

Religion in Pakistan's Politics: Power, Legitimacy, and the Marginalization of Spirituality

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Abstract: Religion occupies a central position in Pakistan's political discourse, constitutional framework, and public life. While Islam was envisioned as a moral and spiritual foundation for the new state, its role in politics has increasingly shifted from spirituality to an instrument of power, legitimacy, and control. This paper argues that in Pakistan, religion is frequently employed by political actors, state institutions, and non-state groups to justify authority, suppress dissent, and mobilize support, often at the expense of genuine spiritual and ethical values. Through historical analysis and contemporary examples, the paper examines how religion has been politicized, the consequences of this politicization, and the resulting marginalization of spirituality in Pakistani politics.

Keywords: Religion; Politics; Pakistan; Political Legitimacy; Power; Control; Islamization; Spirituality.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and politics in Pakistan is both intimate and contentious. Founded in 1947 as a homeland for Muslims of South Asia, Pakistan's identity has been closely tied to Islam from its inception. However, the meaning of Islam within the political sphere has been continuously contested. Rather than functioning primarily as a source of spiritual guidance and moral development, religion has often been transformed into a political tool.

This paper explores why religion in Pakistan's politics appears less about spirituality and more about power, legitimacy, and control. It contends that the politicization of religion has served short-term political objectives while weakening social cohesion, democratic norms, and authentic religious practice.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RELIGION AS POWER AND LEGITIMACY

Political theorists such as Max Weber and Michel Foucault highlight how authority often seeks moral or divine legitimacy to sustain itself. Religion, with its sacred status and emotional appeal, provides a powerful source of legitimacy. In weak institutional settings, where democratic

traditions are fragile, religion becomes an especially effective means of control.

In Pakistan, religion has frequently been invoked to:

- Legitimize political authority and regimes
- Define national identity and exclude dissenting voices
- Mobilize the masses through emotional and moral narratives

This instrumental use of religion contrasts sharply with spirituality, which emphasizes personal faith, ethics, and inner transformation.

3. HISTORICAL ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS POLITICIZATION IN PAKISTAN

3.1 THE FOUNDATIONAL AMBIGUITY

Muhammad Ali Jinnah's vision for Pakistan remains a subject of debate. While he spoke of religious freedom and equality, subsequent political elites emphasized Islamic identity to consolidate unity in a diverse and fragile state. This ambiguity laid the groundwork for the political use of religion.

3.2 THE OBJECTIVES RESOLUTION (1949)

The Objectives Resolution formally linked sovereignty to Allah, embedding religion within the constitutional framework. Although symbolic, it provided future rulers with a religious justification for political decisions and laws.

3.3 ISLAMIZATION UNDER MILITARY RULE

The most explicit politicization of religion occurred during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime (1977–1988). Islamization policies were used to legitimize military rule, suppress political opposition, and reshape society through state-controlled interpretations of Islam. Religious laws became instruments of control rather than spiritual reform.

4. RELIGION AS A TOOL OF POLITICAL POWER

4.1 ELECTORAL POLITICS AND RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES

Political parties in Pakistan often invoke religion during elections to gain moral authority and discredit opponents. Accusations of being “anti-Islam” or “un-Islamic” are commonly used to silence debate and delegitimize rivals, reducing politics to moral binaries.

4.2 ROLE OF RELIGIOUS PARTIES AND CLERGY

Religious political parties and influential clerics act as power brokers, leveraging religious sentiments for political concessions. Their influence often exceeds their electoral strength, reflecting the symbolic power of religion rather than popular mandate.

4.3 BLASPHEMY LAWS AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Blasphemy laws illustrate how religion can be weaponized for control. While framed as

protecting religious sanctity, these laws are frequently misused to intimidate minorities, settle personal disputes, and silence critical voices.

5. MARGINALIZATION OF SPIRITUALITY

5.1 DECLINE OF ETHICAL AND SPIRITUAL DISCOURSE

The politicization of religion has shifted focus away from core Islamic values such as justice, compassion, honesty, and humility. Public discourse emphasizes identity and punishment rather than ethics and spiritual growth.

5.2 SUFISM VS. POLITICAL ISLAM

Historically, Sufism played a significant role in spreading Islam in South Asia through spirituality and inclusiveness. In modern Pakistan, Sufi traditions have been sidelined or commodified, while rigid, politicized interpretations of Islam dominate public space.

5.3 RELIGION AS IDENTITY, NOT PRACTICE

For many, religion in politics functions as a marker of identity rather than a guide for personal conduct. This disconnect allows corruption, injustice, and abuse of power to coexist with religious rhetoric.

6. CONSEQUENCES FOR SOCIETY AND THE STATE

The use of religion as a political instrument has produced several negative outcomes:

- Increased sectarianism and intolerance
- Marginalization of religious minorities
- Weakening of democratic debate and pluralism
- Erosion of trust in both religion and state institutions

Rather than strengthening moral governance, politicized religion has often contributed to instability and social division.

7. DISCUSSION: WHY POWER OVERRIDES SPIRITUALITY

Several factors explain why religion in Pakistan's politics prioritizes power over spirituality:

1. Weak democratic institutions encourage reliance on symbolic legitimacy.
2. Low literacy and limited religious education enable manipulation of religious narratives.
3. State and non-state actors benefit from controlling religious discourse.

4. Spirituality, being personal and introspective, does not easily translate into mass political mobilization.

8. CONCLUSION

Religion in Pakistan's politics has largely evolved into a mechanism for power, legitimacy, and control, overshadowing its spiritual and ethical dimensions. While Islam remains deeply meaningful to Pakistani society, its politicization has distorted its role, reducing spirituality to the margins of public life. A reimagining of religion's place in politics—one that emphasizes ethics, justice, and personal faith rather than coercion and identity—may offer a path toward a more inclusive and stable political culture.

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