

Role of Religio-Political Activism of TLP in Shaping Security Challenges for Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The substantial increase in support for conservative and far-right parties is a growing trend in South Asian politics. It is a part of emergent global tendencies of political polarization and the resultant rise of anti-democratic political forces around the world caused by diverse and unlike reasons. The subsequent outcomes of polarization propensities are steady societal discord and democratic erosion in both the global north and south countries. However, the adverse consequences of the rise of radical and far-right forces are comparatively more apparent in some of the South Asian states due to existing authoritarian traits in respective political systems and frequent political instrumentalization of religion into politics for the legitimacy of governments and regimes. In Pakistan, far-right parties remained less successful in electoral politics which led them to emphasize more on their ability to mobilize people in the name of religion in the form of agitation, protest, and violent demonstrations against the government. The display of radicalized discourses through street power often challenged the writ of the state and from time to time, these far-right groups like Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP) secured their bargaining position to pressure the government in Pakistan to overlook their violations of law and crimes to disturb law and order situation. The religio-political activism of far-right parties in Pakistan is deeply grounded in their discernment of an Islamic state which led them to see religion as an absolute authority over government and society while justifying their political power claims. The underlying study through the case study of TLP, tends to understand that how these religious political parties view the state and society in Pakistan. The emergence of TLP, its radical discourses, and the rise of gradual support to this religious party reflected the growing trend of polarization, anti-democratic trends, and its far-reaching consequences on national integration and most importantly in the larger context of the security of Pakistan.

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1 Introduction

The emergent political trends around the world are largely characterized by growing intolerance, a rise in authoritarian policies, and shrinking spaces for political, social, and religious dissent. The far-right politics in Western states primarily characterized by populist and nationalist movements are viewed as a response to liberal world order. The emergence of far-right politics in Europe is ascribed to the interwar period and globalization whereas their success in electoral politics started in the 1980s and their members secured seats in respective parliaments. The democratic crisis and far-right politics in the West are shaping authoritarian measures while eroding the mechanism and links like representative parties which are used to connect people and social forces with the political process (Chacko & Jayasuriya, 2018). In the West, far-right politics is often reflected in populist discourses as populist leaders tend to challenge the status quo and make populist appeals in electoral politics to form governments. The emergent radicalization of far-right politics and their success in electoral politics so often translates into authoritarian policies and regimes. France, Poland, Hungary, Italy, and Sweden are such examples in Europe as in these states, far-right parties are electorally successful and politically powerful, nevertheless, their ability to weaken liberal democracy differs. The far-right parties in these countries share analogous ideologies of authoritarianism, nativism, and populism (Mudde., 2022). The contemporary far-right resurgence in Europe is largely attributed to the negative impact of neoliberal policies and, the rise of discontent with mainstream parties' policies related to immigration causing national identity and cultural issues. The other key factors are socioeconomic apprehensions of the indigenous set of population in rejection of globalization, the arrival of refugees from conflict-ridden areas, and decision-making spaces and job markets occupied by qualified immigrants in these countries. The political standings of most far-right parties in Europe are centered on opposition to incoming migration while warranting white supremacy over minorities and non-white races.

In South Asia, the roots of polarization can be traced to the second half of the twentieth century and the emergence of nation-states in the region. The dynamics of societal discord and polarization in Asian states are largely based on ideology, ethnicity, and religion (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2020). Religious nationalism is one of the key drivers of conflict causing religious extremism and radical tendencies in South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. The religious-driven ideologies and politics in South Asian countries are used to securitize religious minorities, and mobilize and recruitment of people in religious groups and parties to propagate hate and violence against other religious groups, certain sections of society, government policies, and states as well. In South Asian states, religious-driven political parties occupy most space in the category of far-right politics. The substantial incorporation of religious nationalism in far-right oratory and discourses gave birth to religio-political activism in South Asia which distinguishes these case studies from European far-right politics. In states like Pakistan, where religio-political activism did not succeed ostensibly in electoral politics, other means are employed by religious groups and parties to display their presence to influence the political landscape of the country. In Pakistan with few exceptions of right-wing religious political parties like Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F). etc., most right-wing and far-right parties are not electorally significant. This makes them focus more on their populist and radical oratory to attract religious audiences to accentuate their power to mobilize people in support of their political and religious postures. These religious groups and parties develop transnational links to like-minded religious groups across borders and often pressure the government on some foreign policy issues. The societal support for these

religious parties in some regions in Pakistan significantly increased in the backdrop of the War on Terror and most recently US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the revival of Taliban rule.

Most far-right political parties in Pakistan evade condemnation of coordinated terror attacks against the state, armed forces, security agencies, and public lynching in the name of religion while often making efforts to block laws about the protection of religious minorities and weaker sections of Pakistani society such as women and inter-sex groups. Religious extremist groups do exist in Western societies however they are located at the margin. In South Asia, the state of affairs is contrasting to European societies as these religious groups advocating extremist ideologies occupy center stage of mainstream politics. Religious extremism in South Asia is exhibited through the religiopolitical activism of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. In the South Asian milieu, religious institutions and leaders are empowered either to incite violence or peacebuilding. The underlying reason is the availability of a large number of audiences to religious extremist organizations, especially in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. Their ability to bring people on roads often endangers the law-and-order situation while increasing the probability of risking the physical security of citizens of these states. Religion is a pertinent factor in South Asia countries through which far-right parties and right-wing groups build their support, develop their relation with respective states, secure patronage networks, and advance diaspora outreach (Aoun et al., 2012). Furthermore, the politics of religious extremism in South Asia can be linked to the inconsistencies ascending as a consequence of faulty national policies as governments tend to use religious discourse and legislation either to discord opposition to their policies or to victimize their critics and opponents through religious sticks. For instance, the ruling party in India; the BJP was accused of considerably enforcing discriminatory policies against religious minorities and silencing dissent voices by asserting Hindutva ideology (*Human Right Watch*, 2021; Wirsing et al., 2004).

1.1 Research Argument

This research aims to focus on the origin, ideology, activities, and impact of TLP on Pakistan's security. It also highlights important perspectives on the emergence and development of TLP as a new religio-political player in Pakistan's politics. This research argues that the security Establishment strengthens the political standings of religio-political groups through patronage for political engineering. However, once the Establishment's objectives are achieved, such religious groups and parties become irrelevant though these radical and far-right groups and parties due to their enlarged religious and sectarian influences become a threat to the country's security. Moreover, in the wake of securing popular sentiments, governments adopted a policy of appeasing religious extremist groups the TLP which empowers these radical organizations to assert their power more than their electoral strength.

2 Research Methodology and Research Questions

The underlying research is primarily qualitative and incorporates an explanatory research approach. Primary data is also collected through semi-structured interviews while employing criterion sampling. The interview respondents are political/security analysts, retired military personnel, and academic experts from universities and think tanks who have expertise in security policy, foreign policy, and militancy. study precisely analyses the religio-political activism as a result of far-right politics in Pakistan. The case study of the emergence of TLP and its interaction with the state, government, and society aids in comprehending the role of religiopolitical activism in shaping national security challenges for Pakistan. This research proceeds with the following research questions:

- Why do far-right parties like TLP assert their political power through protest, agitation, and violence?

- How does the political strategy and religious discourse of TLP tend to challenge the writ of the Pakistani state?
- Why politics of protest from a religious party like TLP is dealt with a softened approach in Pakistan?
- How does the religio-political activism of TLP help it to occupy political space in Pakistan while shaping security challenges?

3 Conceptual Framework

The term ‘religio-political activism’ refers to the active engagement of religious groups and organizations in political and constitutional affairs. These activist groups integrate their religious beliefs with political efforts to endorse specific social, moral, or policy reforms. The driving force behind such activism largely stems from their desire to align governmental policies with their religious tenets, beliefs, and ideology. Grounded in their religious convictions, these activist groups strive to influence societal norms and public policies. The motivations for religio-political involvement vary among different religious communities, as they seek to work towards social justice, equality, and the promotion of specific moral principles while safeguarding religious liberty. This form of activism may entail encouraging followers or supporters to participate in various political activities, such as voting, lobbying, attending protests, or advocating for policy changes. It is employed to either support or oppose laws and regulations that align with or diverge from the religious perspectives of these groups on issues such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, religious freedom, and various other social and ethical matters (Gafurov et al., 1996).

The involvement of far-right parties in religio-political activism varies significantly based on the political culture and religious context of South Asian countries. In some instances, these parties are explicitly established to represent the interests and values of particular religious communities or denominations. Their advocacy may center around policies in line with religious beliefs, such as social conservatism, issues related to family values, education, or religious freedom. Some religious political parties actively seek support from religious communities, utilizing religious identity as a tool to mobilize voters. They may enlist religious leaders or symbols to garner support and generate interest among voters affiliated with a particular religion. Religious groups or leaders hold the potential to influence the policy agenda of political parties, encouraging them to address concerns specific to the religious community. Mainstream political parties might form alliances with religious groups or leaders to bolster their electoral support and legitimacy. In certain cases, religious organizations may endorse or support particular mainstream political parties that closely align with their religious beliefs (Behuria, 2008).

Religio-political activism has the potential to shape policy decisions across various government levels. Political parties with religious affiliations may actively work to advance specific legislation or thwart proposals they perceive as conflicting with their religious principles. In certain instances, religio-political activism can exacerbate polarization and contribute to identity politics, with religious differences being magnified and manipulated for political advantage. Motivated by religious considerations, these parties may strive to instigate social and cultural transformations based on their interpretation of religious values. Consequently, discussions and disputes may arise on topics such as morality, gender roles, and the role of religion in public life. The impact of religio-political activism on a country's political landscape is contingent on factors such as the overall political system, the degree of religiosity in the population, and the inclination of political parties to either embrace or resist such forms of activism (Rizvi., 2016).

4 Historical Overview of Religio-Political Activism in Pakistan

Religion is a political and constitutional potent force in Pakistan's political system which makes it an important dynamic to legitimize regimes, and governments and enhances the political claims of various groups and parties. The course of politics of these far-right parties in Pakistan is largely characterized by two factors; their ability to protest and the extent of patronage they receive from the state elite generally to replace other mainstream political and regional parties and to divide their support base. The recent literature on religio-political activism in Pakistan predominantly centers on the intersection of religion and politics within the country. The concept of religio-political activism originated in the late 1940s in the Sub-Continent. It gained official endorsement during the 1970s and early 1980s in Pakistan when the nation underwent a phase of Islamization under the military rule of General Zia-ul-Haq. Throughout this period, the Zia regime introduced various Islamic laws and policies, actively promoting the incorporation of religion into politics to consolidate its authority. In Pakistan, religio-political activism is closely linked with several religious groups and parties, including Jamaat-e-Islami, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan. These entities have played a proactive role in advocating for a conservative, Islamic agenda in the country's political and social domains. The history of religious political activism in Pakistan has been punctuated by numerous controversies and conflicts, such as the Blasphemy Law and the persecution of religious minorities. Some critics contend that the injection of religion into Pakistan's politics has marginalized secular voices and contributed to the erosion of democracy in the nation. Despite these challenges, religio-political activism remains a prominent characteristic of Pakistan's political landscape, with religious groups and parties continuing to exert a substantial influence on the formulation of the country's political discourse and policies (Haqqani, 2010).

Religio-political activism in Pakistan encompasses a political movement aiming to advocate for and implement Islamic laws and values within the nation's political and social structures. This movement traces its origins to the historical foundation of Pakistan as a homeland for Muslims in South Asia, where the fusion of religion and politics has been prevalent since the country's establishment in 1947. The trajectory of religio-political activism in Pakistan has been characterized by various issues and controversies. A pivotal point of contention revolves around the role of religion in the country's political system. Advocates of religio-political activism argue that Islam should serve as the guiding principle for Pakistan's political and social systems, while opponents assert that the nation should be a secular state respecting the rights of all religious and ethnic minorities. The matter of blasphemy laws has also been a focal point of conflict within the religio-political movement. Criticism has been directed at the country's blasphemy laws, which prohibit the insult of the Prophet Muhammad or the Quran, with concerns raised about their alleged misuse to target religious minorities and stifle dissenting voices (Hashmi, 2009).

The Musharraf era in Pakistan, spanning from 1999 to 2008, denotes the period when General Pervez Musharraf assumed power, initially through a military coup and later as a civilian president. The process of legitimizing the military regime imposed constraints on mainstream political parties and their leadership through various authoritarian means. This, in turn, created significant political spaces for both new and previously marginalized actors in Pakistani electoral politics. One noteworthy beneficiary of Musharraf's policies was the emergence of religious political parties, as the regime sought to sideline mainstream political entities. Despite the newfound political openings, religious parties in Pakistan generally faced challenges in securing substantial electoral influence at the national level, struggling to translate their ideological appeal into widespread electoral gains. Throughout the Musharraf era, significant developments unfolded concerning religious and political parties, even though the political landscape became more open. Despite their ideological strength and activism, religious parties encountered difficulties in translating their religious and ideological appeal into electoral success on a broader scale. During this period, these parties often concentrated

on issues related to Islam and national identity, criticizing Musharraf's alignment with the United States after the September 11 attacks and his involvement in the war on terror. This allowed them to resonate with public sentiments against perceived Western interference and maintain their relevance in the political arena (Cohen, 2004).

Despite their electoral weaknesses, religious parties maintained active engagement in various spheres of influence. They participated in legal and political activism, championing causes related to Islam, morality, and social justice. Frequently, these parties orchestrated protests, demonstrations, and sit-ins to propel their agendas forward. The Musharraf era witnessed the proliferation of private media channels and heightened public discourse. Leveraging these platforms, religious parties sought to disseminate their messages and perspectives to a broader audience, although their success in translating this media presence into electoral victories was not always guaranteed. The emergence of extremism in Pakistan within the context of the War on Terror is a nuanced and multifaceted issue rooted in historical, geopolitical, socio-economic, and cultural factors. Initiated in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, the War on Terror significantly impacted Pakistan and played a role in the escalation of extremism within the country. This research endeavors to offer valuable insights into the motivations, ideologies, and mechanisms underlying the phenomenon of religio-political activism and its manifestation in the intricate societal fabric of Pakistan.

4.1 Discussion: TLP as a Far-Right Political Party

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) is well-known in Pakistan for taking a strong stand on religious issues, especially those about blasphemy laws and the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) finality. It surfaced after Mumtaz Qadri was executed in 2011 for killing Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab because Taseer had criticized Pakistan's blasphemy laws. In its first phase, it began as a movement calling for Qadri's release. The second phase began with Qadri's execution in 2016. Rallies, large-scale protests, agitations, and sit-ins were held in various cities in favor of the blasphemy law and Mumtaz Qadri (Basit, 2020; Ghani., 2018). TLP came into the political limelight through demonstrating massive protests, sit-ins, and rallies calling for the stringent enforcement of anti-blasphemy legislation and the preservation of the Prophet Muhammad's reputation, the party attracted a great deal of attention. It also changed its name to 'Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan' in 2017 when it became a recognized political party through its registration with the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) (Malik, 2002). Maintaining the sacredness of Islam and enforcing Sharia law in Pakistan is at the center of TLP's agenda. It has also called for severe punishments for blasphemy, including the death penalty.

In 2017, a month before the famous Faizabad interchange sit-in, an independent candidate; Akhtar Hussain Rizvi who was defaultly associated with TLP contested in a bye-election in Lahore constituency; NA-120 aiming to fill the vacant seat due to disqualification of the former Prime Minister; Mian Nawaz Sharif by Supreme Court of Pakistan. This candidate focused on the issue of blasphemy in his electoral campaign, rallying voters while securing an impressive 7130 votes against strong candidates like Kulsoom Nawaz of PML-N and Yasmeen Rashid of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) while securing 5.7 percent of the total votes costed in the constituency (Khan., 2017). The party became well-known during Pakistan's 2018 general elections, when it received a sizable number of votes, particularly in Punjab despite not winning many seats. TLP's strategies, which frequently include street demonstrations and coercion, have forced the government to make concessions, casting doubt on the legitimacy of the state and its capacity to control such movements without using force. TLP has also participated in several high-profile demonstrations over the years to voice opposition to the government's blasphemy laws and to further propagate its agenda of a Pakistan that is more focused on Islam. The party's dominance has sparked conversations

about how it has and may affect the political and social climate of the country, especially in Punjab (Zaidi., 2020).

The case study of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) exemplifies the emergence of activism centered on a specific issue, particularly the blasphemy laws. TLP's grassroots movement underscores the potency of such movements in instigating political change. Despite controversial methods and perspectives, TLP has effectively mobilized a substantial following, shaping the country's political discourse. However, the party's activism has faced criticism for inciting violence and endorsing extremism (Basit, 2020). The Barelvi citizens, feeling alienated and neglected, found informal expression through Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan's (TLP) disruptive actions, occupying public spaces and staging sit-ins. A significant progression occurred when TLP transitioned into a religious political party, channeling its worldview into the political arena. The party framed the central issue of khatam-e-Nabuwat as a struggle, particularly against other sects, notably the Deobandis. The charismatic leadership within the party played a pivotal role in its authoritative functioning and organizational stability (Sarwani., 2021).

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) actively engages in content creation and consistently confronts its adversaries, revealing a state of turmoil and conflicting politics. Its actions might serve as a means for Deobandis to distinguish themselves from other Barelvi political factions in Pakistan, some of which have formed alliances with non-religious organizations like the Muslim League and traditional political parties. TLP resorts to street protests to compel the government to address its demands, especially when it perceives a lack of attention in the political arena. The party strongly opposes pro-minority policies and advocates for the strengthening of blasphemy laws within the political sphere. For example, TLP's platform explicitly calls for the execution of individuals proposing changes to Pakistan's blasphemy laws (Sarwani., 2021).

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) garners support primarily from the middle-class youth in the Barelvi community, especially those actively engaged on social media. This demographic, comprising lower-middle-class Barelvi individuals, is susceptible to vigilantism and violence within Pakistan's current tumultuous political landscape. TLP effectively connects with this subgroup by appealing to their sense of belonging and encouraging a sectarian approach to political activity. The party's leader, Khadim Rizvi, publicly encourages discontent, reinforcing the group's inclination toward violent behavior and political engagement. The majority of TLP's supporters are young individuals from the poorer and middle classes. When prompted by the group's leaders, TLP protesters engage in destructive actions such as damaging property, attacking vehicles, burning tires, and blocking major roads. The combination of poverty and religious sentiments creates a potentially explosive situation. TLP's choice to adopt a publicly militant stance may be influenced by other Barelvi factions, except Sunni Tehreek, failing to achieve their political objectives and safeguarding shared interests through peaceful means (Behuria, 2008).

In 1984, General Zia-ul-Haq enacted blasphemy laws in Pakistan, criminalizing the insult of Prophet Muhammad and prescribing death as a punishment. Subsequently, various Islamist organizations, including Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), have utilized these laws to justify their anti-Ahmadi and anti-religious minority policies. TLP specifically sought to undermine blasphemy activists, emphasizing their role in organizing rallies in support of these laws. This strategy not only aimed at challenging Deobandis but also served to distinguish TLP from other Barelvi organizations that were more open to forming alliances with different religious-political groups in Pakistan (Mazna, 2017).

TLP has declared its commitment to maintaining blasphemy laws regardless of the consequences, with its manifesto advocating death for anyone attempting to amend these laws. TLP members have been accused of threatening those seeking changes to these laws.

The party has criticized Deobandi clerics, like Maulana Tariq Jameel, for not protesting against suggested amendments to the 2017 Election Bill, which includes modifications to blasphemy laws. Following the Red Mosque incident in Islamabad and the APS event in Peshawar, the Pakistani government sought support from Sufi organizations to counter Deobandi terrorist groups, including TLP. The favorable factor for TLP was the rift between PMLN and the deep state (Basit, 2020).

Table 1
TLP Strategy Against Government Policies

Year	Nature of Event or Legislation	TLP Demands or Reservations	TLP Strategy or Plan of Action to Press Government	Outcomes or Consequences Causing Key Changes
2017	Amendments in Election Bill 2017	Objection to the change of the word ‘Oath’ to ‘Declaration’ Demanded resignation of law minister	Faizabad Interchange Sit-In Protest	Law minister; Zahid Hamid resigned.
2018	Acquittal of Blasphemy case against Christian Women; Asia Bibi	Following the SCP’s judgment, TLP termed the CJ & judges in the bench “liable to be killed”.	Disordered daily life across Pakistan by staging widespread protests	Police arrested over 100 members of TLP, including the party’s chief. As a result of an agreement between the Government (represented by the Federal Minister of Religious Affairs & Punjab’s Provincial Minister of Law) & TLP, authorities pronounced that the government will block the review petition against the respective judgment & Asia Bibi cannot leave Pakistan till decision on the review petition against her acquittal as Government promised to add her name to ECL. However, she departed from the country.

2020	Publication of blasphemous caricatures	of	Expel Ambassador and French goods	French boycott	Violent nationwide protest	The government signed a written agreement with TLP to fulfill their demands and will put the question in parliament.
2021	Arrest of Rizvi	of Saad	Close embassy	French	Protests started in several cities of Pakistan for the release of the TLP leader.	The secret agreement was signed between the government and TLP. Ban was uplifted on TLP. Release Saad Rizvi
					Clashes erupted between protesters and law enforcement agencies.	

Source: (Ahmed., 2022)

4.2 The Opening of Extremism in the TLP

TLP successfully organized rallies and processions in various cities against the amendment of 295-C³ of the Pakistan Penal Code and demanded the death penalty for those found guilty of blasphemy. The slogan was raised “*Gustakh-e-Rasool ki aik saza, sartan say juda* (There is only one punishment for a blasphemer: beheading)”. TLP is largely popular among the impressionable adolescents of the lower middle class. When an organization like TLP calls upon a demonstration, people vent their rage and fury by trashing public and private property, assaulting automobiles, burning tires, and blocking highways (Basit, 2020). For instance, on the occasion of Qadri’s Chelum,⁴ on March 27, 2016, around 2000 protesters entered Islamabad’s Red Zone. They held sit-ins and demanded that the government declare Mumtaz Qadri a hero while turning his jail cell into a national historical site. They also asked for the execution of the death sentence of Asia Bibi, and the termination of Ahmadis from government jobs. Such sit-ins and protests enabled TLP to acquire a bargaining position and the government had to negotiate to call off the blockade of roads and demonstrations (Basit, 2020; Majoi, 2021).

In November 2017, there was a three-week sit-in held at the Faizabad interchange, deliberately blocking the highway connecting Rawalpindi and Islamabad. This protest centered around the Election Bill of 2017, specifically addressing changes in the oath wording for both the electorate and parliamentarians. The government attributed this alteration to a clerical error, while religious parties perceived it as a softening stance toward the Ahmadis. Despite the reversal of the amendment, demonstrators insisted on the resignation of Law Minister Zahid Hamid. The police were unable to disperse the protestors, prompting the government to seek assistance from the army. However, the army declined to use force, encouraging instead negotiations with the TLP. Eventually, through the army’s mediation, an agreement was reached. This pact ensured the Law Minister’s resignation,

³ A specific clause in the ‘Pakistan Panel Code’ known as 295-C, which was incorporated in 1986 by an act of parliament and meant to uphold respect for the Prophet. 295-C has become an important point of their sectarian identity and true follower of Islam. For further detail, see: <https://pakistan.org/pakistan/legislation/1860/actXLVof1860.html>

⁴ Ceremony held on the completion of forty days after the demise of Mumtaz Qadri

released TLP prisoners, dropped their cases, and established a body to investigate police actions against the protestors. However, controversy arose regarding money distributed to the demonstrators by DG Rangers Punjab after the agreement. Military officials claimed they were assured the protestors could return home peacefully. Ultimately, the Law Minister apologized and resigned, significantly bolstering the party's morale and prompting the government to yield to their demands (Zaidi., 2020).

When the caricature competition in the Netherlands was announced in August 2018, the TLP called for another march against Islamabad to put the government in a tough position once more. Khadim Rizvi compelled the administration to cut all ties with the Dutch government, which created a headline in international media. However, before the Pakistani government could act, the Dutch Prime Minister called off the competition (Majoi, 2021). Likewise, the PTI government appointed an Ahmadi as a member of the Economic Advisory Council. Khadim Rizvi threatened the government with a nationwide protest due to which the appointment of the said academic was called back (Sabat et al., 2020; Sevea, 2018). In 2018, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan unveiled its 20-point election manifesto intending to contest its first general elections. The main features of the manifesto were the supremacy of Islam and the sanctity of the Prophet (PBUH), implementation of Sharia, elimination of internal and external forces hostile to Islam, eradication of terrorism and corruption, creation of an Islamic welfare state and bloc of Islamic countries for security of the Muslim *Ummah* would be established. Additionally, a new ministry would be formed named “Amar Bin Maaroofo Nahi Anil Munkir” to promote Islamic values, ban co-education, and also work against vulgarity. It also included that foreign policy would be changed in line with Islamic teachings, an interest-free economy, and engaging in trade for the country's prosperity. TLP started its electoral politics a few months before the general election of 2018 and gained momentum while having a strict stance on the Namoos-e-Risalat (Sareen, 2021; Shah, 2021). According to the Election Commission report (2018), TLP failed to secure any seat in the National Assembly though won two seats in the Sindh Assembly. Despite this, TLP scored a large number of votes and emerged as a significant political force. A unique aspect of TLP was not to ally with any other party in the general elections of 2018 (Qureshi & Naz; Sevea, 2018).

The state of Pakistan often deals with religious extremists for political and strategic reasons. For instance, PML (N) and PTI governments time to time accept unreasonable demands to appease the TLP. In this view, the PTI government was one step forward to appeasing TLP by conceding to its demands over the remarks of French President Macron to defend the right to make a caricature of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as an integral part of French secularism and freedom of expression. The government promised to consider the expulsion of the French ambassador to Pakistan within two or three months hoping that it might temporarily end the protest. It was also assured to table a resolution in parliament and boycott trade with France that weakened the state's authority (Kaura., 2021; Sareen, 2021). Two days after the government's assurance, Khadim Rizvi passed away. After forty days of mourning for Khadim Rizvi at the end of January 2021, his successor Saad Rizvi reminded the government to implement the November 2020 agreement. PM Imran Khan stated that no other leader has done more to highlight the issue of blasphemy at the international level because it was also a part of his faith. The PTI government made a case that it is not feasible to end diplomatic ties with France because it would hurt Pakistan more than France and also influence Pakistan's relations with the European Union (Kaura., 2021; Sareen, 2021). After three days of violent protest across the country, the Punjab government detained Saad Rizvi in April 2021 to maintain peace and public order, placed an order for a country-wide crackdown against TLP members, and declared its proscribed organizational involvement in terrorism under the Anti-terrorism Act. As news of Saad Rizvi's arrest hit the media, the TLP supporters gathered on the road across the country. The government decided to ban TLP and

detained its leaders further enraged the supporters. In another attempt to force the government to cut diplomatic ties with France, the protesters began a march towards Islamabad. The government initially ordered for use of force to prevent protesters from reaching Islamabad, leading to the death of several people and policemen during violent clashes in Punjab. The PTI government held negotiations with TLP leaders while the protesters stayed in Wazirabad, where it was announced to call off the protest as a result of a deal with the government. In the larger national interest, the ban on TLP was lifted and Rizvi was released in November 2021 (Ahmed., 2022; Gabol., 2021; Haider., 2021; Shah. & Ali., 2021).

The capitulation of government raised questions on the capacity of the state to combat the existential threat to the country. The writ of the state seemed to fail in front of the lawlessness of TLP (Hussain., 2021). In a short period of five years, TLP forced the PML and PTI governments to accept the legitimacy of its ideology through street protest and challenged the writ of the state. TLP's radical narrative affected the Pakistani diaspora as the influence of TLP is not just limited to Pakistan. The stabbing attacks in Paris injured two men carried out by Ali Hassan, the follower of Khadim Rizvi. The incident happened in 2020 near the former office of Charlie Hebdo, a French magazine that published a caricature of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) considered blasphemous across the Muslim world (Ahmed., 2022).

4.3 Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan: Challenge for the Security of Pakistan

The question arises, who does and does not consider TLP or similar groups as a threat to national security? Have unbiased researchers spoken or have followers or supporters of these groups made these claims? The far-right- and right-wing groups have impaired the three aspects of the national security of Pakistan. The first challenge is for human security as certain groups of people are influenced by these rigid attitudes and adopt hateful behavior towards common people in society while causing loss of life through terror attacks, displays of violence, and lynching. Second is the socio-economic aspect of security. That is, how economic affairs and daily life in Pakistan are affected due to sit-ins and protests by such groups. Third is the political aspect, that is, to what extent does the radical behavior of such groups lead to political instability? Education is part of the culture and to what extent an already weak education system would be affected by protests and strikes of such groups?

The assessment of TLP's threat to Pakistan's security may vary depending on different perspectives and the evolving political situation in the country. During semi-structured interviews conducted for underlying research, most respondents viewed TLP as a threat and national security concern because of its resort to the use of violence. The majority of respondents considered widespread support available to TLP as a key reason to makes it difficult for the state to take decisive action against it. However, some of the respondents expounded that TLP is a legitimate political party with mass support. Participants' opinions were varied on how to handle the TLP issue, with some suggesting legal action while others questioned the status of the party as an extremist group. One argument emerged that the rise of political parties like TLP is due to flaws in policies and the use of political engineering to suppress dissenting voices. It was also pointed out that TLP does not cause any problems as long as it uses non-violent methods to agitate. However, if it is involved in violent and extremist activities, it becomes a threat to national security and should be treated as such. One of the respondents suggested that banning parties like TLP is not a valid solution as it will not discard its activities so it's better to provide them space to electorally contest their political power claims. The effective way is that once they break the law they register cases against them to pursue these cases, arrest them, and take police action against them. Another participant pointed out that TLP does not have a militant or armed wing like other extremist groups, while Mullahs and Mosques are core social institutions in Pakistan. Participants also conferred that the state sponsors religious groups and parties that have an impact on Pakistan's national security. One of the respondents stated that religious groups like TLP are being used for political purposes as Jammatt-ul-Dawa was used in the past. However, if the

state is serious about overcoming the problem of religious extremism, it must review the political engagement of state elites with extremist groups. The majority of respondents considered it the major weakness of the state's approach towards extremist organizations.

It was also pointed out that the TLP was created by the security establishment, but later left unattended, leading to security problems. During the violent protests of the TLP, several innocent civilians and law enforcement personnel were killed, raising questions about national security. Therefore, these kinds of groups that we have created ourselves are affecting our national security. Unbiased research and monitoring of such groups is needed to understand their impact on society and national security. In contrast to hasty and retaliatory action. The respondents' views emphasized the need for long-term state policies and strategies to address the problem of religious extremism. Unfortunately, the state response to the phenomenon of religious extremism leading to an increase in terrorism is not consistent. Most respondents agreed that any non-state actors who act against the interest of the state are a threat to the national interest. So, it is the responsibility of the state to constrain them. TLP became a non-state actor when it was banned in 2022 for a short period. After the ban was lifted, it became a stakeholder and relevant to society. It has street power that exerts pressure on the state. The interview results emphasized the potential of the TLP to pose a serious threat to Pakistan's internal security and international image, as evidenced by the incident of lynching of a Sri Lankan national in Sialkot, in December 2021. It also has grassroots sympathies as it fights for Khatam-e-Nabuwat (a religious belief related to the finality of the Prophethood of Muhammad). On a similar footing, it was also argued by a few respondents that the state should take a firm stand against all extremist parties, including the TLP and JUI (F) because political parties like TLP deteriorate the image of Pakistan at the international level.

5 Findings

This research examines the rise of religious-political activism in Pakistan and its impact on the national security of the country. Pakistan's formation was rooted in Muslim political mobilization in United India in the name of Islam, especially during the last decade of British rule. The partition of United India in 1947 was characterized by religious identity as the principal consideration. In post-partition, this led to making religious parties and their affiliates politically relevant in Pakistan's politics despite their historically weak electoral position. In the post-1971 era due to the initiation of the Islamization process through state discourses and measures to transform Islam as a constitutional potent force in Pakistan, religious parties became politically empowered. The religious political parties started to address their Islamic concerns with added political activism leveraging religion and their ideological perspectives to gain political traction. In the contemporary political landscape of Pakistan, among these, the most prominent Islamic political entity is Tehreek-e-Labbaik, led by the renowned figure late Khadim Hussain Rizvi. Islamic parties are generally identified as confessional organizations publicly advocating Islamic principles, often relying on religious references in their discourse to articulate and safeguard their faith. The predominant Maslak in Pakistan is the Bareilvi sect, followed by the Deobandi. The goals of Pakistani religious parties might not solely aim for the establishment of Islamic law but also align with specific sectarian, cultural, and professional objectives.

Religious parties play a pivotal role in uniting and reconciling disparate objectives within decentralized denominational social movements. This research evaluates the implications of religious parties' politics in Pakistan. Any religious sect participating in elections exerts pressure on others to follow suit, potentially risking a loss of influence otherwise. The impact of Maslaki Parties on state cooperation is influenced by two complementary factors. On one hand, when their relationship with the state is strained, denominational parties face exclusion from political decision-making. On the other hand, Pakistan, a fragile state, heavily leans on its Islamic heritage, similar to many post-colonial

politics. The key concerns involve proscribing un-Islamic practices such as alcohol consumption and obscenity, resisting legislative reforms related to marriage age, divorce, sexual consent norms, and domestic abuse. Moreover, marginalizing modernists and imposing severe sanctions on heretical groups like the Ahmadis, originally a Deobandi cause, for "blasphemous" speech, a Barelvi touchstone, and enforcing Ramadan fasting and punishment for blasphemy constitute significant elements.

The TLP, from the Barelvi sect⁵ of Sunni Islam, came to the front during the War on Terror when Deobandi hardline groups started targeting the shrines and mosques of the Barelvis. In an incident in Lahore, the shrine of revered Data Ganj Bakhsh came under attack. However, the real rise of TLP came in the wake of the assassination of former governor Punjab Salman Taseer and the execution of his assassin, Mumtaz Qadri, who became a hero overnight. Following Taseer's assassination and Qadri's execution, the TLP movement gained momentum. Peer religious groups fostered a collective consciousness in support of specific political or religious issues. The TLP leveraged Qadri's case to bolster its political influence, positioning itself as the self-appointed guardian of Prophet Muhammad's honor (Hurmat-e-Rasool). Engaging in political agitation, large-scale protests, and rallies, the TLP made significant strides. For instance, around 2,000 TLP protestors reportedly entered Islamabad's red zone during Qadri's Chehlum in 2016, demanding various actions from the government, including designating Qadri as a hero and implementing changes in the Election Bill of 2017. Despite their unsuccessful electoral bid in 2018, TLP secured substantial votes, becoming Pakistan's fifth-largest political party and the third-largest in Punjab.

Unlike other parties, TLP refrained from forging electoral alliances, relying instead on government support arising from Sufi groups' involvement in counteracting Deobandi terrorist organizations post the Peshawar APS attack and the Red Mosque protests in Islamabad. Additionally, TLP capitalized on the discord between the PML-N government and the deep state, utilizing the military's moves to support other religious groups and destabilize the PML-N regime to expand its political influence.

The growing influence of TLP across Pakistan particularly in Punjab poses a challenge to national security. In recent years and on several occasions, TLP at times has effectively paralyzed the government with its demands, most of which were completely unacceptable (like the expulsion of a French Ambassador or removal of a Federal Minister), even inconsistent with international and national norms. Despite this, the State showed complete subservience. If the State succumbs to the demands of TLP, which it did on many occasions, how is it not considered a national security issue, one may ask; in which other country can one group bring down the State power to its knees? The fact that this group is backed by a powerful lobby for political purposes is quite another matter. But one ought to remember, when empowered or armed, a group would no longer restrict itself to the original goal but would go far beyond. The roots of TLP are deep, especially in Punjab where the death of its leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi saw the largest funeral congregation in the country's history. The shrine of Mumtaz Qadri is visited by tens of thousands of his devotees. That the very person paid to protect an official assassinated him shows the deep roots of extremism in the country. What a state's backing or empowering of such groups can do can be measured by the reaction of the Taliban government in Kabul which took over after the hasty withdrawal by the United States under Biden administration. The Taliban were vehemently backed by Pakistan on the misplaced notion that once the US withdrew, the Pashtun Taliban government would do Pakistan's bidding and secure their country disallowing India any ingress political or military. It has proved otherwise. The Taliban government has not only implemented independent self-serving policies but refused to aid Pakistan in controlling or reining in TTP. The recent violent attack in Peshawar Mosque that

⁵ softer "Sufi" version with belief in mysticism

resulted in the killing of over 100 innocent worshippers and TTP claiming responsibility is a clear demonstration of how much Pakistan's policy of aiding Taliban or similar groups has helped the country. TLP may not have been a threat for long as it can be kept on a tight leash by a powerful establishment. Once it deems it can unshackle and operate independently, it would most certainly be detrimental to the national security interests of the State. It must be remembered that tens of thousands within the armed forces (military) rank and file are die-hard supporters of TLP or at least, its ideology of Khatam-i-Nabawat, blasphemy law, etc.

6 Conclusion and Recommendations

This research also highlights the complex relationship between the state and extremist groups in Pakistan and suggests adopting a more nuanced approach to address the problem. A comprehensive approach is required to address the issue of religious extremism at the state, policy-making, and societal levels. Due to the TLP's unyielding ideology, well-organized mobilization, and ability to attract large crowds have fostered an environment conducive to social unrest, violence, and potential national instability. TLP's demand for strict implementation of the blasphemy law and its confrontational tactics have resulted in frequent clashes with law enforcement agencies leading to widespread disruptions. Its extremist rhetoric not only encourages religious intolerance but also undermines Pakistan's founding ideals of plurality, diversity, tolerance, and democratic federalism. The respective organization's ability to exploit religious sentiments and manipulate public opinion is a serious obstacle to the government's efforts to maintain law and order, promote social harmony, and protect the rights of all citizens.

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