

# Religious Revivalism in Pakistan: A Vicious Circle of Abhorrence

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## Abstract

*Extreme forms of religious revivalism or religious activism not only hold in the interests of intellectuals but also, throughout the world of our own day, are in the very forefront of contemporary public consciousness and concern. Pakistan is one such country among the Muslim states where religious revivalism and extremism is growing at a high scale. Undoubtedly, the image of country has received a big blow and Pakistanis all over the world are increasingly being viewed with suspicion and distrust. Particularly after 9/11 and 7/7, Pakistan has been facing severe criticism for harbouring religious extremist outfits. Since, it is also being alleged that three or more of the suspects in July 7 events were British nationals of Pakistani descent, who had visited Pakistan prior to undertaking their suicide missions, this had drawn international attention to the role of the religious schools (Madrassas) in Pakistan and, in general, to the growth of religious extremism in the country. Moreover, religious extremism has led to sectarian confrontation, internal destabilization and serious security concerns in the country. Extremist tendencies among the youth has grown alarmingly in rural as well as urban areas creating further panic in an already intolerant society. Vicious propaganda is being carried on against one another contrary to Islam's basic teaching that "All Muslims are brothers." Therefore, this paper attempts to study the evolution and development of the phenomenon of religious revivalism because the country is in the process of being divided along sectarian, anti-democratic and anti-secular lines. It also demystifies the process of religious frenzy which seeks to provoke repressive reactions while making the country a centre of gravity for extremist / revivalist forces all over the world.*

## The Advent of Religious Revivalism in Pakistan

Although, the British colonization of the Indian Sub-continent produced Islamic revivalist movements, both militant and intellectual, the partition of India weakened that process. Like the rest of the Islamic world, democracy could not take roots in Pakistan and the armed forces as the largest power brokers rose to the top of political

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hierarchy. In this backdrop, the local Islamic groups that subscribed to the revolutionary ideology of the brotherhood during the 70's and maintained close contacts with international Islamic movements and networks, allied themselves with the Pakistan military and emerged on the scene as a pro-establishment entity. However, the political activism of certain Islamic revivalist groups and the state-sponsored Islamic organizations did not reflect religiosity on the part of the majority of the country. In the late 70's, a number of factors aided by shifts in the domestic, regional as well as international scene, such as the Nizam-i-Mustafa Tehreek and the over throw of Mr. Bhutto's democratic government (1977), the Iranian revolution (1979), and the Induction of the Soviet troops in Afghanistan (1979), turned out to be the main causes of religious revivalism in Pakistan. Unlike the first three decades of Pakistan's history, the fourth saw a significant transformation of the society. This change occurred gradually but left a deep and lasting impression on the society. Pakistan had lost much of its modern orientation and was considerably closer to the neighbouring Muslim countries and transnational Islamic networks of the West-Asia (Zaheer, 1998).

In its early days, the state-sponsored religious revivalism in Pakistan manifested itself in several areas of collective life. In politics, it denied the legitimacy of people's parliamentary democracy and, instead, sought to introduce a political system based on so-called Islamic principles. One manifestation had been a referendum which tried to seek a mandate for further Islamization and, by implication, the extension of the tenure of the president general for five more years. In economics, religious revivalism expressed itself in compulsory collection of Zakat and Usher and the introduction of an interest-free banking and investment system. In the legal sphere, which held top priority on the Islamization agenda of Islamic groups in Pakistan, revivalism meant the reintroduction of Islamic penal laws which provide Islamic punishments for drinking alcohol, theft, adultery, and kazaf (false accusation concerning sexual offences). Further ordinances established a Federal Shariah Court as well as local Qazi courts to hear criminal and civil cases under Islamic laws. The Federal Shariat Court, in both its original and appellate jurisdictions, ruled on whether existing laws were in accordance with Islam or not — except, of course, those issued under the authority of martial law of General Zia-ul-Haq. Another addition was the introduction of the Islamic law of evidence under which, in certain cases, the evidence of two women is regarded as equal to that of one man. In the cultural sphere, religious revivalism manifested itself in the banning of dance clubs; the imposition of strict gender morality; the observance of Islamic moral standards in the production and screening of television programs; the revision of all textbooks to express an Islamic orientation; increasing allocations for religious instruction; declaring Friday as the weekly holiday instead of Sunday; obligatory prayers break during working hours in governmental and private offices; emphasis on the Urdu language and national dress in government offices; and a kind of moral aversion, at least in rhetoric if not in substantive behavior, on the part of intellectuals as well as government authorities, against non-Muslim cultural symbols and institutions (Ahmad, 1994). It is also pertinent to note that an upsurge of international Islamic cultural exchanges and conferences as well as unprecedented enthusiasm and public display in celebrating Islamic religious

festivals and holidays, further supported the process of transformation of Pakistani society under the umbrella of a fanatic-military regime.

While the early parliamentary regimes used a “*Liberal-Modernist Islam*”, Ayub Khan a “*Developmentalist Islam*”, Yahya Khan a “*Nationalist Islam*”, Bhutto a “*Socialist-Populist Islam*” or “*Islamic-Socialism*”, to legitimize themselves, however another military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq used overtly a “*Revivalist-Fundamentalist Islam*” to legitimize his brutal, oppressive, undemocratic and inhuman grip on the political system of Pakistan. The so-called Islamic government of Zia sought to elicit the moral commitment of the people by linking the destinies of Islam and Pakistan with that of the military regime. General Zia maintained that the military rule had been vital for the preservation of Islam and Pakistan. Zia’s revivalist commitment may be seen from one of his statements, while addressing the councilors of Multan District, Zia declared: “*Pakistan was achieved in the name of Islam, and Islam alone could provide the basis to run the government of the country and sustain its sovereignty and integrity..... But no Un-Islamic government would be allowed to succeed the present regime*”(Ahmad, 1998). Thus, the trinity of Islam, Pakistan and the military regime became one and the same thing.

There is no denying the fact that, the Afghan-Soviet war proved to be a major factor in the spread of religious revivalism in the entire Muslim world, particularly in Pakistan. The war added a further dimension to the mosaic of religious groups which were being operated through “behind the scene operators.” An unprecedented rise in the establishment of “Deeni Madrassas” (religious seminaries) in Pakistan reinforced by Western capitalist democratic block and their Muslim stalwarts, namely, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and UAE, began changing the political scenario at home. Pakistan had never remained under such conditions but, now, was forced to evolve a process of revivalism and extremism. The ruling elite of Pakistan was of the view that the Jihadi revivalist network of organizations would serve as a double-edged sword for Islamabad. On the one hand it would ensure strategic depth for Pakistan against India by turning Afghanistan into a Pakistani satellite and successfully implementing Pakistan’s strategy to hold down hundreds of thousands of regular Indian troops in a low-cost war in Kashmir. And on the other, it would restrict the democratic forces’ movement of establishing an autonomous civil order which could become a threat to military’s corporate interests and their permanent presence in the power corridors. This was also the same period when Al-Qaeda (A transnational Islamic Network of revivalists) started laying its worldwide network by attracting the youth of the Muslim world for Jihad against the Soviet Union. Hundreds of thousands of young men from Morocco to Malaysia reached Pakistan (the base camp of Afghan Jihad) either to participate in the Afghan war or get admission in madrassas (Lawrence, 1999). Over a period of time, the revivalists infiltrated the decision making authority and their collaboration facilitated the transformation of Pakistani society, without taking the fallout of that change into consideration.

## **Rise of Revivalist Forces in the 90's**

With the pullout of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1986, religious revivalism in Pakistan had reached a level where it had begun to imperil the image of Pakistani nationhood, and from all accounts, this dreadful campaign was so well organized and so well equipped, that even after the death of General Zia-ul-Haq, the anti-revivalist political parties and civil society organizations found themselves out of depth in tackling the vicious circle of revivalism. There seemed no doubt that the oil-rich states of the Gulf, behind the scene operators of Pakistan and Islamic transnational networks, had made a common cause for a variety of reasons (domestic as well as external) by turning Pakistan into a war-theater. At the conclusion of Afghan-Soviet war, and the departure of U.S.-led Western support from Afghanistan amid infighting among various Afghan factions for control of the devastated country, which affected Pakistan's political scenario and their Pakistani stalwarts opened another chapter of hatred in the name of sectarianism. Also contributing to the inflammation of religious revivalism, was the flow of religious cadres graduating out of the madrassas. There had been a dramatic increase in the number of such madrassas within one and a half decade.

Unfortunately, by default or design on the part of the ruling elite, Arab and Iranian money had gone into the establishment of rival sectarian mosques, imam bargahs and madrassas (Sultan, 2002). Since these institutions charged no fees and frequently provided even free boarding and lodging, the products of these madrassas which emerged were not only steeped in religious fanaticism and sectarian prejudices, but also committed to operating as dedicated volunteers on behalf of the organizers of the madrassas. They came out primed to act aggressively in support of any thing they were induced to accept as a holy cause. And all they needed were training, weaponry, political / financial support and a cause for activities which were readily available and were promptly provided to them by the state organs in order to preserve their corporate interest inside and outside the country. Pakistan had all the ingredients for a religious blow up all lined up.

The emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan, further boosted the morale of religious revivalists in Pakistan and they tried to make efforts to reshape Pakistani culture according to their vision and vigor. During that time, Osama Bin Laden with his transnational Islamic network established a permanent base in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia and a few Arab countries from where they planned their moves on the international chessboard. Although, the Americans took a very serious notice of anti-American activities, successfully carried out by the Muslim extremists in various parts of the world, yet, Pakistan's successive civil and military regimes remained quiet (Leonard, 2001). The new military dictator General Musharraf, who turned out to be pro-modernist and anti-revivalist vis-a-vis General Zia's state sponsored Islamization, was reluctant (before 9/11) to fully cooperate with the U.S. because the military wanted to see country's western borders stable and secure. On the other hand, Indian's military build up on the eastern borders of Pakistan and their traditional stand on Kashmir issue, kept Pakistan aloof from taking any serious measures to curb revivalist forces.

## **The Rollback of Pro-Revivalist Policy in the Aftermath of Taliban-America War in Afghanistan**

The Taliban-America war in Afghanistan, in the aftermath of 9/11 events, proved to be fatal for revivalist outfits and a major shift in Pakistan's domestic and foreign policies regarding its traditional stance was witnessed. In his efforts to earn the cooperation of Americans, General Musharraf provided tactical assistance, intelligence support, land and air space to U.S. forces for the overthrow of the Taliban. On the other hand, in clearing away the wreckage of its past policies, the ruling elite made their erstwhile companions of the last two and a half decades, the scapegoats (Richard, 2002). With a view to cleansing the society of revivalism or extremism, the government banned five religious extremist groups and launched a series of crackdowns on religious activists sealing their offices and headquarters and rounding up a large number of leaders, workers or sympathizers. Moreover, the government put a sixth outfit on the watch list, laid down rules for regulating and regularizing madrassas and mosques and declared that Pakistan would not allow anyone to use its territory for covert or overt subversive activities in the country, the region and the world. The government officials however admitted that announcing the decision was an easy task but its implementation would be a real test. Meanwhile, authorities initiated a probe mission to check the credentials and funding of the revivalist outfits involved in "Jihad".

There is no denying the fact that previous regimes, after 1988, both civil and military, had been pursuing a tentative policy to contain revivalists, rather deliberately ignoring the fact that most of the religious institutions were producing an army of diehard fanatics who were brain-washed and were led to believe that they were destined to accomplish a divine mission. However, the changed geo-political circumstances in the region forced the present regime to deal effectively with the destructive forces of revivalism. Although, most of the religious parties in the country disclaimed any connection with attempts to trigger extremist violence, nonetheless they could hardly absolve themselves of the charge of promoting bigotry and fanaticism (Charles, 2002). Some mainstream religious political parties had been guilty of mounting hate campaigns against the rival sects, minorities and liberal shades of opinion and incited their loyalists to use force, despite the fact that the large majority of peace-loving, tenacious, vibrant and enterprising Pakistanis always rejected the dictated social orders and religious fanatics who forcibly tried to implement their ruthless agenda.

It is generally believed that the events of September 11 and the fall of Taliban, in many ways provided a unique opportunity and impetus for Pakistan to re-evaluate its directions and make a conscious decision to effect a departure from the past. As part of various measures taken by the government to rollback its long standing pro-revivalist policy, a code of conduct for madrassas and ulemas was evolved, requiring restraints to be observed in various matters, for instance, admission in the madrassas, students from foreign countries, registration of the madrassas, curriculum and training. Along with this move, objectionable sectarian literature, contentious issues regarding other religions and literature having revivalist overtones were tried to be confiscated with

the raising of number of law enforcement personnel to combat the menace (Tariq, 2001). However, these measures have not proved enough in stemming the raging tide of revivalist militancy and violence is evident from countless events occurring all over the country. A certain degree of diffidence and lack of clarity seems to characterize the government's policy towards the revivalist forces. Often, government officials contradict each other, while in the recent move to contain fund-raising and related activities of these outfits, the federal and provincial governments appeared to differ on the strategy to be followed. Therefore, a damage to the government's intentions and image is being caused by its seeming inaction or helplessness. More alarming still, the revivalist do not seem to care how much losses have been caused to them, but they are carrying out their operations and taking part in political activities according to their routine. It goes without saying that the present situation calls for an urgent, whole hearted and decisive action, for only a reactive approach on the demand of external powers will take us no-where.

### **The Drastic Impacts of Revivalism on Pakistani Society**

The emergence of armed gangs with a religious agenda of their own brand, trying to enforce their writ in defiance of law of the land and people's aspirations, is above all a challenge to the authority of the state apparatus and people's will. Needless to say, all madrassas, which have proliferated over the last two and half decades, either under the state patronage or reinforced by the neighbouring countries for their strategic purposes, have clear cut revivalist and sectarian objectives. According to a report there were in 2004, at least 834 religious schools engaged in extremist sectarian training, and 1216 graduates of these institutions were wanted by the law enforcement agencies on charges of violent crimes but were absconding (Askari, 2002). No matter how positive a contribution the madrassas have made as a parallel school system for the under privileged classes, there are no two opinions about the evil being done by the nurseries of revivalist warriors. So long as militant outfits preaching violence and resorting to extremist activities as a means to accomplish their revivalist goals, have the facility to recruit cadres from the madrassas, the supply-line for religious warfare will remain in place, no matter how prompt and efficient the law-enforcing organizations are in responding to acts of violence.

Undoubtedly, in the absence of a genuine democratic culture in Pakistan, religious revivalism has played a crucial role in incorporating religious fervour in a particular class of youth. Most students come from low income families and many gladly hand over their young ones to an institution where meals etc. are provided, and where the parents will also have the blessings of the mullah and the community (Talat, 1999). Most parents are not the slightest bit perturbed by the harsh punishments meted out to their children and these are seen to be the correct way to discipline them as well as to have divine sanction. Furthermore, students who graduate from madrassas are immediately qualified to become teachers in these institutions. Their attitudes towards secular education is mocking and contemptuous. To them, religious education and revivalist literature is both an obligation and a salvation without which they have neither a career nor any hope for the future. It is also pertinent to note that the subjects

which are taught at madrassas are: Arabic grammar, logic, religious philosophy (mostly of the Arabic language), hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic history, debate and discussion on religious issues and interpretation of the Quran, besides the grand designs of Jews, Christians and Hindus also come under discussion (Rasheed, 1998).

Almost in all the madrassas, whether of Sunnis or Shias, the walls are plastered with posters glorifying the Afghan Jihad, Iranian revolution, war in Iraq and guerilla war in occupied Kashmir against the Indian troops. The madrassas have much to offer in the way of inspiration for a young adventure seeker. Every madrassa is fed with an ample supply of pro-jihad literature. These institutions receive books and audio tapes on Jihad as well as newspapers reporting from war fronts inside Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya, Palestine and Kashmir. Today, approximately 8000 registered and another 2000 unregistered deeni madrassas (religious schools or seminaries) are disseminating the revivalist message of all brands all over Pakistan and outside the country (Salahuddin, 2004). Particularly, the spirit of jihad is a by-product of life in the madrassas. There are invariably a few warrior students in every madrassa who make regular visits to the war fronts of foreign countries like Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asian states, Chechnya, Iraq and occupied Kashmir (Shakeel, 2003). They return with tales of valour and glory which are recounted to the impressionable minds at these schools. Thus, the recruitment of males begins in their early teens to fill the front-lines in the war. The widespread proliferation of modern small arms and semi-automatic rifles helps involvement of children under the age of 18 in conflicts with a glamour for martyrdom.

Unfortunately, this maddening frenzy is continued despite heavy damage to the society and the passion for revivalism is becoming the sum and substance of a large number of unemployed, ignored and victimized youth of the down-trodden classes. Interestingly, however, there has not been a very strong reaction from political parties, bureaucracy and intelligentsia who, except pointing their accusing finger at the “foreign hand”, show little concern.

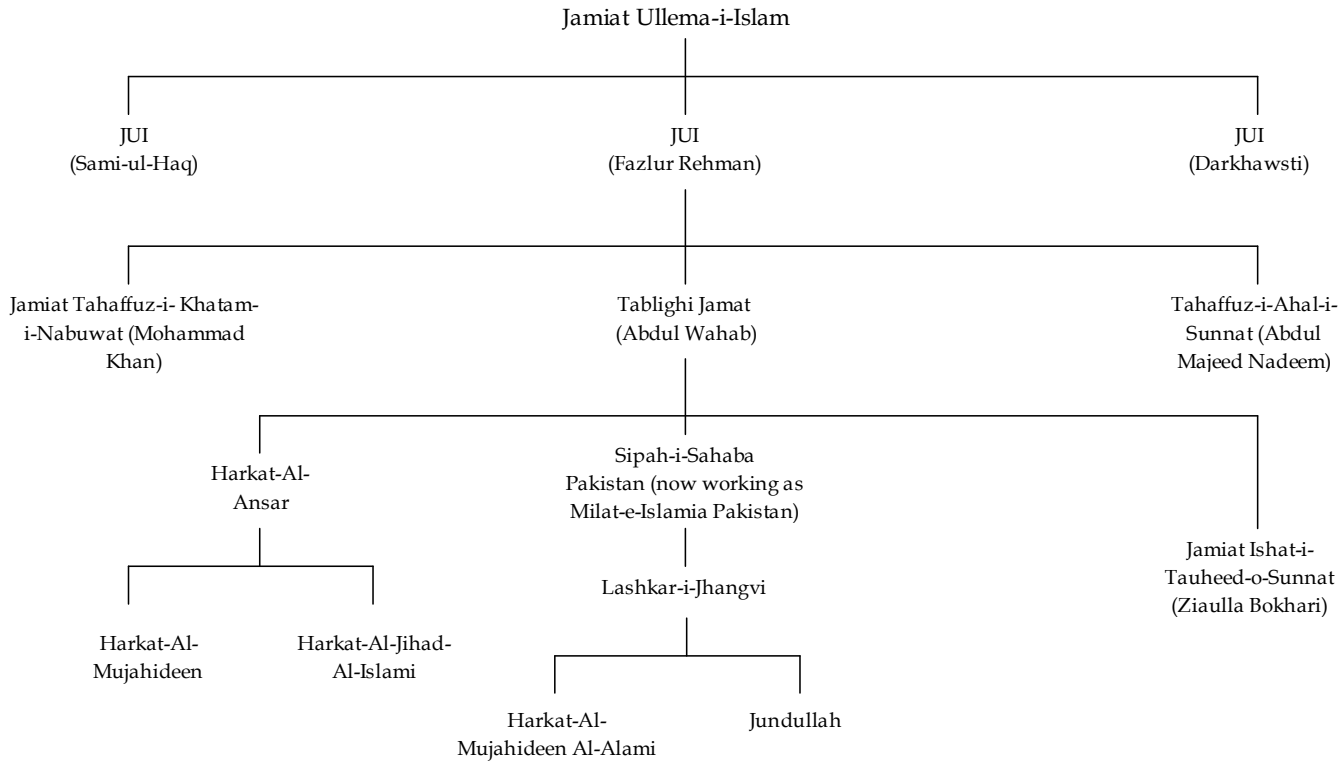
## **Conclusion**

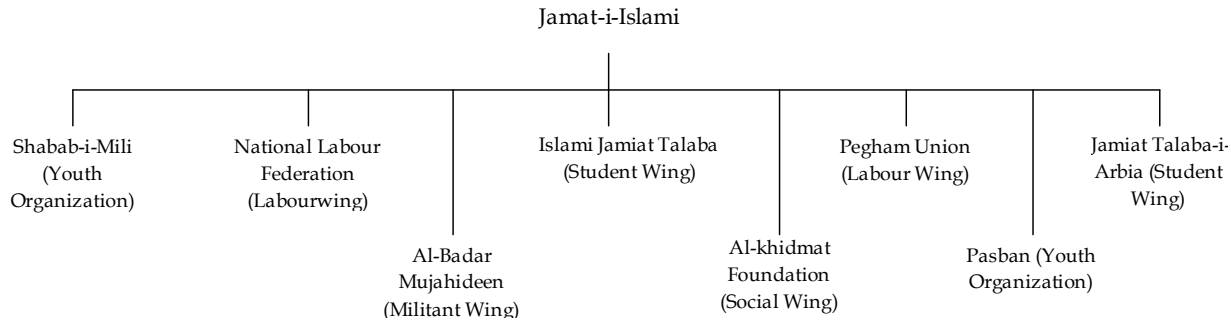
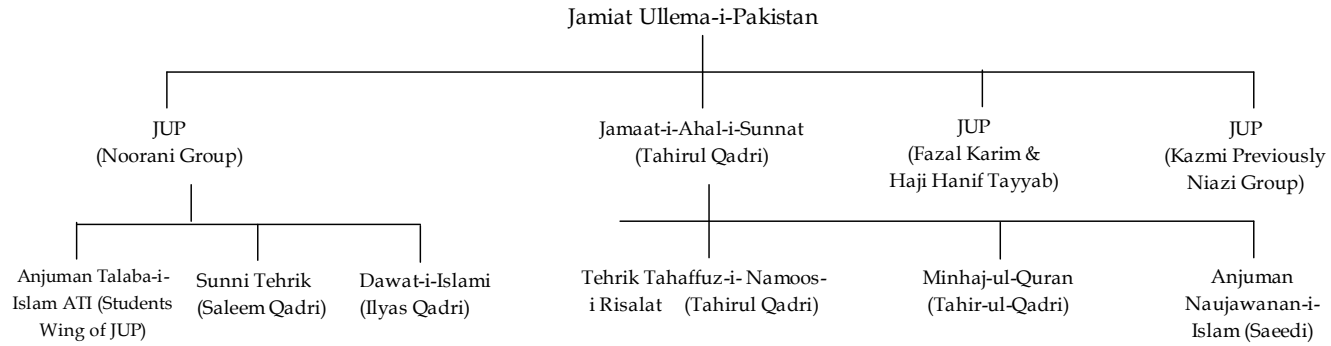
Since the very inception of the new state, Pakistan’s rulers have used Islam to legitimize their authority which was, more often than not, derived from the coercive apparatus of the state rather than from popular support. Since the majority of the regimes came into power through extra-constitutional means, their claims to legitimacy were dubious. As a result, these regimes tried to portray Islam as a source of legitimacy rather than taking Islam as a source of inspiration to provide social justice to the down-trodden communities of Pakistan; The chaotic parliamentary regimes from 1948 to 1958, Ayub Khan’s so-called development-oriented government, Yahya Khan’s transient government, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s populist corporatism, Zia-ul-Haq’s conservative authoritarianism, Benazir Bhutto’s feudal-dominated regime and Nawaz Sharif’s authoritarian capitalist regime — all benefited from the same tactics (Suleman, 2001). In each phase, Islamic ideology was invoked, albeit with varying emphases, in order to legitimize not only the authority of the incumbents but also their contemporary policy

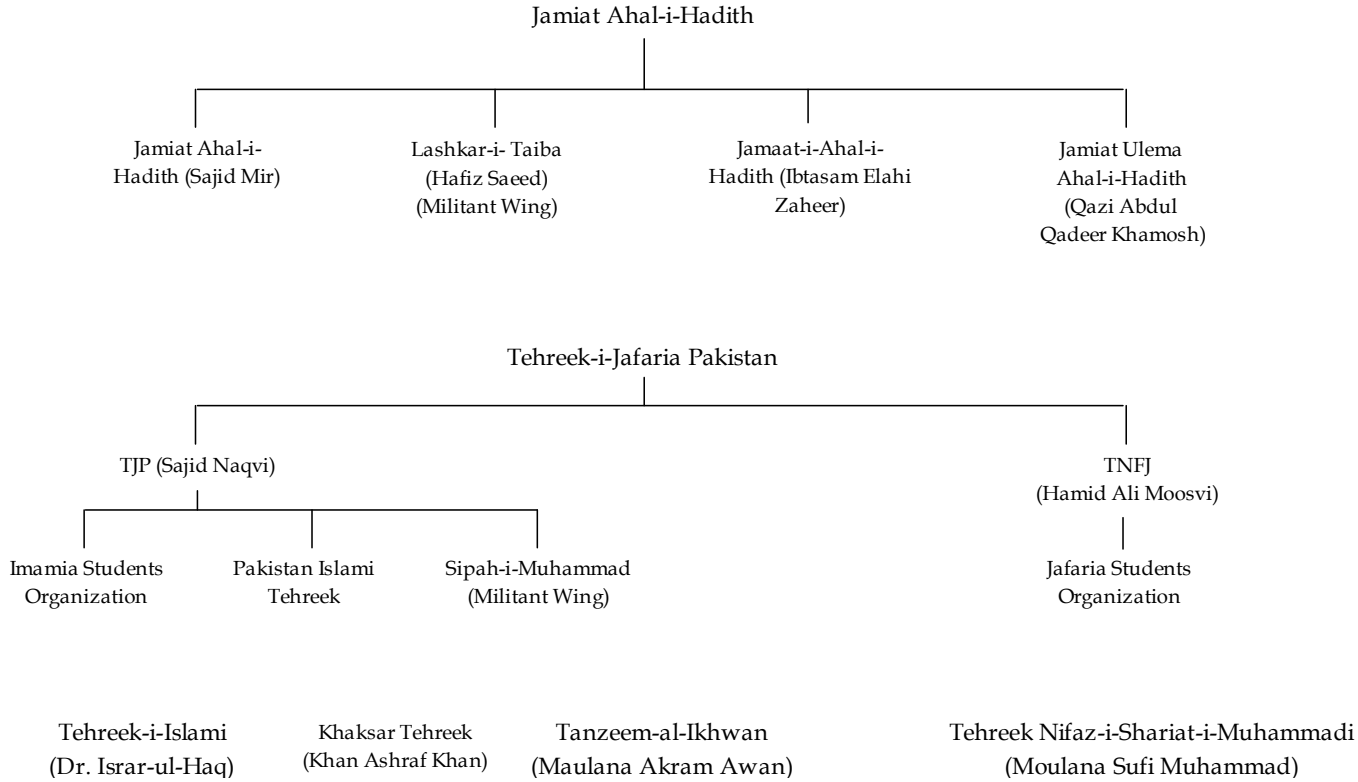
goals. But, particularly, General Zia-ul-Haq's oppressive regime is considered to be responsible for creating a situation in which road to salvation had become indistinguishable from purely political objectives and the regime's need for legitimacy. His monopoly over the instrumental use of Islam proved to be fatal for the future of the country. The non-sectarian, non-violent and non-ideologized part of the population, at about 98 percent, felt constrained under the new culture manufactured and thrust on the masses in pursuit of religious ritualism. Islam's good name had been exploited ruthlessly with a view to seeking the support of the religious political parties and to create a constituency among the lower middle class of the Punjab, urban Sind, and the North West Frontier Province. Issues like *Zakat, Ushr, Islah-i-Mu'ashra, Chadar* and *Chardivari* paved the way for the religious outfits to legitimize their nauseant grip on political power and to safeguard the interests of the ruling elite, which tried to compound its bases of support among the masses (Tasawar, 2003). Since then, every regime whether civil or military, has desperately clutched at the coat-tails of the fundamentalists when their governments had been rocked by a crisis of confidence or political legitimacy. Moreover, the continuing failure of governments to provide education and jobs to the swelling tide of the unemployed, became a fertile breeding ground for alienation and religious revivalism. Even today, the tragedy is that despite all the tall talk about economic breakthrough indulged in by the government, there is no tangible evidence on the ground of its having launched a comprehensive, concrete and credible action plan for ameliorating the appalling misery of the masses. In its efforts to fight the American war on terrorism on Pakistani soil, the Government (and General Musharraf) had to face the wrath of the revivalists. Bomb blasts, rocket fires, missile attacks and other acts of subversion and sabotage from tribal / rural areas to major cities has become the every day feature in Pakistan. A dangerous situation of rebellion, therefore, is brewing up as the army is battling the local and foreign extremists in the North West Frontier Province.

In contemporary Pakistan, therefore, an intense struggle is underway between the spirit of liberalism and dogmatism. The former is generous, moderate, compassionate, and is focused on the real issues of men and women in the present-day context; whereas the latter is unrealistic, uncompromising, power-hungry, and finds inspiration in religious dogma, sectarian pride and dictatorship. Enlightenment takes the individual as the measure of all things and resists abstractions that go beyond the dimensions of man. Dogmatic dispensation cannot justify the cruelties caused to individuals in pursuit of a faith or an ideology, nor justify pain in the present for the sake of a utopian future or a paradisiacal hereafter. And yet such cruelties and pain are intentional tactics deliberated in religious conflicts. The revivalist seeks to provoke repressive reactions which may drive the moderates and democrats out of the political arena and simultaneously bind those who remain more tightly to the "cause". In their fervor, revivalists condemn democracy as a crime and as the traditional conception of religion in Pakistan embraces all aspects of human life, neither politics nor economics is autonomous of religion; they are simply encompassed by religion. Therefore, the battle against religious fanaticism has to be an all-out battle. It calls for going the whole hog in fight to the finish spirit. There is no half-way house, no room for compromise, nor complacency, or expedient adjustments.

### Pakistani religious revivalist groups, their sub-organizations, splinter organs and breakaway factions







\* Compiled from data provided by Mehmood Zaman, "Blood, Sweat and Tears" in *The Review*, Karachi, September 11-17, 2002, PP.4-8.

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