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Transnational Ideologies, Violent Conflict, and Pashtun Social Identity

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Abstract

The Pashtun borderland has assumed enormous international political significance in the wake of 9/11. However, the Pashtun inhabitants of the area continue to be profoundly impacted by the on-going conflict in the region. The conflict has reconfigured the whole fabric of the socio-cultural life of its inhabitants. While some scholastic attempts have been made to address the socio-dynamics of the conflict, detailed accounts of the impacts of the conflict on Pashtun social identity 'Pashtunwali' remain scarce. This study aims to investigate how the violent conflict in the region has changed the Pashtun socio-cultural system of "Pashtunwali" including, for example, Jirga, Melmastia and Hujra. This socio-cultural system has, in the past, played a crucial role in conflict resolution and sustaining peace in society. Field data was gathered in Pakistan's tribal areas and in selected urban areas through semi-structured interviews and participant observation with local and key respondents. The study finds that under the influence of transnational ideologies, militants incorporated religiosity into the secular culture of Pashtunwali which, in turn, has significantly impacted the socio-cultural life of the tribal people.

Keywords: Al-Qaida, Militants, Conflict, Transnational Ideologies, Pashtunwali

1. Introduction

The US attack on Afghanistan spurred an influx of foreign militants into the tribal areas through a porous border. With the assistance of local supporters, who had developed a symbiotic relationship during the Afghan Jihad, the militants were directed and guided to safe places. Tribal areas became the home of transnational terrorist organizations (Rashid, 2009) where they established a safe haven in a rugged mountainous terrain which provided them a strong base. The Pakistani policy of denial failed due to unsurmountable pressure on Pervez Musharraf by the international community to target the safe havens of militants in tribal areas. Consequently, the deployment of Pakistani troops opened a Pandora's Box that engulfed the whole region. Since then, the region has become the site of intense conflict between the Pakistani military and militants. Where the conflict has brought many overt challenges to the tribal communities, there seems a silent transformation at play in the overall character of tribal life.

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The study is based on primary and secondary data collected over three months. A qualitative, descriptive approach is adopted for analysis of the peculiarities of phenomenon either observed or recounted in local interviews. The perceptions of people are obtained through interviews and observation. A semi-structured interview guide was used for data collection to understand the impacts of conflict on Pashtunwali. Both local and key respondents are interviewed for this research study. The key respondents include local influentials who fled the area due to threats on their life by the Taliban, retired bureaucrats and NGO officials.

3. Violent conflict and transformation of social and cultural networks

In order to comprehend the theme of this study, it is essential to have a more precise understanding of what mean by 'conflict.' Definitions abound. According to Oxford Dictionaries (2015), 'Conflict is a serious incompatibility between two or more opinions, principles or interest.' According to Smith, conflict is significantly more intense 'Conflict is a serious armed clash between two or more centrally organized parties, with continuity between the clashes, in disputes about power over government and territory resulting into violence' (Smith, 2004: 3). For Goodhand, conflict is a struggle, between individuals or groups over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources to assert their values or claims over those of others (Goodhand, 2001). Finally, Suhrke sees conflict as an 'event that leads to physical and structural violence resulting in the disturbance and breakdown of normal life' (Suhrke & Chaudhary, 2009). The definition of both Suhrke and Goodhand are particularly useful for understanding conflict in tribal areas of Pakistan, as the conflict is both an event and an ongoing process of power struggles, where the militant's groups imposed their violent ideology through the use of violence, resulting into a complete breakdown of normal traditional tribal life.

Transformation of social and cultural networks refers to the significant changes in the social structure of society including norms, values, institutions and cultural products and symbols. Socio-cultural transformations arising from conflict can either be productive or destructive, depending on the dynamics of the conflict. In most conflict-ridden societies, new social developments transform the culture of violence resulting in positive transformation. Duffield (2001) argues that post-conflict development, in general, has become transformative as the international organizations seeking to introduce the development of new institutions, human rights and economic development (Duffield, 2001). A study conducted by Elahi (2015a) in Swat Valley, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, provided similar results on post crises development policies. He argues that 'over the last decade and especially in the post-conflict development policies the government and the international community have accepted the importance of addressing human security, poverty, gender equality and the need of strengthening of both formal and informal institution and civil society organization for bringing peace and security to the affected communities' (Elahi, 2015a:58). Positive social transformation associated with conflict thus involves processes of changing the existing institutions, social structure and the aspiration of certain segments of society who seek long term transformation (Garcia, 1994; Mitchell, 2005).

However, conflict can also be destructive, weakening social cohesion in societies by destroying norms and values. Weak societal cohesion further increases the social disorganization and fragmentation which further leads to the escalation of violent conflict (Colletta & Cullen, 2000). According to Wood, conflicts in societies radically change the pace of change in existing social structure, networks and relationship in the society with perhaps irreversible effects (Wood, 2008). The erosion of social norms and values affect the ability of collective action (Colletta & Cullen, 2000). Violent conflict affects the functioning of existing institutions where the armed actors take the role of the state, and they seek to impose a new social order by use of violence to achieve their war objectives (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004). Armed actors defy all the norms, values and social networks in society inimical to their ideology and pave the way for the emergence of new parallel institutions (Arjona, 2009).

The negative effect of violent conflict in tribal areas can be understood in three ways: targeted killings of local leaders, erosion of existing social institutions and new cultural traits (Taj, 2011). The selective violence against the traditional tribal leaders instigates fear in society (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004). In FATA, this resulted in a paradigmatic shift in the local authority structure, where the acclaimed local authority is losing power to an armed or violent group. Terrorizing the local community through selective violence creates a trust deficit among

the population, making the environment conducive for the emergence of new institutions. The new armed group installed their structure of authority and imposed it on the local population through coercive means. This new logic of violence has subsequently led to a complete erosion of more traditional forms of authority and solidarity, which in itself has facilitated the formation of new sources of power.

A visible transformation is noticed in Pakistan tribal areas, in the forms of religion-behavioral change under the influence of transnational ideologies. The movement of neo-jihadism in the post 9/11 engulfed the Pashtun borderland in the name of religion propagating extreme transnational ideologies alien to Pashtunwali. Transnational ideologies disrupted the social cohesion of Pashtun tribal society replacing it with a self-engineered, newly reformed notion of 'true' Islam. These ideologies demonstrated how violent religious extremism could lead to purification campaigns that justify mass killing, and social and cultural transformation at horrific levels.

4. Understanding Pashtun social organization 'Pashtunwali' (Pashtun Magna Carta)

Pashtun is the dominant ethnic group in Pakistan tribal areas, as well as the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan. Pashtuns across Afghanistan and Pakistan share a common social organization which is embedded in the legal history of Pashtuns and widely practiced as a component of customary law known as 'Pashtunwali.' (Ahmad, 1980; Barth, 1981; Caroe, 1958). Pashtunwali means 'the way of Pashtuns' (Rzehak, 2011), and comprises the informal, unwritten law formed by primary normative rules which guide the cultural practices that are strictly followed by the Pashtun tribal groups (Ahmad, 1980). It is the sum of collective expectation (Johnson & Mason, 2008) and collective wisdom (Barth, 1981) that does not stem from one authority, but has been developed over a long period of history and accepted as a socio-cultural entity (Rzehak, 2011). The main tenants of Pashtunwali include Melmastia (hospitality), Jirga (council of elders), Hujra (common guest house or community centre), Badal (revenge), Nanawatee (refuge, asylum), Ghairat (honour, chivalry), Tarboorwali (agnatic rivalry), purdah and Namooos (gender boundaries) (Ahmad, 1980; Barth, 1981; Daur, 2014; Glatzer, 1998; Rzehak, 2011).

There is no state institution to implement this unwritten law, but people have internalized these social norms to the extent that they become implicit and reach a quasi-legal status. J.W. Spain argues that it is nearly impossible to find a Pashtun child - male or female - which is not aware of the elements of Pashtunwali (Spain, 1972). Pashtunwali is 'so essential to the identity of the Pashtun that there is no distinction between practicing Pashtunwali and being a Pashtun' (Kakar, 2007: 2). For Pashtuns doing Pashtu means to bring one's behavior in line with the ideals and moral concepts of the Pashtuns (Rzehak, 2011). These norms not only describe what constitutes honorable behavior in society but it also includes various sanctions for those who violate these rules. Barfield argues the real Pashtun demands that one not just speaks Pashto, but do Pashto, that is, follow the precepts of the Pashtunwali (Barfield, 2003). Any deviation from the rules and norms of Pashtunwali leads to Paighur (ostracism) and in most cases results in expulsion from the tribe. The one who follows the maxims of Pashtunwali is considered respectable and enjoys high esteem in society (Glatzer, 1998). The codes exercise great influence on Pashtun actions and have been held sacrosanct by Pashtuns (Barth, 1981; Rzehak, 2011). Though it is not a religion, Pashtunwali is a very sacred code of conduct that in some circumstances and in some cases, it is called the 'fifth religion.'

4.1. 'Jirga' as a conflict resolution mechanism in the Pashtun borderlands

Jirga means 'gathering' or 'consultation,' and is a proto-legal system for mitigating conflicts and legitimate ways to resolve them (Gohar & Yousufzai, 2005; Wardak, 2004). It is the legislative assembly maintaining order in society by implementing the normative dynamics of Pashtunwali by consensus. Jirga is based on local traditional informal law (Narkh) and institutionalized rituals based on impartiality and results in binding decisions. Jirga, often comprised of a council of elders, represents an operational democracy, exercising both an executive and judicial role in settling disputes and dispensing quick decisions based on equality between men (Bangash, 2004; Wardak, 2004). In everyday practice, Jirga settles disputes related to families and tribes on the property, blood feuds, and money, serving to limit private violence. Jirga decides the cases after proper investigation, allowing both parties to speak, listen to the witness and spare no efforts to reconcile the opponent parties (Bangash, 2004).

All are equal, and everyone has the right to speak and argue, although regard for the elders is always there without any authoritarianism or privileged rights attached to it.

4.2. *Melmastia (hospitality)*

In Pashtun society, the concept of hospitality has been institutionalised. (Ahmad, 1980; Spain, 1972). Pashtuns are famous for their generosity toward guests and welcome them with a broad smile on their faces. 'Melmastia' refers to the feeding of guests and strangers and the provision of temporary shelter to those who ask (Rzehak, 2011). A Pashtun feels happy to receive a guest and feeds him with the best food regardless of his past relation (Daur, 2014). A guest of one individual is considered and treated as the guest of all in the Hujra (see next section). Even the poor are hospitable to the extent that a guest will probably get the wrong picture of their real economic situation (Rzehak, 2011). During fieldwork, an older person explaining Melmastia said: 'In the evening after serving the guest with our best food, a local musical programme was arranged to amuse the guest with traditional dances *Attanr*. However, it is worth mentioning that Hospitality includes not only rules of behavior to be observed by the host, but rules for the guest as well, such as adhering to the norms of the society.

4.3. *Hujra (communal guest house)*

In Pashtun traditional society, Hujra is a communal property which provides a platform for social, political, economic and cultural learning in traditional tribal society. According to Elahi, 'Hujra was a source of socialization where common issues of the tribe were discussed, and people helped each other in times of need' (Elahi, 2015b: 232). It serves as a school where practical knowledge about Pashtunwali is transferred from one generation of men to another (Daur, 2014). Hujra was not only a place of Jirga's; it also served as a social club in a tribal society where musical programmes used to be arranged once a week where male members of all ages participated. The essentials of the Hujras include charpai (bed), pillows, musical instruments and chillum (hookah). While sitting in Hujra, an influential elder of one of the study villages said: 'it is a tradition that when elders are discussing community issues, younger boys should listen carefully, without interfering unless asked.' However, we will see from this study that the very existence of this old traditional pillar of Pashtun culture is at the verge of disappearing.

5. A paradigm shift in the post 9/11 period

After the US intervention in Afghanistan, both local and foreign militants (Al-Qaida, Uzbeks, and others) who had fled Afghanistan entered the tribal areas and took advantage of the antiquated structure of governance. Initially, they were peaceful guests of their close affiliates, but after consolidating a strong foothold in the region, now they had to go on their way. Al Qaeda and other foreign insurgents started imposing their strict ideology with the help of the local supporters. Moreover, they challenged the century-old norms of Pashtunwali by creating a reign of terror in the region. Militants defied all the norms that were against their doctrine, such as Jirga, Hujra, etc. and glorified the religious aspect of Pashtunwali through their conservative Islamic interpretation.

5.1. Impacts on Jirga

A critical aspect of the militants rises in the tribal area was to assume the 'function of state and tribe' (Siddique, 2014: 78). To achieve both, militants targeted the Pashtunwali institution of 'Jirga,' or council of elders, which played an important role in conflict resolution and maintaining peace in society. Militants understood that dismantling this traditional conflict resolution mechanism would strengthen their power in the region. During an interview with a local researcher in Islamabad, the researcher argues: 'local tribal elders were targeted mainly because local and foreign militants feared that the elders have enough influence to mobilize the local population against them and could form anti-militant Lashkars (an armed group formed by tribe/tribes) in the regions.' To tribal elders marked to be killed, militants sent \$16 to buy his shroud and the needle to sew it with (Rashid, 2009). For the creation of a reign of terror, they usually left written letters on the dead bodies of those they killed, saying that anyone who contacts the government or army will face the same fate. In order to escape assassination, most of the tribal elders fled the area and permanently moved to Peshawar or Islamabad. One Malik who escaped

assassination, explains, 'militants made two attempts to kill him. They labeled him pro-government and pro-American. In Mohmand Agency, suicide bombers killed more than 100 tribal elders (Dawn, 2010). In the Aurakzai agency, a truck full of explosives hit a Jirga and killed dozens of tribal elders (Taj, 2011). A local researcher maintains that 'more than 2,000 tribal elders are killed in tribal areas during the last decade of conflict'. These attacks have limited the scope of the Jirga in tribal society. Militants control over the Jirga and the attacks on local Maliks weaken the century-old mechanism of conflict resolution and let the conflict spread like cancer where a few members of society benefited at the expense of the rest.

Disrupting the Jirga by targeting the local Maliks created a power vacuum and chaos in the region - which was the ultimate goal of the militants. This chaos results in a breakdown in social relations, thus limiting the communities' collective ability to fight against the militants. However, within a short time, the vacuum was filled by Taliban - established parallel courts. For effective propaganda, the militants used mosques as a platform, where selected sermons were delivered every Friday glorifying their justice system and asking people to boycott the local elders. The role of the tribal elders was effectively eliminated when they announced the implementation of Sharia law in March 2006 in Waziristan. Mullahs, who previously held a lower position in the Pashtun social hierarchy, now grew in power and replaced the traditional, high ranking Maliks. The replacement of Malik by Mullah effectively broke down the conflict resolution mechanism of Jirga, locking the Pashtun borderland into an unending conflict.

Militants set up an Amir (local commander) for every tribe/village, who listened to the problems of the local people and worked as a bridge between the local population and the central Amir (regional commander). They started dispensing judgment at a local level, making the Jirga redundant. One local respondent explains that the initial popularity of militants justice occurred for two reasons: quick justice and free arbitration among families disputes. They initiated a door-to-door campaign and dissolved decade long conflicts between families. The speedy justice gave them fame and popularity especially among the poor class in society. However, once they secured local support and sidelined the local Maliks, they started demanding money for all services. Local jails were set up in each village, where the local commander (Amir) was authorized to put anyone in jail if he violates their the decision of Amir. These jails were also used as torture cells for those who were against their ideology. Unlike Jirga where a person has the right to appeal a decision, militants verdict was final and binding.

Along with speedy justice system, militants established funds for victims of military operations. According to the local commander of one of the study villages, they distributed more than 15 million Pakistani rupees to the families of victims, this, in turn, gave them popularity and fame'. When asked about the sources of funds, a local respondent said: 'they initiated collecting money from the local rich families in the name of jihad [...] they owe money based on the income of the person'. They also used coercive tactics of forced money collection, which compelled many better-off families to migrate to the settled areas of Pakistan. Whereas a traditional Pashtun sees himself as completely independent and takes orders from no man, the militants' enforce its version of Sharia rule through its religious leaders.

5.2. Effects on Melmastia (hospitality)

Militants' policies of intimidation in the tribal region have seriously affected the concept of Melmastia, a main tenant of Pashtunwali. Security analysts argue that people of tribal areas provided refuge to Al-Qaeda and other foreign militants under Pashtun cultural code Melmastia (Cheema, 2008; Rana, 2009). Some also argue that the people of tribal areas found a profitable business where the Arabs provided large sums of money for renting a house. For instance, Nawaz and de Borchgrave write in their paper, 'Fata the Most Dangerous Place,' 'unemployed locals-tribal entrepreneurs-discovered the lucrative business of harboring foreign militant' (Nawaz & de Borchgrave, 2009: 23). However, interaction with key, local respondents and personal observation at the ground level present an opposing picture. The primary data collected for this research study reveals that the reign of terror and the militant's coercive policy forced the local population to shelter them. Local respondents maintain that: 'indeed, people provided shelter and protection to the foreign militants for temporary periods, and they were asked to abide by the rules of tribal society [...] soon foreign elements supported by the indigenous like-minded turned more violent where the local population was made hostages through use of force'.

Under the code of Pashtunwali, hospitality is not unconditional. It is the custom of the tribal belt for a host to provide shelter and protection temporarily where the guest will live according to the terms and conditions of the host (Rzehak, 2011). Taj argues, 'any breach of rule or violation of the terms and condition on the part of the guest can lead to the expulsion of the guest from the tribe' (Taj, 2011). In practice, the expulsion of foreign militants, no matter what their behavior, becomes impossible. The local militants used intimidating tactics to deter the local population from organizing any Jirga against the foreign militants. The foreign militants never surrendered their weapons to the tribesmen; instead, they overpowered the local community by killing their Maliks and influential elders.

Effects on Hujra (communal guest house)

Transnational insurgents backed by local militants in the region severely affected the Hujra culture in tribal society. Owing to the growing influence of Mullahs in the region, the status of Hujra has been replaced by mosques. Musical instruments and performances disappeared due to militancy in the region. While sitting in the Hujra, an older person of one study village explained: "This village had four communal Hujras divided into four shakh (branches) where each shakh has its own Hujra for guests. However, during the past fifteen years, three of them disappeared". He further explained that: 'two attempts were made by the militants' to destroy the remaining one, but God saved it.' While asking about the reasons for their opposition to the Hujra culture in the tribal society, he mentioned: 'militants fear that the influential elders can use this platform to form resistance against them in the region and the growing importance of the occupational class in militants ranks and file that ignited them against Hujra culture in the tribal society'. It is true that in the past, the professional class was not given equal status in tribal society. The elder explained that 'the role of the professional class was to offer food, water, clean the Hujra and play the musical instruments.' This is reminiscent of the saying of Ghani Khan, a great Pashtun poet, 'Pashtuns loves music but have great contempt for musicians' (Khan, 1994). The emergence of the militants as a new force in the region provided the lower class with an opportunity to take revenge on society. This does not mean, however, that all members of lower classes were either involved or willingly engaged with militants for reason of class alone, even though they had grievances-there were, also, strong elements of coercion.

A local respondent argues 'Hujras now become the place of gambling and most of them are occupied by militants' providing temporary refuge for foreign militants.' This pillar of Pashtunwali is on the verge of disappearing. It's no more a place of unexpected guests, musical nights, social training for young children. Now dry leaves make a hissing sound swirling in the verandas of the Hujras.

6. Concluding remarks

In the past decade of conflict, Pashtunwali-related culture and traditional values have been overshadowed by the Taliban and their fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. Under the influence of de-tribalized groups such as Al-Qaida, religious-based tribalism was introduced to the region. The findings of the study reveal that power relations within Pashtun society have shifted dramatically. The power of traditional Maliks has been replaced by religious leaders, Mullah, who in the past were not even allowed to sit in the Jirga. Backed by lower occupational class and poor strata of Pashtuns, militants set up a parallel administration in Pashtun tribal society, undermining the traditional conflict resolution mechanism of the Jirga. The creation of a power vacuum in the region through the removal of the influential village elders resulted in chaos, which has led to perpetual conflict in the region.

In this chaotic situation, Pakistan could have used the centuries-old conflict resolution mechanisms, Jirga, to control the situation. Instead, they let this mechanism die. Interaction with the local community during fieldwork unveiled the vast importance of Jirga in bringing peace to the region. Local villagers argued that the recent wave of militancy in the region could only be cured through local means, in this case by utilizing the Jirga, an institution which is embedded in tribal society. However, there is a need to reform the Jirga structure in tribal society. To overcome the elitist model of Jirga, it should be balanced and comprehensive, providing a representation of all segments of the tribal society, including women. It should take into consideration the grievances of the neglected classes by providing them due to place in the Jirga.

The development of the post-9/11, religiously-sanctioned patriarchy in tribal areas needs to be challenged. The cultural aspects that have been wiped away need to be revitalized and a culture of mutual respect promoted to quell the suppression of both men and women in tribal society. The few positive changes in the region such as growing awareness of the issues, education of both men and women and the emergence of civil society organizations in FATA could help to fuel such change if the political will to solve these serious issues does indeed exist.

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