Religion and Politics: A Conundrum of Identity Formation and Political Movements in Malakand, Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper examines the dynamics of religious identity, exclusivism, and violence, and their impact on socio-political transformations in the Malakand Division of Pakistan. The people of Pakistan—particularly those in Malakand—demonstrate a deep emotional attachment to religion, which is often exploited by extremist groups in the region. The intersection of religion and politics here is both intricate and far-reaching, exerting a profound influence on the Pakistani state and society. This study is grounded in field research and relies on primary data collected through interviews, focus group discussions with diverse social groups as well as an analysis of friday sermons (*Khutbah*) in mosques in the research area. *The thematic findings are generated by using the theoretical framework of Mary Douglas' Enclave Theory. The findings suggest that rigid religious ideologies, intra-faith doctrinal differences, contested dogmatic narratives propagated by radicals at the societal level, and the emergence of counter-narratives promoting peaceful coexistence, compassion, and pluralism, all shape the socio-political landscape of Malakand. The religious rhetorics generated within the tribal social order were made more complex by state interventions. The post-colonial state structure has influenced local level power alliances in an attempt to transform the social order from informal tribal led governance to more formal state led one. The study argues that faith-based divisions and the polemics employed by religious scholars has impacted traditional cultural and religious identity and significantly contributed to provocation and violence in the region, which is apparently associated with Pashtun culture*.

*Keywords***:** religious identity, exclusivism, violence, socio-political transformation, narrative, world view

Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the dynamics of religious identity, exclusion, violence, and their impact on socio-political transformations in the Malakand Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The interplay between religion and politics in Pakistan has acquired increasingly nuanced forms, particularly in the aftermath of the post-9/11 "War on Terror". This study examines how the state has employed a multitude of security measures—coercive technologies of

power and disciplinary mechanisms—to impose control. The unprecedented use of force, combined with cracks and inconsistencies in state policy, provides an alternative perspective that contrasts with the state's official security discourse. Within this framework, the logic of state (in)security constrains liberal spaces, while archaic forms of political violence are inherited and perpetuated by non-state actors (Sahill, 2018). The state system has become increasingly anarchic, legitimizing the use of power. The resurgence of religion, together with the global de-secularizing trends, has re-positioned religion from its so-called "Westphalian exile" to a continuation of politics by other means (Hallinan, 2007).

Historically a tribal society, Malakand was transformed into a political entity in the nineteenth century. In Dir, Chitral, and Bajaur, small khanates struggled for dominance. The historical and archeological sites of Swat Valley and its surroundings testify to a peaceful past. Researchers and archeologists regard the valley as a repository of living evidence, reflecting an amalgamation of Mesopotamian, Central Asian, and Indian civilizations. The Muslim conquest over the Hindu Shahi marked the emergence of a new wave of civilization in the region. Subsequently, different dynasties and Muslim tribal influences left their imprint from the ninth century onward.

The Mughal expansion into the region, its connections with Swat, and the political activities of Khushal Khan Khattak reflect the broader history of the Yousufzai tribe. Before the emergence of princely states, tribal skirmishes and power struggles intensified during the late nineteenth century under British colonial rule. With the annexation of the region into Pakistan, profound political and social transformations occurred, leaving lasting effects on local society.

By the end of the twentieth century, the Cold War and the subsequent "War on Terror" profoundly reshaped this ethnically homogeneous yet politically divided region. Malakand, and especially Swat, Dir, and Bajaur, bore the brunt of these conflicts. The rise of *Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-i-Muhammadi* (TNSM) under Maulana Sufi Muhammad and later the *Tahreek-e-Taliban* Pakistan (TTP) under Maulana Fazlullah marked one of the most violent and transformative periods in the history of the Swat valley says S. Rome, (personal communication, July 30, 2023).

This paper attempts to address the causes of intra-faith exclusion and violence in the Malakand region of Pakistan. It further explores the transformation of the socio-political institutions and practices under the influence of radicalization and violent extremism. This research focuses on how the narrative of exclusivism has become dominant in society, particularly in the Malakand Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The analysis is situated within the lens of political anthropology, examining the extent to which exclusionary ideologies have reshaped local institutions, practices, and socio-political customs. It also explores the role of religious worldviews in shaping these dynamics, both within localized contexts and in relation to the broader socio-political landscape. Finally, the study reflects on how four decades of unrest have profoundly affected the lives and collective psychology of the people of Malakand.

Methodology

This research explores the problem under research through qualitative methods deriving its findings both from secondary and primary sources. A detailed and thorough investigation of secondary sources, archival documents, reports, indigenous materials on polemics was undertaken. To synthesize relevant concepts and ideas, an extensive literature review was conducted. The primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Participants included members of local *Jargahs*, community leaders, religious scholars affiliated with different factions and organizations, and families affected by violence.

Using a socio-theological approach combined with participatory observations (PO), the study sought to understand, explain, and clarify the lived experiences, perceptions, attitudes, values, and beliefs of the groups under investigation. Direct engagement with participants enabled the collection of in-depth insights into social processes and provided a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play. The analysis is grounded in primary research aimed at exploring the worldviews of individuals with diverse factional affiliations to religio-political groups and organizations, particularly regarding socio-political issues within Malakand. By prioritizing authentic voices and avoiding prescriptive conclusions, the study captures the complexities of everyday life in Malakand and lays the foundation for a comprehensive discussion of the findings and their implications.

The demographic data obtained from interviews reveal significant insights into intra-faith identity within the Sunni Muslim community, particularly among the Deobandi and Hanafi sects in Malakand. The sample predominantly comprises male participants, with only one female student included, highlighting a pronounced gender imbalance in representation, particularly among religious and community leaders. Most respondents identified with the Sunni (*Deobandi*) sect, underscoring the strong presence of Deobandi scholars, leaders, and community members, while limited representation from the *Sunni* (Hanafi) and *Shia* (Ismaili) sects reflects some degree of diversity. Participants included religious scholars, educators, politicians, and community elders – individuals who hold considerable influence within their localities. Geographically, respondents were primarily from Malakand Division, with particular representation from Dir Upper, Dir Lower, Swat, and Bajaur, making the study localized but reflective of broader regional trends. The strong representation of individuals affiliated with religious seminaries (*madrasas*) highlights the critical role of formal religious education in intra-faith identity. This profile not only underscores cohesion within certain sects but also reveals latent divisions stemming from sectarian/factional affiliations. Additionally, it points to the need for more inclusive approaches that integrate women's perspectives into discourses on intra-faith identity.

Map: Malakand Region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
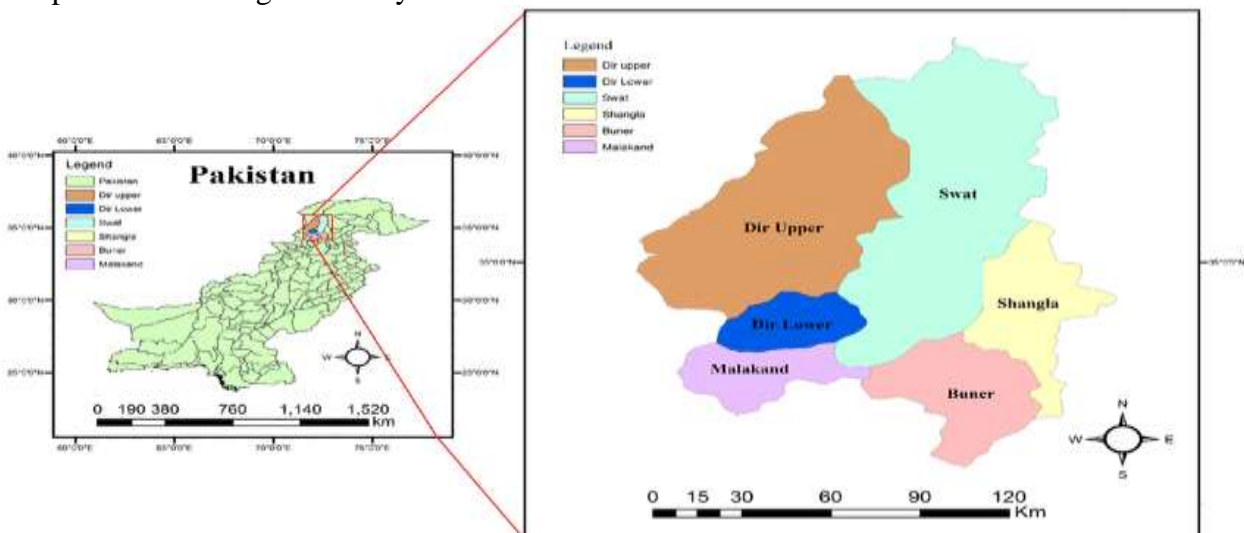
Source: **https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Pakistan-showing-the-study-area-Malakand-division_fig1_355381064**

Ethnographic Profile of Malakand

The Pakhtuns population of Malakand, predominantly Yousafzai, is organized around three interconnected features: patrilineal descent, landownership rights, and birth status (Jan, 2010). The ethnographic divisions of Malakand include the *Akozai Yousafzai, Tarkalani,* and *Uthmankhel*. Patrilineal genealogies trace conversion to Islam across multiple generations, with detailed records available in colonial reports (Military Report, 1906). Barth (1959) observes that these genealogies often contain "spurious pedigrees" constructed to establish landownership and political legitimacy (Jan, 2010). The Pakhtuns social structure sis characterized by institutions such as the *hujra* (a Pakhtuns male gathering) and *jumat* (mosque), which serves as public spaces. Distinctive cultural practices include traditional dress, cuisine, and folk customs (riwaj), with dialectical variations reflecting clan and sub-tribal identities.

Other groups historically residing in Malakand include the *Torwal* and *Gauri* tribes of Swat *Kohistan* (Mountainous region) the Bashkari of Patrak Kohistan, and the *Lamotai* of Upper Dir. Linguistic studies suggest that the Gauri language, linked to Vedic texts, has affinities with languages spoken in northern India. The name Gauri was coined and used by Morgenstern and Fredrick Barth (A.I.O.U, 2004, p. 258-288). Gujjars, Mashwanis, Roghanis, Katani, also assimilated into Malakand society. In the early twentieth century, significant Hindu and Sikh population lived in the region, particularly in Dir, Buner, and Bajaur, though their numbers declined considerably after partition. Colonial records describe Malakand's people as deeply superstitious but disciplined, capable of intense collective mobilization described as "fanaticism". Major power centers included local khanates and religious leaders such as the Akhund of Swat, Ilyas Paindakhel of Malazai, Bahadur Shah Khan of Bandai, Khan of Sundrawal, Akhund Abdul Ghafoor, the Nawab of Nawagai, and Umara Khan Mastkheil, and other influential village leaders had existed who ruled through power and wealth. No centralized authority existed until the British consolidated power through the War of Malakand (1897-1898), after which boundaries were demarcated among Dir, Swat, Chitral, and Bajaur through different treaties.

Contested Religious Ideologies and Pashtun Society in Malakand

The contested religious identities of Malakand Division must be contextualized historically within broader political evolution of Pakistan. Since its annexation, the region has experienced a surge in competing religious ideologies, particularly during the last four decades. These shifts reflect both localized traditions and wider political developments.

Religious enclaves and group affiliations have become central to identity formation and socio-political mobilization. The state's role in fostering certain groups, personalities, and religious organizations has reinforced divisions. Dominant sectarian ideologies in Malakand include Deobandis (Hanafi), Panjpiri Jamaat-e-Ishaat, Salafism/Wahabism (Ahl-al-Hadith), and the Barelvi movement. Other groups, such as Jamaat ul Muslimeen, the Tablighi Jamaat, and Jamaat-e-Islami, also maintain influence, having been differences over Islam, politics, democracy, and jihad. Religious factionalism has fractured society, with Sunnis further divided between Wahabis and non-Wahabis, often disapproving of each other with fervor that fuels tension. Religion in this context with homogeneous totality has taken the primary and exclusive influence despite having broad division and multiple interpretations (Syed, 1984).

Religious groups with extreme ideologies capitalized on Islam's role in social life. Maulana Maududi's writings, which rejected nationalism as "the creation of devil", inspired many fundamentalist leaders. Despite Muhammad Ali Jinnah's modernist vision, Islamist groups

reorganized under the Objectives Resolution of 1949 (Ahsan, 2005) Sharply opposing *M. Ali Jinnah's* concept of Pakistan before the Commission of Justice *Munir* and M.R Kyani probing the 1953 Lahore communal riots, interestingly the same *Ulema* belonging to different factions when asked for definition of Islam each of them came up with their own definition (Numan, 1988). General Zia Ul Haq further entrenched religion in politics by promoting an "Islamic order". His regime's policies, closely tied to religious forces, laid the foundation for radicalization in Pakistan (Saleem, 2010).

The Afghan War catalyzed the mushrooming of religious seminaries (*Madaris[1]*)*,* funded by foreign aid and aligned with state policy, especially in the 1980s (Bell, 2007). In 1971, Pakistan had 900 Madaris; by the 1980s the number had increased by 8,000, with an additional 25,000 unregistered institutions clustered near the Pak-Afghan border. The formalization of zakat (an Islamic religious tithe – 2.5 %) further empowered the ulema (Singer, 2001). This proliferation facilitated extremist ideologies, sectarian divisions, and militancy. State-backed narratives displaced older traditions of tolerance and spirituality. Fellow Muslims of other sects, particularly Shias, were increasingly labeled as "others". By the 1990s, nearly all religio-political parties maintained militant wings.

These contested ideological orientations afflicted society with a scheme of studies. Currently six Boards for different seminaries based on intra-faith based factional division exist in Pakistan. The network of *Madaris* were established and even female madrasas were introduced for the first time. The new school curriculum carried with content-based on extremist ideology. Ali and Marwat (2024) note that Afghan refugee camps hosted two types of schools: those where textbooks were provided by the UNHCR, and Mujahideen schools, where jihad (holy war) was promoted and curricular material was developed with the support of the University of Nebraska, United States. During the 1990s, nearly all religio-political parties and groups in the region maintained militant wings aligned with their ideological orientations. These groups were actively recruited, financed, and trained in the tribal areas and in the Malakand Division.

Darul Uloom Haqanya became especially prominent in training leaders of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (Khattak, 2023). The region subsequently witnessed waves of military operations, internal displacements, and lawlessness, leaving local populations traumatized. Mainstream media often ignored or misrepresented these experiences, but oral histories preserve collective memory rooted in both resistance and cooperation as elaborated in Durkheim's concept of "mechanical solidarity". It identifies the socio-political patterns of relations and control. It also demystifies the question of identity and other variables associated with politics, religion, and culture of the region. Religious identities in the region have become deeply entrenched, with various groups justifying their authority in the name of religious purification and political objectives (Khan, 2022). The weaponization of religious law and factional differences represents a political phenomenon in which violence is used as a means to exclude and delegitimize other Muslim groups or individuals. This process is closely tied to the broader state security apparatus and its ideological foundations. Violence committed in the name of this ideology has often been tolerated, neutralized, or even openly supported and financed through societal charity. This raises a critical question: why is militant ideology tolerated, normalized, and financially sustained by society? As Roy (2004) observes, "its proponents support jihad as a permanent and individual duty, for the very reason that there is no longer a true Islamic ruler or even a true *ummah* that could call for jihad."

The disjointed manner in which religious framing has developed in society further exacerbates the issue. In Malakand, religious orientations tend to dominate over other social customs, values, and traditions. The Some scholars argue that exclusionary practices based on religious identity have become increasingly entrenched, with large segments of society embracing a rigid religious worldview often associated with intolerance and violence (Hussain, 2016). The risk of chronic violence increases in societies marked by religious diversity. As Gutting (2016) notes, in modern era, violence rooted in religious intolerance spreads more easily, fostering fear and, in some cases, outright warfare. State institutions have also been implicated, as their policies and practices influence religious actors in deciding to employ violence as a means of altering the political status quo (Lieven, 2011).

Findings: Religious Identity and Socio-Political Transformation

Religious Identity emerged as a central theme, illustrating how religion profoundly influences personal beliefs, societal norms, and political frameworks. Many interviewees (M.K. Zeb, Personal Communication, March 3, 2023) highlighted how madrassa education reshaped their understanding of Islam, transforming it from a private devotional practice into a comprehensive framework for societal governance and law. This underscores the pivotal role of religious education in shaping both personal and collective identities.

Movements such as the Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith further demonstrate how factional identities inform religious practices. Religious identity also intersects with political activism, as evidenced in the advocacy for an Islamic system of governance by respondents who rejected democracy as un-Islamic system of governance (M.Z. Haq, Personal communication, March 28,2022). Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), among other movements, has sought to integrate Islamic principles into political and social structures, reflecting the enduring role of religious identity in socio-political reforms. The historical roots of these identities, particularly within anti-colonial movements, further reinforces their significance.

At the same time, factional divisions within religious discourse have contributed to conflict and violence as some respondents criticized state-sponsored policies that, in his view, exacerbated sectarian violence (A.R. Khalil, Personal Communication, April 12, 2023). Conversely, others noted that the complexity of sectarianism has also produced calls for a unified Islamic identity that transcends factional divisions. Together, these perspectives highlight the dual nature of religious identity: it can unify through shared belief or divide through doctrinal disputes (S. Arman, Personal Communication, April 18,2023). Therefore, always been in control of the big actors and entities.

Families who lost members during the violence of the *Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi* (TNSM) recounted the profound challenges they faced, including economic hardship, social disruption, and unresolved property disputes. One respondent reflected on initially being drawn to the rhetoric of jihad, influenced by propaganda framing it as a religious duty. However, over time especially after the failures of uncoordinated militant ventures post-9/11, such views shifted. The respondent admitted that what had once been seen as religious obligation was later recognized and proven as disastrous and misguided.

Mothers within these families played a crucial role in guiding their children through these turbulent times, instilling resilience, patience, and critical reflection. Their leadership fostered a more grounded worldview among the younger generation, who increasingly recognize the dangers of blind allegiance to militant ideologies and the importance of critical engagement with faith.

The general findings highlight the deep connection between religious beliefs and societal transformation. Some scholars' frame revolution as rooted in prophetic traditions, emphasizing its central role in confronting and reshaping social systems (Q.B. Zeb, personal communication, march 7,2022). The influence of religious leadership is also evident in Maulana Wahid's emphasis on the importance of Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*) for addressing emerging social issues. He contrasts Islamic democracy – anchored in divine sovereignty – with secular democracy, which he considers antithetical to Islamic values. This ideological stance reflected in the activities of organizations such as Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM). As Maulana Zahoor ul Haq notes, TNSM historically rejected state mechanisms like police intervention: "we stopped going to police stations, as we considered registering an FIR as a sin, and declared jihad in response to global political events like 9/11" (M.Z. Haq, Personal communication, March 28,2022). Meanwhile, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) advocates for societal transformation through democratic means, emphasizing the implementation of an Islamic way of life. Others highlight growing academic awareness of the interconnections between religion and politics (S. Arman, Personal Communication, April 18,2023).

Extremism, in the opinion of some has been externally influenced and used to foster division, transforming communities into factional entities. They cite Kunar, Afghanistan, bordering Bajaur as an example of how interconnected communities of shared lineage were permeated by cross-border political and religious movements (M.K. Zeb, Personal Communication, March 3, 2023). Over time, traditional tribal systems that once safeguarded women, mosques, and Jirgas have been eroded. Extremism has altered this landscape, normalizing violence and reshaping cultural values. For four decades, international conflicts have turned local soil into a battleground, where political manipulation and psychological tactics eroded longstanding traditions. Extremism, Khan Zeb argues, was deliberately exported and exploited, with the complicity of religious organizations such as JI and JUI. In contrast, the secular Awami National Party (ANP) resisted this tide of violence, paying the heavy price for losing approximately 1400 of their political workers. According to Khan Zeb, these conflicts were imposed to undermine Afghan history and cultural identity for historical and political reasons.

The General Secretary of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chapter of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), frames the formation of TLP as a reaction to political marginalization – specifically the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, who murdered Punjab Governor Salman Taseer (d. 2011) over alleged blasphemy (S. A. Shah, Personal Communication, July 1, 2023). TLP situates itself as a defender of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) honor and the doctrine of Khatm-e-Nabuwwat (finality of Prophethood). Historical accounts of Akhund Panju Baba, a spiritual leader during the Mughal period, further illustrate this continuity: he resisted the influence of Pir Sarmast, a follower of Bayazid Ansari (1525-1585), whose heterodox practices challenged Islamic orthodoxy (Usmani, 2023, p. 109). Today, the custodians of shrines in the Barelvi tradition face opposition from groups such as Panjpiri and Ahl-e-Hadith, reflecting broader sectarian/factional tensions. These dynamics underscore how religious ideologies continue to drive both social change and political activism, often in response to perceived threats to religious values and identity.

Violence in Pashtun Culture: Internal Contradictions or External Forces

Interviewees widely asserted that Pashtuns are culturally and religiously traditionalists, and that violence is not intrinsic to their society. Historically, violence was not an inherent feature of

Pashtun culture but was introduced through state policies and foreign interventions. External forces, particularly foreign policy decisions, have been decisive in reshaping internal dynamics. Pashtunwali, the Pashtun code of conduct, illustrates this point well. Revenge, or *Badal*, is a traditional concept; however, even in such cases, the perpetrator is expected to leave the area, and, over time, the victim's family may choose to forgive. Culturally, revenge does not extend to targeting women, children, elders, or guests. This reflects a deeply ingrained respect for ethics, values, and humanity, even in the face of aggression.

However, a troubling shift has emerged in Pashtun society with the introduction of violence and extremism through external ideologies and philosophies. These influences have led to attacks on places of worship, *madrasas*, community spaces such as the *Hujra*, and even on women, children, and the elderly. Violence transformed into a political ideology, has distorted the traditional Pashtun approach to conflict, turning it into a tool for political and economic gain. One interviewee argued that when violence is framed as part of an ideological struggle, it becomes a form of cultural and societal assault, damaging the very fabric of Pashtun identity and values. M.K. Zeb, (Personal Communication, March 3,2023) argues that around 500 years back Mughal king Babur killed thousands of Pakhtuns and labeled them cruel as well. At that time, Amir Haider Ali Khan stood as a figure of resistance. During the Sikh era, leaders such as Mir Alam Khan, Maulana Mehmud Makhfi, and Babari Mullah emerged as revolutionary figures fighting against those who invaded this soil.

The Contested Idea of Democracy and Islam in Society

The contested relationship between democracy and Islam is another critical issue. Some believe that democracy's fundamental principles contradict Islam while others argue that Islamic ideology inherently supports democratic governance and civil rule. The concept of *Shura* (consultation) is often cited as an equivalent to parliamentary democracy. In contrast, ideologies such as *khilafat,* internationalism, communism, and pan-Islamism often erode humanity and individual rights.

Participants in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) at *Ahya-ul-Uloom[1] Jamaat-e*-Islami viewed democracy as compatible with Islam and as a preferable alternative to anarchy. Others, such as Maulana Iftikhar, stressed the need for reforms within the system, advocating for representation by the "right people"—a more evolutionary perspective. These views illustrate how religious movements and political ideologies play crucial roles in shaping societal transformation. A member of District Reconciliation Committee (DRC) in Lower Dir highlighted how the socio-political vacuum in Malakand was filled by religious parties like Jamaat-e-Islami, pointing to a revolutionary transformation through political Islam in response to state failure.

The Philosophy of Jihad in Local Religious and Political Contexts

The role of jihad in local contexts reveals complex dynamics between religious groups and the state narrative. Diverse perspectives exist, often distinguishing between the authority of religious scholars and the state. The diverse perspectives on jihad, often delineating between the roles of religious authorities and the state are expressly emphasized. As Q.B. Zeb (Personal communication, March 7,2022) also contends that jihad is a core tenet of Islam, yet critiques the interpretations of *Mullahs*, asserting that the military should be responsible for conducting jihad rather than religious clerics. Similarly, M.Z. Haq (Personal communication, March 28,2022)

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[1] Ahya ul Uloom Markaz (Center for the revival of knowledge) The District Head Quarter of Jamaat Islami in Dir lower.

recalls that the declaration of jihad following 9/11 was widely endorsed by Pakistan's religious scholars, marking it as a compulsory act against perceived injustices.

In contrast, others maintain that jihad should primarily be directed against non-Muslim adversaries, suggesting a more statist nationalistic version (M.I. Hussain and M. Inam, personal communication, March 3,2022). Whereas F. Andaleeb (Personal Communication, March 30,2022) reflects concerns over emotional exploitation during previous conflicts. And M. F. Qayum, (Personal Communication, March 10,2022) contend that while jihad is fundamentally a state responsibility, individuals may initiate it if the state fails to uphold Islamic principles. This sentiment is echoed by A.R. Khalil (Personal Communication, April 12,2023) who emphasizes that only the state has the authority to declare jihad, highlighting the potential dangers of non-state actors engaging in militant actions. A women religious seminary student presents two perspectives, one that places authority in the hands of state leaders and another that allows religious scholars to issue individual calls to jihad under specific circumstances (Faiqa, Personal Communication, Feb 5, 2023). However, others questioned the widespread belief that the state-sponsored organizations undermine national rights and freedom to ethnic groups and minorities.

Intra-Faith Doctrinal Differences

Field data reveals notable differences of opinion among different Islamic sects. Qari Bahadur Zeb argued that discussions should focus more on pressing social issues – such as economic disparities and imperialism – than on sectarian disputes, which exacerbate conflicts. Similarly, M.Wahid (Personal Communication, March 25,2022) emphasized the value of differing interpretations within Islamic jurisprudence (*Ijtihad*) as long as they remain respectful and within the agreed boundaries. Three primary areas of disagreement were identified:

- Islam vs. *Kufr* (disbelief): A divide that will persist until the Day of Judgment.
- Sunnah vs. Bid'ah (innovation in religion): A distinction that will remain until the end of time. Ibn Taymiyya, in *Jaad al-Haq,* ranked Bid'ah just below *Shirk* (polytheism), highlighting its severity.
- *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning): Considered a blessing when practiced within limits. The prophet Muhammad (PBUH) described this diversity as *"ikhtilaf e ummat e rahmatun"* (the disagreement within my community is a mercy).

Nonetheless, significant doctrinal divides – particularly between Sunni and Shia beliefs – were observed, with some framing these differences as matters of faith (kufr) rather than theological debate. Usool al-Deen (principles of religion) is seen as a framework for addressing emerging issues. Ghair muqallid (non-conformists) often criticize traditional jurisprudence, attempting to undermine the four established schools of thought. with God), highlighting its severity. The third difference involves *Ijtihad*, or independent juristic reasoning, which is viewed as a blessing if it stays within certain limits. The Prophet Muhammad referred to this diversity of opinion as "*ikhtilaf e Ummat e rahmatun*" (the disagreement of the community is a mercy).

However, significant doctrinal divides, particularly between *Sunni* and *Shia* beliefs, were identified, with differences often framed as matters of faith (*kufr*) rather than as theological debate. Through the knowledge of *Usool-e-Deen,* guidance can be extrapolated to address newly emerging

issue. The *ghair muqallid*[2] (non- conformists), therefore, target *Fiqh* as their primary point of criticism, attempting to undermine the four established traditions of Islam.

Sami-u-din Arman highlighted how the proliferation of sect-specific *madrasas* has deepened sectarianism by teaching different doctrines without unified standards. This fragmentation has turned religious education into a source of division rather than unity. The female seminary student Faiqa (Personal Communication, Feb 5, 2023) acknowledged sectarian differences while emphasizing her affiliation with the Deobandi school of thought, asserting that the essence of religion (Deen) is Islam itself. While recognizing sects, such as Barelvi, Ahl-e-Hadith, and Panjpiri, she expressed gratitude for being part of the Deobandi tradition, which she views as devoid of hierarchical distinctions. She contrasted Barelvi beliefs – where the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is seen as Noor (light), immortal, and omnipresent – with Deobandi beliefs, which reserve such attributes exclusively for Allah. Her perspective highlights a blend of traditional values, with a recognition of modernity's challenges in the socio-political landscape of Muslim communities.

K. D. Khan (Personal Communication, April 27, 2023) observed that historical Pashtun religious unity, traditionally rooted in the Hanafi school of thought, has been undermined by external influences. Similarly, M.K. Zeb (Personal Communication, March 3, 2023) noted that the last forty years of conflict have catalyzed dramatic shifts, with whole villages in areas like Kunar adopting Wahhabi ideologies. The result has been growing fragmentation, as seen in the establishment of over 39,000 largely unregulated madrasas producing around three million students – 80% of them Pashtun children. Many promote *Takfiri* (exclusivist) ideologies, in stark contrast to the 247 madrasas that existed at the time of Pakistan's creation. As the Arabic proverb goes, *"Al-Nas ala din al-sultan"* ("People follow the religion of their ruler"), emphasizing that the public should avoid being swayed by the state's manipulations in matters of faith.

The Evolving Role of *Jargah*: Ulema vs. Traditional Leaders in Pashtun Society

The general opinion reflects the shifting dynamics between religious leaders (*ulema*) and traditional leaders (*khans and maliks*) in governing societal affairs, particularly in Pashtun regions. Historically, khans and maliks, representing tribal authority, played a dominant role in local governance through traditional institutions such as the Jirga. However, the growing influence of religious leaders within these structures has significantly altered the local power balance. There is an opinion that emphasizes that religious scholars can serve as effective judges in the *Jargah* if they possess knowledge of both religious principles and societal customs. It is further suggested that a synthesis of *ulema* and traditional leadership could offer the most effective governance model (Q.B. Zeb, Personal communication, March 7, 2022). The rising influence of religious leadership is particularly evident in account, where local elders – regardless of political affiliation – united to demand the implementation of *Sharia* in Maidan (M.Z. Haq, Personal communication, March 28, 2022). This illustrates the group dynamics of the enclave, which can also be understood through the framework of Grid-Group theory. It highlights the unifying role of the *ulema* in rallying support for religious governance, at times surpassing traditional political divisions.

Similarly, Maulana Ibrar Hussain noted that *Shura* and *Jargah* are increasingly dominated by *ulema*, reflecting a broader shift from tribal to religious leadership. The decline of traditional leadership is further underscored by some observing that *Ullasy* (from the people) elders, once

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[2] Muqalideen (Followers of the tradition (Conformists) of different school of thoughts i-e Imam Malik, Imam Shafi, Imam Hambal, Imam Abu Hanifa) and *ghair Muqalideen* (non-followers of religious tradition in Sunni Islam).

key decision-makers, have become dormant as religious leaders assume more prominent socio-political roles (M.K. Zeb, Personal Communication, March 3, 2023). Thus, the authority once firmly held by *Khans* and *Maliks* is being replaced or overshadowed by the influence of *ulema*.

This transformation is not without its critics. Some, local notables argue that the role of religious leaders (*maulvis*) has historically been negative, despite their rising social authority. Traditionally, the *Ullasy Jargah* was a cornerstone of Pashtunwali (S. Hassan, Personal Communication, March 25, 2023). However, the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) undermined and discredited this institution, particularly over the last four decades. Informants pointed out that this shift eroded the *Jargah's* independence and integrity.

There is a further reflection on how the tradition of Jargah has changed, with elders being killed and the institutions no longer representing the community as it once did (K. D. Khan Personal Communication, April 27, 2023). Today, local business clubs and community organizations often exercise greater influence than the Jargah, suggesting that its decline is not only the result of religious ascendency but also the emergence of alternative power structures supported by the state. Discussions with *Jargah* members in Dir highlighted the persistence of this institution despite pressures. For instance, the *Jargah* in Talash was established to fill a vacuum created by the limitations of political and judicial systems (FGD, March 29, 2022). Members categorically stated that the *Jargah* faced direct threats from the Taliban, including incidents of intimidation, such as the kidnapping of a local Nazim Muhammad Umer, aimed at pressurizing the *Jargah* and its members. Despite these threats, the *Jargah* remained committed to its role.

Content Analysis of Friday Sermons Delivered at Mosques Affiliated with Different Factions
Friday sermons (khutba) from mosques affiliated with different factions in Malakand and surrounding areas were analyzed to identify cross-cutting themes. The content revealed recurring emphases on religious solidarity, resistance to external and internal threats, and Khatam-e-Nabuwwat (finality of prophethood) – a growing religio-political issue. Key topics related to different schools of thought discussed in the Friday sermons (FS) revealed the following:

Religious Solidarity and Resistance to Threats; Khatam-e-Nabuwwat – a Growing Religio-Political Issue
The sermons present a rich tapestry of Islamic teachings that intertwine faith, community, and ethical governance A strong call was made for Muslims to embody the principles of Deen-e-Islam in daily life. Faith and accountability emerged as central themes, particularly regarding wealth distribution and zakat (FS UoP- 2023). Governance was also a recurring concern, with repeated calls for establishment of an Islamic state led by knowledgeable and just rulers.

Notably, some sermons reflected traditionalist views on women in leadership, quoting hadith that "a nation led by women will not succeed". They also cautioned against obedience to *Mufsideen* (those who spread mischief), and *Mushrikeen* (non-believers) (FS-5, 2024). Political discussions often defined the state as a combination of land, people, and sovereignty, while stressing that rulers must possess integrity and moral understanding of Islamic principles. Importantly, the condition for leadership was described as knowledge of the faith, not necessarily madrassa education.

The issue of *Khatam-e-Nabuwat* was framed as central to Muslim identity and deeply tied to the honor of the Prophet Muhammad. One speaker declared that this belief runs through the veins of the people (FS-5-2024). A significant aspect of the discussions revolves around the concept of Khatam-e-Nabuwat, or the finality of prophethood. Speakers emphasize his role as the final prophet and as a model for Muslims to emulate, urging congregants to pledge allegiance to his

teachings and reflect on the deep love and commitment that early Muslims had for him. Adherence to the *Sunnah* was stressed with exhortations such as, "We must follow the Prophet's Sunnah at any cost, even if it displeases the world – or our parents" (FS-2023). Historical references were invoked to explain how Muslims were diverted from their faith during colonial times: "The British chose *Mirza Ghulam Ahmed*[3] to confuse Muslims about their faith and jihad, as jihad opposed their rule. One speaker stated, "If someone is slave to the masters of *kafir* (Infidal), not bounded to Deen Islam, how he can rule the Muslims" (Ibid). The sermons also cited Pakistan's laws, specifically PPC/CrPC 295-C, which prescribes death or life imprisonment for derogatory remarks about the Prophet Muhammad. Speakers reminded congregants that during the Prophet's time and under his companions, blasphemy was punished by beheading – legally and formally through the state authority (FS-5, 2024). Maulana Maududi offered a rational perspective on *Khatam-e-nabuwat*, noting that since Muslims constitute a distinct community defined by belief, disputes over this matter inevitably divide society until one side is proven guilty (Maududi, 2017, p. 28). The Sermons, therefore, urged Muslims to remain steadfast, resist modern distractions, and uphold Islamic values against external pressures. The Friday sermons convey a cohesive narrative that intertwines respect for the Prophet Muhammad, with calls for active engagement in piety and responsibility for the community. They inspire Muslims to embody their faith, fostering a strong sense of identity and purpose within the Ummah.

Conclusion

The historical and ethnographic evolution of Malakand reveals significant transformations since the early 20th century. From tribal authority to formal state institutions, religion has remained a fundamental force in shaping its social order. Internal contradictions and struggles for power have persisted, embedded in Pashtun social and political history since both the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Colonial-era stereotypes of Pashtuns as "brave warriors" or "savages and unruly" reflect broader ethnic and geographic framings that continue to influence contemporary discourses, especially as radical religious movements become intertwined with cultural and social values. After annexation with Pakistan, Pashtun society underwent further transformations as local elites aligned with state institutions. The Afghan war accelerated these changes, reshaping patron-client relationships and undermining the authority of traditional structures.

Religion, once a unifying moral order, increasingly became a political tool. This shift raised popular sentiments tied to religious identity, while persistent violence transformed people's experiences of the state and their daily lives. Yet, reliance on egalitarian structures such as the *Jargah* persists, despite decades of disruption.

The study highlights the continued importance of non-violent resistance, belief in democratic rule, and grassroots institutions in shaping social order. Unresolved land disputes, weak regulation, and the state's inability to extend strong institutional frameworks continue to create instability. Field insights suggest that when violence is framed as an ideological struggle, it constitutes not only a political but also a cultural and societal assault eroding Pashtun identity and values.

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[3] A controversial religious scholar who founded the constitutionally declared religious minority organization *'jamaat e Ahmadiyya"*.

The analysis of Friday sermons underscores the dominance of religious discourses in shaping collective identity. Justice and ethical leadership are central themes, with repeated calls for rulers who are *adil* (just) and warnings against oppression and cruelty. The sermons advocate political engagement, urging Muslims to exercise their right to vote wisely to ensure that competent and righteous leaders are chosen.

Overall, the findings demonstrate how political Islam encompasses both individual piety and collective action. The insistence on protecting the honor of the Prophet Muhammad, especially through the discourse of *Khatam-e-Nabuwat,* serves to galvanize communities against perceived threats, reinforcing a deeply ingrained religio-political identity.

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Annexure-I

S.No.	Name	Interview Date	Designation	Area/District	Occupation	Gender/Age	Sect and Sub-sect	Interview conducted via
1	Qari Bahadur Zeb	7/3/2022	Nazim Madrasa Rahimia	Dir (L)	Religious Scholar	Male/ 48	Sunni-Fikr e shah waliullah	Personal Communication
2	Maulana Wahid (Pseudonym)	25/3/2022	Mohtamim (Admin:) Madrasa	Dir Lower	Religious Scholar	Male/45	Sunni	Personal Communication
3	Maulana Zahoor ul Haq	28/3/2022	Religious leader	Dir Maidan	TNSM	Male/45	Sunni	Personal Communication
4	Fazal Andaleeb	28/3/2022	Pashtu Poet and Intellectual	Dir (Lower)	Pharmacist	Male/55	Panjpiri	Personal Communication
5	Participant #1	22/3/2022	Participant (Affected Family)	Dir lower	medical practitioner	Male/40	suni	Personal Communication
6	Participant #2	22/3/2022	Participant (Affected Family)	Dir Lower	Student	Male//28	Sunni	Personal Communication
7	Participants 1-5	29/3/2022	Member, Jamaat Islami(FGD) at Ahyaul Uloom	Dir Timergara	Youth Affairs	Male/30-45	Jamaat Islami	Personal Communication
8	Participants #1 -8	29/3/2022	Local influentials/ community elders	Maidan (FGD)	Local Residents	Male/ 30-55	Local elites, Jargah Members	Personal Communication
9	Participants # 1-12	29/3/2022	Members of Talash Jargah social and Political elites/ influentials	Talash Lower Dir.	Local Jargah Members	Male/ 30-65	All were Sunni	Personal Communication
10	Maulana Ibrar	28/03/2022	Nazim Daru Uloom Panjpir Khal lower dir.	Panjpir Khal Lower Dir	Religious Leader	Male/40	Sunni	Personal Communication
11	Sami Uddin Arman	18/04/2023	Lecturer	Peshawar	Academician/Researcher	Male/47	Sunni	Personal Communication
12	Said Hassan	25/03 / 2022	Member DRC	Lower Dir	Local Influential	Male/60	Sunni	Personal Communication
13	Maulana Irshad	18/03/ 2022	JATWS (Panjpiri Jamaat)	Lower Dir	Religious teacher (Wahdatul Madaris Board)	Male/40	Sunni (Panjpiri)	Personal Communication
14	Maulana Fazl e Qayum	10/3/2022	SeminaryTeacher	Malakand (Skhakot)	Religious Leader	Male/45	JI (Jamaat-e-Islami)	Telephonic interview
15	Maulana Khan Zeb	03/3/2023	Writer, Religious leader	Bajour	Politician/Religious Scholar	Male/46	Sunni	Personal Communication
16	Abdurehman khalil	12/04/2023	Assistant Professor	Peshawar	Religious scholar/ Academic	Male/46	Sunni	Personal Communication
17	Syed Najmul Hassan	10/11/2023	Librarian/ Khadim	Peshawar	Librarian at Al-Hassan Reference Bookstore & Syed Muhammad Ghaus Academy	Male/48	Hanafi	Personal Communication

18	Syed Ahmed Shah	1/7/2023	Gadi Nasheen	Akber Pura, Peshawar	local leader of TLP KP Chapter	Male/40	Barelvi	Personal Communication
19	Khaliq Dad Khan	27/04/2023	Ex-MNA JI Swat	Swat	Politician	Male/70	Sunni	Personal Communication
20	Sultan e Rome	16/05/2023	(R) Professor, Jahanzeb College	Swat	Academic	Male/65	Sunni	Personal Communication
21	Faiqa Qazi	05/02/2023	Seminary Student, Jamia Anwarul Uloom	Malakand Skhakot	Also studied BS (Physics) from Women University in Peshawar	Female/24	Sunni-Hanafi	Research assistant