



## **Religion as an Instrumentum Regni under the Imran Khan Government (2018-2022):**

### **An Analysis of its Impact on the State and Society**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines Imran Khan's use of religion as a tool of politics during his premiership (2018 to 2022) and its impact on the state and society. The instrumentalization of religion is not unprecedented in Pakistan's history; rather, it is a recurring pattern that continues to characterize mainstream electoral politics today. Imran Khan's bragging about modelling his government on the "State of Madina" and the establishment of the "Rehmatul-lil-Aalameen" Authority (RAA), etc., would serve a political purpose—to win the sympathy of the people (and power). Simply put, he used religion as a tool to give his dubiously elected government a facade of legitimacy—his political opponents dubbed him as "selected" by the military establishment rather than elected by the people of Pakistan. He revived the legacy of General Zia-ul-Haq by giving the "Islamic touch" to everything political—and to his political ambition, by extension. This use of religion for politics in Pakistan has engendered polarisation (religious, social, and political) as well as religiously motivated extremism (and terrorism)—with a negative impact on its social cohesion, democracy, and economy. Methodologically, the study is qualitative and based on secondary sources, with data collected from books, research papers, research articles, and periodicals.*

### **Keywords**

Instrumentalization, Religion, Politics, Islamic Rhetorics, Islamic Notions, Extremism, Terrorism

### **Introduction**

"Imran Khan is a political IED" (improvised explosive device).

Christine Fair (Fair, 2015).

Imran Khan is a political figure but not a political leader. His sole aim appears to be to gain, increase, project, and maintain power. Two key tools he has been using to get power are democracy and religion. His involvement in politics has nothing to do with strengthening democracy. He only wants to use the tool of democracy to get power. There is evidence that he would undermine democracy itself. He did that by unconstitutionally dissolving the National Assembly when he was ousted from government through a vote of no confidence in 2022. The second tool is religion. He is not a religious person, but his religiosity is more a show of piety—to use it for political benefits by appealing to the emotional attachment of the people to religion. So, religion is another potent tool that he has used to get to the helm. He cashes in on his popularity as a sportsman.

Imran Khan's popularity lies in sports—cricket. Cricket is the most popular sport in the subcontinent. Imran Khan became a national hero in 1992, when under his captaincy, Pakistan won

the International Cricket World Cup. He was popular before the 1992 Cricket World Cup as well. During the 1980s, his widespread fame contributed to his image as a “playboy,” often making headlines in tabloid articles (Faiz, 2022). He also stepped into philanthropic activities; he helped build the first-ever cancer hospital in Lahore. Khan initiated various charitable endeavors, notably founding the Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital in 1994 and implementing the Sehat Insaf Card scheme under his government in 2020, providing free health facilities to the poor. These initiatives were garnered support from both urban and rural counterparts. In 1996, he formally embarked on his political journey by founding his own party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). He underwent a significant transformation, shifting his viewpoint and lifestyle from Western to Islamic orientation.

Moreover, during the War on Terror, Pakistan was a frontline state in the war against terror under General Pervez Musharraf. He marked his presence on the political landscape in Pakistan with his stance on issues such as Musharraf’s alliance with the West, drone attacks in the tribal areas, anti-corruption, pro-poor and Islamic rhetoric, etc. He not only challenged Musharraf’s military establishment but also openly started defending the Taliban and blaming the West for the socio-economic and political problems in Muslim societies. However, behind this rhetoric, he harboured political ambitions, hidden beneath the cloak of Islamic sentiments (Kainat, 2021). Imran Khan’s project of Islamist civilisationism was an effort to present himself as the leader of the Muslim community (ummah). He considered himself as a messiah—with a divine mission to establish another *Riyyasat-i-Madina* (Naya Pakistan) (Shahid, 2021).

To present oneself as a real Muslim, one has to appease the conservative audience (the majority of the people of Pakistan). Leaders have to take a certain position on issues such as the Taliban—both Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, Islamic government, the West, the status of women, and relations with ulama (religious scholars). Below is a discussion about his stance on these issues.

#### **Imran Khan View on the Taliban**

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan following the withdrawal of American forces and the collapse of the American-backed government. There was a visible euphoria in Pakistan over the Taliban’s regaining of Kabul. Imran Khan also could not keep his joy to himself and termed the Taliban’s victory as the breaking of the “shackles of slavery”—of the West (Shakil, 2021). His support for the Afghan Taliban is evident from his “breaking the shackles of slavery” statement.

His position on armed *jihad* (*qitaal*) is ambiguous as well. His statements implied that those who fight for freedom were engaged in Jihad. In the context of jihad, he would avoid blaming the Taliban or even Al-Qaeda after terrorist violence in Pakistan—even when they had accepted the responsibility for carrying out attacks. He also alleged that these terrorist groups were being sponsored by hostile foreign intelligence agencies, with the underlying purpose of creating instability and disturbing the internal dynamics of the state. Moreover, his allegiance and sympathies toward the Taliban led him to associate himself with ultra-right groups, as he sided with the alliance of the religious parties, namely, the *Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal* (MMA) (United Party/Council for Action) alliance, which publicly opposed kinetic operations against militants, especially against the Taliban in ex-FATA—Federally Administered Tribal Areas. For his unconcealed sympathies for the Taliban—both Pakistani and Afghan—his opponent gave him a nickname—“Taliban Khan.” He declared that the Taliban “broke the shackles of slavery,” when the ISAF troops withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021 (Dawn, 2021). He also referred to Osama bin Laden as “martyr” in the National Assembly of Pakistan (Dawn, 2021). All these assertions put him squarely in the Islamist, if not outright jihadist, camp.

#### **The 2013 Election and Slogans of New (Naya) Pakistan**

The main slogan of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party in the 2013 general elections was “Change for Naya (new) Pakistan.” The 2013 election was held to be free and fair, although allegations of rigging arose from political factions within Pakistan. Although the electoral results reflected a highly polarized and fragmented political landscape, the victory of Nawaz Sharif in the 2013 election further underscored this fragmentation. The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) claimed victory by securing seats across all four provinces, with its primary stronghold in Punjab. Conversely, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) won 27 seats, 16 of which were from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. While the *Muttahida Qaumi* Movement (MQM) and Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) maintained their influence in Sindh, and PML-N dominated Punjab, PTI emerged as the leading party

in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Balochistan not only witnessed the lowest voter turnout, but also, no single party secured a majority there in the 2013 general elections—thus reflecting a deep fragmentation in Pakistan's body politic.

In the 2013 general election, the PTI gained a sizeable number of seats, granting them an electoral victory in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). His electoral strategy included demonising traditional political parties and politicians for fleecing the poor of the country. Moreover, Imran Khan criticised dynastic political parties, as it was undemocratic in nature and it was exclusive—other political actors had little chance to come to power. He argued that Pakistan's political elites were puppets of the West. He criticised politicians for taking the begging bowl to the International Monetary Fund. This characterization painted Pakistan as a puppet state. (Chaudhry, 2018). He promised he would not go to the IMF for loans, as it was tantamount to slavery.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) won seats but not a majority in the 2013 general election. It has to form a coalition government in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province by aligning with Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), a party known for its hardline right-wing Islamist ideology. Jamaat-e-Islami has been trying to Islamise the curricula since 1947. It also tries to inculcate religious and conservative values in the students. The PTI-led provincial government made the study of the Quran mandatory in schools. Some reforms in madrassahs were also implemented. Additionally, the provincial government granted 300 million Pakistani Rupees (PKR) to Darul Uloom Haqqani in 2016 and another Rs. 227 million in 2018 (The News, 2018). Imran Khan, in connivance with Dr. Tahir ul Qadri, a right-wing Islamist preacher based in Canada, initiated a large-scale protest movement in 2014 known as the *Azadi* March (Freedom March), aimed at holding the government accountable for the Lahore Model Town killings of his followers and challenging the corruption of the ruling elite.

#### **Imran Khan Mission of *Riyasat-e-Madina* (State of Madina)**

Before the general election of 2018, Imran Khan chanted populist slogans of change, promising a “*Naya*” (New) Pakistan, the eradication of corruption to mobilize people for his cause. Also, he chose to utilize religious rhetoric for political gains. He appealed to both the non-Sufi Muslims and the Sufi Muslims. For winning over the Sufis, he adopted pop-culture Sufism; he censured the “fake liberals” for winning over the non-Sufis. His rallies became elaborate performances, featuring pop music and illusions that suggested Khan mission had been ordained by the Almighty (Paracha, 2023). He did not spare any tool or refuse any help—even from non-democratic forces—for winning power. His efforts paid off: his party received the most votes in the 2018 general elections and came to power with the help of undemocratic forces, namely, the military establishment.

The PTI had to form a coalition at the center. Imran Khan announced the inclusion of members from the *Muttahida Qaumi* Movement (MQM) and the PML-Q—Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam) in his cabinet (Dawn, 2018). Once in power, he magnified his religious personality—using state power and media. Whenever he would appear in public, he carried a string of beads to symbolize his constant remembrance of God. His speeches almost always include Islamic verses and examples—with the aim to appeal to the religious sentiments of the people and cash in on their emotional attachment to religion. Khan would invite ulama (religious scholars) to his official meetings, demonstrating his strong affiliation with them. Among these scholars, Maulana Tariq Jamil stands out as one of the most prominent.

Imran Khan wanted to make a welfare state out of Pakistan, modelled on the state of Medina—established by the Prophet Muhammad (PBHH) fifteen centuries ago. In his Express Tribune article titled “*Spirit of Riyasat-i-Madina: Transforming Pakistan*,” Imran Khan outlined five guiding principles for the State of Madina. He elaborated on key ideological foundations, including the rule of law, justice, an ethical model, and the pursuit of knowledge, all of which, when harmonized, promote meritocracy and societal cohesion (Khan, 2022). Imran Khan used Islamic notions, such as establishing *Riyasat-i-Madina* and the National *Rehmatul-lil-Alameen* Authority (NRA), to portray himself as a messiah and an incorruptible man, exploiting the sentiments of the masses to gain popularity (Paracha, 2021). So, it was a wrapped-in-religion political performance rather than an action out of religious conviction.

#### ***Rehmatul-lil-Alameen* Authority (NRA)**

Imran Khan, as the prime minister, established the *Rehmatul-lil-Alameen* Authority (NRA) under the Federal Ministry of Education and Professional Training in 2021. The primary objective of this authority was to shape the character of Pakistan's youth according to Islamic values, inspired by the

lives of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his companions. Its goal was to develop curricula rooted in the teachings of the Quran, Hadith, and broader Islamic conservatism (Tribune, 2022). In July 2022, Shahida Akhtar Ali, a former member of the Pakistan National Assembly from JUI-F, proposed to President Arif Alvi that the title of the Authority be amended to include “*Khatam an-Nabiyyin*.” The proposal was accepted, and the name was changed to the National *Rahmatul-lil-Alameen Wa Khatam an-Nabiyyin* Authority. Imran Khan was appointed as the patron-in-chief, with a chairman appointed by the Prime Minister. On December 7, 2021, Imran Khan selected Ejaz Akram, a controversial figure, as the chairperson of the authority.

### **Islamist Civilizationism and Imran Khan Educational Reform: The Single National Curriculum (SNC)**

Imran Khan used Islamist civilizationism as a political tool in the post-election period of 2018 to transform Pakistan into a model of Riyasat-i-Madina and Naya Pakistan. He incorporated Islamism within the framework of Islamist civilizationism, framing his politics as a “Clash of Civilizations,” pitting the West against Muslims (Yilmaz, 2021). Imran Khan depicted the West and the Muslims as archenemies perpetually at odds with each other. He became a potent advocate against Islamophobia on the international stage, raising his voice and addressing the issue at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). However, the West was not the only target. Liberals and feminists came under pressure in his government, labelled as Western-leaning and opposed to the vision of *Naya Pakistan* as a model of Riyasat-i-Madina. Khan employed rhetoric that idealized a caricature of Muslim women, while condemning liberal feminists as un-Islamic. Imran Khan denounced feminism in Pakistan, claiming it as a product of Western culture embraced only by elite Pakistani women. He espoused a flawed logic, blaming women for rape and associating sexual violence with women clothing choices.

Imran Khan blamed women’s dress for rape cases: “if a woman wears very few clothes, it will have an impact; it has to affect men sexual drive” (Tariq, 2021). His patriarchal and gender-biased views on women reflect a regressive mentality. He further argued that there are no nightclubs and discos, asserting that the moral fabric of the society would be badly affected if such temptations were not eliminated among young men (Dawn, 2021). For Imran Khan, Western concepts such as liberalism, feminism, etc., had no place in his Riyasat-e-Madina, so women would enjoy the same status and rights as they did in the original State of Madina. Imran Khan benefited from this narrative, portraying himself as victorious in a battle against those influenced by foreign culture and homegrown brainwashed liberals. Following the Women March, Khan issued a statement suggesting that feminists division of people along feminist and non-feminist lines was a cultural issue, stemming from the educational system. He asserted that incorporating Islamic elements into the educational syllabi to provide education in accordance with Islam and Islamic principles was the primary motive.

Imran Khan vision to bring equity to the educational system under a Single National Curriculum (SNC) aims to realize the vision of Riyasat-i-Madina. This initiative led to the transformation of education into an Islamic manner, with syllabi designed in accordance with Islamic principles (Dawn, 2021). Imran Khan vision for the SNC reflects not only an effort to establish a centralized education system but also a deliberate attempt to align the national curriculum with Islamist civilizationism. Rather than focusing on promoting fairness and equity in education, the primary drive behind the SNC was the Islamization of the curriculum. The SNC was to be imposed from above on both public and private schools. Opponents of the SNC have been “otherized” as foreign agents. He criticized English-medium schools for misleading children and promoting Western culture, which he believes traps them in a chain of slavery. He stated that the SNC aims to break this chain of slavery and replace imported education systems (Dawn, 2021).

Under the SNC project, Imran aimed to produce a new generation inspired by his fundamentalist and conservative brand of Islamist civilizationism. Imran Khan’s close partnership with the *Ittehad Tanzimat Ul Madaris* Pakistan led to several revisions in the curriculum. New subjects, including *Muamalat* (social dealing) and *Islam aur daur e hazir ke taqazay* (Islam and the demands of the contemporary world), were incorporated into *Islamiat*, a mandatory subject in the national curriculum of Pakistani madrasa. Imran Khan emphasized the importance of introducing students to the core principles of Islam at a young age to foster their moral growth. Therefore, he emphasized the mandatory teaching of these subjects in middle school.

As a part of his mission of Islamist civilisationism, the Imran Khan government made it obligatory for students—at both college and university levels—to study the Holy Quran and that no student would be awarded a degree without passing the necessary examination. Imran Khan's project of Islamist civilizationism seemed to aim at Islamizing the curriculum rather than promoting equity and indigenization. His primary motive appears to be distancing people from Western culture and its education system, by criticizing and biasing tendencies towards Western values, in order to gain popularity and keep the masses blinded through various populist rhetoric and narratives. In the vision of the new Pakistan, there is a deliberate shift away from Western standards, opting instead for a more literal interpretation of Islam and conservative values. This ideological shift also involves distancing the nation from Western influences, accompanied by a narrative that criticizes and marginalizes western culture. As a result, it deepens the division among the people, particularly along religious and ideological lines (Hoodbhoy, 2021).

In a nutshell, Imran Khan presented himself as the self-styled leader of the Muslim Ummah, who was ready to take on the West on behalf of them. an anti-Western stance, making derogatory remarks to advance the interests of Muslims and improve their image on the international level. Imran Khan built his political campaign around anti-Americanism. He was a harsh critic of the US drone strikes in the tribal areas and of its role in the war on terror, especially in Afghanistan. He also made an issue out of Islamophobia—to appease his base in Pakistan and in the West. He applauded the Taliban and openly supported them, portraying himself as an anti-US figure, which made him popular in most Muslim states (Hussain, 2023).

### **The Impact and Implications of the Instrumentalization of Religion for the State and Society**

Since its inception in 1947, both civilian leaders and military dictators have politicised religion for personal interest and political gains in Pakistan. The politicisation of religion has led to the destruction of the fundamental pillars of state-societal relations and has resulted in religious and sectarian polarization, intolerance, extremism, radicalism and a disharmony among different groups in society. After the partition, Pakistan became the homeland for the Muslims of British India. Although Islam was a strong bonding force and helped create a national identity, the country has been divided along ethnic, provincial, religious, cultural, class, and linguistic lines (Jalal, 2014).

The role of religion in politics has been a contentious issue throughout Pakistan's history. Pakistan's founder, Quaid-e-Azam, never stated that Pakistan would be a theocracy. His various addresses indicated that he envisioned Pakistan as a democratic state. His public statements show that, for him, while Islam held importance, its role in the polity was limited. Moreover, the politicization of religion during civilian leadership and military rule has deprived Pakistan of the ideals of its founding father. After the partition of Pakistan, the founding father, Quaid-e-Azam, emphasized strengthening democracy and promoting plurality and diversity. This was exemplified by the appointment of Chaudhry Zafar Ullah Khan as his foreign minister and the Hindu Jogendra Nath Mandal as his law minister (Hoodbhoy 2016). Another step that reflects Quaid-e-Azam's vision of plurality is the flag of Pakistan—with the white stripe added to it to represent minorities (Burki, 1986). This mixing of religion with politics ultimately led to the marginalisation of minorities and the homogenisation of an otherwise diverse state.

After Jinnah's death, the confusion and inefficiency of the politicians led to the politicisation of religion in Pakistan. Although Islam holds a central place in Pakistan, the division between secularists and traditionalists turned into an arena of political struggle. This clash dominated the adoption of the Objectives Resolution in 1949 and the naming of the country as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in the 1956 constitution. Later on, the constitutional status of Islam and General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization project enmeshed Pakistan in an environment of fear, intolerance, and religious extremism. The imposition of a harsh and fundamentalist brand of Islam, the introduction of Sharia laws, and severe penalties for blasphemy allegations have undermined the democratic character of the state and marginalized minorities from mainstream society.

The politicization of religion has also affected societal cohesion, leading to sectarian divisions between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Political leaders and parties have exploited these sectarian divisions to mobilize support, fuelling intolerance and insecurity throughout the state and society. Pakistan's support for the holy warriors (*mujahideen*) against the Soviet troops in Afghanistan in the 1980s and Pakistan's continued support for Islamist militants (for foreign policy objectives) have radically altered the nature of Islam in Pakistan. Mob killing of alleged blasphemers has become a norm, and

the killing of members of minority groups across the country is reminiscent of intolerance, extremism, and radicalism among its people (Bajoria, 2011).

The impact of the politicization of religion on the Pakistani state has intertwined religion with state affairs and influenced the corridors of power, leading to legislation that reflects the interests of the majority (Muslims) while marginalizing minorities. Moreover, the use of Islam by both civilian leadership and military dictatorship for political gains—particularly General Zia ul Haq’s Islamization project, the Hudood Ordinance, etc., —has injected a conservative version of Islam into mainstream society. This has given rise to religious extremism, sectarianism, radicalism, and intolerance among different groups across the country.

Shia-Sunni relations remained peaceful in Pakistan until the late 1970s. However, in the 1980s, General Zia implemented nationwide Islamization policies and a puritanical interpretation of Islam that privileged extremist Sunni religious thought. This led to the eruption of Sunni-Shia conflict and polarized sectarian tensions in Pakistan. These reforms included extensive changes to the constitution that entrenched an orthodox interpretation of Sunni Islam, alienating not only the Shias but also the Bareilvis. Moreover, it was against the Shiite religious jurisprudence to enforce a Zakat system whereby zakat (tax) would be automatically deducted from bank accounts (Ahmed, 2011). Violent sectarianism was born.

Furthermore, during the Cold War, the USA and Saudi Arabia funded Pakistan to train *mujahideen* who fought jihad against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. The support greatly bolstered Sunni militant groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. It also established a vast madrassa network, training students mainly in Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith persuasions. Since its establishment in 1985, Punjab has been home to numerous sectarian groups. One such *Jhang*-based, anti-Shia group was the *Sipah-e-Sahaba* Pakistan (SSP), which was led by Haq Nawaz Jhangvi. Although initially operating as a political party, the SSP gained some traction in Punjab but was also linked to violent militant activities. In retaliation, the Shia extremist group *Sipah-e-Mohammad* Pakistan (SMP) emerged, with the aim of defending the Shia community, and was reportedly involved in several acts of retribution (Nazar, 2016).

In Pakistan, the distinction between religious and secular parties becomes blurred when it comes to the dominance of Islam. From Bhutto’s Islamic Socialism to Imran Khan’s rhetoric of “Riasat-e-Medina”, it is clear that so-called secular parties use religion to take their political agendas forward and secure public support (Ahmed, 2023). The Pakistani state has benefitted from using religious parties for political ends, engendering a struggle for power among them. This has led to the adoption of Sunni-biased laws and policies, increasing Shia-Sunni rivalry. Sunni religious groups started an anti-Ahmadi campaign in the 1950s that culminated in their constitutional exclusion from Islam in 1974. According to Husain Haqqani, General Zia ul Haq’s military policies exacerbated sectarian polarization and confrontation between different religious groups (Haqqani, 2005). Additionally, the US-led war in Afghanistan and the alliance between Pakistani local militants and Al-Qaeda increased sectarian violence in Pakistan, mostly targeting the Shia and other minority communities as well as state institutions (Bajoria, 2011).

The militant manifestation of religion in Pakistani politics has increased the impact of religious extremism. Consequently, several political leaders and military dictators have used Islamic idioms, and the anti-Soviet Afghan war and Kashmir struggle have become more religious than territorial and political disputes (Haqqani, 2005). The politicization of religion in Pakistan in previous decades has created an environment of hatred, bigotry, and sectionalism. The Afghan jihad of the 1980s proved a great boon for the jihadi industry. This contributed to the roots of religious extremism and intolerance among the masses (Rashid, 2008). It is a commonly known fact in Pakistan that religious political parties never got more than seven per cent votes in elections. Religious political parties thus rely on religion to influence and mobilise the masses. They use fear and violence as instruments to stay relevant in politics. The *Mutahidda Majlis-e-Amal* (MMA) would use the emotive phrase “Islam in danger” during the 2002 election, and Islamic militants took actions against “infidels” in the tribal areas (Abbas, 2015).

The use of religion by the state, often for its strategic interest associated with jihad, has sown the seeds of terrorism in Pakistan. In the 1980s, they were glorified as *mujahideen* and prepared to fight jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. After 9/11, the US declared war against global terrorist organisations, especially Al-Qaeda under Osama Bin Laden, to eliminate religiously

motivated terror from the world. Pakistan sided with the US—to help it eliminate terrorism from the face of the earth. Militants started targeting Pakistani forces and established sanctuaries from where they could enforce Sharia in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Tellis, 2008). Religious mobilization in Pakistan was employed by external forces, including Saudi Arabia, which established a number of large global charities in the 1960s and 1970s with the primary aim of spreading Wahhabi Islam, supported by the global jihadist organization Al-Qaeda. This created a foundation for terrorism and violence in Pakistan, which has had devastating impacts on state institutions and the nation-building process (Hashmi, 2009).

There are profound impacts of the politicization of religion in Pakistan. The virulent impacts, such as sectarian polarization, religious extremism, intolerance, radicalism, violent extremism, and terrorism, have weakened state-society relations and badly affected every aspect of the state and society. The implications of the politicization of religion in Pakistan have impeded genuine democracy and had adversely affected the fabric of society. The use of religious rhetoric for political gains has stifled the growth of civil society. Thus, it empowers religious groups to challenge the legitimacy and authority of the state. The politicization of religion in Pakistan has significant implications for economic growth because religiously influenced policies create an environment of persistent insecurity and terror, discouraging foreign direct investment and hindering economic growth (Zaidi, 2011). There is no investment possible in any state where there are bombings every single day. There is thus a close link between political stability, economic growth, and cultural development. Violent extremism and terrorism strike at the roots of development. Pakistan is a case in point: a thriving state turned into a pariah as a result of flawed policies and terrorism.

### **Conclusion**

The intertwining of religion with politics has a deep and evolving history in Pakistan. This trajectory of Islamization began with the 1949 Objective Resolution, became entrenched during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Islamic nationalism, intensified during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, and continued under Imran Khan's leadership. Imran Khan promoted the vision of establishing a "State of Madina," using religious sentiments to strengthen his political narrative and embed these slogans into mainstream societal debates and discourses. As the founder of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in 1996, Khan's political journey gradually reshaped public opinion and led him to the prime minister's office from 2018 until 2022, when he was removed through a vote of no-confidence initiated by the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM). Throughout his tenure, Khan consistently invoked religious themes to rally popular support, often emphasizing the model of "*Riyasat-e-Madina*." His initiatives, such as the creation of the National *Rahmatul-lil-Alameen* Authority (NRA), became subjects of intellectual discussion across the country. Furthermore, his advocacy for Muslim causes resulted in the United Nations' declaration of March 15 as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. His policies also focused on integrating madrassahs into the formal education system and promoting religious teachings through the introduction of the Single National Curriculum.

Imran Khan's vision of *Riyasat-i-Madina* and his use of religious rhetoric as a tool to come to power follow the traditions of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Zia ul-Haq. His emotive slogans included the transformation of Pakistan into a "*Naya Pakistan*" modelled on the state of Madina and the establishment of the *Rehmatul lil Aalamin Authority*—aimed at building the character of the nation in accordance with the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He initiated the Single National Curriculum (SNC) to regulate the curricula—to check if any content was contrary to the teachings of Islam. Imran Khan also praised the Taliban for coming to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, claiming they had broken the shackles of slavery. Aspiring to be the greatest leader of Muslims, he raised his voice against Islamophobia at the United Nations to gain popularity and legitimize his struggle.

The politicisation of religion has had enormous consequences for Pakistan: it has wreaked havoc on the social fabric, weakened the state-society bond, and has stifled the growth of democracy. This phenomenon has provided a conducive environment for intolerance, sectarianism, violent extremism, and terrorism to thrive unchecked. The process of religious purification and sectionalism started in the early years of Pakistan. The Afghan *jihad* of the 1980s provided an opportunity for sectarianism, jihadism, and violent extremism to flourish in Pakistan—with the support of the state, the US, and Saudi Arabia. General Zia used religion to legitimise his regime and prolong his stay in power, and Pakistan saw exponential growth in sectarianism, jihadism, and terrorism. In the post-9/11

war on terror, Pakistan became enmeshed in radicalism, local militancy, and extremist violence. All these factors have negatively impacted the economy, democracy, and statehood in Pakistan—which in turn have not only abetted a sense of insecurity among its citizens but have also tarnished its image on the world stage.

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