Defining extremism BY H U M A Y U S U F | 2/24/2020

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| THE mass shootings at sheesha bars in Hanau, Germany, and the stabbing of the muezzin of London`s Regent`s Park mosque have put far-right extremism back in the headlines. For too long extremism was intrinsically linked with violent extremist Islamists, while attacks such as the Hanau tragedy were dismissed as the acts of a crazed loner. That has changed. But the continuing lack of precise definitions continues to muddy public discourse on extremism, with serious implications for policy and law.The multitude of labels applied to the Hanau gunman demonstrate the difficulty of articulating far-right extremism: neoNazi, anti-immigrant, Islamophobe, white supremacist, white nationalist, incel, terrorist, etc. But there is an urgent need to better define far-right extremism because consistent language is the first step towards generating coherent policy responses and proportionate legal outcomes.Many argue that there is a futility to defining extremisms. Af ter all, `extremist`is a judgemental term that can be used to describe anyone you don`t agree with. There can be no neutral definition of the term because an extreme point of view can only exist in relation to something else. As such, extremism is usually defined in relation to a centrist political position. But attempts to label different types of extremism have merely highlighted the political and ideological inconsistencies that thrive at the centre in most countries.The difficulty of defining extremism does not, however, detract from the importance of doing so. Clear definitions of extremist categories help countries identify and monitor them. Studies after the New Zealand mosque attacks last year showed that the global media is three times more likely to describe violent Islamist extremists as terrorists than the far right. Consistent use of labels in the media would give the public a more accurate sense of the prevalence of an extremist ideology, and drive effective policy articulation. This is most apparent in the US, where battles over what to call far-right extremists have allowed the administration to obfuscate over and even align with the rise of a hateful and violent movement.The US experience also shows how languages of extremism affect legal outcomes.Islamist extremists in the US are more likely to face terrorism charges than far-right extremists who commit identical crimes but face lesserpenalties.Transparent, consensus definitions of extremism are also needed to prevent the label from being cynically used to criminalise dissent. Politicians and corporates alike enjoy terming their critics extremists as a way of silencing them. Indeed, there is a cur-rent outcry in the UK as counterterrorism police are defining environmental activists, particularly those associated with Extinction Rebellion, as extremists.More efforts are needed to tackle the selective use or abuse of the term `extremist`. In the UK, the Commission for Countering Extremism in 2019 defined a new category of extremist behaviour: hateful extremism. This includes amplifying hate and drawing on hostile beliefs against an `out-group` who are perceived to be a threat to an `in-group`. The `us versus them` aspect enshrined in this definition should capture a range of far-right extremisms.Writing in the New Statesman, Quassim Cassam has argued that focusing on the extremist mindset is a more effective way to identify and respond to new extremist categories. Extremists perceive themselves to be victims; they aspire to a utopian society; they are obsessed with `purity` (eg racial or theological); they thrive on conspiracy theories; they are angry. A focus on the extremistmindset (which would also capture non-violent actors) would give rise to more thoughtful and pre-emptive policy responses.Debates about how to define extremism may seem ex post facto in Pakistan, where the language wars have been under way since the early2000s. But we should not think definitions are irrelevant to us. After all, the failure to appropriately articulate extremist threats has led us to transition from serious concerns about violent extremism and terrorism to `liberal fascism` and sedition. Indeed, the idea that a pro-democracy, pro-human rights positioning is as extreme and threatening as violent or supremacist religious ideologies has been normalised (this is also the case in India, where the `urban naxal` is perceived to be as problematic as the Hindutva ideologue).The power of this language of extremism is apparent in legal outcomes here as well.As Irfan Husain recently noted on these pages, the treatment of liberals (detention, harassment, sedition charges) is more appropriate to that of extremists, while extremists are rewarded with cash, land, media coverage and prestige. Rethinking how we define extremism with a focus on mindset, approach and social outcome may be our only option to course correct now.  The writer is a freelance journalist.Twitter: @humayusuf  |