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Combating Violent Islamist Proxies: The Role of Civil Institutions in Pakistan

The Pakistani state is notorious for harboring and protecting violent Islamist militants. Decades of using Islamist militants to counter India, however, have resulted in Pakistan becoming a victim of religious intolerance and sectarian conflict. As Pakistan democratizes, its civil institutions will play a key role in effective governance and promoting non-violent solutions. This dissertation uses an ontological security approach to examine how Pakistan's civil institutions combat violent Islamist militants.

The ontological security of a state refers to the security it achieves by developing and maintaining its self-identity, which consists of how a state perceives itself and wants to be perceived by others (Steele 2008). Sometimes, however, ontological security clashes with physical security in which a self-defeating policy can provide a state with ontological security but physical insecurity (Mitzen 2006). The use of violent Islamist proxies by Pakistan's armed forces and intelligence establishment is a prime example of how Pakistan has protected its self-identity as an "Islamic" state while putting its territory at risk. Yet, in 2014 Pakistan's parliament passed the Protection of Pakistan Ordinance, which has given sweeping powers to law enforcement agencies in hopes of countering Islamist militants that have conducted attacks within the state. Pakistan therefore highlights the tug-of-war that numerous states are engaged in with respect to national security: on one end, the state sponsors a certain type of militant group to meet its geostrategic goals and on the other it counters them, claiming to protect its territory. While focusing on this paradox, this dissertation asks: how do civil institutions combat violent Islamist militants? And, how has countering Islamist militant groups complicated Pakistan's national identity, its democracy, and its relationship with Islam?

This research project will analyze three civil institutions: judiciary, political parties, and the police. I will engage in three months of ethnographic fieldwork in Pakistan, from September to November 2015. Primary data during this phase will be collected in the form of interviews and archival research. Interviewees will include elected representatives, lawyers, judges, journalists, and academic and policy experts on counterterrorism. In-person interviews will be conducted in both English and Urdu.

Discourse analysis will be applied to Pakistan's anti-terrorism legislation, anti-terrorism court rulings and judicial opinions, newspaper articles, independent think tank reports, publications by political parties (i.e., local pamphlets and leaflets, press releases to local newspapers and media outlets, etc.), and interview transcripts. Discourse analysis will: 1) reveal the Pakistani state's narrative regarding counter-extremist measures, and 2) explain how civil democratic institutions specifically counter violent Islamist militants. Archival research will be conducted at the Punjab Public Library in Lahore and the National Archives of Pakistan in Islamabad.

The AIPS Summer Research Grant is absolutely critical for this phase of my project, as I currently do not have funds necessary to carry out this international fieldwork. Additionally, my ability to straddle multiple subject positions as an American woman of South Asian descent, and fluent in multiple languages of the region, affords me a unique vantage point to address these critically emerging issues of militancy and counterterrorism in a climate of the "war on terror."