The Interplay of Nationalism and Religion in Pashtun Society: An Analysis

Surat Khan

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan. Email: suratkhan81@yahoo.com

Abstract   *This paper discusses the role and interplay of nationalism and religion in the context of Pashtun society. Both nationalism and religion have been pivotal in shaping the international system and in guiding the mutual interactions of human beings and social groups. For the Pashtun society, both religion and nationalism simultaneously exist . Historically, the role and impact of both phenomena have been varied. However, as a result of Pakistan's policy of strategic depth and the resultant Afghan Jihad in Afghanistan vis-à-vis the USSR, religious extremism and radicalization have increased specifically in the Pashtun areas of Pakistan and this rise has conversely impacted the nationalist fervor of the Pashtuns resulting in the decline of the Pashtun nationalism.*

Introduction

This paper discusses the role and interplay of nationalism and religion in the context of Pashtun society. The phenomena of nationalism and religion have been very important in shaping the international system and guiding the mutual social interactions of individuals and social groups. In the case of Pashtun society, both religion and nationalism are present simultaneously. Historically, the role and impact of both phenomena have been varied. However, as a result of Pakistan's policy of strategic depth in Afghanistan vis-à-vis the USSR, religious extremism and radicalization have increased and this rise has conversely affected the nationalist fervor of the Pashtuns and has resulted in the decline of Pashtun nationalism.

Religion and Nationalism in Pashtun Society

Religion and nationalism both the phenomena have been present in Pashtun society sharing an intricate relationship. The intricacy between both the phenomena is due to the reason that both offer an imagined community to their adherents. Nationalism is based on the sense of closeness among a group of the population sharing a common national identity created and evolved as a result of common national symbols, culture, and history. Similarly, every religion offers a system of beliefs and a code of conduct to its adherents and as a result of sharing a common belief system, the adherents of a common religion also have a tendency of imagining themselves as different in relation to the followers of other religions with different belief systems. The concept of Muslim Ummah among the Muslims, in this regard, clarifies the point of an imagined community based on a religious belief system. Due to this complexity, it is challenging and sometimes difficult to study the mutual relationship and influence of both the phenomena vis-à-vis each other.

Moreover, the existing literature on nationalism has ignored the relationship between nationalism and religion. The scholars of nationalism like Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, due to their modernist approach towards nationalism have ignored the relevance and influence of religion in the 18th-century national movements. They believed nationalism to be a modern phenomenon which has mainly resulted due to economic reasons. Another reason for the less focus on religion in the field of social sciences is the scientific and rational perspective of the philosophers of enlightenment and early social scientists. The main argument of the enlightenment thinking was to critically analyze the human society and its issues not on the basis of religious beliefs but on the basis of rationality and scientific thinking based on objective observation. For instance, Voltaire remarked that "age of enlightenment" would replace superstition and authoritarian religious order (Scott, 1994). Similarly, the eminent social scientists of the 19th century such as Karl Marx, Emile

Durkheim, and Max Weber believed that religion was a declining force in the world, one that would eventually disappear (Shupa, 1990). These scholars believed that religion would play a less important role in the modern world. On the same pattern, in the 19th century; particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, the applicability of scientific methods was emphasized by the scholars of Political Science and International Relations. The emergence of Critical Theory as an alternative school of thought in the field of social sciences advocated that religious identities would play an important role in defining the events of the 21st century. The idea of Clash of Civilizations as propagated by Samuel P. Huntington is the reflection of such thinking (Huntington, 1997). This discussion clarifies that in the field of social sciences the phenomenon of religion has largely been overlooked. Consequently, it has been difficult to understand the influence of religion on human society generally and especially in the case of national movements. In understanding the mutual relationship between nationalism and religion in the Pashtun society of Pakistan, It is imperative to generally define religion and analyze its influence in general sense.

Religion can be defined as a belief in sacred and natural being/beings. Additionally, every religion provides its followers with a broader framework and code of conduct regarding life and helps in understanding the complexities of the world. The religious codes of conduct deal with the different aspects of human life. Religion has a deep impact on the behaviour of its followers because believers act in the name of their religion. Due to this reason, religion has played both constructive and destructive roles in human society. Religion has been both a source of peace and violence. Human beings have developed communities, humanitarian and charitable institutions for fulfilling their religious duties. For instance, the advent of Islam transformed the very nature of Arab society from a disorganized society to a powerful and rich society. At the same time, human beings have fought bloody wars on the basis of their respective religions. The Crusades (1095-1291), religious wars, between the Muslims and the Christians point towards the violent aspect of religion in human history. Similarly, the Protestant Reformation in Europe led to the bloody Thirty Years War (1618-1648) in Europe. Even within the same religion, different divisions can be found. The Shia-Sunni divide and the Protestants-Catholics divide show the intra-religious divisions inside the same religions. The Muslim World has been historically divided through sectarian lines. The current pattern of alliances in the Middle East regarding different issues and the Saudi-Iran rift points toward the sectarian/religious divide of the Muslim World. Similar divisions can be found in other religions of the World. It clarifies that religion can be both a source of harmony and violence simultaneously.

The resurgence of religion in the 20th and 21st century makes it important to study the inter-relationship between religion and nationalism. Religion has been historically having varied impacts on nationalist movements. In some nationalist movements, its impact has been crucial whereas in others religion has been less effective. For instance, in the case of Northern Ireland, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, the development of nationalism primarily had religious origins and motives (Rieffer, 2003). The example of Irish nationalism explains that religion like economic factors can play an important role in influencing a nationalist movement. The Irish nationalist movement started as a series of movement in the 12th century. The Catholic population; persecuted by the Protestant Britain through a series of penal laws and restrictions, wanted independence for themselves which they did not attain until 1949. In the 18th century, the Irish movement got inspired by the American War of Independence fought by the Americans against Great Britain for independence. The difference between both the independence movements was the role of religion in both the nationalist movements. The American War of Independence was purely motivated by economic factors whereas, on the other hand, the Irish movement had religion as a primary motive. This example shows the varied level of impact that religion can have on a nationalist movement. Therefore, while studying a nationalist movement, along with other factors such as economic and political causes the role of religion also needs to be kept in consideration.

The Partition of India and Pakistan, the creation of Israel, and the post-revolution Iran also provide examples for understanding the impact of religion on nationalist movement. In these cases, the inter-relationship between the two is so deep that religion and nationalism seem inseparable and synonymous. The Independence Movement for Pakistan was mainly guided by religious motives and slogans. It was reiterated by the leaders of the movement that the Muslims of the sub-continent needed a separate homeland where they could lead their lives freely according to the injunctions of Islam and where they could develop and prosper as a powerful and prestigious country of the Muslim world and international community. Similarly, the creation and nation-building in Israel were also motivated by religious factors. The post-1979 Revolution developments in Iran also points toward the importance of religion for nationalist movements. In Iran's case, the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, by referring to the symbols of the Shia Islam repudiated all the western developments in Iranian society and he referred to it as foreign corruption in their society. These cases show that in some nationalist movements religion has a very central role and without understanding the religious dimensions, these movements cannot be understood. However, all nationalist movements are not necessarily religious in nature instead they are secular in their outlook. The example of modern Turkey and post-1789 Revolution France illustrate this category of nationalist movements.

After the First World War, Ataturk embarked upon the task of building a nation-state in Turkey on western and secular lines. He believed religion to be a private matter of individuals and therefore for his vision of modern Turkey religion was a less important factor. In the same way, the French Revolution of 1789; inspired by the Enlightenment thinking, did not appeal to the religious sentiments of the people of France instead of the Revolution called for curtailing the authority of the powerful Catholic Church and also the privileges of the religious clergy class. As a result, nationalism in the post-revolutionary France purely relied on nationalist symbols for the creation of a strong French identity based on the slogan of liberty, equality, and fraternity. These instances show that some nationalist movements do not rely on religion for the mobilization of masses instead such movements are secular in nature and purely based on nationalist symbols. These instances of various nationalist movements are helpful in making easy the understanding of the inter-relationship of religion and nationalism in the case of the Pashtuns.

Pashtun society also demonstrates the inter-relationship between the phenomena of nationalism and religion. The majority of the Pashtun region had embraced Islam by 1000 A.D (Siddique, 2014). and since then Islam has been an important element in the national identity of the Pashtuns. In contrast, *Pashtunwali,* the customary code of honour followed by the Pashtuns as their way of life, is pre-Islamic in its nature. However, with the advent of Islam, many of the codes of *Pashtunwali* have been adjusted in the framework of Islamic injunctions and teachings. Consequently, it is difficult to separate the influence of religion from the national identity and outlook of the Pashtuns. Even there have been times when through religious teachings, it was attempted to unite the Pashtuns to struggle for national liberation against the rulers of the time at different times. For instance, the Pashtuns waged fights against the Mughal rulers of the sub-continent and against the Sikh rulers of Punjab. Moreover, the nation-building struggle by the Afghan rulers in the early 20th century also tried to blend nationalism and religion to create unity among the Pashtuns. Similarly, the *Khudai Khidmatgar* movement based on Pashtun Nationalism and the revival of the glory of the Pashtuns was an anti-colonial movement of the 20th century (Khan, 2003). These different examples clarify the presence of both the elements of nationalism and Islam in the collective national identity of the Pashtuns. However, the impact of both phenomena has remained varied. Historically, at times, in some Pashtun nationalist movements, Islam and nationalism have been deeply interlinked thereby making them inseparable. However, at times, there have been attempts by some prominent Pashtun leaders to keep the nationalist aspirations secular in their outlook.

In the 16th century, an anti-Mugal movement started from the Pashtun region of Waziristan under the leadership of a moderate and Sufi religious scholar famously known as *Pir Roshan* (the enlightened teacher) and the movement came to be by known as the *Roshnya* which meant the enlightened (Siddique, 2014 Pp. 25-26). The Mughals had come to power by overthrowing the Pashtun Lodi Dynasty of India in 1526. After the death of Zahiruddin Babar, the first Mughal ruler, Sher Sha Suri, a Pashtun, again snatched power from Hamayun, the son of Babar, in 1530. The Suri Dynasty ruled till 1557 and then again the Mughals came to power under the leadership of Jalaluddin Akber often referred to as Akber the Great. In order to consolidate his rule in India, Akber introduced a new religion as Din e Ilahi. This new religion was the combination of prevalent major religions. In response to this development, Pir Roshan started his *Roshnya Tehrik* aimed at healing the tribal divisions among the Pashtuns and promoting unity among them against a common enemy i.e. the Mughals. The base of this movement was provided by the moderate Sufi religious teachings of Pir Roshan enshrined in his famous book *Khair ul-Bayan* which is considered as the first book of Pashto prose. This movement, though motivated by religious teachings, turned into a national liberation struggle of the Pashtuns. To counter the Roshnya Tehrik, the Mughal rulers patronized another Pashtun religious scholar known as Akhund Derweza. This person, belonging to the Hanafi school of Islamic Jurisprudence, countered the teachings of Pir Roshan by relying upon a very strict interpretation of Islam. The followers of Akhund Dervez considered Pir Roshan heretic. The thoughts of Akhund Derveza can be found in his Pashto prose book *"Makhzan ul Islam".* The followers of this movement were staunch supporters of the Mughals. Both this religious movement had importance for the creation of the national identity of the Pashtuns. These movements also helped in the enrichment of the Pashto Language, central to Pashtun nationalism, and literature in the form of producing eminent Pashto writers and poets. This movement continued to have its influence for the upcoming centuries and even today its impact can be seen in the Pashtun society.

On the other hand, some nationalist struggles of the Pashtuns had been secular in nature relying more on the phenomenon of nationalism and appealing to the nationalist and cultural identity of the Pashtun instead of religious identity. For instance, the 17th century Great Pashto Poet and Warrior Khushal Khan Khattak, wanted to unite the Pashtuns against the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb who had imprisoned him for seven years. His national liberation struggle was secular, more nationalistic and less religious in its outlook. Similar nationalist developments can be traced back in neighboring Afghanistan in the first three decades of the 20th century where the successive rulers of Afghanistan tried to modernize and reform the state machinery of Afghanistan on nationalist lines. During this period, such national symbols as national constitution, language, anthem, and even sport were introduced. The national constitution of Afghanistan was based on the principle of equality of all citizens irrespective of their

religion. These developments in the neigbouring Pashtun region had an impact on the nature of another important nationalist movement which started in the N.W.F.P, a Pashtun region of United India. The *Khudai Khidmatgar* movement launched in 1929 under the leadership of Abdul Ghaffar Khan in the N.W.F.P was an anti-colonial nationalist movement which aimed at the revival of the past glory of the Pashtuns. In order to forge unity among the Pashtuns, this movement relied more on appealing to the tenets of *Pashtunwali* instead of religion.

This brief discussion about the inter-relationship of religion and nationalist movements in the context of Pashtun society clarifies the point that both the phenomena i.e nationalism and religion have interacted with each other. During some movements, religion has been a primary factor behind nationalist struggles as explained through the instance of *Pir Roshan*. Conversely, some nationalist struggles of the Pashtuns had been secular in outlook. The nationalist struggles of the Great Poet Khushal Khan Khattak, the early 20th-century nation-building drive in Afghanistan and the famous *Khudai Khidmatgar* movement of Ghaffar Khan illustrate this category. The point that needs to be noted is that the Pashtun society, as a complex society, exhibits both the phenomena of religion and nationalism. The Pashtuns have been practicing Muslims since 1000 A.D and at the same time, they have been following the pre-Islamic customary norms of *Pashtunwali* in their daily lives. However, after the formation of Pakistan, the dynamics of Pashtun nationalism started changing as a result of the threat perceptions of the newly formed state vis-à-vis Pashtun nationalism. To counter the threat of Pashtun nationalism, the newly formed state of Pakistan relied on using religion as a political tool for forging national coherence and directing foreign policy especially vis-à-vis Afghanistan. With the passage of time, such policies; besides succeeding to some extent in countering Pashtun nationalism, have resulted in a more dangerous phenomenon in the shape of religious extremism. The forthcoming discussion generally highlights these policies of the new state through which Islam was employed for political reasons to emphasize and highlight the Islamic identity of the Pashtuns to suppress their national identity and aspirations. The developments following the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and its impacts on Pakistan in terms of religious extremism and Pashtun nationalism are important in this regard.

The invasion of U.S.S.R in Afghanistan is a significant historical event and it has had long-lasting negative impacts on the region. Under the strategic compulsion of the super power's rivalries and the politics of the Cold War, the United States of America decided to confront U.S.S.R in Afghanistan. The chosen mode for this confrontation was proxy warfare by using guerrilla tactics. As a result of Pakistan's closeness with Afghanistan, Pakistan seemed appropriate for acting as the base of this important proxy war. On the other hand, Pakistan had to calculate its own strategic options. Unlike America, communism as an ideology was not a much bigger threat for Pakistan. This war provided an opportunity to Zia-ul-Haq, the military ruler of Pakistan, to legitimize its rule. Moreover, it also compelled the U.S to overlook the nuclear program of Pakistan which had started in 1970 and had been continuing in the 1980s. Similar to the Cold War compulsions of the United States, Pakistan had its own regional strategic threats especially vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan. To respond to these threats, the military establishment of Pakistan devised a policy referred to as strategic depth. This policy basically aimed at having a Pro-Pakistan regime in Afghanistan which would not only ameliorate the insecurity emanating from Afghanistan instead it would also help in providing Pakistan with strategic depth in the case of the latter's confrontation with the eastern hostile neighbor i.e. India. In the context of these strategic calculations, Pakistan and the United States forged an informal alliance to fight this war through the Islamists famously known as the Afghan Jihad. Saudi Arabia also played a pivotal role in terms of providing material and human resource for waging this Jihad against the communists commonly referred to as infidels by the religious clerics during this period. The theatre of this Afghan Jihad and its training and logistical bases were mainly established in the Pashtun regions and the soldiers engaged in this war were religiously motivated students of the thousands of seminaries established and funded and established during this campaign for the fulfillment of the above mentioned strategic goals of the participating states. While thinking about giving practical shape to the doctrine of strategic depth, it seems that the decision-makers did not give consideration to the long-lasting sufferings it might bring for the Pashtuns in terms of radicalization and militarization of their homeland. Abubakar Siddique beautifully explains this scenario in his book as:

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan transformed Pakistan into a frontline ally of the United States. With Washington's blessings, Islamabad's military rulers had virtually a free hand to shape the Afghan resistance. To prevent the establishment of nationalist guerrillas, Islamabad refused to recognize parties exiles associated with the nationalist mainstream. Pakistani agents controlled supplies intended for the Afghan Islamists that had been sent by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Western Europe and China. The Islamists were also funded by wealthy private donors in the Gulf. The regime of General Muhammad Zia-ul Haq promoted the jihad to legitimize Pakistani military rule. Pashtuns were major victims of this policy, as it radicalized and militarized their homeland homeland (Siddique, 2014. Pp. 40-41).

The above-quoted paragraph reiterates the point that during this campaign the focus of Pakistani decision-makers was to discourage nationalist forces and to encourage, support and fund religiously motivated Islamists for waging the Jihad.

As a result of this decade long proxy war, the United States and its allies succeeded in defeating and disintegrating the U.S.S.R until now the second superpower of the bipolar international system. With the Soviet, disintegration, the United States immediately disengaged from the theatre of war to prepare to claim the leadership as a sole superpower of the newly established unipolar international order. Pakistan continued its policy of attaining strategic depth in Afghanistan in the unfolding civil war in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal. The idea of strategic depth seemed to have fulfilled with the establishment of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 1996 recognized only by three countries, Pakistan being one of them. These two decades of war in Afghanistan deeply affected the Pashtuns homeland in many respects. First and foremost, the presence of millions of Afghan refugees, mainly hosted in the Pashtun areas of Pakistan, had negative social and economic impacts. More importantly, the phenomenon of radicalization and extremism increased in the region as a result of the decade long indoctrination through seminaries and religious sermons during the Afghan Jihad. Additionally, the Pashtun homelands were intentionally militarized to achieve United States objectives of Cold War and Pakistan's aims of strategic depth.

The event of 9/11 again changed the dynamics of international politics and revived American interest in the regions to counter the phenomenon of global terrorism. Pakistan again adopted the role of a frontline ally of the United States in its efforts in the Global War on terror. Now both the states had to fight the same elements which they had supported in getting the U.S.S.R disintegrated. This war against terrorism has continued in the tenures of the three successive Presidents of the United States. The end of this war in the form of the complete elimination of terrorism and reaching a political settlement in Afghanistan still seems to be out of sight. From the Perspective of the Pashtuns of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan (former N.W.F.P), there has been an important and fundamental change in terms of increased radicalization and decline in Pashtun nationalism. The American War that started in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, targeted the networks of the terrorist Al-Qaeda and its supporter of the Afghan Taliban, ousted from power in Afghanistan. Consequently, these networks infiltrated into Pakistan's tribal areas referred to as F.A.T.A (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) through the long and porous border shared by Pakistan with Afghanistan. Here, these networks found their indigenous partners as explained by Zahid Hussain in his book the Al-Qaeda Connection. Prominent among the indigenous terrorist organizations of Pakistan is the anti-state Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The majority members and leadership of the TTP are religiously motivated Pashtuns sharing the vision of Caliphate in the Muslim Ummah based on the strict interpretation of Islam. This network, based in Pakistan's tribal areas, has been active in Pakistan and it has been successful in carrying out numerous deadly terrorist strikes in Pakistan. The Presence of such network was complemented by the ascendency of Muttahida Majlis-i- Amal, a combination of religious parties, to the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the neighbouring Pashtun majority province to the tribal areas, in the 2002 General Elections in the country. Thus, the American War on Terror in Afghanistan played an instrumental role in pushing the terrorist networks to settle in Pakistan's tribal areas, a region which had already been used as a launching base for waging the Afghan Jihad in the 1980s. The victory of the M.M.A in N.W.F.P while campaigning for elections had also used religious rhetoric in favour of Jihad against the U.S forces. The historical events of Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and the response of the U.S after 9/11 in the shape of attacking Afghanistan and Pakistan's reluctance to change and revisit its policy of strategic depth contributed to promoting religious radicalism and militarization in the Pashtun region.

Conclusion

This continuous process of the growth of radicalism and extremism in Pakistan has had an important and fundamental impact on the Pashtun society and that is in the form of weakening of the national identity symbols of the Pashtuns. In the aftermath of the Afghan Jihad and the War on Terror, a new religiously motivated class emerged having links or sympathies with the organizations like TTP. As a result of their religious inclinations, the world view of this class tried to change the centuries-old national fabric of the Pashtuns. With the increase in their influence, slowly and gradually this new class started attacking the Pashtun national symbols. For instance, almost in all tribal areas of Pakistan where the Taliban had influence, music and the Pashtun cultural dance *Attan* was banned. Similarly, numerous prominent *Maliks (*tribal elders), who had an important position in the power structure of the tribal areas, have been eliminated through a process of target killings by the terrorist networks such as the TTP. The ultimate impact of this rise in religious extremism in the Pashtun areas has been the decline in Pashtun nationalism as a result of the weakening of the Pashtun national symbols and their centuries-old customary code of *Pashtunwali.*

References

Appleby, R. S. (1994). *Religious Fundamentalisms and Global Conflict. Headline Series No. 301*. Foreign Policy Association, 470 Park Avenue South, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10016-6819; tele. pp. 7-8.

Khan, A. (2003). Pashtun Ethnic Nationalism: From Separation to Integration. *Asian Ethnicity*, *4*(1). Carfax Publishing: Taylor and Francis Group. P.8-9.

Rieffer, B. A. J. (2003). Religion and nationalism: Understanding the consequences of a complex relationship. *Ethnicities*, *3*(2), 215-242. Published in June 2003 by SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA, and New Delhi). P. 217.

Samuel, P. (1996). Huntington, The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order. New York: Touchstone.

Shupe, A. (1990). The stubborn persistence of religion in the global arena. *Religious resurgence and politics in the contemporary world*, 17-26. p. 19;

Siddique, A. (2014). *The Pashtuns: The Unresolved Key to the Future of Pakistan and Afghanistan*. Random House India. P.25. Ibid, P. 25-26. Ibid. 40-41.

Turner, B. S. (2008). *The body and society: Explorations in social theory*. Sage.

The religious scholar Robert N. Bellah spoke of 'civil religion in America' to describe the psycho-social system of beliefs and practices that Americans live by even when we claim not to subscribe to any religion. Even more telling is the Soviet experiment. This was an attempt at shutting out traditional religion altogether, so that there would only be nationalism as a complete substitute. After the era of Stalin, there was the practice of 'posthumous rehabilitation' where Soviet citizens who had died as enemies of the State would be relieved of their alleged crimes and punishments. We do this