

***Moonis Ahmar*****UNDERSTANDING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: PAKISTAN AND THE  
PREDICAMENT OF YOUTH****Abstract**

In South Asia, contemporary Pakistan is one of the most affected countries as far as terrorism and violent extremism are concerned. Although, the phenomenon is not new in Pakistan, the country, however, witnessed a gradual resurgence of violence and extremism during the last three decades. This paper examines the phenomenon of violent extremism by linking it with the radicalisation of youths in Pakistan. It dwells at length the permeation of extremism in various segments of Pakistani society in the post-1971 Pakistan; the role of state in not reversing the tide of religious extremism which got an impetus because of the Afghan War and the events occurring in post- 9/11 period. Why the culture of tolerance witnessed erosion in the last four decades and how ethics and values declined particularly among the new generation of Pakistan are also be examined in the paper. More so, the transformation of extremism from moderate to radical and violent are also examined while focusing on the erosion of the culture of tolerance and the permeation of violence at societal level. A road map dealing with the predicament of youths in Pakistan by eradicating extremism is also discussed and plausible solutions of growing radicalisation of youths of this country are delineated in this paper. It is argued that meaningful steps need to be undertaken by the people at the helm of affairs to ensure positive transformation in the approach, attitude and behaviour of youths to prevent them from falling into the trap of intolerance, extremism and violence. And such steps include not only social, economic and governance reforms but also must include extensive reforms of the education sector as well.

**1. Introduction**

The phenomenon of violent extremism in Pakistan is not new but it got an impetus in the last three decades. Intolerance, radicalisation, militancy, violence and terrorism take their roots in a society which is frustrated and ridden with economic and social injustices. Therefore, extremism, if not controlled, can take a violent shape; can polarise the youths of the country and destabilise not only society but also the state. It is not only in Pakistan where the youth is vulnerable to violent extremism, but it is a phenomenon, which is common in South Asia and in other regions of the world.

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Conceptual understanding of violent extremism means the mindset and approach which promote feelings of hatred and fanaticism against a particular person or a group. When intolerance permeates in the minds of people because of various reasons, the outcome is its transformation in a violent manner threatening the survival and security of people.

This paper will examine the phenomenon of violent extremism by linking it with the radicalisation of youths in Pakistan by responding to following questions:

1. What is the conceptual *basis* of violent extremism?
2. How has violent extremism *impacted* on the society of Pakistan?
3. How is the *predicament* of the youths of Pakistan related to the phenomenon of violent extremism?
4. How can violent extremism in Pakistan be *neutralised* and what are the impediments in this regard?
5. How can the *process* of de-radicalisation of youths of Pakistan be unleashed?

Furthermore, the paper will dwell at length the permeation of extremism in various segments of Pakistani society in the post-1971 Pakistan and the role of state in not reversing the tide of religious extremism which got an impetus because of the Afghan War and the events unfolding in post-9/11 period. Why the culture of tolerance witnessed erosion in the last four decades and how ethics and values declined particularly among the new generation of Pakistan will also be examined in this paper. More so, the transformation of extremism from moderate to radical and violent will also be examined in this paper while focusing on the erosion of the culture of tolerance and the permeation of violence at the societal level. A road map dealing with the predicament of youth in Pakistan by eradicating extremism will also be discussed and plausible solutions of growing radicalisation of youths of this country will also be delineated in this paper. The central idea that is analysed in this paper is: 'Human and Social Development' in Pakistan will not take place unless its youths are productive with better social learning, education and professional training.

The culture of violent extremism was noticeable in Pakistan, even before 1971. For instance, in November 1970 at the Karachi airport, the airline cargo truck driver, Feroze Abdullah killed the Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Zygryd Wolniak who was accompanying the Polish President Marian Spychalski and going back to his country after five-day official visit to Pakistan. In that incident three Pakistani security staff, press reporter and photographer were killed and many were injured. According to Associated Press, the driver was arrested and confessed to the police that, "I want

to eliminate all enemies of Islam. I wanted to kill all the visiting Polish party who are Socialists. Socialism is against Islam and Socialists want to destroy Islam and Moslems".<sup>1</sup> Such was the mindset representing a school of thought which propagated hate against a particular ideology. During 1970 and 1977 election campaigns, religion were used by various political parties merely for political gains and reflected their extremist and militant mindsets. The slogan that "Islam is in danger" was used by the right-wing political parties during 1970 elections so as to get popular support but failed in their task as religious parties faced an electoral rout in these elections.

The replacement of the culture of tolerance with the culture of violent extremism in Pakistan is an interesting phenomenon because once a relatively peaceful country is now perceived that it has been transformed as extremist and radical. How Pakistan can transform as moderate and tolerant country needs a major shift in its societal and state approach on issues which are critical in nature and must be dealt in a prudent manner. Transformation in the mindset of people who over a period of decades patronised and promoted extremism will, however, be an uphill task but needs to be taken by the state and societal actors.

## 2. Conceptual Basis of Violent Extremism

The shift from extremism to its violent form in Pakistan is the outcome of a process encompassing transformation in attitude, behaviour, role and perception of people over a period of several decades. Following the unleashing of the so-called process of Islamisation by the then military regime of General M. Zia-ul-Haq and the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, a new generation of 'Jihadists' emerged in Pakistan propagating religious extremism.<sup>2</sup> The culture of extremism and violent extremism is thus a phenomenon of 1980s but has deepened in Pakistani society with the passage of time. Analysing the nexus between extremism and culture, Elaine Pressman finds "extremism to be culturally relative term in that extremist beliefs are dependent on the cultural perspective since the person who holds views which are considered to be extreme within one cultural context or time may not be considered to hold extremist beliefs within another cultural context or time".<sup>3</sup>

How the concept of extremism and violent extremism are defined and why there still exist misconceptions about the rise of intolerance and violence needs

<sup>1</sup> *Daily Kent Stater*, Vol. LVI, No. 24, 04 November 1970. Available at <http://dks.library.kent.edu/cgi-bin/kentstate?a=d&d=dks19701104-01.2.7>, accessed on 02 April 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Hassan Abbas, *Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army, and America's War on Terror*, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2005, pp. 89-132.

<sup>3</sup> See Dr. Elaine Pressman, "Risk Assessment Decisions from Violent Political Extremism 2009-02", Canadian Center for Security and Intelligence Studies, 2009, quoted in Muhammad Feyyaz, "Youth extremism in Pakistan – Magnitude Channels, Resident Spheres and Response," in *Defense Against Terrorism Review*, Vol. 6. No. 1, Spring & Fall 2014, p. 65. Muhammad Feyyaz argues that the literature views extremists as diseased, immoderate, inflexible or irrational actors of times mixing conservatism as well as sentimental attitudes of society with religion as narrative. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

to be examined in some detail. According to the Macmillan English Dictionary extremism is a, "tendency to have political or religious ideas that are considered extremely unreasonable by most people".<sup>4</sup> Ideas which some people, groups or state wants to impose on others is counterproductive and reflects an extremist mindset. The Greenwood Encyclopaedia of International Relations defines extremism as, "immoderation in policy or in one's intellectual, political, or social opinions and judgments".<sup>5</sup> A country which has a history of intolerance and promoting fascism cannot be termed as normal and is certainly a threat to those who want to adhere to a peaceful way of life. Oxford English Dictionary defines extremism as "opposed to moderate".<sup>6</sup> In the Saffire's Political Dictionary, extremism has been defined as "a position at the either end of the ideological spectrum and home of politically far-out".<sup>7</sup> Merriam-Webster dictionary defines extremism as, "the quality or state of being extreme". Collins English Dictionary defines extremism as, "it is a behaviour or beliefs of extremists".<sup>8</sup> Therefore, moderation and sanity cannot be imposed merely by speeches, table talk or rhetoric but requires a mindset which has a respect for other cultures and religions as a key to eradicate extremism and violent extremism. The National Action Plan (NAP) of Pakistan which was announced following the attack on Army Public School (APC) on 16 December 2014, killing dozens of children focused on de-radicalising society and eradicating violent extremism.

According to a research carried out by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, Islamabad, "extremism means forcefully rejecting the existing means of political participation, attempting to create new ideologies and narratives to bring about a structural change in all spheres of life (social, political, economic or ethnic) by challenging the legitimacy of existing system institutions".<sup>9</sup> In a book, *Extremism and the Internet* by Peter Brophy, Jenny Craven and Shelagh Fisher, extremism is defined as "an individual or group's willingness to promote their cause by violence and by the denial of fundamental human rights to others".<sup>10</sup> In a book, *Political Extremism and Rationality* edited by Albert Breton *et al.*, "political extremist could be defined as one who uses extremist method, for examples, bombings, inflammatory language, terrorist activity and so forth, but whose platform is or may be centrist rather than extremist in political (left-right) space".<sup>11</sup> Nobel laureate from South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu defines extremism as: "when you do not allow for a different point

<sup>4</sup> Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, Oxford: Macmillan Edition, 2002, p. 490.

<sup>5</sup> Cathal J. Nolan, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of International Relations*, Vol. 1, A-E, London: Greenwood Publishing Company, 2002, p. 529.

<sup>6</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> *Saffire's Political Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*, London: Harper Collins Publications, 1995, p. 589.

<sup>9</sup> Syed Mazhar Abbas Zaidi, "The Process of Radicalization: Contextualizing the Case of Pakistan", in *Conflict and Peace Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, April 2011, quoted in Abdul Basit, "Countering Violent Extremism: Evaluating Pakistan's Counter-Radicalization and De-radicalization", in *IPRI Journal*, Vol. XV, No 2, Summer 2015, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Brophy, Jenny Craven, and Shelagh Fisher, *Extremism and the Internet*, Manchester: Center for Research in Library & Information Management, 1999, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Albert Breton, *et al.* (eds.), *Political Extremism and Rationality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 25.

of view; when you hold your own views as being quite exclusive; when you don't allow the possibility of difference. When extremism starts to have a political end, for example to force governments to the table of negotiations for some changes in their policies. It starts to become synonymous with radicalisation".<sup>12</sup> Based on the above definitions and discussion on extremism four major conclusions could be drawn. First, extremism is a mindset which tends to impose one's own way of life and ideology on others by coercive and fearful means. Second, extremism is contrary to normal behaviour of people and it tries to propagate something which can lead to violence and destruction. Third, the transformation of a moderate and peaceful culture into extremist is a universal phenomenon as all over the world one can notice the assertion of extremist groups. Finally, extremist approach, if transformed as a policy of state can be lethal because it can result into widespread violence. Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Japan adopted extremism, intolerance, violence and aggression as a state policy by persecuting and eliminating their opponents thus causing lethal damage to humanity. Furthermore, extremism flourishes in a culture of intolerance where dissent and critical thinking are not acceptable by those people and groups who want to impose their own ideology or way of life.

Conceptual dimensions of extremism and violent extremism should also include three major characteristics. First, the deep level of frustration, anger and antagonism prevailing among those who behave or act in an intolerant manner either because of their economic predicament or fear that their culture or religion may be under threat. Second, the motivation and inspiration from those who convince potential extremists about the justness of their cause or ideology. Extremism is the outcome of a process in which substantial indoctrination takes place till the time the potential extremist is ready to go to any length in order to achieve his or her objective. Third, the extremist mindset lacks prudence and rationality in order to justify militant or terrorist act. To a large extent, the bulk of violent extremists are those who are categorised as youths and it is this segment of society which is highly vulnerable to violence and terrorism. Furthermore, the transition from a normal to an extremist mindset also includes the absence of a positive approach and the productive use of time. In a country where human development is the priority and people are engaged in productive activities, there are meagre prospects of people, particularly the youth drifting into extremism or violent extremism. Such things only happen in a society where there is huge unemployment; lack of acquiring good quality and affordable education; absence of good health, sports and recreational opportunities. During the 1960s, Pakistan was considered as a role model in many developing countries particularly South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia because, the focus and thrust of government at that time was on strengthening the process of modernisation, industrialisation and human development. Dr. Mahbub ul Haq, the legendary figure in Pakistan's economy was known for his focus and emphasis on Human and Social

<sup>12</sup> Available at <http://theplayhouse.org.uk/tapestry/category/background/what-is-extremism/>, accessed on 23 March 2016.

Development<sup>13</sup>. Had Dr. Mahbubul Haq's vision on 'Social and Human Development' in Pakistan been sustained, neither the radicalisation nor the extremism among the youths of Pakistan would have taken place because of his thrust on providing better education, health, housing and employment opportunities.

### 3. Impact of Violent Extremism

A major impact of violent extremism is the erosion of values of tolerance, moderation and enlightenment in Pakistani society. In a situation when youths constitute the major segment of population, their drift into extremism and violence results in societal chaos and instability. Therefore, violent extremism and its manifestations can at best be understood in terms of four major characteristics:

- a. Inbuilt violent nature;
- b. Reactive nature because of injustices, discrimination and persecution;
- c. Absence of the rule of law and a viable justice system; and
- d. Acceptability of violence in society.

Together with these characteristics one can also observe the use of religion, race and language to evoke hatred and violence against a particular community.

According to the Australian government's programme "living safe together building community resilience to violent extremism", "violent extremism is the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals. This includes terrorism and other forms of politically motivated and communal violences. If a person or group decides that fear, terror and violence are justified to achieve ideological, political or social change, and then acts accordingly, this is violent extremism. All forms of violent extremism seek change through fear and intimidation rather than through peaceful means".<sup>14</sup> Motivations for violent extremism can be buttressed by offering benefits in terms of money, promoting the biases and hatred against a particular ideology or community and promising a place in heaven as in the case of Muslim jihadists. Motivation to go to heaven if given life for the cause of Islam and Jihad lured hundreds of youths of Pakistan to become suicide bombers and cause lethal damage to the lives of thousands of people.

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<sup>13</sup> Sanjaya Baru, "Mahbub ul Haq and Human Development A Tribute", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 35, 29 August - 04 September, 1998, pp. 2275-79. Also see, Khadija Haq and Richard Ponzio, "Introduction" in Khadija Haq & Richard Ponzio, (eds.), *Pioneering the Human Development Revolution: An Intellectual Biography of Mahbub Ul Haq*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Available at <https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/aboutus/Pages/what-is-violent-extremism.aspx>, accessed on 24 March 2016.

Eight major implications of violent extremism particularly in the context of Pakistan are:

1. Polarisation of society resulting into the permeation of intolerance at the grassroots level;
2. Potential and actual use of force;
3. Stalemate in vibrant economic and commercial activities;
4. Stagnation in productive educational activities;
5. Frustration, anger and antagonism leading to chaos and disorder;
6. Deepening of insecurity in different segments of society;
7. Erosion of the rule of law and governance; and
8. Fragility of the power of youth to bring positive change in society.

Violent extremism in Pakistan is not a new phenomenon because as pointed out earlier it is the outcome of several decades of state and societal negligence on issues which can deepen extremism, intolerance, militancy, radicalisation and terrorism. Two types of violent extremism are noticeable in post-1971 Pakistan. First, ethnic violent extremism which got its impetus in Sindh and Balochistan following the surge of Baloch, Sindhi and Mohajir nationalism. The first outbreak of violent extremism took place in Sindh in July 1972 when the Urdu speaking community rejected the passage of Sindhi language bill in the Sindh Assembly resulting into the eruption of language riots in different cities and towns of Sindh. The second phase of ethnic violent extremism occurred in late 1980s and early 1990s when large scale Mohajir-Pashtun and Mohajir-Sindhi riots took place in Karachi and in Hyderabad because of clash of interests among ethnic communities on issues of employment and land resources. Second, religious violent extremism, which transformed into sectarian violence during 1980s. Following the proliferation of weapons and the rise of Jihadi culture getting an impetus against the backdrop of Afghan Jihad and the surge of sectarian militant organisations, thousands of people were killed in various violent and terrorist acts particularly since 9/11. The red mosque episode of July 2007 and the military operation in Swat in 2009<sup>15</sup> caused large scale casualties resulting into the surge of terrorist acts particularly suicide attacks in different parts of Pakistan.

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<sup>15</sup> Ziaur Rehman, Irfan Haider and Fazal Maula Zahid, "Swat: An Unquiet Calm", *Daily Dawn*, Karachi, 21 September 2014.

As a result of the use of hard power to quell insurgency in Swat in 2009 launched by the defunct Tehrek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) radicalisation of youths emerged as a serious threat to society. Systematic attacks on schools, particularly girl's schools, in the tribal areas of Pakistan and in Swat meant that violent religious extremist groups wanted to deny youth's access to education.

How the implications of violent extremism could effectively be dealt with and what are the impediments in this regard also require attention and analysis. There is no quick fix solution to deal with violent extremism but there is certainly a possibility to cope with the implications of this menace by following four strategies. First, zero tolerance for intolerance and militancy by discouraging all such acts which create hate and anger against a particular community. This requires change in the mindset of those people who negate the existence of a particular community or an ideology. Second, exclusion of all such contents in syllabi of schools, colleges and universities which promote biases and subjectivity against a particular community by targeting their way of life or propagating to impose their way of life on others. Since the minds of youths are quite sensitive and indoctrination in favour of a particular ideology or an ethnic/lingual group may be easy, it is the responsibility of state to make sure that education is not used to poison the minds of youths. It is a matter of utmost concern that subjectivity and biases are often promoted in history text books by relegating the socio-cultural or religious status of a community or a religion. When state is weak or follows a policy of appeasement or indifference *vis-à-vis* hardliners and extremists the outcome is the deepening of the culture of intolerance and aggression causing insecurity among religious minorities and all those groups whose culture and languages are targeted.

Third, endurance of good governance, rule of law, efficient and affordable justice system can go a long way in diluting the menace of violent extremism. Extremism in its violent form evolves in the minds of people and its eradication can only take place when there is a positive transformation of human mind in the form of tolerance and peace. Fourth, human development and human security is the most effective way to deal with the implications of violent extremism because pro-people development will neutralise all such elements which thrive and promote violent extremism particularly among the youths on accounts of poverty, social and economic backwardnesses. By providing adequate employment opportunities to the youths and engaging them in positive activities, much can be done to tackle the menace of violent extremism. By promoting the culture of sports and other healthy activities, the level of frustration, anger and antagonism among the youths may be significantly reduced. Radicalisation of youth is not only a critical issue in Pakistan but in many other countries, particularly those belonging to the Muslim world. Exposure of successful countries of the world to the younger generations by arranging study tours; providing scholarships in



large numbers to deserving students for their higher studies particularly in the first world countries will be a valuable investment to utilise energies of youths in scientific and educational discourse. Training of youths in different professional fields can also contribute in curbing violent extremism particularly in those parts of the country where threats of militancy are quite serious.

#### 4. Youth and Violent Extremism in Pakistan

The most vulnerable segment of Pakistani society is youth and its predicament is responsible for the permeation of extremist ideas in its mind. Around 40 per cent of Pakistani population is composed of youths which can be an asset as far as the process of development is concerned but unfortunately because of state and societal neglect, youths are often used as a fuel by extremist groups. According to a Pakistani writer, "extremism may have penetrated almost all segments of the Pakistani society. In the long-term defeating terrorism only through state-led efforts looks dim without engaging the community at multiple levels. The mindset prevailing among the Pakistani community is that eradicating extremism and terrorism is only government's job".<sup>16</sup> That, "extremism in Pakistan is certainly not confined to religiously inspired militancy and terrorism only; it is prevalent in the society at all levels. A large segment of the Pakistani society especially the youth is vulnerable to extremist propaganda".<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it is argued that, "research on various asymmetrical conflicts indicate that the youth that constitute the rank and file of any insurgent or extremist group participate in violence for a variety of overlapping reasons. They are either coerced by the families and communities or motivated by their adverse socio-economic circumstances to join terrorism".<sup>18</sup> How the youth of Pakistan, which has enormous potential to contribute and excel in different fields, drifted into the path of extremism and radicalisation needs to be analysed in some detail. How the universities of Pakistan, which should be the centres of learning and research, transformed into sanctuaries of religious and ethnic extremist elements?

Alarmists argue that the universities of Pakistan are highly vulnerable to the surge of violent extremism<sup>19</sup>, because of the presence and activities of various extremist, militant and terrorist religious organisations. It is not only the students who are involved in promoting violent extremism but some faculties are also suspected of preaching intolerance and violence. According to a news report, in December 2015, two Punjab University faculty members and one student were taken into custody by the Lahore Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) during a

<sup>16</sup> Abdul Basit, "Countering Violent Extremism: Evaluating Pakistan's Counter Radicalization and De-radicalization Initiative," *IPRI Journal*, Vol. XV, No. 2, Summer 2015, p. 64.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>19</sup> See editorial, "Extremism in Universities," *Daily Dawn*, Karachi, 17 July 2017. Also see, Raza Khan, "Extremism and Education in Pakistan," *The Express Tribune*, Karachi, 01 June 2017.

raid on University premises for their alleged links with the banned Hizbut Tahrir (HuT).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, another newspaper report revealed that “security officials have initiated a probe against a professor for running a network of international terrorist organisation - Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) - inside the Karachi University Campus”.<sup>21</sup> Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, which is a premier institution of higher education in Pakistan, is also experiencing the deepening of the culture of extremism. According to a news report entitled, “Penetration of Extremist Elements Growing in QAU”, it was revealed that, “last week the students of Quaid-e-Azam University shut down the campus over patronisation of a student organisation with extremist ideology by a group of faculty members. The teaching faculty and students fear the top ranked university will lose its candour soon if the influence of conservative and orthodox elements continue to grow”.<sup>22</sup> There may be other reports about how academic institutions are influenced by the extremists and violent mindset using religion for their political purposes. Student organisations having affiliations with various political parties propagating religious extremism are held responsible for indoctrination of young minds with extremist ideology.

A violent expression of youths against fellow student was witnessed on 14 April 2017, when Mashal Khan a 23-year-old student of Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan was killed and another seriously injured by a vigilante mob for allegedly “publishing blasphemous content online”.<sup>23</sup> An article on Mashal’s inhuman murder states that, “in an unbelievably horrifying incident yesterday, a few hundred students of Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan lynched to death one of their classmates on suspicion of uploading blasphemous content on the social networking site Facebook. As per the account of some students at the university, Mohammad Mashal Khan, a 23-year-old journalism student, was sitting in his hostel room when a mob burst in. They promptly dragged him out, before subjecting him to a gratuitous torturing spree that ended in him being beaten to death and subsequently shot”.<sup>24</sup> The investigations which were ordered to probe the inhuman murder of Mashal Khan found him innocent of charges of blasphemy and found those university students and staff of the university responsible who were against his critical approach on the matters of corruption and nepotism in his university. The incident of Abdul Wali Khan University depicted the alarming state of aggression and violence among the youths who brutally killed their fellow student on suspicions of blasphemy and holding anti-religious views. The perceived surge of violent extremism in different campuses of Pakistani universities is a source of alarm. The challenge of countering violent extremism

<sup>20</sup> “Two PU faculty members, student arrested for Hizbut Tahrir links: CTD”, *Dawn*, 14 December 2015.

<sup>21</sup> *Pakistan Today*, 22 March 2016.

<sup>22</sup> “Penetration of Extremist Elements Growing in QAU”, *The Nation*, 20 March 2016.

<sup>23</sup> See news report, “Mardan University student lynched by mob over alleged blasphemy: police”, *Daily Dawn*, Karachi, 15 April 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Marvi Sirmed, “The unforgivable murder of Mashal of Mardan”, *Daily Times*, Lahore, 14 April 2017.

among the youths studying in higher educational institutions must be taken seriously by the policy-makers of Pakistan who in the National Action Plan (NAP) unveiled after the terrorist attack at the Army Public School on 16 December 2014, emphasised on eradicating extremism and radicalisation as far as the younger strata of society is concerned.

There is no short cut to eradicate violent extremism but an approach based on three "P"s *i.e.*, prudence, pragmatism and perseverance can certainly go a long way in dealing with the causes that trigger the outbreak of violent extremism among the youths of Pakistan.

Six steps, if taken by the people at the helm of affairs, can certainly ensure positive transformation in the approach, attitude and behaviour among those youths who are considered as intolerant, extremist and violent. First, taking measures against those who use the youths for accomplishment of their evil designs. This would require zero tolerance for ethnic and religious extremist groups who first indoctrinate minds which are immature and then use them for carrying out violent and terrorist activities. Terrorist cells, where indoctrination and training is given to potential suicide bombers who happen to be youths are primarily located in the tribal areas of Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> The nexus between violent extremist groups located in Pakistan and Afghanistan is a fundamental cause of concern for those who fear the destruction of the present generation at the hands of those who use religion and ethnicity for political purposes. Second, the youths of Pakistan must be engaged in healthy activities like sports, culture, travel and tourism. Furthermore, their energy and skills must be utilised for community services and technological innovation. Since an empty mind is a devil's paradise, the lack of engagement of youth in healthy activities is a cause of frustration, anger, antagonism and violence. It is not only the responsibility of state to provide better educational and employment opportunities for the youths of Pakistan but the civil society and corporate sector must also play a meaningful role in this regard. Third, vision for a better future of Pakistan is the essence for eradicating extremism, intolerance, militancy, radicalisation and terrorism. Better Pakistan means a country which is normal in its way of life, attitude and behaviour and where non-issues are not projected for fanning ethnic and religious extremism. Respect for one's religion, sect, race, language and class is the key to ensure a stable society. The engagement of youth in economic and social development of Pakistan is the need of the hour so that the vision for a better Pakistan is transformed from a myth to a reality.

If there is rise in the standard of living of an ordinary Pakistani and his/her purchasing power increases, it means the decline of extremist and intolerant behaviour. Violent extremism gets a space when poverty is rampant; when there

<sup>25</sup> Khuram Iqbal, *The Making of Pakistani Human Bombs*, London: Laxington Books, 2015.

is massive unemployment; when there is absence of the rule of law and good governance. Since the youths are the future of Pakistan their disempowerment and marginalisation is lethal for the positive future of the country. A healthy, empowered, enlightened and educated youth will certainly neutralise those who since long have got enormous space to foment militancy and violent extremism in society. Fourth, promoting the culture of reading among the youths is the essence of their 'constructive engagement' paving the way for an enlightened mindset. Unfortunately, there is a sharp decline in the standard of education in Pakistan in the last four decades which has much to do with the erosion of culture of reading. Lack of focus and wastage of time on activities which are at the expense of their academic growth augment their wilderness. Therefore, it is imperative that educational reforms focusing on inculcating analytical skills and critical thinking among students will go a long way in defeating the forces of retrogression, extremism and radicalisation. This would require a shift in educational priorities whereby uniformity in the standard of education and syllabi needs to be enforced in the whole of Pakistan. Seeds of extremism and violent extremism are planted in a situation where good quality education is not provided to all the students of Pakistan whether studying in schools, colleges and universities. It is the responsibility of the state of Pakistan to make sure that education till high school is made free and compulsory and of good quality so that sense of deprivation on the basis of class and social status is eradicated.

Fifth, providing students a sense of participation is imperative in order to develop leadership skills. Since February 1984, when student's unions were banned in Pakistan by the then Martial Law regime of General Zia-ul-Haq, one can observe the sharp rise in extremism, intolerance, radicalisation and militancy among the youths. Student's unions, despite their imperfections, provided a viable platform to college and university students to get training in managing affairs related to their educational institutions and developing a sense of responsibility along with leadership qualities. Banning of student's unions created a vacuum which deprived the youths of Pakistan to play a leadership role in the country's politics, economy and other fields of life. One plausible way to counter extremist, militant and intolerant thoughts and groups is by providing student community a sense of participation by restoring student's union. Counter argument against the unbanning of student's union is based on the narrative that such an act may deepen violence in the campus as student parties are more violent and intolerant than three decades ago and political parties pull their strings in order to serve their vested interests.

Be as it may, the risk in lifting the ban on student's union exists, but a bigger risk is in the shape of frustration, anger and extremism which exist in the absence of student's unions. Finally, materials taught particularly at the school level propagating biases and hate against a particular community must be

removed so that young minds are not poisoned. An extremist mindset in youth is not created automatically but is also the outcome of the environment and what he or she is taught. The so-called religious groups may oppose the removal of such materials from history textbooks but the risk of teaching factually wrong history will keep the minds of youths closed and devoid of objectivity and reasoning. Courageous and bold stance taken by the state will save the future generations of Pakistan from further damage.

## 5. Conclusion

Countering violent extremism is not similar to countering terrorism because the latter is the culmination of a violent mindset. Yet, without effectively dealing with extremism and violent extremism terrorism cannot be eradicated. Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programme as outlined by a Pakistani writer on countering extremism and terrorism must have a conceptual framework. According to him,

Before launching any major CVE programme evolving conceptual framework is imperative to understand the trends that underpin the phenomenon. It will be the first step towards well-meaning and holistic CVE programmes in Pakistan. A nuanced understanding of what works, and what does not, in a particular environment is crucial for the success of any CVE programme.<sup>26</sup>

He further suggests that in "CVE programme at the broader level, without improvement in governance, economic and security situation, CVE efforts will have a minimal impact. A national level CVE policy, if implemented judiciously is one commitment among many others to bring about positive change in the society".<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, "the family, public schools, colleges, public universities, mosques and madrasas have emerged as the key channels to spawn extremism among youths. In the reformation drive, both by the governmental and non-state agencies, local as well as foreign, the family which is the building block of society, should become the prime focus of attention. It is recommended that out of the 25 million people in the major urban centres of the four provinces and some 10 million people in rural Punjab, the youth segment of the unemployed and under employed amounts to six million should receive first priority for rehabilitation. These elements can cause social unrest and violence which, if mistaken for religious violence can compound response strategies with higher risk of societal disturbance".<sup>28</sup> Such recommendations are worth for consideration and must be implemented by the concerned stakeholders with a purpose to transform extremist

<sup>26</sup> Abdul Basit, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> Muhammad Feyyaz, "Youth Extremism in Pakistan – Magnitude, Channels, Resident Spheres and Responses," *Defense Against Terrorism Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring & Fall 2014, p. 87.

and violent minds of youths of Pakistan through a process of enlightenment and development. After all, the shift from a normal behaviour to extremist is easy but the transformation of a violent mindset to peaceful one is quite difficult.

Reforms to de-radicalise the youths of Pakistan cannot be implemented unless there is political will and determination on the part of those who are at the helm of affairs. Ban on the use of religion for political purposes and preaching hate against a particular minority or sect is the need of the hour. Religious extremism and fanaticism is not a new phenomenon in Pakistan and is as old as the history of this country. What is different today is the permeation of the culture of violence in the length and breadth of Pakistan in the shape of suicide attacks, killing and injuring hundreds of innocent people and deepening the level of insecurity. When the culture of violence is deep rooted and after every violent incident one can hear same old rhetoric on the part of state authorities to punish culprits, nothing changes and the prospects of eradicating violent extremism would remain elusive. Hence, the predicament of youths in Pakistani society has deepened because of societal violence threatening their present and future.