Political Islam: A Challenge to Islam in the Muslim World

[1]Muhammad Salman, [2]Arab Naz, [3]Hazirullah,
[1]Waseem Khan, [4]Irum Mughal and [1]Umar Daraz

[1]University of Malakand, Pakistan
[2]Chairman, Department of Sociology University of Malakand, Pakistan
[3]Department of Sociology, IIU Islamabad, Pakistan
[4]Program Officer, Pakistan Academy for Rural Development Peshawar, Pakistan

Abstract: This study is based upon secondary information that has been debated throughout the intellectual discourse with regard to the issue of fundamentalism and religion. With particular reference to the current debate, it examines the challenge that Fundamentalism poses to Islam. The main theme of this paper is to focus on Islam as religion which is not only the harbinger of Fundamentalism (as commonly projected) but itself facing the challenges of being victimized by phenomenon. After seeping into the foundation (real origin) of fundamentalism, the researchers have explained the problems of intrafaith and interfaith that accentuates fundamentalism as a challenge to Islam. The issue has been resolved by holding a mediatory approach while keeping in view the real essence of the world religion.

Key words: Political Islam · Fundamentalism · Extremism · Jihad · Islam · Islamism

INTRODUCTION

The role of religion in politics had been controversial and debated since long. The Post-Modern Political System has evolved over a period of clime and time through evolutionary/revolutionary/or transformational stages per se. With the emergence of Nation State System, a gradual transition took place resulting shift of political powers from religious institutions to the political ones. This shuffle watered seedlings of Democracy and Secularism which, in turn, paved the way for Modern Political Order. This is the account of Christian West but the move unfolded differently in the Muslim World. The Nation State System came to the Middle East by the close of Colonial Period when the Middle East had already established and experienced Indivisible State Power System where Conquestorial Democracy was unsolicited-regrettably. This Western Political Order was identified and perceived as Westernized in Thought and Action creating a chaotic environment in the Muslim World. Over a course of time, the rippling currents have merged religion and politics in the Islamic world in a manner where differentiation is hard to locate religious

and political moves, intentions and actions. Religion has been politicized perversely in the Muslim States unlike its (Islam's) true functional spirit as a complete Code of Life.

Most often so-called religio-political groups with an agenda of establishing a system based on the fundamentals of their forged ideology/ religion come into the mainstream politics and go to every possible extent to get their vested motives achieved. Such conflict-ridden groups strictly adhere to their egocentric or phony fundamentals and don't hesitate in use of violence, too. Such contentious political doctrines are rampant in the Muslim World and therefore this phenomenon of extremism is often thought of as Islamic fundamentalism that leads to *Islamophobia* in the world-view.

Islam (like all other religions of the world) indoctrinates the message of global fraternity, altruism, fellow-feelingness and peace, has been damaged by such subversive political vandals (for cheaper fame), which use religious rhetoric to get themselves accepted. But, it is, however, a complex phenomenon as these fundamentalists are as religious as political in appearances. Nevertheless, the major concern the researcher attempts to highlight here is the challenge

Corresponding Author: Muhammad Salman, Lecturer in Political Science, University of Malakand, Pakistan.

this fundamentalism poses to Islam. This fundamentalism keeps its intolerant approach not only towards other world religions, but within Islam for different sects, too. They believe in the righteousness of their self-aggrandizing belief and interpretation of Islam, whereas consider others to be falsified versions of *Shariah*. Such pseudonym of Islam thwarts progressively enlightened attitude and this is how the image of Islam is projected worldwide-with a denial. The researcher regrets to say about such nom de plume, as intolerant and retrogressive clique.

The researcher has also spotlighted the malignancy of the politico-military powers towards Islam and some of the shifting trends and issues in International Politics that contribute to the rise of Fundamentalism which poses a precarious challenge to Islam. The researcher has keenly researched the phenomenon of Fundamentalism in Islam and came up with viable and visionary futuristic solutions.

The Present Paper Is Divided into Five Major Sections:

- The definition and meaning of Fundamentalism
- The issue of Authority and Interpretation
- Fundamentalism and Extremism
- Lack of Islamic knowledge on the part of religious claimants *(Imams)* and masses
- Findings and Conclusions.

Political Islam (Fundamentalism): The phenomenon of Islamic Fundamentalism which some scholars call *Political Islam* [1], or Islamism [2] can not be defined with precision because of the different trajectories that it assimilates over the course of history in different regions and religions according to their peculiar Codes of Conducts (widely manifested behaviors) to other religions [3]. Similarly, the types of Fundamentalism are also difficult to categorize because of different perceptions and experiences about the ways of guarding the basics of religion. It is worth-mentioning here that some scholars and journalists while prompting against Fundamentalism keep Traditionalism vis-a-vis Modernity (modern interpretation of the text), with Fundamentalism as a misunderstood perception of the term.

Although, the term Fundamentalism is originally a Protestant term [4] but commonly it referred to the strict adherence to the text or the basics of a religion. That is one of the commonality in fundamentalists (of all the religions including Islam) that they resist the system in vogue and opt for *"less modernized"* and tradition-oriented society [5].

Defining Fundamentalism with exactitude is also difficult because Religious Fundamentalism is a global trend and undercurrent (replicated in all the religions), as stated that it is original with Protestant Christianity. Thus, it is quite pertinent to delineate the phenomenon from that standpoint: "Fundamentalism can also be described as over confidence and over optimism in a single conceptual system. It goes beyond believing that the profound reality to which it points are true. It optimistically believes that this system (and only this system) corresponds to these realities. This is accompanied by a concern that we will loose our grip on these truths if this particular conceptual system is dented [6].

One may disapprove this definition, but the argument in spotlighting this definition suits the researcher's concern that is: staunch adherence to religion. Another important definition of the phenomenon is, "Fundamentalism is '*an attitude towards time*'. It proposes' an ideal path, initial condition' or 'Golden Age which contrasts the present and be retrieved, either by going back to an originating text or 'by the reformation of society' according to models seen to be copies of an idealized past [7].

The later mode of Fundamentalism discussed by the researcher is a new trend that transpires as a result of the hunt of the West for a new enemy after the collapse of Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (the Ideological Enemy of the West) in 1991. Political Islam [8], Islamism [9] or the Politicization of Islam [10], commonly called as Fundamentalism is an occurrence with different meanings in different parts of the Islamic World which makes it difficult for it (Islamic Fundamentalism) to achieve common objective. That is why to deal with Fundamentalism as a Challenge to Islam one should first understand that what Fundamentalism is in reality. The researcher argues that Islam is frequently being made the target of disparagement for its promotion to Fundamentalism, but he (the researcher) refers to [11] who is of the opinion that a distinction is needed between Islam as religion and Fundamentalism as an Ideology to clarify this confusion. Islam is a religion with strong beliefs, whereas Fundamentalism is a Political Ideology based on politicization of religion.

The Question of Authority and Interpretation: The issue of authority to interpret the primary sources of Islam

(*Quran and Sunnah*) dates back to the period of Orthodox Caliphates particularly when Hazrat Ali (the fourth caliph) tried to convince people that *Quran* needs commentary and interpretation and none other than human will do it. His stance was rational but it divided the people on the question of interpretation [12]. Those who relentlessly opposed him were the precursors of Fundamentalism and its aftermaths because their stance was unbending against open mindeness and large heartedness-the true spirit of Islam.

Islam does not have a hierarchical system like church and the diversity of opinions makes it difficult to decide that who is right. However, the convention of diversity in interpretation was established with the institutionalization of the religious authority to interpret the text, in Seven Schools of Thoughts of *Fiqah* (Four in *Sunni* Islam and Three in S*hiah* Islam)-all worked on the principle of mutual respect. The religious authority to interpret and elucidate was given with consensus to the learned scholars in Islam and its Comparative Studies with other religions. But this outcome was distorted by the meddling of Modernism and Modernity in 19th Century in the form of Homogenized Cultural Colonialism, Conquestorial Imperialism and other challenges to Islam. It was this point of time that the difference commenced between those who ingeniously interpreted the tenets and injunctions of the earlier jurists and those who were ignorant of the Modern trends and issues-currents and crosscurrents. Media (both print and electronic) aggravated the situation by marginalizing the authority of *Ulama* (scholars well-versed in religion), leading to the rise of Fundamentalist tendencies and leaning.

This lopsided situation needed reforms, but just as the results of the reformation in Christianity were more drastic, so were the consequences of reforms in Islam. The self-claimed-secular and Western educated elites who started interpreting Islam were austerely lashed because they did not attend any seminary for religious education [13]. Even those enlightened Muslim leaders and parties who were educated both in religious and modern education were denied of the legitimate right to rule when they gained victory in the elections through peaceful means, for example, the military in Algeria seized power and denied Islamic Salvation Front of their overwhelming majority to rule. Similarly, in Egypt and Tunisia the governments of the time (in 1990s) backed out of their promise to hold elections and thus blocked the way for those Islamists who were seeking change through legal means [14]. The parochialism of the political and military

leadership of these Muslim states provided a conducive environment to the growth of Fundamentalism per se.

Another concern that contributed to the problem (authority to interpret) is the establishment of the Nation State System that has perversely affected the concept of *Ummah* and its subsequent unification. Or in other words, the nationalization of religion served as a setback to the unity of *Umma*. The religious authorities in some cases became state salaried functionaries and the verdicts issued by them are confined to their respective states only, for example, the *Fatwa (edict)* issued by an *Imam (a highly learn religious authority)* in Egypt is mostly applicable only to the people of Egypt and that issued by the religious authority in Pakistan is applied to the people of Pakistan [15].

This issue is in addition to the question of Whose Islam? and What Islam? [16] the fragmentation of religion in territorial boundaries is creating exasperation in Muslims that is often regarded as a cause of fundamentalism (returning to the cultural roots and moorings). Essentially, the most important solution to the foregoing problem in this connection is *Ijtihad* (interpretation of the text to deal with the problems of modern day world). This is also a red-hot issue because some hold the opinion that *Ijtihad* has ended with four *Imams* or Caliphs (previously mentioned), where some of the modern religious scholars who are well-cognizant of the need of the time emphasizes the contemporary-futuristic interpretation of the text of the Holy *Quran* and *Sunnah* to provide solution to the problems of the Muslims in the post-modern era of Science and Technology. Annaimy goes even a step farther and comments that the text of the Holy *Quran* should be subjected to critical examination. He defines *Din* and *Shariah* distinctly: the former according to him refers to the fundamentals (beliefs) of the religion that can not be changed, whereas the later (religious observances) is the way of life that requires needful and permissible change as per need of the time (Annaimy: 8-15). It is not the issue of the authority to interpret rather it is the question of understanding of the religion (in its true letters and spirit) and its interpretation in the right context. The necessity of time essentiates that the Muslims need to learn, "to differentiate between religion itself and human understanding of religion [17].

The rise and growth of elite educated in Islam, Sciences and Technology that fashions a new leadership poses an encounter to the authority of the traditional *Ulimas* and the *Ulimas* in their desperation try to play

with the sentiments of the people by projecting the elite educated class as against Islam that further promote fundamentalism and the rise of extremist tendencies, a worst confounded challenge to Islam. In reality, Fundamentalism and Extremism are not the same as commonly understood.

Fundamentalism and Extremism: Returning to original text or adherence to it is in itself a righteous gesture from religion viewpoint, but the ever-evolving change in life needs adjustment in accordance with time but not against the fundamentals of the religion. Fundamentalism and its confusion with extremism is the result of many factors; first, the misuse of the *Quranic* text for serving particular purposes, for example, recently as it is observed during *Talibanization* in Pakistan the extremists would use some selected verses of *Quran* in advocating and achieving their objectives, no matter to what extent they would go and exercise their futile thoughts and actions. This proves the argument that Fundamentalism is an ideology of politicizing the religion and not religion itself; second and the important issue is the opportunistic and rash interpretations of the Islamic teachings by the Western scholars and even political leaders for safeguarding their national standpoint and gaining cheaper popularity. Exemplifying the concept and practice of *Jihad* by a renowned guild of the Western scholars define it as: "duty to defend Islam against State aggression" [18]. This is a constricted and biased interpretation of the broad term *Jihad*-terrestrially and celestially. Even many Muslims are unaware of the depth of the meaning of *Jihad* [19]. The term *Jihad* literally means effort [20] the ceaseless struggle begins and ranges from self to System with the intention of Improvement, Peace and Prosperity in all walks of life. The defense of Islam against aggression is not the final meaning of *Jihad,* as it is segment of *Jihad*. How the definition of Western scholars could stand valid if *Article 51* of the Charter of the United Nations Organization (UNO) upheld the right of self-defense and authorize the use of force against aggression [21]. However, a challenging question is posed to those scholars and policy makers, or stake-holders, which are trying to project Islam as a Universal Religion (religion of Humankind) and not a religion promoting Extremism.

The advocates of the Clash of Civilization assert the claim that Puritanism, Extremism and Violence are the known and authentic expressions of Islam [22]. Unfortunately, a deaf ear and blind eye are turned to the expansive and all-encompassing Islam (its meaning, teachings and purposes-here and hereafter) and belief is established on the mal-intentions and worst practices of handful vandals--regrettably. The word Islam means Perennial Peace as a Paradigm which *Quran* itself comments "There is no compulsion in religion"(Quran, 2: 256). Therefore, before labeling Islam with Fundamentalism, one must take into account the view of those who believe that the present day extremism is a complete violation of the spirit and integrity of the concept of *Jihad* [23].

Mostly, Western scholars in their indictment of Islam go to the extent that they fail to see the superiority of Islam over their civilization in many respects. Those who put forward the allegation that Islamic Fundamentalism is promoting terrorism overlook the reality that Fundamentalism is the cause of party-political sadism and partisan vehemence and the so-called well enlightened Western Civilization is a spur of street crimes. Similarly, if the Islamic Fundamentalism is producing *Mojahideens* but the fact cannot be ignored that Western Civilization is working as a manufacturer of muggers and aggressors, worldwide. Lastly, in Iran the citizens may be subjected to strict control of the Fundamentalist government, but unlike America they are less in-danger by their fellow citizens which suggests the political austerity is found more in fundamentalist society but it is doing better in the prevention of social violence as compared to the Civilized West [24].

One can argue that prying of the Imperialists and the cultural interloping started off by the West has caused stern sensitivity in Muslims (irrespective of the distinction of conservative and the liberals) that is helpful for those who are politicizing Islam for gaining mass support to drive out Western hegemony from the Muslim lands. The argument is that the phenomenon of Fundamentalism is even confused with Extremism in a manner that in most of the cases Classical Traditions of stated earlier is the religion of Peace and the conduct of war reflected in teachings of the holy Prophet Muhammad (*SAS!*) and the jurists of Eighth and Ninth Century indicate that the current indiscriminate killing and viciousness do not represent the true Fundamentals of Islam [25]. Even the violence against defenseless according to Islamic teachings is an offence against the society and God [26]. The question of Fundamentalism and its confusion with Extremism is not a new trend. The puritanical effort of the *Wahaby* Movement and the violence used for the success of their ideology is an

eminent example, but the religion was politicized globally. The West observed in Islam (as an ideology) the only opportunity to counter Communism. Worth-mentioning is the time when Western Military instructors taught the importance of *Jihad* to Afghan *Mojahidins* and those (from the Islamic world) who were participating in Afghan war against Communism [27]. More shockingly, president George W. Bush (J.) on one hand in his speech on 12 September, 2001 used the word "Crusade" [28] whereas to acquire the support of the neighboring Muslim states of Afghanistan he painstakingly referred to the verse of *Quran* and described Islam as the religion of peace [29].

A final argument to clarify that Fundamentalism and Extremism are not the same phenomena is that the battle of NATO (which was originally created to fight Communism) is now converged against Islamic Fundamentalism. The argument still retains that Extremism and Violence is not Fundamentalism. "If Fundamentalism is to be engaged in battle, it would not be done with tanks. Fundamentalists do not have an armored division; they have neither Scud missiles nor atomic weapons [30].

In the light of all these facts regarding the manipulation of Islamic Fundamentalism, it is justified to say that the use of term Fundamentalism [*Usulia*] and Extremism [*tatarif*] synonymously are incorrect [31]. Deplorably, in some of the very authentic writings the terms are used synonymously. If all this is happening to Islam so one can contend that why Islam is blamed for Extremism alone? Why the more violent and inhuman moves of the other states, religions and their respective factions do not receive the same critical attention of the world? The answer is clear, though there may be some other factors but one of the key causes is that majority of the Muslim are ignorant of the fundamentals of Islam and mostly the quasi *Ulimas* are happy by keeping them in the dark so as to retain their authority. However, the unawareness of the self-styled *Ulimas* is also handed down throughout the Islamic world which is the focus of the next section of this paper.

Ignorant *Ulimma* and the Unaware Masses: Fundamentalists in the West, or those linked to some international organizations are well educated but as mentioned earlier that Fundamentalism varies from place to place of the Islamic World. That is why it is not possible to handle the phenomenon single-handedly or unilaterally. Another complication is the dichotomy of the educated and uneducated fundamentalists. On one hand there are leaders who have the insight, hindsight and foresight to the problems of the Post-Modern World and on the other hand there are those so called *Imams* and *Ulimas* who are not even fully aware of the wide scope of Islamic Teachings and are resistant to any viable and sustainable change. These unfamiliar and ill-informed *Imams* are fortunate enough that most of their followers are also unknowing, too, of the Islamic teachings. It was shocking for the researcher to know from one of the informant that, "they (*Imams*) have nothing for our religious improvement and spiritual satisfaction".

This is one of the countless examples of those educated Muslims who are frustrated of the ignorance of their religious leaders and the Muslim masses as well. Moreover, the current extremist violence projected by *Talibans* (religious students) in Pakistan is the conspicuous example in the analysis and synthesis of the politicization of the Islam. The ignorance of the masses, who failed to understand the real message of Islam, which is perennial peace, tolerance, brotherhood and interfaith harmony. A cogent question could be asked that Is it justified to do unjust and violence in a country having its ideological basis in Islam, no matter whosoever are the sufferers-Muslims or Non-Muslims? To find the answer, one must refer to the period of the prophet Muhammad (*SAS!*) and discover that what his attitude to the hypocrites of Madina even when he knew that they were making intrigues against Islam and the Muslims. Surely, the reason was obvious that they claimed to be Muslim by pronouncing *"La-ilaha-illallah Muhammad Ur Rasooll Ullah"*(There is no god except Allah and Muhammad (SAS!) his last messenger!).

The two major outcomes from the present extremist scenario can be understood quite unequivocally:

- The current extremists projection of Islam is not the part of the teachings of Islam; and,
- The so-called or opportunist *Ulama* damaging Islam as a religion and Fundamentalism as an ideology-irreparably. In such circumstances how one can expect protection of Islam from outside menaces that are being pestered by the internal vulnerability of unawareness and lack of education about the fundamentals of Islam.

CONCLUSION

Islam has never called itself a civilization in the recent times because of the territorial, cultural and neither

political divisions, nor it has claimed that it is one of the contenders in the power struggle of the world. Islam is a religion that instructs, rationalizes and elucidates the ways and means of living in this world to achieve success in the world here and the hereafter. However, the study of different sects within Islam and against Islam makes it clear that this religion requires well-educated minds to defend its fundamentals on intellectual grounds-globally-judiciously. Here the case is referred to the regional, local, national and even international *Imams* and *Ulimma* to project the true Islam of Allah and Muhammad (*SAS!*).

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the foregoing paper is that Islam as religion is different from Fundamentalism (as a political ideology) because the study of Arab Nationalism (not the part of this paper) reveals that their political fundamentalist ideology, at times, loses its focus on the fundamental teachings of Islam.

Lastly, the diffusion of the Western Lifestyle in Islamic Culture and the wind of criticism that blows from West towards Islam are stimulating the fundamentalist propensies in Muslims. These contemporary currents of Fundamentalism are the upshots in a shift towards religio-political commitment.

Glossary:

IMAM: Commonly religious leader, but here is used in two places in different senses. 1. Imam as the religious come political authority and 2. Imam as leader of the mosque.

ULIMA: A plural of Alim that means a learned person (religiously).

*FATWA***:** A religious verdict issued by a competent authority.

*CALIPH***:** Used in sense of the ruler of the Islamic state.

IJTIHAD: Interpretation of the primary sources of Islam (Quran and Sunnah) by the jurists

*SUNNAH***:** Traditions (sayings, deeds of the Holy Prophet and his ascent to an action or rejection of any action performed in front of him.

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