

The Pakistan Policy Symposium

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How to Handle Pakistan's New Hardliners

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Last year, **Pathways to Change – Pakistan Policy Symposium**, a two-day event jointly organized by the Wilson Center and INDUS, convened expert scholars, academics, and practitioners from the United States and Pakistan to explore Pakistan's recent achievements in economic, political, and foreign affairs as well as its opportunities to address current and future challenges. Speakers and panelists focused on identifying practical, innovative, and above all actionable policy solutions. The following series of policy briefs, which draw on discussions from the symposium, will be of interest to the academic and scholarly communities; diaspora audiences; business and policy circles; and any general audiences interested in Pakistan, U.S.-Pakistan relations, or international relations on the whole.



The 2018 Pakistani general elections saw the emergence of two new hardline religious political parties that quickly captured the attention of domestic and foreign observers of the country alike.

The first party, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), earned widespread attention when it brought the country to a standstill in November 2017 over an alleged change made to an election law that the party and its supporters perceived as benefitting the ostracized Ahmadi sect. The TLP belongs to the Barelvi sub-school of Islamic thought, which follows syncretic practices, emphasizes personal devotion to the prophet Muhammad, and has long been considered the more moderate of Islamic sects.

However, the party has overtly violent origins. It was formed to express support for Mumtaz Qadri, who in 2011 killed Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab province, for defending the rights of a woman accused of blasphemy. In May 2018, a man claiming to be a TLP member shot and wounded the then-Pakistani interior minister, accusing him of blasphemy. Since the 2018 elections, in which the TLP surprised many observers by receiving the fifth-highest vote share in the country, the party has threatened and staged protests on a number of occasions. Most notably, in October and November 2018, the TLP held violent protests after the Supreme Court acquitted a Christian woman, Asia Bibi, who had spent eight years on death row on charges of blasphemy. A video statement released by the party said unequivocally that if Asia Bibi were pardoned, "there will be terrible consequences against the government and the judiciary."

The second new hardline party to contest the 2018 elections was the Milli Muslim

League (MML), the political front of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)—a banned terrorist group thought by New Delhi and Washington to have carried out the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Despite claims that the groups are unrelated, images of LeT leader Hafiz Saeed appeared on much of the election material used by the MML.

The elections also saw the continued participation of an older extremist, anti-Shia political party, the Ahle Sunnah Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), whose influence has continued to grow over the last few years, despite clear linkages to a militant group called Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.

The emergence and increasing importance of these parties signifies a qualitative change in the type of Islamist political party that is now contesting elections in Pakistan. Unlike the long-standing mainstream Islamist parties, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam (JUI), the ASWJ, MML, and TLP can be more accurately described as armed groups with political wings, or as violent political movements. Indeed, as Pakistan's leading English-language newspaper *Dawn* puts it, "There is a clear difference between religio-political parties that engage with the processes of parliamentary democracy, and those that hold it in contempt and will ultimately undermine it."

This distinction is important. Scholars have proposed that the inclusion of Islamist parties in the political and democratic process may moderate their goals and tactics, and could lead them to put down their arms—a theory referred to as the inclusion-moderation hypothesis. It is far from certain, however, whether this theory applies to all types of Islamist parties. While the inclusion-moderation hypothesis is likely to fit for certain Islamist parties and under certain electoral conditions—

such as important episodes in Indonesia and Tunisia—it is much less likely to be applicable to these more hardline parties in the Pakistani electoral system.

This is, in part, because such parties have little incentive to moderate. Rather, they are able to use violence or the threat of violence to push forward their policy and ideological agendas from outside of the legislative system, making their presence—or lack thereof—in the legislative bodies less significant. This has been the case, for example, with the state's frequent capitulation to the TLP's demands as a result of the latter's anti-blasphemy protests. Indeed, the agreement that the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party signed with the TLP following the October-November 2018 protests has been likened by some opposition members to a surrender.

Relatedly, the continued support such parties receive from relevant stakeholders in Pakistani politics also removes another incentive to put down arms. For its part, the military is thought to have played an extra-constitutional arbitrator role in navigating the TLP's protests. A widely circulated video in November 2017, for example, showed a member of an army-controlled paramilitary force distributing money to protestors. Similarly, considerable evidence exists to suggest that members of mainstream political parties—regardless of their own ideology—have allied with members of hardline religious parties such as the ASWJ for electoral expedience. These alliances have taken the form of seat adjustments or campaign appearances with members of banned groups.

Parties like the ASWJ and TLP are filling gaps left by the absence or organizational weakness of mainstream parties as well

as the breakdown of traditional power structures, particularly in rural parts of the country. Parties used to ally with landed elites or heads of kinship networks for purposes of vote gain. Today they turn to local sectarian clerics for valuable vote banks. As such, these extremist actors now function as prized electoral intermediaries for many mainstream parties, providing voters with necessary material support and patronage.

If the Pakistani state wants to control the problem of radicalization in society, it must confront its own role in supporting these actors for short-term political gain. By capitulating to their demands, permitting airtime to their anti-minority rhetoric in the public sphere, or providing them space to contest elections alongside mainstream democratic actors, the state is acquiescing to their extremist nature without any evidence that these parties are moderating. Mainstream political parties must also work to strengthen their own organizational structures and reduce their dependence on local-level electoral allies, particularly in cases where these allies espouse extremist ideologies.

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