major political parties. Similarly, some politicians like Murad Rass and Khuwaja Hassan (members of mainstream political parties of Pakistan) also opined that this phenomenon (of violent extremism) does not exist at an alarming scale in Pakistan, as it has been curbed by the combined efforts of the army and the government. They believed that the manifestations and rising vote bank of these parties in the previous elections were temporary. While drawing a comparison with other countries, the participants argue that the trend of far-right extremism has not been found at the state level in Pakistan (such as in India and U.S). Further, it was argued that all such parties with a strong sectarian inclination and/or a supremacist approach that allows hate speech and violence are deficient and do not pose considerable danger to the socio-political fabric of the society. In response to the question about the rising vote bank of newly emerged religious parties like TLP and MML (see tables 1, 2 & 3), Khuwaja Hassan said:

[...] Their presence in the last election was more like an administrative process than political. Even the member of TLP, who contested the previous elections of MNA seat said that their vote bank increased due to the decline in the vote bank of PMLN' (personal communication, October 2019).

Discussing the same concern, Liaqat Baloch, a senior member of Jammat-e-Islami, was of the view that:

The vote bank of these parties increased as people were disappointed with the performance of liberal and moderate political parties who had been in the government and failed to fulfill their promises, so people diverted from these parties. The example can be seen in the elections of 2018, where religious parties gained a vast number of votes like TLP, Jammat-e-Islami, and many others. But we could not get the desired results because the votes were dispersed in different religious parties. From my point of view, all religious parties should unite under one banner to get the desired results (personal communication, November 2019).

Some participants had a different opinion. They believed that if religio-political organizations kept growing at the same pace, they would threaten other parties. Respondents believed that, if left unchecked, these elements (far-right political parties) can threaten our existing constitutional order and associated socio-political agreements. As witnessed in the 2018 General Elections, such elements have developed a significant vote bank which is alarming. The 2018 General Elections show that the votes received by far-right parties have reduced the winning chances of

major moderate political parties. The assassination attempt on veteran politician Ehsan Iqbal also shows the hate-mongering stance of far-right political parties. Tabish Qayyum, a former member of MML, stated:

The 2018 elections somehow paved the way for far-right parties in the mainstream politics of Pakistan. MML and TLP, as far-right parties, gained a considerable number of votes which showed that people feel more attached to religion. For instance, TLP's stance on blasphemy captured the people's sentiments. Other than these, some parties have their own objectives, such as MML is committed to Kashmir freedom struggle and the issue has once again become mainstream. Apart from that, people have realized that the so-called moderate parties have failed to deliver the society (personal communication, September 2019).

In response to the question about the strategies to counter the violence and hate-instigating elements of the far-right, most participants argued that the only way forward is to work for better economic conditions of the people. If people are satisfied and engaged in healthy economic activities to fulfill their family needs, they will not go towards extremism. However, Tabish Qayyum, a former member of the MML, linked it to the vacuum in the law-and-order situation of the state, consequently leading to anarchy, violence, and militancy. He argues that effective policies and efficient implementation by the LEAs are needed to overcome these challenges:

[...] if the democratic mainstream system would be strong, then the law and order of the state would be robust, which lessens the chances of any violence, which is important for regional security. The role of Law Enforcement Agencies is very much indispensable. The tragic incident of the Peshawar school massacre in 2014, which killed 149 people, including 132 schoolchildren, led to the change in the government's policy manifested in National Action Plan to curb extremism and militancy in Pakistan. (personal communication, September 2019).

The participants further argued that the engagement of these far-right political parties in the mainstream is needed because extremist and radical entities will change their behavior if they are allowed to become part of the mainstream political system and engage in productive activities. Living in the era of information, people are becoming more aware and are demanding an active and effective role of the government. An expert on religious affairs opined that moderate mainstream religious actors should be weaned away from the far-right extremists to isolate and contract these latter elements. In doing so, state initiatives such as 'Paigham-e-Pakistan' should be widely owned and effectively practiced. Moreover, existing laws and their enforcement mechanisms also need to be made responsive so that hate speech and violent extremism can be curbed effectively. Above all, educational avenues and media outlets should be fully utilized for promoting tolerance and inclusiveness. Nevertheless, all the participants agreed that these strategies need robust implementation and enforcement. Most of the experts interviewed opined that the presence of these far-right parties is 'administratively' planned or are products politically motivated process to gain certain political objectives.

As far as the threat is concerned that is expected to be arising from the politics of far-right political parties in Pakistan, all the interviewees agreed that it does not exist on such a level as it used to be in the past, particularly during the 1990s. Against the backdrop of the APS incident, the extremist elements were dealt with

'hard' measures by the joint efforts of the government and the security forces of Pakistan. In 2015, Pakistan observed the rise of TLP over the publication of Prophet Muhammad's caricature in France. The developments over the incident, which led to the beheading of a school teacher by a young Muslim, enraged many Muslims, who believed the publication was blasphemous (Erlanger, 2020), leading to country-wide protests by TLP, spearheaded by Khadim Hussain Rizvi. The TLP leadership demanded that the government expel the French ambassador and cut ties with the European Union (Baloch & Ellis-Petersen, 2021). Rizvi's sudden death amid the protests on Nov 20, 2020, and the fact that tens of thousands of his supporters attended it was seen as an indication of increasing mass support for the party (Shah, 2020). Khadim Hussain Rizvi was succeeded by his son Saad Hussain Rizvi who reiterated his party's stance against France and French President Emmanuel Macron. TLP launched a major protest in April 2021, which resulted in the arrest of Saad Hussain Rizvi on terrorism charges along with hundreds of his followers (Ahmed, 2021). The standoff between the government of Pakistan and the outlawed party, responsible for the violent clashes with the police and the death of six police officers, ended in a 'secret' deal which resulted in the release of Saad Hussain Rizvi. The government revoked the earlier declaration that declared TLP a banned organization, hence, removed Rizvi's name from the anti-terrorism watch list (Gabol, 2021). The deal, however, is seen by many as a worrying indication of the government surrendering to the far-right political parties, and this resurgence of far-right political parties can challenge the state writ for their vested interests.

Conclusion

This article discusses the re-emergence of far-right political parties in Pakistan, i.e., MML, ASWJ, and TLP. The political parties have been well observed as 'violent' (religiously-oriented) entities. In addition, an increase in their vote bank and support among the people have been noticeable. However, this research argues that the emergence of these political parties can be considered as a 'temporary' and politically motivated phenomenon. Hence, they do not pose a 'threat' to the mainstream political parties. Yet, such mobilization(s) can easily disrupt the socio-political order, as observed in the recent episode of TLP protests. It is equally important to ensure that the LEAs and related institutions effectively counter hate speech (provoking violence) and violent extremism. We also need to consider addressing the structural determinants of violent extremism (socio-economic development, improving education and social services) (Makki & Yamin, 2021).

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