

THE CHALLENGE OF EXTREMISM IN PAKISTAN: ARE THERE LESSONS TO BE LEARNT FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF SINGAPORE?

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Abstract

The failure of the state of Pakistan in effectively dealing with the menace of extremism and militancy - ethnic, sectarian or religious - has not only caused the deepening of societal polarization but also aggravated its economic predicament. This paper examines how Singapore has been able to prevent extremism from threatening the state and societal structures and why Pakistan has not been able to successfully deal with it. The new state of Singapore under the dynamic leadership of its Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew embarked on the road to progress and modernization. Singapore encouraged the process of nation-building by promoting ethnic and religious harmony in the post-independence period. Now, 46 years after its emergence as a new state, Singapore, despite its small size, is an economic giant and is considered a model of ethnic-religious harmony. Singapore is much ahead of Pakistan in the human development index, and the quality of life of the people living in that South East Asian country can match the standard of any developed state. Whereas, in 1965, Pakistan was ahead of Singapore in terms of industrialization and economic growth, it now lags far behind that country in literacy ratio, per capita income, GDP and GNP. The role of leadership, particularly, of its first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew (1965-1990) was decisive in the transformation of Singapore from a developing to a developed state.

Key Words: Extremism, Pakistan, Singapore, Experience.

Introduction

This paper examines how Singapore has been able to prevent extremism from threatening the state and societal structures and why Pakistan has not been able to successfully deal with the challenge of extremism. Although, there are numerous differences between Pakistan and Singapore in terms of demography, economy, culture and politics, the two countries have some common characteristics: they are multilingual, multiethnic and multi-religious and, at the time of their inception, both faced the heavy task of nation-building. Singapore has handled the challenge of extremism and militancy in a manner that has ensured peace and social harmony. Pakistan, in

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comparison, has followed an approach which, instead of curbing extremism and militancy, has further exacerbated the menace of violence and terrorism.

Extremism is a global phenomenon and no society is free from it. But the nature and degree of extremism vary from country to country in relation to the state of their socio-economic development. If the society is educated, enlightened and economically prosperous, the prospects of extremism transforming into militancy, radicalization, violence and terrorism become proportionally dim.. But, if the society is backward, under-developed and illiterate, the challenge of extremism becomes serious.

Pakistan, like many countries in the Muslim world is passing through a critical phase of instability. A fundamental reason which seems to have destabilized state and societal structures is the spread of extremism and militancy at different levels. The deepening of ethnic, sectarian and religious intolerance has caused much violence and eroded the rule of law.

Pakistan, since its inception as a nation-state has faced the challenge of extremism and militancy. Created on the basis of religion, the new state of Pakistan faced not only a crisis of leadership but the task of national integration also remained unfulfilled resulting in the disintegration of the country on December 16, 1971. In fact, Pakistan is the only post-colonial state to have experienced the secession of its majority part. The post-1971 Pakistan however missed opportunities to ensure social justice, cohesion and promote moderation which gave rise to the resurgence of ethnic nationalism in its provinces of Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (formerly known as North-Western Frontier Province). Ethnic and lingual forces asserted themselves and religious militancy gained ground during the 1980s.

The failure of the state of Pakistan to effectively deal with the menace of extremism and militancy whether ethnic, sectarian or religious not only caused the deepening of societal polarization but also augmented its economic predicament. On the other hand, unlike East Pakistan, which seceded from Pakistan, Singapore was expelled from the federation of Malaysia on August 9, 1965 and became an independent state because of ethnic conflict between the Malay and Chinese communities. The new state of Singapore under the dynamic leadership of its Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew embarked on the road to progress and modernization. Singapore encouraged the process of nation-building by promoting ethnic and religious harmony in the post-independence period. Now, 46 years after emerging as a new state, Singapore, despite its limited territorial space, is an economic giant and is considered a model of ethnic-religious tolerance. Singapore is much ahead of Pakistan in the human development index and the quality of life of the people living in that South East Asian country can match the standard of living in any developed state. Whereas, in 1965, Pakistan was ahead of Singapore in terms of industrialization and economic growth, it now lags behind that country in literacy ratio, per capita income, GDP, GNP and economic growth rate. The role of leadership,

particularly of its first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew (1965-1990) was decisive in the transformation of Singapore from a developing to a developed state.

Singapore is one of the few South East Asian countries where the state promotes harmony and inter-faith dialogue. To what extent the process of nation-building has been helpful in curbing extremism and militancy and promoting cultural, ethnic and religious peace in Singapore and how that country can serve as a model for Pakistan will be examined in the ensuing discussion.

Questions

This research will attempt to answer the following questions:-

1. How extremism in Pakistan has *deepened* and to what extent the state and society of Pakistan can deal with this issue by providing better education and ensuring socio-economic development?
2. How Singapore handled the issue of *nation-building* and why Pakistan failed to learn from the experience of Singapore in this regard?
3. How far *leadership* can be regarded as a major factor when comparing Pakistan and Singapore in dealing with extremism and militancy?
4. What is the relevance or irrelevance of Singapore's experience for Pakistan in dealing with extremism and militancy?
5. What *lessons* can Pakistan learn from the success of Singapore in dealing with its diverse cultural and religious issues?

Pakistan and the Challenge of Extremism

The threat of extremism in Pakistan is as old as the history of the country. Since the creation of Pakistan on August 14, 1947 till today, the country has been exposed to political, religious, sectarian, class and gender extremism which over the years has grown and acquired a violent and radicalized character. As a result, the country has experienced the worst form of political violence and acts of terrorism in the last three decades.

Extremism has manifested itself in five different forms in Pakistan:-

1. Religious extremism.
2. Sectarian extremism.
3. Ethnic extremism.
4. Class extremism.
5. Gender extremism.

Religious, sectarian and ethnic extremism is violent in nature whereas class and gender extremism is more destabilizing socially than it is violent.

Twelve factors which have contributed to the permeation of extremism in Pakistani society are as follows:-

1. Use of religion for political purposes.
2. Preaching of intolerance and hate from mosques and religious schools.
3. Social backwardness and frustration.
4. Illiteracy and ignorance.
5. Under-development and poverty.
6. Absence of rule of law.
7. Absence of reasoning and rational approach.
8. Unemployment and frustration among the youth.
9. Lack of a viable democratic culture.
10. State's failure to curb extremist and militant groups.
11. Proliferation of drugs and weapons.
12. Lack of tolerance and moderation.

In retrospect, Pakistani society was not extremist *per se* but because of the factors listed above, pockets of extremism started growing taking the country deeper into the morass of extremism and violence. Zafar Hilaly, a former ambassador, writing in *The News International* believes that extremists are unable to take over the Pakistani state. He argues that, "although, our extremists are determined to force their ideology on the country, they cannot succeed on their own strength or on their political appeal, while their long-term prospects are poor. Their ideology has nothing to do with tackling issues that really matter to most people, such as governance, economic and financial problems, generating jobs, making the country attractive to investors, managing foreign relations, providing security and managing external defense without plunging the country in self-destructive war with other countries."¹ The failure of successive governments in Pakistan to understand the adverse implications of allowing religion to be used for political purposes deepened intolerance and militancy in society. Unfortunately, issues which caused extremism and frustration in various segments of population were neither properly understood nor any serious effort was made by state authorities to address those issues. Consequently, Pakistan which was a new state and had enormous potential to emerge as a progressive, modern and democratic country in the Muslim world missed the opportunity and allowed itself to become a haven of extremist and violent groups..

Hassan Abbas, a Pakistani origin scholar now based in the United States, gives a vivid account of transformation which took place in Pakistani society in his book, *Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army and America's War on*

¹ Zafar Hilaly, "Extremism- Not the Only Problem," *News International* (Karachi), February 10, 2011.

Terror. He considers religious extremism a pre-9/11 phenomenon, because, “when Musharraf stepped in as head of state on October 12, 1999, the harvest was left to glean was significantly bitterer than those of the leaders who had gone before him. Through the active fostering by Zia-ul-Haq, the funding of Saudi Arabia, espoused by the United States, and the venal abandon of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif the seed of religious fanaticism sown more than two decades earlier had come to confront him as fully grown trees perversely balanced by the empty coffers of state.”² The hardening of extremism, intolerance, militancy and radicalization which triggered violence and terrorism in Pakistan took place over a period of several decades.

There are three schools of thought that define the phenomenon of extremism in Pakistan. First, those who consider the policies of military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq responsible for nourishing Islamic extremists for perpetuating his rule. Second, those who believe that extremism, militancy and terrorism deepened in Pakistan because of the role of the Army and the intelligence agencies. Third, those who consider the failure of the state and society in dealing with the unresolved social and political issues on which extremism nurtures. All the three schools of thought, however, agree that negligence and indifference on the part of people at the helm of affairs have caused Pakistan’s drift into extremism.

Khaled Ahmed, a noted political analyst, traces the rise of extremism in Pakistan in the following words:-

Pakistan was Islamized gradually but when it reached a peak in this process in the 1980s, the country became vaguely aware of an extremism that the West called fundamentalism. When the international media began using the word there was an immediate reaction against it. The cleric and the intellectual both thought it an attack on Islam and began defending Islam instead of worrying about the growing extremism at home. Religious extremism began in earnest during the second jihad which was the extension of the Afghan jihad against the Soviets to Kashmir as a low-intensity conflict with India after 1989.³

The implications of the so-called “Afghan Jihad” in transforming the state and society of Pakistan are numerous. First, it destabilized Pakistani society by inducting the culture of weapons, drugs and religious fanaticism, including sectarian violence. Second, the state actors while heavily involved in patronizing the “Afghan Jihad” believed in exploiting the religious sentiments of the people and the availability of thousands of trained persons for

² Hassan Abbas, *Pakistan’s Drift into Extremism Allah, the Army and America’s War on Terror* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2005), 20.

³ Khaled Ahmed, “Islamic Extremism in Pakistan” *Journal of South Asia* (Lahore) (October-December 2003).

accomplishing Pakistan's strategic objectives in the Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Was it a coincidence, that the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989 was followed by the outbreak of popular uprising in J&K? Nevertheless, the genesis of extremism in Pakistan cannot be properly understood without linking it with the dynamics of "Afghan Jihad" and the surge of Islamic radical groups in the country.

Ishtiaq Ahmed, a Pakistan origin academic in Sweden, argues that, "Zia visualized a social order in which all sectors of life including administration, judiciary, banking, trade, education, agriculture, industry and foreign affairs were regulated in accordance with Islamic precepts. Thus began a radicalization of Pakistan in religious terms which was referred to as Islamization."⁴ Yet, one cannot single out Zia-ul-Haq for the spread of the virus of extremism in Pakistani society. The issue is more complex and complicated because of the state's role in using religion as a force for national integration. For instance, as early as 1949, the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan passed "Objectives Resolution" which clearly suggested that Pakistan should be an Islamic democratic state. The tussle between secularists who opposed Pakistan as a religious state and religious groups who wanted to equate Pakistan and Islam finally led to the marginalization of the moderate and secular elements of society. Successive Pakistani governments submitted before the rising tide of religious extremism because of three main reasons. First, the military governments lacked popular support and in order to marginalize mainstream political parties they patronized ethnic, sectarian or religious extremist groups. This is particularly true of the ruling elites who, despite having a secular outlook, used the ethnic and religious extremist groups for their own interests. Second, the fragile power base of civilian governments and their failure to strengthen democratic institutions provided space to the extremists. Third, neglect of the education sector and lagging employment opportunities for the burgeoning young population by military, quasi-military and civilian governments deepened frustration among this most vulnerable segment of Pakistani society. This provided the clergy ground to lure the poor and uneducated youth into their Jihadi cadres. The failure of the state to provide education and employment opportunities to the majority of youths deepened the level of polarization in the society.

On the question of Madrassas (religious seminaries) promoting extremism and militancy, a noted Pakistani writer, Ayesha Siddiqa, is of the opinion that, "such seminaries are taking root and becoming stronger with the passage of time and local people must act now to discourage them. Madrassas had been set in the country's biggest metropolis, Karachi, in a large number

⁴ Ishtiaq Ahmed, "Radicalization and De-Radicalization in Singapore and Pakistan: A Comparison," *Conflict and Peace Studies* (Islamabad), vol.2, no. 3 (July-September 2009): 1.

and a visit to just one locality, Gulshan-i-Maymar, would show that how they had mushroomed over the years. Liberal-minded people of the city should beware of those preaching extremism among them.”⁵ Around 50 per cent of the Pakistani population is comprised of youth and in view of rampant illiteracy, unemployment and social backwardness, Madrassas by providing this poor lot with food and shelter are able to indoctrinate them for their political motives.

Zahid Hussain, a senior Pakistani journalist, rules out the possibility of taking over of state power by Islamic extremists when he writes in his book *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle With Militant Islam* that, “Pakistan may not be facing any imminent threat of an Islamic fundamentalist takeover, but there is a real danger of fragmentation with radical Islamists controlling part of the country. The growing influence of militant Islam, particularly in the strategically located North Western Frontier Province and the Western province of Balochistan is ominous.”⁶ The threat of extremism in Pakistan would not have become serious had the state taken serious interest in dealing with the causes that were promoting extremist tendencies in society. Military, civil bureaucracy, feudal oligarchy and political parties failed to visualize the mushrooming of extremist and militant groups. Particularly, the military establishment, which remained at the helm of affairs for a long period of time, miscalculated the capability of those groups which had been patronized for years for various reasons. According to an Indian writer, “If one has to counter Islamic extremism ideologically, one has to start destroying its roots in Pakistan. While the Pakistan Army has taken some action against Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in the Pashtun belt, the Pakistani authorities have not taken any action to confront extremism ideologically. Their pretence of reforming and modernizing Madrassas has allowed the Madrassas to continue [to] produce extremism and terror.”⁷ Similar views on the role of military in dealing with the phenomenon of extremism are expressed by another Indian writer when he says, “successive civilian and military-led governments, the military and intelligence agencies have employed Islamic extremism as a tool of their policies. As such, extremist Islam has emerged as a top-down phenomenon. To quell the rise of Islamic extremism, Pakistan must address fundamental problems plaguing its existence, namely strengthening institutions, reforming the education system and stabilizing Pakistan’s

⁵ See news item, “Role of Madressahs in Promoting Militancy Discussed,” *Dawn* (Karachi), February 9, 2011.

⁶ Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 190.

⁷ R. Raman, “Spreading Roots of Extremism in Pakistan,” *Eurasian Review*, February 1, 2011, [http://www.eurasianreview.com/analysis/spreading-roots-of-extremism -in-Pakistan-09012011](http://www.eurasianreview.com/analysis/spreading-roots-of-extremism-in-Pakistan-09012011) (accessed February 1, 2011).

periphery.”⁸ One wonders if the high-ups are aware of the destructive capacity of extremism to destabilize the state and societal structures and it is hard to understand why the Pakistan military could not realize the negative implications of sponsoring Jihadi groups in Afghanistan on their country’s internal and external security dynamics. Giving an official perspective on the challenge of extremism, the then Federal Minister for Information, Qamar Zaman Kaira said at a seminar held at the Allama Iqbal Open University that, “Pakistan is facing terrorism and extremism, which is eating away the country like termites. Extremists want to impose their ideology through force and the whole nation needs to be united for getting rid of extremism. Extremists are damaging the country and they want to impose their vision in [the] country and [the] nation should fight mutually against extremists.”⁹ Yet, the menace of extremism, militancy, radicalization and terrorism cannot be eradicated only through the force of rhetoric. If the government is serious in effectively dealing with the growth and proliferation of extremist trends in society, it must pursue an approach based on eliminating the causes which breed intolerance and extremism. Extremism in Pakistan is partly attributed to American military involvement in Afghanistan and continuous drone attacks in the tribal areas. In fact anti-Americanism has become synonymous with the rise in extremism. The official US stance on the surge of extremism in Pakistan is however different as Washington considers the presence of extremist groups in the country responsible for the acts of terrorism.

In a news conference in Washington DC, the US State Department spokesman, P. J. Crowley, told reporters that, “we have been concerned about increased extremism in Pakistan for some time. It is at the heart of our Strategic Dialogue and our strategy with respect to Pakistan. We have made clear, political violence is a threat to the civilian government in Pakistan, and obviously this is just the latest example.”¹⁰ More so, briefing Washington based foreign correspondents on current global issues, US State Department’s spokesman Philip J. Crowley said that, “that there is security dimension to the challenge represented by the extremists that is a threat to Pakistan and a threat to others. But a great deal of the challenge is in expanding economic opportunity throughout Pakistan, including tribal areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan.”¹¹ A strong segment of Pakistani society widely shares the perception that the United States is part of the problem, rather than part of the

⁸ Chietigi Bajpaee, “Pakistan’s Extremism Starts at Top,” *Asia Times*, February 27, 2008, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South-Asia/IJB27D-p02.html> (accessed on February 1, 2011).

⁹ See news item, “Extremisms Eating Away the country Like Termite: Kaira,” *Nation* (Lahore), February 1, 2011.

¹⁰ “US Expresses Concern about Increasing Extremism in Pakistan,” *Hindustan Times*, January 8, 2011.

¹¹ *Dawn*, January 22, 2011.

solution as far as the issue of extremism is concerned. Images of civilian casualties in Afghanistan and in the tribal areas of Pakistan are used by hard line Islamic groups to foment extremism, militancy and intolerance. The argument of extremist groups is simple: since America is responsible for causing enormous sufferings for Muslims, particularly in Afghanistan and in Iraq, there is no option left than to target the symbols of Western culture and to establish a “true” Islamic state.

Pakistan can successfully cope with the challenge of extremism if it follows a three pronged approach. First, purge the society of elements who propagate hate and intolerance. This would require the silent majority to wake up and play a proactive role in neutralizing groups who use religion or ethnicity for their vested interests. Second, state institutions, particularly military and security agencies, should also be purged of extremist elements among them with whose tacit support extremism and militancy grow. Third, social and economic issues which cause extremism must be seriously addressed by the state and society because an indifferent approach would only deepen frustration and anger. The sooner the challenge of extremism is understood and dealt with in a serious manner, the better it will be for the future generations of Pakistan.

Singapore and the Challenge of Extremism

The nature of extremism in Singapore is different from Pakistan’s because of differences in their socio-economic and political situation. Since its emergence as a sovereign state in 1965, Singapore has passed through a process of nation-building through modernization and multiculturalism. The challenge of nation-building was considered pivotal by the country’s founder and first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. When separation took place between Malaysia and Singapore on August 9, 1965, amidst Malay-Chinese race riots, religious and racial contradictions between the majority Chinese and minority Malay communities emerged as a serious threat to the country’s survival. The hard task before Lee Kuan Yew was not only to ensure Singapore’s existence as an independent state but also to transform his country into a modern and developed country.¹²

According to the 2010 census, out of Singapore’s total population of 5.08 million as of end June 2010, Chinese constitute 75 per cent, Malay 13 per cent and Indians 9.2 per cent respectively.¹³ In 1959, when Lee Kuan Yew became Prime Minister of Singapore, the per capita of GDP was US \$ 400 and when he stepped down from his office the per capita GDP had risen to US \$

¹² Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965-2000* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 2000).

¹³ “The Key Demographic Trends,” http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/c2010acr/key_demographic_trends.pdf (accessed February 21, 2011).

22,000.¹⁴ The fragile position of Singapore at the time of its separation from Malaysia was narrated by Lee Kuan Yew in the following words:-

We faced tremendous odds with an improbable chance of survival. Singapore was not a natural country but man-made, a trading post the British had developed into a nodal point in their world-wide maritime empire. We inherited the island without its hinterland, a heart without a body.¹⁵

Without mineral resources, territorial depth and adequate security forces, Singapore had to start its journey from the scratch. Hostile relations with its neighbour Malaysia and the threat of racial riots between the Chinese and Malay populations further compounded the plight of the new state. Answers to how the nascent state was able to cope with the enormous challenges and how within a generation Singapore replaced gloom with optimism and fear with hope; how the policy of "multiculturalism" was pursued to make Singapore a model of ethnic and religious harmony and how the issue of extremism and radicalism was handled and what measures were taken by the state authorities to prevent the surge of ethnic and religious militancy, may provide insight to Pakistani establishment in dealing with its problem of growing extremism and violence.

At the time of separation from Malaysia, Singapore was not regarded as a viable state because of the reasons mentioned above. At the time of independence from the British in 1959, the population of Singapore was 1 million which has grown to 5 million in 2010. Cross cultural and religious identities in Singapore are used as a source of strength rather than a weakness so as to promote merit and multiculturalism. The success of Singapore in managing numerous challenges since its inception as a new state was because of its leadership and the policies which aimed at the welfare of the people rather than the interests of a certain class. According to Eugene K. B. Tan,

Singapore has enjoyed racial and religious harmony since its independence in 1965. What is not so evident is the tremendous care, effort, and pre-emptive prudence invested in nurturing multi-religiously, as an integral part of Singapore's multi-racialism framework. Buttressed by the State's professed commitment to secularism, racial and religious harmony is one of Singapore's five Shared Values. This stability is jealously guarded by the state especially since rapid modernization has neither resulted in the

¹⁴ Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First*, 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 19.

decline of religious belief nor the downgrading of importance of religious institutions among Singaporeans.¹⁶

Yet, despite its success in addressing the issue of ethnic and religious divide, Singapore has yet to achieve the level of political freedom and dissent that an affluent modern society must ideally enjoy. A feature published in *The Guardian Weekly* points out the paradoxical nature of Singapore's political order by arguing that,

Singapore presents itself as a modern liberal democracy: it has a parliament, elections, courts, a constitutional right to free speech and the consumerist gloss of capitalism. The country has by any measure succeeded since independence. But its authoritarian political culture is needlessly restrictive. The media is largely state-owned. Defamation and contempt laws threaten dissent. It is depressing that a country as successful as Singapore should feel the need for such restrictions on free speech. Singapore wants to be judged as a first-world nation. It must find the confidence to allow its citizens the freedom that goes with that status.¹⁷

In the post 9/11 scenario, Singapore like many other countries also could not escape the threat of extremism. The country's response to this threat was four fold: First, state policies which provide no space to groups trying to promote extremism and chaos in society. In order to manage racial and religious harmony in Singapore, intelligence and security agencies embarked on a policy of neutralizing elements by monitoring their activities and detaching them from the mainstream population. Second, education which aims at promoting the ideas of tolerance, coexistence and harmony. Third, robust economic and commercial activities which discourage those elements who want to exploit ethnic and religious sentiments of people for the fulfillment of their ulterior motives. In the last 46 years, Singapore has emerged from a third to a first world status, through its approach of "egalitarian capitalism" that translates into people's access to the basic necessities of life and at the same time encouraging talent, merit, enterprise, motivation and challenge to ensure productivity and growth. This approach acted as a deterrent against extremist groups because the bulk of the people enjoy quality of life and reject notions of militancy and radicalization. Nonetheless, the use of more "soft" than "hard" power helped the government of Singapore in effectively dealing with the challenge of extremism. According to Tham Seong Chee,

¹⁶ Eugene K. B. Tan, "Keeping God in Place: The Management of Religion in Singapore," in Lai Ah Eng (ed.), *Religious Diversity in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2008), 55.

¹⁷ "The Singapore Grip," *The Guardian Weekly* (London), November 26 – December 2, 2010.

Singapore has embraced the politics of pluralism and the value of modern capitalism in its economic pursuits. In governance, it has chosen the path of full secularism and the rule of law. In religious and cultural matters, the state has very much left the management of both of their respective adherents except on issues of state interests.¹⁸

Finally, a policy of discouraging majority-minority conflict was pursued by the government of Singapore. Through that policy, ethnic and religious isolation was discouraged by promoting inter-mingling of cultural and religious groups in the interest of mutual understanding and tolerance.

The central role in preventing extremism in Singapore is played by the Internal Security Department (ISD) which ensures the observance of the Religious Harmony Act and the Internal Security Act. Through these Acts, the ISD not only monitors threats to the security of Singapore but also checks the activities of groups which may cause religious or racial unrest in the country. Particularly since 9/11, the task of the ISD in curbing extremism has become critical because of the activities of the extremist Islamic group *Jamaah Islamiyah* (JI). Separating JI from the mainstream Muslim population of Singapore was the main task of ISD. How real was the threat of JI in promoting extremism and terrorism in Singapore and to what extent JI worked in collaboration with other radical and terrorist groups of South East Asia is discussed in the following section.

Dealing with Religious Extremism and Terrorism

The network of extremist militant and terrorist organizations posed a major challenge to the government of Singapore. Yet, the threat of terrorism became real when in December 2001, the ISD arrested 15 persons and in August 2002 arrested more persons who were mostly members of the JI. They were arrested because of their involvement in terrorist planning. Ustaz Mohamed Bin Ali, in his paper “Coping with Threat of Jemaah Islamiya – the Singapore Experience,” argues that “although, the Singapore JI branch has been neutralized, the external threat remains significant. Furthermore with the arrests of its Singapore members and Singapore’s strong support for the US, JI has strong motive to retaliate and attack Singapore. To deal effectively with the new face of terrorism, the Singapore government has adopted an integrated approach to its national security program, structured around the Prevention, Protection and Response domains.”¹⁹ In terms of JI’s international character, it

¹⁸ Tham Seong Chee, “Religious Influences and Impulses Impacting Singapore,” in Lai Ah Eng (ed.), *Religious Diversity in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2008), 16-17.

¹⁹ Ustaz Mohamed Bin Ali, “Coping with the Threats of Jemaah Islamiyah – The Singapore Experience” and Abdul Halim Binkader, *Fighting Terrorism: The Singapore Perspective* (Singapore: Taman Beccan Pemuda Melayu Singapore, 2007), 110.

has been argued that, “local terrorist groups, such as the Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) actively, operated as a transnational network effortlessly crossing national boundaries, sharing talents and skills and exploiting the tensions arising from the conflicting national jurisdiction in Southeast Asia. This has enabled them to carry out operations in Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, and Singapore and ultimately perpetrate devastating attacks like the October 2002 Bali night club bombing, the wake-up call for Southeast Asia and the acknowledgment of terrorists in the midst. Even after the subsequent investigation and arrests, as JI has demonstrated, such radical organizations are learning organizations whose methods, techniques and strategies will change to meet changing circumstances.”²⁰ But, by dealing with local extremist groups in a professional manner, the Singapore government managed to curb the threat to its peace. Within the Islamic community in Singapore, strong rejection of extremism and militancy provided little space to hard line groups to permeate in the mainstream Islamic community. As rightly said by Abdul Halim Binkader in his book, *Fighting Terrorism: the Singapore Perspective* that,

Fifteen percent of Singapore’s population are Muslims. They live harmoniously with Singaporeans of other races and religions. The Mufti of Singapore, the highest religious authority on Islam, has strongly condemned terrorism and terrorist acts. He emphasized that the actions of JI suicide bomb-maker Azahari Husin were a complete deviation from the teachings of Islam, which forbid anyone from committing suicide. He added that the teachings of Koran call for peace and multi-religious societies.²¹

Article 15 of the constitution of Singapore is the basis of secularism in the country. That article states that, “every person has a right to profess and practice his religion and to propagate it.” As a secular country, Singapore follows the principles of religious freedom and tolerance. The problem occurs when some of the elements try to exploit and manipulate the sentiments of 15 percent Muslim minority in Singapore, particularly amongst its youth for developing hatred against the secular ideology. Halim argues that, “fortunately, our Muslim community understands the threat posed by extremist ideas. It openly denounced the JI terrorists and their plot. It has been working with the Government to root out extremists and radical teaching. To combat their deviant ideology, a group of Muslim clerics took the initiative to study the JI ideology, focusing on their distortion of core concepts like (oath of allegiance),

²⁰ Barry Desker, “ASEAN and New Forays in Regional Counterterrorism Cooperation” in A Collection of Papers of the International Symposium on International Counter-Terrorism situation and Cooperation, Beijing, China, 10-13 May, 2004, *China Institute for International Strategic Studies and Hutung Institute for International Relations*, 343.

²¹ Abdul Halim Binkader, *Fighting Terrorism*, 14.

the Ummah and Jihad. In April 2003 they formed a Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) to help counsel the detained JI members.”²² Likewise, according to Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, Member of Parliament, Singapore, “the Muslim community in Singapore has come forward to be the vanguard against extremist Islamist views. Our Islamic scholars speak up and hold public forums to challenge deviant views, as well as to explain concepts like jihad. These efforts help us in isolating and reducing the influence of the extremists who advocate intolerance and violence.”²³

One important way to deal with extremism in Singapore has been through provision of liberal education to its citizens. Halim points out the fact that “in Singapore, education has long been used to promote social cohesion and integrate our communities. There are no special schools for any one race other than the handful of madrassas whose annual intake of students is capped at 400. On the ground, there are grassroots opportunities to facilitate interaction between different groups and to promote community cohesion.”²⁴ Faishal agrees with Halim on the relevance and use of education to promote tolerance and moderation in Singapore. He argues that, “another important component of our fight against terror is education. Education enables people to liberate themselves from the trap of dogmas, intolerance and social divide. Relevant, quality education is the most effective instrument to improve quality of life and self-governance. This is the cycle that education seeks to break, by focusing the mind to be discerning, able to decide what is right and what is needed for self and social improvement.”²⁵ Along with better education, social mobilization and community work to effectively deal with extremism, intolerance, radicalization and terrorism, pursuing a counter-ideological approach is also required. In order to defeat those who pursue the ideology of extremism and terrorism in Singapore, the counter-ideological drive is a useful effort.

Muhammad Haniff Hassan in his paper, “Counter-Ideological Work: Singapore Experience” is of the opinion that, “Singapore’s counter-ideological efforts have been instructive in identifying the objectives of counter-ideological work, target groups, the importance of collaboration between Muslim scholars and the security agency, and the approaches and pitfalls involved. From this experience, it could be summarized that some of the important objectives of counter ideology are to immunize Muslims in general from extremist ideology, persuade less fanatic members of terrorist groups to abandon the ideology,

²² Ibid., 19. According to him, RRG has developed its own model for countering extremist ideas. Beyond rehabilitating extremists, it also counsels the detainees’ families and educates the wider community on the true meaning of jihad and the terrorist threat.

²³ Dr. Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, “The Singapore Example – Shared Value, Racial Harmony, Education & Economic Growth,” Ibid., 53.

²⁴ Abdul Halim Binkader, *Fighting Terrorism*.

²⁵ Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, “The Singapore Example,” 53.

rehabilitate detained terrorists and minimize non-Muslims' anxiety and suspicion by presenting alternatives to terrorist ideology.”²⁶ Hence, the most effective method to defeat the forces of extremism and terrorism is to come up with a counter ideology which can get the support of people for stability and peace in society. The Singapore experience in combating extremism needs to be examined in the light of two major realities. First, the failure of extremist elements to influence the majority of Muslim community and second, the efforts made by the Singapore government to contain the threat of terrorism by rehabilitation measures for the terrorists arrested by the ISD. Prior to the threat of Islamic extremism and militancy, Singapore also encountered the challenge from Communist groups in a professional and tactful manner. But, the Communist threat subsided in the post-cold war era and because of the transformation of the People’s Republic of China since the formulation of “open door policy” by Deng Xiaoping in 1978.

Singapore’s approach in containing extremism has been a prudent one. Its objective has been to marginalize elements who want to destabilize the society by taking advantage of ethnic and religious contradictions. Using its pluses like high educational standards, adherence to meritocracy instead of mediocrity, good quality of life and firm control of ISD on security matters, Singapore has been able to marginalize the threat of extremism. Needless to say, JI could have been a major terrorist threat to Singapore had the government not controlled extremism in this comprehensive manner.

Lessons from Singapore

There are numerous dissimilarities between Singapore and Pakistan in terms of their demography, territory, economy, mode of governance and the way of life of the people. But, at the same time, one can note that there are a number of similarities between Pakistan and Singapore particularly in terms of their emergence as new states, external threats, internal challenges and opportunities for a better future. It is another story that Pakistan which emerged as a new state in 1947 -- 18 years before the emergence of Singapore, has lagged behind in human development, education, work ethics and the rule of law. The following tables will highlight similarities and dissimilarities between the two countries.

²⁶ Muhammad Haniff Hassan, “Counter-Ideological Work: Singapore Experience” in Anne Aldis And Graeme P. Herd (eds.), *The Ideological War On Terror Worldwide Strategies for Counter Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 153.

Table - I
Basic Facts about Pakistan

| S.No | Item | Facts |
|------|---------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | Population | 174.5 million |
| 2 | GDP | US \$ 157 billion |
| 3 | Per capita income | US \$ 902 |
| 4 | Inflation | 20.8% |
| 5 | Defense Expenditure | US \$ 4.4 billion |

Basic Facts about Singapore

| S.No | Item | Facts |
|------|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | Population | 4.6 million |
| 2 | GDP | US \$ 170 billion |
| 3 | Per capita income | US \$ 36,454 |
| 4 | Inflation | 6.5% |
| 5 | Defense Expenditure | US \$ 8.23 billion |

Source: *The Military Balance 2010* (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2010), 367 and 424.

Table – II
Similarities and Dissimilarities

| S.No | Item | Singapore | Pakistan |
|------|------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Post-independence challenges | Vital | Vital |
| 2 | Consistency in leadership | Applicable | Not applicable |
| 3 | Issue of nation-building | Applicable | Applicable |
| 4 | Process of democratization | Fragile | Fragile |
| 5 | Military's intervention | Not Applicable | Applicable |
| 6 | Economic development | Successful | Under-developed |
| 7 | Corruption | Controlled | Rampant |
| 8 | Governance | Controlled | Poor |
| 9 | Social modernization | High | Low |
| 10 | Violence and | Non-existent | High |

| | | | |
|----|---------------------------|---------|--|
| | Terrorism | | |
| 11 | Political ideology | Secular | Islamic |
| 12 | Relations with neighbours | Normal | Hostile to a large extent with one neighbour |

Table – III
Extremism and Radicalisation

| S.No | Item | Singapore | Pakistan |
|------|---|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | Religious extremism | Controlled | Serious |
| 2 | External role in promoting Islamic extremism | Exists but controlled | Exists |
| 3 | State's role to control extremism | Effective | Not very effective |
| 4 | Drive for the rehabilitation of terrorist groups | In existence | In partial existence |
| 5 | Education and community services to control extremism | Effective | Still not effective |
| 6 | Policy of multiculturalism to control extremism | Exists | Not in existence |
| 7 | Societal role to control extremism | Exists | Not effective |
| 8 | Economic opportunities and development to control extremism | Exists | Marginal |

From the above data on extremism and radicalization, it appears that at the state and societal level, effective measures have been taken to control extremism. But, in Pakistan, in view of large-scale violence and terrorism and socio-economic challenges, the menace of extremism has assumed a major threat to its very existence.

There are more areas of dissimilarities than similarities between Pakistan and Singapore. Ironically, the two countries had started their journey more or less at the same economic plank but in case of Pakistan, lack of a viable leadership, periodic military intervention in politics, corruption, bad governance, illiteracy, backwardness, hostile relations with India and Afghanistan and the dangerous cycle of violence and terrorism transformed

Pakistan into a fragile state. Whereas, consistency in leadership, policy of multiculturalism, tolerance, good governance, emphasis on merit, equal economic opportunities, modernization, social mobilization and normal relations with neighbors have transformed Singapore from a third world state to a first world state. Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, wrote in his memoirs that, "Pakistanis are hardy people with enough of the talented and well-educated to build a modern nation. But unending strife with India has drained Pakistan's resources and stunted its potential. Political will was difficult to exercise in a country without an educated electorate and with the legislature in the grip of land owners who controlled the votes of their uneducated tenant farmers. This made land and tax reforms near impossible. Corruption was rampant, with massive thievery of state property, including illegal tapping of electricity."²⁷ Lee Kuan Yew was approached by several Pakistani heads of state and government, from General Zia-ul-Haq to Benazir Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif and Pervez Musharraf to seek his advice on how Pakistan can follow the Singapore model of modernization and development. But Lee Kuan Yew's advice would need a total reversal of policies that the leaders of Pakistan have been pursuing.

An interesting comparison between Singapore and Pakistan was made by Dr. Ishtiaq Ahmed who spent some years there as a Visiting Professor at the National University of Singapore in the following words:-

Both Singapore and Pakistan embarked on a journey as independent and sovereign nations, after British colonial rule withdrew from South East and South Asia. The leaders of both the countries bequeathed visions [of] state and society which were strikingly similar, in fact, identical. Whereas, Singapore was consistent and constant in the [realisation] of the vision of a state with equal rights for all citizens, in Pakistan, the governments that followed deviated from Jinnah's vision. Such deviations helped the Islamists gain influence and power in Pakistan.²⁸

He further compares different aspects of the two countries by arguing that, "Pakistan is a big state in terms of its territory and population. Moreover, while Muslims constitute a minority in Singapore, in Pakistan they are the overwhelming majority. Both emerged as independent states from British colonial subjugation after the Second World War. Both states began their journey as independent sovereign states with nationalist ideals that were very similar."²⁹ In

²⁷ "From Third World to First the Singapore Story: 1965-2000," Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First*, 470, 468.

²⁸ Ishtiaq Ahmed, "Radicalization and De-Radicalization in Singapore and Pakistan: A Comparison," *Conflict and Peace Studies* (Islamabad), vol. 2, no. 3 (July-September 2009): 11.

²⁹ Ibid., 3.

terms of religious moderation and tolerance, one can find variation between Pakistan and Singapore. But, as Ishtiaq Ahmed pointed out, “Pakistan can learn from Singapore how to balance the freedom of religion with restraints on the misuse of religion to sow discord among different religious and cultural communities. Both Singapore, a tiny city-state in South East Asia, and Pakistan, the second most powerful nation in South Asia, have had to deal with radicalization through vastly different contexts.”³⁰ The question is how Singapore was able to successfully deal with the challenge of ethnic and religious diversity and why Pakistan is still grappling with ethnic and religious fault lines causing not only political instability but also large-scale chaos, disorder and violence in society? What can Pakistan learn from the successes of Singapore in controlling extremism, militancy and radicalization?

A comparative study of Pakistan and Singapore in terms of extremism will draw six important lessons for Islamabad. Extremism is a major challenge for Singapore but for Pakistan it is a matter of life and death. In the last four decades, the transformation of Pakistani society from moderate to extremist and radical has resulted in hundreds of terrorist acts causing thousands of casualties and injuries. From any standpoint, extremism in Pakistan has transformed into radicalization and terrorism.

First, unlike Pakistan, Singapore managed to deal with the threat of extremism by focusing on providing better education to its nationals. Pakistan must follow the example of Singapore where better and modern education has made the difference in terms of dealing with the challenges of extremism and radicalization.

Second, the strict compliance of state laws, rules and regulations provides little space to extremist and terrorist groups to conduct their operations. Preaching of extremist ideology is not allowed in Singapore whereas in Pakistan, the state has been unable to curb the activities of those groups who propagate hate on religious, sectarian or ethnic grounds. The 1973 constitution of Pakistan provides freedom to religious minorities but successive governments in Islamabad have been unable to check the surge of groups who generate extremism and intolerance in society. Pakistan should learn from Singapore as far as the strict implementation of laws pertaining to religious freedom, tolerance and inter-faith harmony are concerned.

Third, the secular nature of the state of Singapore has helped to effectively deal with the threat of extremism, intolerance and radicalization. It is high time that Pakistan should address some of the critical issues which divide its society on sectarian and religious grounds. That is only possible when Pakistan follows a secular road because a religious state by law will only add to polarization in society. The upsurge of religious and sectarian extremist groups

³⁰ Ibid., 12-13.

in Pakistan has more to do with the state assuming a religious identity than with the rise in anti-Americanism.

Fourth, economic progress, modernization, adherence to merit and technological innovation is the fourth lesson which Pakistan can learn from Singapore. A modern, progressive and technologically advanced state provides little space to extremist and hard line groups. The reason why Singapore has been able to effectively deal with the threat of extremism is because of the productive nature of society. Pakistan, which was a role model for many Asian countries in terms of its economic growth and industrialization during 1960s, plunged into retrogression because of the failure of successive governments to give priority to human security, social modernization and technological advancement.

Fifth, Pakistan can learn the lesson from Singapore as far as nation-building is concerned. Like Pakistan, Singapore is also a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state but the process of nation-building in Pakistan is still considered an uphill task. When all the citizens of a country are provided equal opportunities and there is no discrimination on the basis of race or religion, the task of nation-building becomes easier. Despite various challenges, the issue of nation-building in Singapore has not been abandoned. Extremism gets a space when a country lacks cohesion and a sense of identity. Pakistan needs to seriously look into the challenge of nation-building so that the forces of extremism and radicalization are neutralized.

Finally, the existence of a strong, competent and honest leadership in Singapore since its inception as a new state is another important lesson which Pakistan can learn in order to deal with fault lines in governance, economy and politics. A leadership which is clear, perceptive and courageous can defeat the forces of extremism and terrorism in society with confidence. But if the leadership remains indifferent, insensitive, weak and confused on tackling the threat of extremism, the outcome may be further radicalization of society. In many respects, Singapore has been lucky to have a stable and strong leadership since its break-up with Malaysia in 1965. In case of Pakistan, absence of a viable leadership has made matters worse to deal with issues which deepened insecurity, extremism and violence in society.

In Singapore, the leadership has encouraged grassroots' activities at the community level to promote tolerance and harmony which greatly helped marginalize extremist groups. The challenge of extremism in Pakistan can be effectively handled if the leadership is able to pursue a professional approach in dealing with the menace of extremism. This is the most important lesson which Pakistan can learn from Singapore.■