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Pakistan

Rising extremism, war on terrorism and women's lives in Pakistan

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Genesis of Extremism

Sixty two years ago at the time of Pakistan's birth in 1947 as a result of partition of United India, the majority of the population in this part of the world was not fundamentalist. The state structures, though weak, nevertheless had chances to grow as a democratic country but on account of repeated interferences by Military regimes, the state started adopting Islamic ideology, giving maximum space to religious extremist forces to promote their non-democratic agenda in the country.

Many religious political parties and sectarian groups were pampered and encouraged to grow by military regimes. Millions of petro dollars were poured in by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to strengthen these parties and groups under direct state patronage. The Islamist forces had a quiet walk over democratic and progressive forces, to consolidate their socio-political spaces in the country. Religious schools (madrassas) were set up to groom and recruit jihadis. These madrassas emerged like mushrooms across Pakistan particularly in tribal areas, which served as real breeding grounds for religious fundamentalism.

The Constitution of country was injected with pro-Islamic clauses, imposing restrictions on women rights, curtailing their mobility to participate in social life. Burka culture was promoted and women were pushed inside the four walls of the house. Segregation on basis of gender was introduced at all levels in the name of Islam. Military dictator Gen.Zia-ul-Haq enacted discriminatory laws against women to please religious forces. Parallel Islamic courts were established by Saudizing the constitution. Under Evidence Act women's' evidence was declared half in comparison to a man. Burden of proof of rape was shifted on woman, while in case of unwanted pregnancy as result of rape, victim was used to subject to punishment by lashes, prison and stoning to death. Women movements and progressive forces though in their limited capacity reacted to these barbaric state measures but could not stop the ugly onslaught of extremist forces.

War on Terrorism

After 9/11 attacks and subsequent US war on terrorism, madrassas continued to grow and so were the influence of extremist forces. Though madrassas are only about 7 per cent of primary schools in Pakistan, their influence is amplified by the inadequacy of public education and the innate religiosity of the majority of the population. Right now there are more than 15,000 registered religious seminaries in the country catering over 1.5 million students and more than 55,000 teachers. This lot of religious proponents has spread in every nook and corner of the country, clamoring for Jihad against everything which, to them, is non-Islamic.

This unchecked growth of religious fundamentalism was not only result of the US war on terrorism or that of Pakistani intelligence agencies policies, but it was also the complete failure of civilian and military governments as well to solve any of the basic problems of the working class in Pakistan. Successive regimes remained unsuccessful to break the socio-politico-economic grip of feudalism and absolute exploitive nature of Pakistani capitalists.

The on-going US "war on terror" has proved counter productive and further fueling religious fundamentalism in

Pakistan. The heavy price of war against Taliban is being paid by civilian population. Thousands of innocent people particularly women and children have been killed in Drone attacks and operations by Pakistani army. About 2 million people had to flee from conflict zones of Swat valley in 2009. Women were the worst sufferers among internally displaced people (IDPs). By many in Pakistan it is seen as a war on Muslims, rather a war on terrorists. It is really difficult situation for left and progressive forces to convince the people that war on terrorism has purely long-term capitalistic agenda.

Thus the war on terrorism not only helped grow further extremism but also created non-conducive atmosphere for the progressive and women rights forces to work in. The agenda of women rights is relegated to large extent. Any body talks about women rights is branded as anti-Islamic and pro-west. The imperialist occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan provided the religious fanatics a political justification to promote their agenda of further religiosity of state and society.

Women as punching bag for extremists

The rapid rise of religious extremism has made the lives of women in Pakistan more miserable and oppressed. The few freedoms and democratic rights earlier available to women are being crushed by the extremist groups. They banned Girls' education declaring it as "western conspiracy". More than 300 girls' schools were burnt, destroyed or closed down by local Taliban in Swat. Women have also been banned from markets and shops. A strict dress code was imposed. In North West Frontier province of Pakistan, a woman must be fully covered, from head to toe. Even girls of eight-nine years have to follow the dress code. Women are not allowed to take part in the political activities and are barred from voting in elections. Women have become an invisible community in the areas controlled by the fundamentalist religious groups. Even after flashing them out of these areas by military, situation for women remains same.

Women have become a punching bag for local militant groups, attempting to impose their own brand of Islam on them. They want to establish Taliban style government in Pakistan. They have been attacking and bombing the music shops and girls' schools, scaring women to remain in their homes. They banned female workers in the public and private sectors.

Women in Pakistan are already deprived of their basic democratic, political and economic rights. In many parts of the country, they have to confront centuries-old traditions and customs. Honor killing, social and economic discrimination, repression, domestic violence, discriminatory laws and sexual harassment are common issues being faced by women.

Musharraf regime made tall claims about legislation to protect women rights. The "Women's Protection Bill" in reality helped little to improve conditions for working class and poor women. The new PPP government also made similar statements to improve women rights conditions but women have little hope with regard to materialization of these statements. Though it has recently introduced legislation against sexual harassment at work place, obviously a welcome step, but what needed is a constitutional package covering socio-economic and political rights of women, in order to mainstream them.

Extremism & Feudalism one against women

In patriarchal Pakistani society, women are mere a symbol of family honor and dignity. Female members of the family are considered as private property. Under the prevailing feudal culture women are confined to home to "save male

honor and dignity". It is strongly believed that if women are allowed out of the home to receive education, to do shopping or a job, the society will become "immoral and vulgar". Even a common Muslim male, who does claim not to be a fundamentalist believe that outspoken and rights-demanding women are responsible for promoting immorality and vulgarity in society.

The extremists are bent upon imposing their code of ethics on women in the name of Islamic teachings. While feudalism implements its code of morality in the name of "tradition and custom". Both are one to crush women rights and unfortunately they are in abundance in Pakistan. About 70 percent population of Pakistan lives in rural areas, where poor masses, particularly women have no control over lives. They do not have right to choice marriage. Girl education is strongly discouraged and women are told to tolerate oppressive norms in the name of morality. The nefarious nexus of feudalism and religious militancy is virtually driving their lives. Their influence is no more confined to the most backward areas of the country. It also gaining ground in the big cities and towns as well.

Though state introduced some laws to stop the practice of inhuman traditions and customs, but these legislations failed to stop the practice of anti-women traditions, particularly in rural areas. For instance a piece of legislation was introduced in 2005 which declared honor killing a heinous crime and the death penalty was imposed as punishment under this law. But this strict law and capital punishment failed to reduce the number of honor killings. There were more than 800 such cases reported in 2007. The number of unreported cases was many times higher. While customs such as 'swara' and 'vani' are banned by law, they continue to take place. The 'swara' and 'vani' are practiced in some parts of southern Punjab and NWFP.

These customs allow young girls to be offered to settle the dispute between rival families. For example, if a person is accused of murder, wants to settle a dispute with deceased family, they can offer their daughter or sister to 'absolve' themselves of the crime. Young girls, two or three years old are simply passed to the rival family. This custom is used to settle all sorts of disputes, without involving the country's law or police. Other traditions include child marriage, exchanged marriage, Forced marriage and marriages to the Holy Quran also continue, despite the existence of the laws and widespread social consensus against them.

The marriage to the Holy Quran is a custom that exists among the feudal families of Sindh. Under this custom, the male members of the family refuse to allow the female members to marry and declare that they have been married to the Quran. The main reason behind this custom is to safeguard part of the land which, otherwise, will go away with marriage of daughter or sister. In the presence of the laws, these barbaric and inhuman traditions and customs are still flourishing. The rising wave of fundamentalism, coupled with results of war on terrorism are making the lives of women more miserable, curbing their fundamental and universal rights.

What is really needed is a united class-based struggle against the rotten system of capitalism, which is directly encouraging religious extremism and feudalism to continue. Capitalism, coopting with feudalism and extremism can not create the conditions in which women can enjoy full rights, freedom and equality. The need for a democratic socialism, providing guarantees of equal rights and opportunities to women is the need of the hour. Women in Pakistan can only enjoy full liberty and freedom in a true socialist society, free from all exploitation, repression and discrimination.