**[Sources of militancy](https://www.dawn.com/news/1588351/sources-of-militancy)**

[Owen Bennett-Jones](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1411/owen-bennett-jones) 03 Nov 2020

WHEN he launched this year’s Human Development Report, UNDP’s resident representative in Pakistan, Ignacio Artaza, said that terrorism is often a reflection of inequality.

Those who favour such socioeconomic explanations sometimes cite other factors motivating violent jihadists, eg anti-imperialism, particularly anti-Americanism, a Robin Hood mentality, search for masculinity, and national or tribal affiliation. In other words, resentment against the West, the landed upper classes, and other ethnic groups are seen as sources of religious radicalism.

These explanations are rejected by those who argue religious doctrine drives violent acts. Suicide bombers believe they’ll go to paradise, sectarian divisions relate to doctrinal disputes and some sects, eg Deobandis, seem more prone to violence than others.

Many Westerners tend to reject such accounts partly because the role of religion in their lives has become so marginal. In the UK, just five per cent of the population go to church. In a society in which few have religious belief it is hard to accept that anyone’s faith would lead them to commit murder. But there are differing shades of Western opinion. Whilst liberals tend to favour socioeconomic explanations, conservative commentators focus on the role of religion —specifically Islam — in inspiring violence.

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Inequality is only part of the explanation.

The debate surrounding sources of militancy is complicated by exceptions to general rules. How can masculinity be a factor when some women are drawn to violent jihad? What sense does it make to point to inequality when some militants are from wealthy backgrounds? And as for religious explanations, is it not a fact that, as well as inspiring the Taliban, the Deobandis have organisations such as the Tableeghi Jamaat which are committed to peaceful methods of spreading their message?

These contentious issues — and the idea that religion is a tool used by powerful elites as a way of getting others to fight on their behalf — lie behind the two main militancy-related phenomena to affect Pakistan in recent years: Talibanisation and sectarianism. In Punjab, the SSP relied on support from urban traders and low-level officials frustrated by the power of Shia landlords. In this sense, the organisation’s apparently religious struggle was in fact an economic one. Similarly, Lashkar-e-Taiba was aware that young men without a future wished to compensate for their powerlessness and lack of social prestige by being remembered as martyrs. That’s why it ensured their sacrifices were recognised in village-level public meetings in which praise was heaped on the martyr in front of the community.

As for Talibanisation in the northwest, it relied on the destabilising impact of the flows of money that came from the drug trade, the explosion in remittances from the Gulf and US and Saudi funding of the anti-Soviet mujahideen. With resources going to previously marginalised communities, the traditional patterns of authority started breaking down, a process that reached its climax in the Taliban’s murderous campaign against the maliks (2007-2010).

But alongside these socioeconomic factors, the religiosity of ‘martyrs’ shouldn’t be overlooked. Children may attend madressahs because there are no regular schools to go to but if they are unlucky enough to end up in the more extreme ones they are cut off from the outside world and indoctrinated by clerics who teach them that killing ‘kafirs’ will be rewarded in paradise. The growth of Deobandi madressahs in particular has provided an ideological basis for the spread of sectarian ideas. In some cases, the young men who attend these institutions are persuaded they have a duty to fulfil a religious mission and that violence is an acceptable method to advance their cause.

Once graduated, the socioeconomic factors kick in once again as these students find themselves simultaneously despised by the Westernised elite that runs Pakistan and alienated from their own village, even their families who are too poor to support them. They are both rootless and angered by their lack of opportunity.

There are other issues which encourage radicalisation such as the splintering of groups, often as a result of manipulation by state agencies which promote their various agendas. For example, in the 1980s, at the start of the Kashmir insurgency, the Pakistani state encouraged pan-Islamist groups with links to Pakistan rather than nationalist groups that were more independence-minded.

Nearly two decades after 9/11, the world has a far better understanding of the causes of militancy. But that’s not to say that there are simple one-size-fit-all explanations. Socioeconomic factors, religion and manipulation by power elites can all be factors. So when people blame inequality they are right, but it’s only part of the story.

*The writer’s book The Bhutto Dynasty: The Struggle for Power in Pakistan was published by Yale University Press recently.*

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