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Pakistan's Emerging Threat: Highly Educated Youth Gravitate to Radicalization

Madeeha Anwar
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The on-campus mob slaying of a journalism student and the arrest of a female medical student for allegedly planning a suicide attack underscore concerns that some of Pakistan's highly educated youth are gravitating toward violent extremism and radicalization.

Security experts say the unrelated incidents show that religious militancy isn't limited to the disenfranchised and uneducated poor. They contend the government has to wake up to a problem that may be getting worse as the country's conservative streak growing deeper.

On April 13, a crowd in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa almost casually carried wooden planks and guns to fatally beat and shoot Mashal Khan, a 23-year-old journalism student who had been accused — falsely, as investigation later showed — of spreading blasphemy on social media.

Then Naureen Laghari, a bright, 20-year-old medical student from a well-educated family in Sindh province, was arrested for allegedly planning an Easter suicide attack on Lahore's Christian community. She had pledged allegiance to Islamic State and had traveled to Syria, where she took military training.

“Laghari is not the first example of radicalized youth to become a foot soldier for a terror outfit,” security and defense analyst Aisha Siddiqia told VOA. “She's certainly not the last one. When

there's no place in the country where you can engage in an open debate on religion, then the only way forward is in the form of radicalization.”

Confused Youth, An Easy Target

Youth dominates Pakistan's population of 200 million people, so its most important demographic group is also the most impressionable. A recent report in the Dawn newspaper indicates that education doesn't prevent militancy: Sindh's Counter Terrorism Department said that out of 500 militants currently held in Sindh's jails, 64 hold a master's degree and 70 have a bachelor's.

Analysts believe deprived and confused youth, particularly those who can't find answers to their problems, are most vulnerable to fall into the hands of extremist groups, such as IS, which is highly tech-savvy and relies heavily on cyberspace to provide hardline narratives that glorify terrorism.

Other factors include political disillusionment, increasing militancy in the country, and poor security measures.

“I think they're [youth] being attracted to extremism because there is so much religious ambiguity and no one to talk to,” Ayesha Ghaffar, a media sciences university student in Karachi told VOA. “I have a lot of questions but there's no one to answer them.”

Most of the current university students grew up in the '80s, when young men were openly recruited from universities for jihad as Pakistan and the U.S. joined to fight the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, then in Indian-controlled Kashmir in the '90s.

Experts believe the result was radicalization in youth on a national level, leaving them malleable as new causes emerged. That is bolstered by well-organized religious groups at most universities whose mission is to spread Islam among fellow students through prayer meetings, charities and other activities.

Deradicalization & Counter-Narrative

“Now is the time to make changes to the blunders we've made in the past, or we'll pay the price forever,” Khadim Hussain, a security analyst, told VOA.

Education experts say it's important to build a counter-narrative and cultivate an environment where youth can openly engage in conversations on issues considered taboo in Pakistan.

They believe outdated teaching methods, lack of development of new skills, and absence of sports and extracurricular activities lead to frustration allow youth to gravitate toward violent terrorism.

“The education system of Pakistan does not train a student in logical/scientific inference or critical thinking. So he’s unable to critically dissect the indoctrinating patterns,” Naureen Zehra, an education expert, told VOA.

Mughees ud Din Shaikh, dean of the Mass Communication department at the Superior University Lahore, added, “Social change takes decades. We need to change the curriculum and come up with a counter-narrative on an emergency basis. Everyone has to play a role towards deradicalization: teachers, religious scholars, mosques, state, security forces – everyone.”

Many see an urgent need to bring fast-spreading religious seminaries (madrasas) into the national education system. Once focused on the lower middle class, they have become prevalent in posh neighborhoods, too.

“As far as education is concerned, forget about universities and colleges, look at the religious schools in very elite neighborhoods in whole of Pakistan,” said Aisha Siddiqa.

Government’s Challenges

Security experts say the government has been avoiding tough decisions.

“Organizations like IS are active on cyberspace and have sleeper cells, but the government doesn’t pay attention because they fear for their perception in the world,” Khadim Hussain said. “This fear has impacted the society and state badly.”

Abdul Qayyum, a lawmaker and prominent member of the ruling PML-N party, denied that, telling VOA that government is aware of the gravity of the matter and is taking measures to prevent radicalization.

“The government is keeping an eye on curriculum, schools, universities and religious seminaries, as well. Through continuous and vigilant monitoring, we were able to catch terrorists like Naureen Laghari before they could carry out any atrocity.”