

Pakistan: Countering extremism

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THE government's decision to establish a commission "for implementation of national narrative and development of structures against violent extremism and radicalisation" is a significant move towards countering violent extremism (CVE) and terrorism (CT) in the long term. In a meeting last month, the cabinet approved the proposal submitted by the interior ministry and the draft legal framework is currently under consideration by its sub-committee on legislation headed by the law minister. This initiative requires debate and ownership by state and society.

The primary objectives of the proposed commission include: (i) providing a legal mechanism to curb violent extremism; (ii) enforcing national narratives and policies in line with the National Action Plan (NAP); (iii) establishing a policy review board under the commission to coordinate with ministries, government departments and academia; (iv) establishing a centre of excellence to conduct degree and diploma courses in CVE and CT; (v) establishing a national facility to design and implement strategies in deradicalisation, rehabilitation, and psychological and religious counselling of prisoners and detainees involved in terrorism; (vi) prohibiting offences related to VE and sectarianism; (vii) preparing deradicalisation modules, strategies and vocational training programmes for suspected terrorists and extremists; and (viii) promoting awareness through print and electronic media, publications, seminars, conferences, etc.

Extremism must be addressed through policies that include strategies and action plans, clarity on CVE laws, and national consensus on narratives. The first-ever National Internal Security Policy (NISP 2014-18) suggested "constructing a robust national narrative on extremism, sectarianism, terrorism, and militancy as the cornerstone of an ideological response to non-traditional threats". Mere words, no action. An under-resourced Nacta could not achieve this.

Also so far on paper alone, the NISP 2018-23 was nonetheless an improved version adopted after extensive consultation with all political parties, and contained an effective institutional mechanism designed in consultation with all provinces. What is the use of making policies if they are not to be implemented? Intriguingly, we still do not have a comprehensive national security policy despite having established a national security division a few years ago. A military doctrine has limited scope. An all-encompassing security policy must prioritise socioeconomic and human development, supported by all elements of national power.

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Nacta drafted detailed CVE policy guidelines in January 2018 after extensive stakeholder deliberations. These identified the drivers of extremism and covered areas such as the rule of law, service delivery, media engagement, education policy, promotion of culture and the four 'R's: reformation, rehabilitation, reintegration and renunciation strategies. Extremism was broadly defined as "having absolute belief in one's truth with an ingrained sense of self-righteousness". Such a mindset was then "likely to be accompanied with violence" to impose one's belief system. The CVE guidelines should have been adopted to reduce intolerance and violence in our society. Similarly,

Nacta's policy review of NAP in 2019 found that actions were required in nine out of 20 points. The government should pay attention to the guidelines and policy review.

The 22-point, 120-page Paigham-i-Pakistan, was launched in January 2018 through the joint efforts of the Council of Islamic Ideology and Higher Education Commission. Currently, it has more than 5,000 signatories. It can be the basis of a national narrative against religious extremism. Reportedly, the CII is toying with the idea of converting it into law, thus criminalising any violations of the decree. This would be a dangerous path to tread, as witnessed recently with the Tahaffuz Bunyad-i-Islam bill in Punjab. The role of the state is that of an enabler and facilitator, not an enforcer, in matters of faith and belief of individual citizens.

Another recent development deserves attention. Extremism has been defined in the Citizens' Protection Rules (Against Online Harm), 2020, as "the violent, vocal or active opposition to fundamental values of the State of Pakistan including the security, integrity or defence of Pakistan, public order, decency or morality, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs". This definition is problematic, ambiguous and likely to promote internal discord. It calls for serious review. It took more than two decades to restrict and rationalise the definitional aspect of terrorism in the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, when in 2019 a Supreme Court bench restricted its scope by delinking acts of terror from personal enmity or private vendetta. Similarly, defining extremism requires thorough deliberation.

In its report in 2013, the UK's Prime Minister's Task Force on Tackling Radicalisation and Extremism quotes from the 2011 Prevent strategy in which extremism is defined as "vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs". The similarities between the UK's and Pakistan's definitions may be a coincidence, but it is worth noting that the British government has abandoned plans to define extremism in law after being told it would criminalise legitimate political and religious activities.

Lord Anderson, former independent reviewer of UK's terrorism legislation, recently said, "The notion [of extremism] is far too broad to be suitable for legislation. Coercive state powers should not be applied to 'extremism', but only to specific types of violent, abusive and anti-social conduct that there is a sufficiently strong reason to prohibit." According to Sara Khan, appointed to head the UK Counter-Extremism Commission in 2017, "Government cannot tackle extremism alone. Extremism is complex and new laws may not result in a reduction. Civil society and communities are vital partners," and "Extremism is a threat to our rich diversity and fundamental freedoms, and it requires a whole society response."

Setting up a CVE commission is a good idea. However, I urge policymakers to pay heed to the words of Edith Wharton: "True originality consists not in a new manner but in a new vision."

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