**[Extreme nation](https://www.dawn.com/news/1784395/extreme-nation)**

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PAKISTAN’s political character is a product of extraordinary circumstances, the British Empire’s geopolitical imperatives, and the absence of a blueprint for the post-independence state. It came into existence in a frenzy of violence, which left over a million dead and some 13m displaced. Historian Ian Talbot argues that Pakistan inherited the more sensitive areas of the British Empire, where maintaining law and order took precedence over the establishment of democratic institutions.

Post-independence Pakistan was an embattled state, as its rivalry with India was born with it. The violent rhetoric of certain Indian leaders, and other pressures, led to “cartographic anxiety” — a fear created by the crisis of identity and survival. This fear has, since, impacted its nature and direction intensely. Eventually, security personnel controlled every aspect of state and society in Pakistan.

As Aaron Friedberg has shown in his book, A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia, insecurity can propel a nation to be self-reliant. He explains how a warring, fragmented 18th-century West surged ahead of united China. In Pakistan, however, the civil-military oligarchy weaponised fear to fatten the state’s repressive organs. Simply put, democracy and welfare were sacrificed at the altar of consolidating the state caught between internal and external hostilities. Consequently, the military-bureaucratic nexus secured a dominant role that has been either overt as martial law or veiled with hybrid regimes.

The oligarchy needed allies as second fiddles and the clergy, political outfits and non-state actors proved amenable. This was hardly unprecedented. A symbiotic relationship between clergy and state goes as far back as the 10th century. Muslim scholars, from Al-Mawardi, Al-Ghazali to Abn Jama’a demonstrated a preference to side with power, ostensibly to avoid civil war or fitna, and Ibn Taymiyya took the position that an agreement between the military and ulema was imperative for a sound society. By implication, and as French historian Claude Cahen argued, he took the caliph out of the equation as the caliphate fell “by right to the effective holder of power”. Saudi Arabia is another example.

They are steps that can be taken to counter extremist violence.

Then there are religiously motivated actors. Recruited from madressahs, they were considered useful for three reasons — to free a part of Kashmir from India, fight in the India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971 and be used as a cheap tool to keep foes at bay. According to estimates, there were only around 300 seminaries in 1947. In 2023, the number of registered madressahs is a staggering 35,337 with 22,000 unregistered ones. Such an exponential growth suggests deliberation and purpose. All these factors created the politics of jihad and a jihadist culture. Unfortunately, as noted academic Aasim Sajjad Akhtar observed in 2014, it is “the military establishment’s patronage of the politics of jihad that allows the jihadi infrastructure to strengthen further with each passing day”.

The following steps, however, can help counter the menace of violent extremism. Firstly, seminaries should be incentivised to include scientific disciplines so that religio-scientists like Abbas Ibn Firnas, the world’s first ‘pilot’ who excelled in both religious and scientific fields, can emerge from them.

Secondly, non-state actors have their own interests in aligning with the state, such as their desire for an Islamic state. With the seventh largest military in the world, Pakistan does not need any of these ‘irregulars’ to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Moreover, the state must break free from the clergy to provide a level playing field to all political parties, and promote democratic values and culture.

Finally, free and fair elections for a sovereign parliament are the need of the hour. Be it physically, psychologically or spiritually, the populace is spent. Its capacity to bear the burden of the unaccountable, insulated state that uses parliament as a sandbag is at an all-time low.

Clearly, the homogenised, hegemonic, exclusivist, top-down nation-building project has failed to deliver anticipated outcomes. Worse still, it has led to exclusion, purification, and multi-layered fragmentation. Eminent American journalist Clifford May’s sombre insight is timeless: “A state committed to the pursuit of religious purity will always find some of the subjects in need of cleansing. Down that path despotism lies.” The question is, can Pakistan afford despotism in the 21st century?

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