



PIPS Policy Brief Counter-Violent Extremism

Working Group 8

Pak Institute For Peace Studies (PIPS) ● www.pakpips.com ● pips@pakpips.com

May 2017

Cultural Diversity and Pluralism

Summary

- This brief summarizes the findings of the eighth working group's meeting on Counter-Violent Extremism (CVE), which examined the spaces for cultural diversity and pluralism in Pakistan and their link to extremism and CVE discourses.
- Cultural diversity is anathema to an extremist body. One of the first acts of militants has been attacking symbols of cultural diversity.
- The group argued faith-based radicalism eroding cultural spaces is partly a transformation of state's desire to impose Islam over the country's varied ethnic groups.
- Radicals tried to impose a peculiar understanding of Arabic culture, in the name of Islam, which denied space for local customs.
- Members warned against imposing any identity, whether religious or ethnic, across the diverse country, Pakistan. They pinned hopes at federalist structure.
- The group called for exploring the country's rich history, to the benefit of the non-Muslims too.
- Local culture should be valued, but in no way shall it be defended when it is invoked to justify violence against women in any form.
- The group called for immediately approving cultural policy and announcing Cultural National Plan, a calendar plan of celebrating diversity.

Background

On April 25, 2017, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) convened meeting of the eight working group on Counter-Violent Extremism (CVE), exploring how extremism shrunk cultural spaces and how to expand them.

This was the eighth in a series of 10 planned meetings on CVE; below are summaries of the previous sessions:

Group members (arranged alphabetically by last name)

Bilal Ahmed

Radio journalist

Dr. Qibla Ayyaz

Former vice chancellor, Peshawar University

Farzana Bari

Gender activist

Rashad Bukhari

Peace activist

Abdullah Dayo

FES Pakistan

Saeeda Deip

Peace activist

Afrasiab Khattak

Former Senator

Mukesh Kumar

TV producer

Khurshid Nadeem

Religious scholar

A.H. Nayer

Educationist

Akbar Notezai

Journalist

Muhammad Amir Rana

Director, PIPS

Mujtaba Rathore

Development professional

Fauzia Saeed

Executive director, Lok Virsa

Saleem Shahid

Senior journalist

Marvi Sirmed

Columnist

Nadeem Omar Tarrar

Director, National College of Arts

Irfan Ahmed Urfi

Writer

- The first working group, which met on March 20, 2017, deliberated about the mechanism for shaping a religion-based narrative that counters those of extremists.
- The second group, which met on March 27, 2017, discussed the mechanism for reintegrating militants willing to shun violence and denounce *takfeer* (the practice of declaring fellow Muslims out of creed of Islam).
- The third group, meeting on April 3, 2017, pondered upon the need for a national dialogue to address critical politico-philosophical issues in the country, especially those producing extremism, and whether a revised social contract could provide answers.
- The fourth group, which met on April 10, 2017, discussed the implementing mechanism of National Action Plan, the country's counter-terror plan announced in January 2015.
- The fifth working group, meeting on April 17, 2017, brainstormed as to how extremism revolves around lack of equal status and physical services to all citizens. The group observed that on the one hand, areas excluded from the mainstream provide space to violent extremists, on the other hand, they often target religious minorities, an excluded group.
- The sixth working group, meeting on April 18, 2017, exploring the way youth are being radicalized in the country, and what can be done in the first place that they don't fall for extremist provocations.
- The seventh working group, meeting on April 24, 2017, explored the way in which media can be engaged to counter extremism.

The themes of these working-group meetings are largely driven from the CVE model PIPS proposed in 2016. A group of scholars, experts, and practitioners had, in a series of meetings, brainstormed over different components of a Pakistan-specific CVE model, one of them being engaging the youth.



This meeting was convened to discuss how cultural spaces can be expanded to counter extremism. The argument of the meeting was simple: as extremists strengthen themselves, spaces for diversity shrink. Thus, to counter extremism, start with diversity. Expand it. The meeting discussed different ways.

Key considerations

- The group found it true that cultural diversity is anathema to an extremist body. Across the country, militant Islamists have targeted cultural symbols.

A member recalled of Afghan Taliban. Their first act, similar to any radical group, was banning Afghan flag, Afghan anthem, a radio station, *naurauz*, Jirga, Buddha statue – all the signs of Afghan culture and history.

Same has been observed of radicals in Pakistan. Even religious events local to Pakistan have come under attack. For long, celebrating the birth of Prophet (PBUH), Eid-e-Milad, was considered a cultural thing, but now, some forces are resisting, calling them *bidat* (innovations in Islam).

Members observed that radicals tried to impose a peculiar understanding of Arabic culture, in the name of Islam. “Talibanization is partly Arabization”, one said.

- The group debated on the causes of why local cultural spaces got denied while religious-ideological radicalism grew.

The overarching issue has been creating national identity on Islam rather than ethnicities. Many argued radicalization emanated from the policy state pursued to glue the country together against perceived threats. The country’s elite saw ethnic diversity as threat to unity, thereby imposing Islam.

Sharing history, one recalled how Bengali language was accorded secondary status; their demands for equality were not accepted. Their cultural trappings were ridiculed, because they didn’t fit in the idea of the country the state was conceiving.

One participant argued the real shift towards monolithic identity began in 1971. After Pakistan got dismembered, security institutions thought the problem lay in not following Islam enough; hence the answer was sought in more Islam. This

was much before General Zia had even staged a coup. Yet, others blamed General Zia for adopting policies that changed the cultural orientation of the country.

Although Pakistan has been part of South Asia, its elite, in response to tensions with India, escaped to Middle East, thinking of Arabic culture as Islamic enough. "They divorced themselves from pre-Islamic era", one said.

Resultantly, the space for ethnic minorities got shrunk. One participant shared of Pashtuns in Pakistan: "Most of the Pashtuns in Pakistan are Muslims; for centuries, Pashtuns have been proud of their ethnic identity; yet, it was during Zia, that the "Muslim" part was exaggerated and the Pashtun part weakened."

Some members counted religious grounds to the shrinking space too. One participant argued that in Hanafi jurisprudence, the one prevailing in Pakistan, there is sufficient room for local customs, but this space is denied in Salafism. According to them, militancy because of relying on Salafism ended up suffocating space for cultural diversity.

- Participants clearly warned. Enforced Uniformity is Dangerous. Pakistan is a multicultural, multiethnic country; to make it functional, the interests and ambitions of all the ethnicities and cultures should be given space. Imposing monolithic identity, be that ethnic, is wrong.

Federalism is not merely administrative, but also cultural, ethnic reintegration.

The group called for exploring rich civilizational background of the country. Pakistan is home to Mehr Ghar, Indus, and Mohenjodaro civilizations. Those should be promoted.

Similarly the land of Pakistan has also hosted Sufi saints. People like Moeenuddin Chishti went through the areas of Pakistan. Local cultural role models like Rehman Baba be included in the curriculum. Similarly, mother tongues be promoted, it was suggested.

- A lack of appreciation of diversity is particular detrimental to non-Muslims. Even though non-Muslims in Pakistan are indigenous to the country, living mutually with Muslims for centuries, they are viewed as foreign to the country, the

participants aggrieved, saying they are not treated as equal citizens and their culture not appreciated as Pakistan's.

One participant argued that before the fall of Dhaka, the non-Muslim population of Pakistan was 22%; after that, it was 3%. This essentially tipped the balance completely in favour of Muslims, thereby squeezing whatever space there was for non-Muslims.

It was suggested that festivals of non-Muslims be promoted and their contribution to Pakistan acknowledged.

- The group observed that culture is often invoked to justify violence especially against women. Cultural relativism in the context of violence is unacceptable. To say "this is our culture" is just an excuse. Only positive expressions of culture should be absorbed.

Key Recommendations

- Parliament and provincial assemblies shall initiate debates on to what extent diversity got dissipated by policies aimed at shaping singular national identity in the past.
- The government shall immediately approve cultural policy at national and provincial levels.
 - The policy, it was suggested, shall be reflective of universal human values, extracted from the international statutes Pakistan has signed upon.
 - The approved cultural policy shall clearly spell out gender equality as its cardinal principle.
- The group decried justifying negative practices carried out in the garb of local cultures, in any policy whatsoever.
- The government shall chart Cultural National Action Plan, which facilitates celebrating cultural activities, inclusive of all faiths and ethnicities.
 - The approach of this plan shall be bottom-up; events shall be celebrated upon the recommendations of stakeholders from the ground all the way up to provinces, followed by the center, to accommodate diversity.

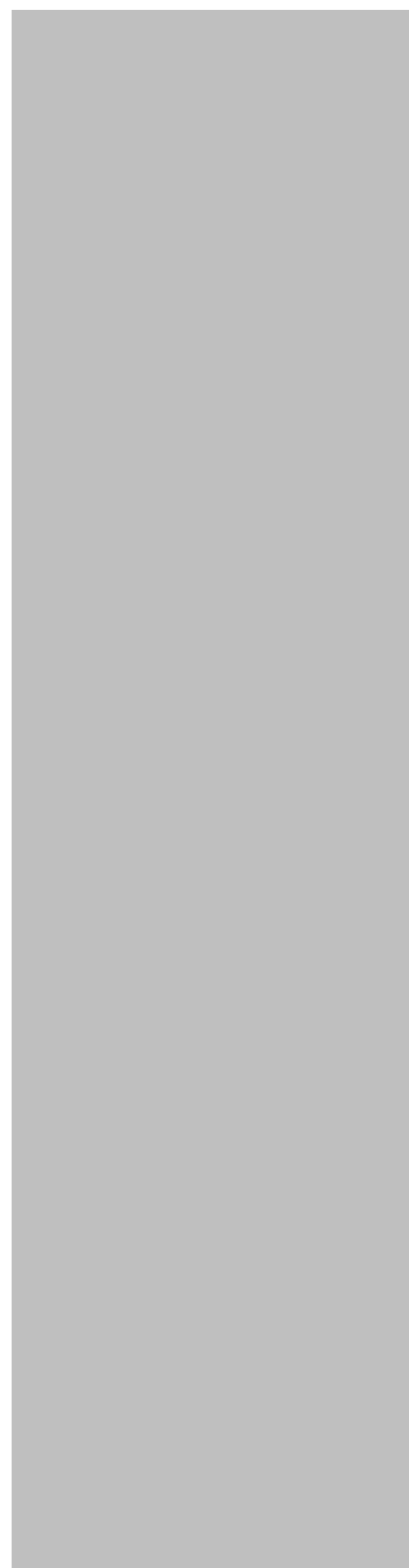
- Several initiatives aimed at securing diversity be undertaken, some are:
 - Celebrating cultural events at all tiers;
 - Promoting unsung role models, such as activists who struggled for people’s rights, by bestowing awards to them;
 - Engaging culture-friendly professionals in institutions impacting cultural diversity;
 - Preserving folk culture and poetry;
 - Securing cultural heritage sites and monuments, inclusive of all faiths;
 - Providing for inclusive spaces;
 - Withhold the trend of unconditionally changing names of different sites.

Table: Working table on recommendations and implementation mechanism on “Media engagement programs”

	Recommendations	Implementation mechanism
<i>Socio-political perspectives /intellectual</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentation of errors be undertaken • Nation-building/state-building process be reviewed • Identity issues be reviewed • “Enforced uniformity” be annulled • Cultural institutions be de-militarized • Importance of constitutionalism be upheld 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University-dialogue forum be conducted to discuss what went wrong • Parliament to initiate debates on the errors of the past <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Engage four provincial assemblies, and their relevant committees like culture, law, human rights. • Constitutional reforms be undertaken, where required



<p><i>Cultural policy – national and provincial</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Announce state cultural policy • Cultural integration across the country • Acknowledge all language as “Pakistani” languages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approve the Cultural Policy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Reflective of national, provincial as well as universal values committed under international agreements (UN, UNESCO) b. Gender has to flash out in the policy • Regional languages be termed as “Pakistani languages” or national languages • Cultural National Action Plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Bottom-up approach, working on the suggestions of the local tiers all the way
<p><i>Expansion of cultural spaces</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural celebrations at national and district level be carried out • Sports budget be increased • Legislation be carried out • Negative customs/tradition be removed • Accept religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity • Revive cultural, social, civilization institutes • Promote role models • Tourism policy be brainstormed • Cultural sites be restored and promoted • Religious tourism be promoted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restructure of censor board <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Engage professionals • Project/promote unsung role models <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Activists, creators of national symbols like emblem, be promoted b. Awards be bestowed upon them • Physical spaces celebrating citizens’ democratic struggles and rights be secured • Preserve folk culture, poetry • Preserve cultural heritage (temples) in towns <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Development projects should take care of the sites • Name changing of different public sites/institutes or cultural heritages, be stopped • Revive cultural events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o At shrines • Preserve cultural sites to boost tourism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Religious tourism • Monuments of all faiths should be preserved • Arts and crafts be promoted • Democracy museum be established <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Democratic symbols be projected in sculptures



Observers

1. Zarghouna Alam, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)
2. Sajjad Azhar, Associate Editor, *Tajziat*, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)
3. Anam Fatima, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)
4. Shagufta Hayat, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)

Rapporteurs

1. Atif Hashmi, Contributor/columnist, *Tajziat*, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)
2. Muhammad Ismail Khan, Associate Editor, *Conflict & Peace Studies*, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)