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Religious Extremism and Governance in South Asia: Internal and External Pressures

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India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are all grappling with intense ethnic and religious tensions that demand careful social accommodation and good governance.

At the same time, ethnic and religious factions throughout South Asia have been tempted to take advantage of recent events in Iraq and elsewhere to stoke latent ethnic and religious tensions for their own political gain.

What can be done by the international community to keep the volatile political environments in Pakistan and Afghanistan from boiling over? How can U.S. policymakers assist regional allies in maintaining international security, peace, and stability in South Asia? On May 15, 2003, the U.S. Institute of Peace hosted a briefing on [religious extremism and governance in South Asia](#). Moderated by Institute South Asia specialist [Deepa Ollapally](#), the panel featured Akbar Ahmed, Ibn Khaldun chair of Islamic studies at American University; Partha Ghosh, director, Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi; and Mohammed Ayooob, distinguished professor at Michigan State University.

Understanding the Mosaic of Politics and Religion in South Asia

Sketching out a picture of the complicated relationship of religion, politics, nation building, and terrorism in South Asia, Partha Ghosh, director of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, stated that religion has played an important role in the development of most modern states in the region. However, contrary to what many may think, Gosh stressed that religion is not new to the political scene and that in India, for example, modern Hindu nationalism can be traced back to the late 19th century. He also noted that while religion might play an important role in a state's formation it need not drive all politics within the state. Conversely, he observed, a state with a secular constitution also does not mean that religion does not play a prominent role within the policymaking process, such as seen in India today.

Another element that Gosh noted has played an important role in the mix of religion and politics in South Asia is ethnicity. He pointed out a review of South Asian politics over the past several decades shows that minority-majority tensions have played a key role in shaping South Asian politics. Amplifying this effect, Gosh stressed, have been recent developments in mass communications that have helped create a larger sense of ethnic identity across traditional geographic boundaries. From radio to satellite television broadcasting, new information and communications technologies have been effectively harnessed, often in a negative way, to propagate religious and political messages throughout South Asia. This, Gosh commented, has served to amplify the virulence of ethnic and religious tensions throughout the region. Mass media has helped radicals spread propaganda and dissent to a much wider audience than they had been able to previously.

Finally, Gosh stressed that although ethnic and religious nationalist movements throughout South Asia's history have been very powerful, states in their reaction to such movements must be careful not to give the movements more momentum. In particular, states must guard against taking punitive actions against an entire ethnic or religious group as a means to respond to terrorists or other violent separatist movements. Thus states often with the best of intention set into motion a vicious cycle where in the fight against terrorism, the states commit human rights violations that weaken the health of the democracy as a whole and actually in the end create further grievances that are used by the terrorists to justify their actions. "A democracy has to respond to terrorism," Gosh warned, "[but if] in the process of that response you violate human rights, you then, in the name of defending democracy, destroy democracy."

The Battle for the Soul of Islam

What role are Islamic extremists playing in the overall political instability seen today in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and throughout South Asia? According to South Asia specialist Akbar Ahmed, while Islamists are an important source of political instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan, their impact is often overstated in the western media. To the contrary, Ahmed argued, the ability of religious extremists to find such a wide audience in both Afghanistan and Pakistan is in fact a symptom of much deeper and complex problems within South Asia. In particular, Ahmed pointed to three problems that have contributed both to the rise in popularity of Islamist movements and overall instability in the region:

1. A general breakdown of law and order. Ahmed stated that both Afghanistan and Pakistan are suffering from similar and deeply rooted breakdowns in the ability of the state to maintain law and order. This has created a situation where not only is physical security of citizens uncertain in many places, but the inability of the central governments to effectively provide social services has left the leadership of both Afghanistan and Pakistan with tenuous popular support.
2. A breakdown in interethnic trust and dialogue. Noting that Indian-Pakistani relations were at perhaps a historic low point, Ahmed argued that even within mixed communities interethnic and inter-religious respect and tolerance are at an all-time low. This has created an atmosphere where a sense of hopelessness has taken over, where Muslim-Hindu differences are viewed on both sides as intractable.
3. A breakdown in the sense of control average people feel they have over their lives. Building upon his previous points, Ahmed suggested that the growth in mutual distrust and the uncertain physical security in Afghanistan and Pakistan have left many feeling that they have no control over their lives. With rampant mistrust between different religious and ethnic groups, many have turned to religion to regain a sense of control for coping with the difficulties of their everyday lives.

Ahmed argued in closing that while these problems were being felt by many on a micro or local level, they were having larger repercussions on a macro or regional level. He also suggested the "struggle over the soul of Islam" so often mentioned in the media today was a longstanding debate over the proper balance of western versus Islamic traditions that dates back several hundred years in South Asia, and it is not as important a cause of political instability in South Asia as some may think.

Looking ahead, Ahmed stressed that the only way the deeper problems that are driving regional instability and religious and ethnic tension in South Asia can be effectively addressed is through efforts at facilitated inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue. Noting the amount of influence the United States has today with the leadership of both India and Pakistan, he argued that the United States could play an important role in facilitating dialogue between the two regional powers. However, Ahmed also emphasized that this dialogue is too important to be left to the politicians and encouraged the international community to pursue initiatives to stimulate Track II and community-based inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogues throughout the region.

A Recipe for Regional Stability in South Asia

The day's final speaker, South Asian politics specialist Mohammed Ayoob, discussed the interconnections between South and Central Asia. In particular, Ayoob pointed out that the political instability in Afghanistan over the past two decades has had a significant impact on the region's overall stability—affecting not only the politics of neighboring Iran and Pakistan, but even [Indian-Pakistani tensions in Kashmir](#) as well.

Taking this factor into account, Ayoob argued, it is important in the development of any U.S. policy towards Afghanistan and in efforts to stabilize regional security that U.S. policymakers employ a broad approach. To accomplish this, Ayoob recommended that the United States consider actively engaging Iran and India in its overall efforts to stabilize the region. Noting the tremendous natural resources at the disposal of both Iran and India, he pointed out that both nations already have a large amount of influence in the region that could assist the United States in many of its efforts. Ayoob also suggested that active and constructive engagement by the United States with both India and Iran might have added policy benefits for U.S. policymakers. Included in such potential benefits is the opportunity to strengthen democratic reformers in Iran as well as the chance to develop more extensive political and economic ties with India.

In closing, Ayoob cautioned that while many within the U.S. policy community may have concerns about working with Iran, it nonetheless was a powerful actor in Central/Southwest Asia that needs to be dealt with by the United States. He also argued that India, like Iran, would be deeply concerned about the impact of an increased U.S. presence in South and Southwest Asia that does not actively and accept their influence in the region. "Both India and Iran have perceptions of themselves and their role in the region and globally," Ayoob warned, "that precludes the ruling elites from accepting any diminution of their strategic regional autonomy."

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This summary reflects the presentations and comments from "[Religious Extremism and Governance in South Asia: Internal and External Pressures](#)"—a Current Issues Briefing held at the U.S. Institute of Peace May 15, 2003. The views summarized above reflect the discussion at the meeting; they do not represent formal positions taken by the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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