Mapping Extremism in South Asia

Sahadevan Ponmoni

Introduction

Extremism remains a dominant factor in politics of South Asia where the states have experienced varied forms of radicalism as an ideology, approach and strategy of a plethora of groups, which seek to maintain status quo or bring about changes in the socio-economic and political realm. Forming an integral part of political processes, unabated extremism has caused enormous strains on the South Asian polities, death and destruction, and institutional breakdown in many states. Sources of extremism are linked to a host of factors rooted in national, regional and international politics. Accordingly, the actors are drawn from a variety of sources, and their identities differ as ethnic, religious or political ideological extremists, depending upon their specific goals and also whom do they target as enemies to promote their cause. In a sense, all of them can be considered as political extremists since their goals and activities are oriented towards and entail politics. The main purpose of this paper is to examine what constitutes extremism in South Asia? What are its principal sources and striking manifestations? By resorting to violence, what do the extremists seek to achieve? How has the South Asian states responded to the challenges? What are the major implications for peace and stability?

What is Extremism?

At this stage it is necessary to be clear about the concept. Extremism is an all-encompassing term marred by ambiguity.
It can mean everything, depending upon how it is interpreted by those who face or experience extremism. Being a politically-loaded term, what is ‘extreme’ for others (state and society) may be ‘moderate’ for groups, which consciously nurture radical beliefs and resort to violent actions based on their ideological predilections. Thus, extremism is just opposite to what moderation stands for. Any immoderate, intolerant, uncompromising and fanatical view, policy, ideology, action or behaviour is termed as extremism. All of these are encompassed in Scruton's definition of extremism. It means "Taking a political idea to its limits, regardless of 'unfortunate' repercussions, impracticalities, arguments and feelings to the contrary, and with the intention not only to confront, but also to eliminate opposition; intolerance towards all views other than one's own; [and] adoption of means to political ends which show disregard for the life, liberty, and human rights of others." Yet, no group labels or accepts itself as an extremist; rather it is others who give such name and identity, more rightly than wrongly, based on their assessment of its extreme ideology, uncompromising goals and subterfuge or violent behaviour. Sometimes it so happens that states themselves use such ‘labelling’ as a technique to further their political goal or cover up their wrong policies (of deprivation, neglect or discrimination) or justify their coercive measures. Nevertheless, extremism as a phenomenon is easily distinguishable from moderate politics.

Often extremism and terrorism are used interchangeably in both academic and policy discussions without realizing the blurred distinction between the two phenomena. Though terrorism is a form of extremism, it entails far more extreme "premeditated" violence against "non-combatants" in pursuit of certain political goals of non-state perpetrators. It is a "conspiratorial style of violence calculated to alter the attitudes and behaviour of multiple audiences. It targets the few in a way
that claims the attention of the many... [and] is distinguished by its high symbolic and expression value."3 There is no universally accepted or recognized definition of terrorism.4 However, many analysts underscore some of these core elements. The task here is not to engage in a definitional debate, but to emphasize the point that whereas all terrorists fall in the category of extremists, not all extremists can be branded as terrorists. It is a different matter that an extremist group becomes a potential terrorist when it changes its method, strategy and targets. Thus, there is only a thin line between extremism and terrorism; it is breached when extremists resort to violence against the non-combatants. It is possible that extremists get a terrorism-tag even if they temporarily use the low-intense terror tactics along side their original method of political violence.

Extremism is not a monolith category. It can be classified according to the basic nature and goals of extremists.5 The prominent ones are based on ethnicity, religion and political ideology. Ethnic extremism is defined as an identity (based on historical antecedents, tradition, language, religion, and culture) group's immoderate belief and action to promote its community's ethno-national interests, really or perceivably threatened or denied by an ethnic partisan state, invariably dominated by a majority ethnic community. This sort of extremism is used as a strategy by both aggrieved minorities and hegemonic majorities. Each reacts to other's extreme ideology, goals and behaviour, thereby adding a conflict dimension to both minoritarian and majoritarian ethnic extremisms. Religious extremism involves groups that make fanatical interpretations wilfully of religious scriptures or doctrines as a source of their identity and ideology and a justification for their radical goals and actions. They function in the name of their religion and for their religion. Thus the "religious convictions that become locked into absolute truths"
make extremists to see themselves as the "God's agents", who use religion to defend their violent behaviour. Political ideological extremism is a broad category that involves ideologically oriented radical groups in armed struggle aimed at achieving systemic changes (political and economic transformations). It can be divided into right-and left-wing extremism. Left-wing extremism is practised by socialist or anti-capitalist groups that draw ideological inspirations from the Communist doctrines. Right-wing extremists are those radical groups or individuals who advocate conservative or reactionary cultural, political and economic policies, support centralized institutions, promote *laissez-faire* and favour restrictions on the people's power and privileges. Some of them believe in the hate-promoting ideology of exclusion and marginalization of the 'other'. Centrists can also be a type of political ideological extremists who favour status quo and resist radical changes advocated by the rightists and the leftists.

**Nature and Dimensions of Extremism**

South Asia is a den of large number of extremists who openly defy the states and create disorder. They are essentially the product of deep ethnic, communal and political divide in the South Asian societies that are inherently complex and prone to competitions. Accordingly, their identity can be defined in ethnic, religious and political ideological terms. Ethnic extremism is widespread and intense in almost all countries, followed by religious extremism forming a dominant source of violence mainly in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. In Sri Lanka and Bhutan, where religion constitutes a critical factor in ethnicity, religious extremism is inseparable from ethnic conflict. It must be noted that just like any other phenomenon, extremism tends to rise and prolong before it is moderated or finally ended. This has been the experience of the South Asian
states, where state coercion led to ending of some extremist movements, but some new ones have been added. The paper deals with only the ongoing extremist movements while making a cursory reference to the old cases in a historical context. It is wrong to characterize or label a community as extremist. Rather, groups or organizations representing it are the ones which appropriately earn this identity if their behaviour is immoderate both in political and violent terms.

**Ethnic Extremism:** This has been intense in three countries - Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan - where it has taken a civil war dimension, causing enormous death and destruction. Sri Lanka ranks high among the violent societies in the region where the Sri Lankan Tamil minority's demand for equality and security has seen the rise of an organized extremist movement, spearheaded by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) until it was defeated by the government forces in May 2009. Initially, the movement had sought to achieve federal autonomy for the Sri Lankan Tamil dominated northern and eastern provinces, which by the mid-1970s turned secessionist following the government's failure to redress the community's bitter feeling of 'relative deprivation' and an acute sense of 'powerlessness'. As their ethnic goals became escalated and the State responded with strong repressive measures, some of the extremist groups such as the LTTE often resorted to terrorism.

Unlike Sri Lanka where the number of ethnic conflict is limited to one, India has experienced at least a dozen major ethnic conflicts since its independence in 1947. Resultantly, the number of ethnic extremist groups operating against the Indian state with the goals of protecting the core interests of their communities has been numerous. Though ethnic grievances are widespread, it is India's Northeast which has recorded a majority of violent and protracted ethnic conflicts in the country. Ethnic extremism in the Northeast remains stronger than it is in other parts of India. The Naga movement,
one of the oldest and protracted ethnic conflicts in the world, has demonstrated how a sub-national group with a strong ethnic identity and feeling of deprivation could challenge the Indian state and resist its military pressure. Two factions of Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) remain the vanguard of Naga nationalism, violently articulating their demand for a separate state. Mizoram had the same experience until 1986 when a peace accord ended the ethnic conflict. However, this has not been the case in other conflicts, such as the one in Assam, Tripura and Manipur, where ethnic extremism has remained unabated and the militant groups have proliferated. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) has remained the most powerful separatist group among them in Northeast. Until the mid-1980s Punjab, where the Sikh nationalists had sought to link their community's survival to creation of a separate Khalistan state, experienced the most virulent form of ethnic extremism that turned terrorism at the end. It was Bhindranwale who added a violent dimension to Sikh nationalism, provoking the Indian State to be equally violent in its responses.

The conflict in Kashmir has generated intense extremism and militarism, particularly since 1990. It has multiple characteristics. From the Indian government's standpoint, it is an internal conflict with international dimensions and the dominant issue has been the border state's integration with the Indian Union as an ideological fulfilment of creating a secular statehood. It can also be seen as an interstate territorial dispute since Pakistan, by advancing the same argument about seeking its ideological fulfilment of being an Islamic state, has made an irredentist claim over Kashmir. At another level, it can be defined as an ethnic conflict since it has involved a community, which is deeply conscious of its ethnic (Kashmiri) identity, in a protracted conflict with the Hindu majority Indian State. But the religion dimension has become salient to influence
ethnicity and, in the process, the former is seen as coterminous with the latter. The link between both religion and ethnicity in Kashmir has produced a virulent form of extremism, which is not amenable to any moderation strategies. A large number of militant organizations, both of indigenous and Pakistani origins, are active in Kashmir as is evident in the rise of extremism and terrorism for the past two decades. Interestingly, the conflict advocates multiple goals: autonomy, secession (independence) and integration (with Pakistan). The assumption is that each goal enjoys some amount of support from the people.\textsuperscript{12}

In Pakistan ethnic extremism remained the single most serious internal challenge to the state ever since its formation in 1947. It exhibited the limitation of Islam as a common religion in creating unity among linguistically/regionally divided communities. Indeed their linguistic identity, which is coterminous with their regional identity, proved to be more powerful than the religious identity that the Punjabi-dominated Pakistani State sought to forge and foster. Secessionist movements in Balochistan, Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Sindh, though unsuccessful in changing the nature and structure of the state, have effectively challenged it to create political instability, disorder and insecurity. The decisive victory for Bengali nationalism in the liberation movement in East Pakistan proved the state's calculations wrong. However, the dismembered and weakened state has bounced back to deter ethnic challenges and thoroughly weaken the ethnic extremists.\textsuperscript{13} As a result, over the years ethnic extremism has waned, if not ended, but religious extremism has gained ascendancy (see below). The latter enjoys an overriding power and influence that the state often finds itself virtually in quandary. The conflict in Balochistan remains the only ongoing but seemingly suppressed resistance
movement in which ethnic extremism is directed against the state. Ethnic extremism in the form of organized insurgency broke out earlier in 1948, 1958, 1962 and 1973-77 and the current spate of violence marks the continuation of the same old conflict after its suspension for a long period.\textsuperscript{14}

Ethnic insurgency for autonomy has ended in both Bangladesh and Bhutan, but discontentment among sections of the tribal people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and the Lhotshmpas (the Bhutanese of Nepali origin) persist. In the case of the former, a peace accord brought an end to the conflict, whereas the coercion by the state led to ending of the conflict in the latter's case. But the past was truly bitter. Insurgency and military operations imposed heavy disabilities on ethnic communities and even threatened their survival in both countries.\textsuperscript{15} In the recent years, Nepal has witnessed an ethnic upsurge in the Tarai region, a long-neglected borderland, where several militant and fringe armed groups operate against the Nepali State to promote the Madhesi cause for political and economic empowerment.\textsuperscript{16}

A brief overview of ethnic extremism presented here reveals an interesting trend. It is waning or dormant in most of the South Asian countries - a trend indicative of triumphalism of the states in the region. Many conflict situations are considered to be post-conflict. But they appear to be a misnomer in some cases since the root causes of conflicts remain unresolved. Waning of ethnic extremism with secessionist goal, however, has not made the region peaceful. Rather, the intensity of violence has increased due to the rise of religious extremism in South Asia.

**Religious Extremism:** It is one of the major challenges facing the South Asian states and their efforts to grapple with the menace have not yielded much result. Both in terms of intensity and impact, religious extremism has attained greater
intensity than other forms of violence now. The region is a home to a large number of religious parties and extremist organizations. Religious parties enjoy political recognition as legitimate political formations. They participate in electoral process and governance even though some of them maintain open or secret ideological, if not operational, links with extremist outfits. However, this is not to say that all religious parties advocate or even endorse violence even if they are able to ideologically influence extremists' agendas. A group committed to its radical ideology and programme and uses violence in pursuit of it is the one that easily qualifies for the extremism-tag. In responding to extremism of groups, states often tend to behave in an immoderate manner by using coercion and intimidation. On most occasions such state behaviour is condoned.

Religious extremism is intense in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and nascent in Maldives, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Whereas India faces twin challenges from both Hindu and Islamic extremists, the other South Asian states experience Islamic extremism only. By acting and reacting to each other's actions and agenda, both the Hindu and Islamic extremists in India reinforce each other's ideology and goals in a competitive manner. Some of the Hindu fringe elements may not be strong in organizational terms but are quite active in times of trouble. They function largely in a localized or provincial environment to promote the Hindu ideology fostered by the Sangh parivar, which has established close ideological linkages with the mainstream parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Besides promoting the culture of violence and radicalized politics, the Hindutva forces have helped breed chauvinism and contributed to the rise of communalism in India. Similarly, there are many Islamic extremist groups, mainly concentrated in the protracted conflict region of Jammu & Kashmir. Incidentally, India does not have any major radical
Islamist party at the national level, but there are many moderate Muslim parties which often share power both at the Centre and states. The absence of radical political Islamists has been made use of by a plethora of extremist groups, such as Students Islamic Movement (SIMI), Al Jihad, Deendar Anjuman and Students Islamic Organization to emerge as the sole champions for the radical Islamic cause.  

In Pakistan, Islamic extremism has occupied a huge political space, constraining the functions of the mainstream moderate parties and posing serious challenges to the state. The two principal and established Islamist parties representing the Deobandi Sunnis are the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islami (JUI). At least the latter is a faction-ridden entity. JUI-F led by Maulana Fazlur Rahman is a dominant faction whose supporters are drawn from clerics and rural masses from Pashtun areas of the NWFP, whereas the JI enjoys support of a large urban middle class in the Punjab province. Both adopt a radical approach to Islamization by seeking a comprehensive application of Sharia to Pakistan's governance structures and complete restructuring of the state. Besides, there are several militant sectarian groups, representing both the Sunnis and Shias. The Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), formed in 1985, and its breakaway group, the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LiJ), established in 1996, are the Sunni militant Islamic organizations. Some of the prominent Shia militant organizations are the Sipah-e-Mohammed Pakistan (SMP) and the Tehrik-e-Jafria (TJP). They coexist and some of them even work in coordination with jihadi groups. Pakistan has more than two dozen terrorist groups whose cadres are recruited from the JUI-run madrasas. In the recent years, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (known as Pakistani Taliban) has emerged as the formidable force, threatening peace and security in the country.

The rise of religious extremism in Bangladesh is
influenced by the developments in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) plays an active role in the country's politics. It maintains links with some extremist groups and has formed a radical youth wing, known as Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS). Other major Islamist parties include the Muslim League, Jamaat-e-Tulba and Islamic Oikyo Jote. The country is said to have about 30 small and big militant groups, including Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harakat-ul-Jihad-i-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B).

As compared, Islamic extremism ranks low in Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives. They do have some moderate Muslim parties, but not political Islamist groups to articulate a radical Islamic agenda. Even some of the violent extremist groups, found in Nepal and Sri Lanka, are rudimentary in a structural and operational sense. They can be described as fundamentalist Islamic interest groups.

Nepal has some of them including Jamaat-e-Millat-e-Islamia. In Sri Lanka, there are about half-a-dozen fundamentalist groups, which confine their activities largely to the island nation's eastern province. In Bhutan, given the restrictions imposed by the state, the tiny Muslim minority has not been able to organize itself or come under external Islamic influences. Maldives is emerging to become a home to some nascent Islamic extremist groups belonging to the Salafi sect.

Both democracies and non-democracies alike in the region are affected by religious extremism. While the extremists have presented radical religion-based agendas in a manner to create close links between religion and politics or politicization of religion and religionization of politics, the pattern and level of violence is determined by the extent of support they mobilize for their cause, capacity of the state to control and combat their activities, and their linkages with groups across the nation and the region sharing the same ideology and goals. The last point
can be clarified in terms of the extremist-terrorist nexus. Religious extremism tends to attain a violent dimension if it is inspired and supported by terrorist groups.

**Left-wing Extremism:** Though the leftist ideology has found its supporters across the South Asian region, it has fuelled extremism mainly in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Of these, India and Nepal continue to face formidable challenges of left-wing extremism, the same ended in Sri Lanka by the late 1980s when the government forces had ruthlessly suppressed the *Janata Vimukti Peramuna* (JVP) insurrection, and it is contained in the case of Bangladesh. The Maoist movement in India is termed as the "gravest threat" to the country's security.\(^{19}\) Even though it has remained dormant for some years in some states, at least ten states in the country are now affected by Maoist violence. Its intensity and magnitude varies from state to state. The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) - known as the People's War Group (PWG) - spearheads the naxalite movement since its formation in 1980. It is predominantly a class war for the Maoists, who have found their support base among the tribal communities in some of the most underdeveloped and backward regions of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal and Maharashtra. Yet, it is treated by the Indian government as a law and order problem, mainly linked to underdevelopment. Fatalities have increased over the years in the Maoist violence and police-paramilitary operations launched by both the state and central governments.\(^{20}\)

The Maoist movement in Nepal has been one of the most formidable left-wing extremist events in the region that has attracted the deep international attention and involvement. Launched by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) as a 'People's War' against the monarchical Nepalese state in February 1996, the movement spread throughout the country and violence engulfed the lives of all the Nepalese. Unlike the
Indian Maoist movement, the people’s war in Nepal has emphasized its class dimensions along with their political goals since it has sought to bring about systemic changes - 'new democracy' - as preconditions for socio-economic transformations in the country. It appeared more as a movement for state reform and comprehensive political restructuring than a mere class war. The state came under duress and its collapse appeared imminent since the Maoist challenges became insurmountable. Both the military and rebel forces fought many bitter battles until November 2006 when a comprehensive peace accord was signed. It has ended the violent Maoist movement, but not moderated their extreme ideology and objectives. Peace is fragile ever since Prachandaled government resigned in the wake of its tussle with the President.

Causes and Goals of Extremism

States reject all forms of extremism, but extremists consider themselves as purposive actors with well-defined goals that, in their views, are just and desirable. Extremism, therefore, does not arise in vacuum; rather a set of conditions exist to create it though they can be objective or subjective, depending upon who interpret them. Although causes for each type of extremism generally vary from other, some of them are common to all. Generally speaking, the denial of identity, security, development and power tends to give rise to extremism in any context. While these are important conditions and requirement for existence of any individual or group or community, in some cases extremists’ agenda or goals centre on denying them to the ’other’.

In creating ethnic extremism the role of state representing or dominated by the majority assumes importance. In South Asia, the general experience of a large number of ethnic groups
is that they resorted to or supported extremism because the state policies created 'fear' (of loss of identity, assimilation and marginalization) and a sense of 'relative deprivation' (by denying them equality) and 'powerlessness' (arising out of hegemonic majoritarianism). Therefore, instead of mediating the conflict between communities, the state's partisan role in support of the majority alienated the minority. Also, parliament in many South Asian states has failed to provide a forum for conflict resolution. Finally, deep mutual mistrust among ethnic groups has given rise to and perpetuation of conflicts. In India, the mainstream Naga, Mizo, Meitei and Assamese nationalists questioned the integration of their ethnic territories into the post-colonial Indian Union and made a strong claim for separate statehood. Although insurgency in Kashmir involves complex interactive factors linked to national and regional politics, its root cause lay in the way the state was integrated into India. Similarly, the Baloch minority perceived its forcible inclusion in Pakistan as an arbitrary outcome of the divide and rule policy of the British and sought to regain the independence they had lost to the Punjabi-dominated Pakistani State.

Furthermore, some ethnic groups feared assimilation of their distinct identities by the dominant groups of the region as part of strategies to maintain the arbitrarily drawn boundaries. To counter such a possibility, they articulated their demand for a territoriality based on their ethnicity. The Bodo Kacharis, Meiteis and Sikhs in India, and Lhostshampas in Bhutan are the cases in hand. In a different way, some groups have nurtured the fear of marginalization as a result of the influx of migrants. This has led to conflicts in the Indian states of Tripura, Manipur and Assam, Pakistan's Sindh province and Bhutan. In Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the governments blatantly followed a policy of ethnic colonization that touched a raw nerve of the Sri Lankan Tamils and the tribal people of the CHT respectively. For a number of South Asian minorities
the denial of equal cultural, political and economic rights is the worst form of threat to their survival. The majority ethnic groups, in the process of establishing their hegemony, have forced homogenization of the societies through imposition of their language on the resistant minorities. In different times, the state in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh followed this policy. Some ethnic communities in India have also developed a sense of relative deprivation, which formed a major source for conflicts.

It must be noted that minority ethnic extremism is not just a one-way track. In fact, in the rise and growth of minoritarian extremism, the hegemonic majority's extreme ideological assertions and supremacy have formed a significant factor. Both categories of extremists have competed to promote their ethnic interests. By seeking a comprehensive political autonomy through state reform and socio-economic and cultural rights, the minoritarian extremism has sought to achieve equal status as a stakeholder in the state. As an extreme step, it has advocated secessionism when the majoritarian ethnic states have rejected its demands for equality and autonomy. Generally, the majoritarian extremists in South Asia have insisted on preserving their community's hegemonic status by completely denying equality or offering unequal rights. Thus, one stands for a positive goal of change and another seeks to advance a negative goal of maintaining the status quo.

A complex phenomenon, the causes of religious extremism are multifarious. In the South Asian context the following causes can be enumerated. First, the fanatical and narrow interpretations of religious tenets and texts and the veneration of mythology have made fuelling effects on religious-oriented obscurantist elements who have found justifications and legitimacy for their actions in their religion. For instance, the Quran being a comprehensive guide for the humanity is
subjected to rigid and narrow interpretation by clerics in Islamic societies, in the best tradition of *ijtihad*, to suit their interests and desires in the changing circumstances. Similarly, epics like *Ramayana* and legends-filled *Mahavamsa* are politically used to promote an exclusionary identity for the Hindus in India and the Buddhists in Sri Lanka respectively. Second, the political use of religion has also contributed to religious extremism. Some undemocratic and unpopular leaders in the South Asian states have openly cultivated radical religious groups and helped promote their religious agenda. In return, these leaders sought to gain political support or legitimacy for their rule. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh provide ample examples of how the weak and vulnerable political leaders made use of religious forces in this regard. Third, there has been steep decline of political secularism in the region, which has contributed to the rise of religious extremism. For long post-colonial South Asia was known for religious tolerance and coexistence. The states - whether Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists - chose to be secular despite the fact that each one of them shared or came to be associated with a particular identity. But the decline of democracy, growing crisis of legitimacy facing regimes and increasing socioeconomic discontentment of people have led to sharpening of their religious consciousness and identities. In the process the pro-secular moderate forces have lost their political voice and space. Thus religious radicalism has bred more radicalism, indicating the changing nature of the polity and the state-society relations in several South Asian states.23

Finally, the external patron support has also provided an impetus for radical Islamic activities. For many years, Saudi Arabia has funded the Sunni Islamic parties, charities and madrassas in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. A large number of madrassas depend on the Saudi funds and most of their students are drawn from the lower strata of the society,
indicating the economic compulsions for their decision to join seminaries. Geopolitical factors have also played a role in the rise of extremism. In their search for power and domination, interested regional and extra-regional powers cultivated Islamists as an instrument of their policy. The rise of mujahideens in Afghanistan can be traced to the US strategy of developing resistance to the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979. In the process, Pakistan emerged as the front-line state to exercise control over the mujahideens. The origin of the Taliban from the Dar al-Ulum Haqqania madrasa in Pakistan under the Saudi-Pakistani patronage has been the most dangerous consequence of the political use of Islamists. Pakistan's Islamic strategy has been extended far beyond Afghanistan to cover India with which it has a long-running dispute over Kashmir. In the post-9/11 period the war on terror itself has given impetus to the rising tide of Islamic extremism. Many Islamist groups find in the US-led counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan a covert Western agenda of undermining the Islamic forces and also controlling the states.

Religious extremists have a variety of political and socio-cultural goals and shown conviction to achieve them at any cost. Beyond their declared goals some extremist groups pursue an objective of 'annihilation'. Political goals include capturing state power, enforcing state reform along their radical religious lines and reinforcing conservative social norms in their country. Some extremist groups nurture anti-state goals by posing threats to its stability and order, as is the case with the TTP in Pakistan. Establishment of a religion-oriented rule forms another objective. In India, the Hindu extremists seek to establish the Hinduvta rule, and the Islamic extremists want liberation (of Kashmir), Islamization and annihilation of their opponents.

The left-wing extremism is guided by the Maoist ideology,
but rooted in particular local socio-economic and political contexts. Its goals are, therefore, oriented towards bringing about a radical change in the existing conditions and creating a new order along the Maoist ideological lines. The Indian Maoism is ingrained in the socio-economic grievances and underdevelopment of the tribal people in the most backward regions. In this regard, the state's economic and development policy, which has caused a deep sense of their alienation and deprivation, worked to augment the Maoist support base across the country. Besides the lack of infrastructure, underdevelopment and pitiable economic conditions, a large scale loss of tribal land to both the government and private sector enterprises for industrialization and establishment of special economic zones has been the greatest source of tribal discontentment. The Maoists find the reasons for the tribal problems in the Indian State's class character and structure linked to capitalism, which they seek to change by launching a sustained armed struggle. Thus, they consider the Indian State as their 'class enemy' and seek to defeat it through an armed revolution.

The Maoists in Nepal share the same ideology and goals, but they have presented a broad-based political agenda of capturing state power and establishing "new people's democracy" - a concept they have borrowed from Mao Zedong's political thought. Thus, radical transformation in the state structure and society has been central to their 40-point demand unveiled at the launch of the armed movement. They are truly 'modern revolutionaries', whose passion for socio-economic and political changes was fuelled by the country's lopsided political system long controlled by the monarchy, neglect of its nationalism, its unequal relations with India, and underdevelopment of its people's lives. In launching such a movement with a comprehensive agenda, the Maoists prepared themselves for a protracted armed struggle. Yet, they have
appeared pragmatic as they used their armed strength for political bargaining aimed at reaching a negotiated settlement, and not for a complete and decisive military victory against the security forces.

**Manifestations and Implications of Extremism**

Extremism manifests itself in many forms in the polity. It is an ‘everyday life’ for a vast majority of the South Asians. They are unable to escape from the undesirable culture of extremism though most of them reject it altogether. The culture appears strong and widespread that it has contagion effects. It affects normal politics and threatens peace and order in societies.

**Breakdown of Normal Politics:** If extremism is a symptomatic of ‘breakdown of normal politics’, it is both a cause and a consequence of the same phenomenon. It stems from political breakdown and in course of its steady progression, it further contributes to undermining the political order and straining the polity where the language of politics tends to become hard and immoderate. It is about ‘defeat’, ‘eradication’, ‘annihilation’, and ‘isolation’ of enemies. For long, until the LTTE was defeated in May 2009, the Sri Lankan government had defended its war as being fought for peace. It was therefore a ‘war for peace’. The LTTE also saw its violence against the government along the same lines. It wanted to defeat the Sri Lankan State and create a separate Tamil Eelam. In its view, it was a just cause - achieving peace for the Sri Lankan Tamil minority settled in the country's Northern and Eastern provinces. Both the Indian government and extremists have preferred to speak in the same violent terms. If the government's choice is to defeat and eliminate all forms of extremism in Kashmir, Northeast and elsewhere in India, the extremists have toed the same line and nurtured a
goal of weakening the Indian State. In the process the language of politics has become irrelevant. In many extremism-afflicted South Asian countries, the extremists have influenced or disturbed the political agenda and political processes. Being power-seekers, some of them use both electoral politics and violence together as a means to promote their cause. The tragedy in South Asia is that some of the mainstream parties, in their desperation to weaken or defeat each other, have sought to use the extremist organizations for their victory in elections or continuation in power.

**Collective Violence:** Riots are common in South Asia. They constitute particularly a predominant collective violent programme involving the mobs in such acts as “arson, destruction of property, and physical injury” (including homicide and rape) against a designated enemy group. Riots are ethnic, communal and sectarian in nature, in that the role of the state can be one of either being a direct or indirect or indifferent participant. Large-scale ethnic violence took place in India (anti-Sikh riots, 1984), Sri Lanka (anti-Tamil riots, 1983) and Pakistan (anti-Pakhtun riots, 1965; the Sindhi-Mohajir riots, 1972-73, 1988, 1990; and the Pakhtun-Bihari Mohajir riots, 1985-87). All of them broke out in major urban centres (Karachi and Hyderabad in the case of Pakistan) and national capitals (Delhi and Colombo) and between two ethnic extremists with strong competing interests. India has recorded a large number of communal riots; the most serious one has been the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat. In Pakistan, sectarian violence is a popular manifestation and outcome of Islamic extremism. It broke out first in Punjab in 1953 against Ahmadis. Since then it has become a regular event, killing thousands of people throughout the country. After Pakistan declared Ahmadis as non-Muslims in 1974, sectarian clashes attained Sunni-Shia dimensions both in tribal and urban regions. In the tribal areas the high intensity of violence has
often made sectarian strife appear as a 'tribal civil war'. The causes for it varied from trivial incidents like 'wall-chalking' to hurting religious sentiments. During 1990-2008, about 2800 people were killed in sectarian violence in urban areas alone and an equal number of people injured in 2002-2008. In Sri Lanka, there is growing Sufi-Salafi sectarian divide, which broke into violence in the East in 2004 and 2006. On both occasions the Salafi Islamists destroyed Sufi mosques.

Selective Revenge Killings: It involves three sets of actors - civilians, extremists and government forces. While extremists and state forces adopt this tactic against each other and rival civilians, revenge killings attain frightening proportions when extremists of the same ethnic group target each other and engage in violence against their own civilian population. Sri Lanka presents a classic case where both sides - the Tamil extremists and the security forces - followed this pattern of violence. The civilian victims included not only members of the two ethnic groups but also the Muslims and many prominent political leaders of the island. In India, revenge killings were the result of inter-extremist group rivalry, the army's operations against both the extremists and their supporters, and the extremist's attacks against the political leaders. Punjab, Kashmir and North Eastern India witnessed this form of violence the most, and the worst case of this kind was the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Both rival ethnic extremists such as Sindhis, Pakhtuns and Mohajirs and security forces were known for their revenge killings in Pakistan. The Baloch militants killed many of their clan group leaders who collaborated with the military regime led by Zia ul Haq or extended political support to the Pakistan Army's plan to encircle Balochistan since 1973. In the recent years, the target killing of rival religious leaders has also increased. In December 2007, the TTP assassinated Benazir Bhutto. The growing nexus between sectarian and jihadi groups is used for
violence against the foreigners. In January 2002, the *Jaish-e-Mohammed* (JeM) allegedly murdered journalist Daniel Pearl with the support of both *Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan* (SSP) and LiJ. Extremists in Bangladesh and Nepal have also adopted revenge killings as a tactic to advance their goals.

**Bomb Attacks:** Often extremists have resorted to terror attacks. Murder and mayhem continues to grip Pakistan. Terrorist violence engulfing the whole nation has taken a heavy toll on the human lives. During 2003-2008, Pakistan recorded death of about 5300 civilians, 1800 security forces and 6300 terrorists. Most of the civilian fatalities were caused by suicide (*fidayeen*) attacks, totalling about 137 during 2002-2008. There were about 250 bombings in 2008. In Bangladesh, the Islamic extremists have turned violent against the civilians. On August 21, 2004 the country had experienced unprecedented violence when an Awami League (AL) rally was attacked, killing 19 people and injuring at least 200. A year later, on August 17, 2005, the *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB) exploded about 450 bombs across the country. In India, bomb blasts in public places have become a regular event. Indian cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Pune have been regularly targeted by the extremists and terrorist groups. Though Islamists in Maldives are not an organized group, they surprised the world on September 29, 2007 when a bomb exploded at Sultan Park in the capital Male, which injured 12 foreign tourists. Until the LTTE was eliminated, Sri Lanka experienced many bomb blasts, targeting both the civilians and the government infrastructure and establishments. Colombo, the national capital, bore the brunt of the LTTE attacks periodically since 1983.

**Armed Movements:** Both ethnic and left-wing extremisms have led to sustained armed movements in many South Asian states. While insurgency and guerrilla warfare have formed the dominant strategies of the extremists in many movements,
some of them (in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal) have reached an internal war dimension - the most advanced form of extremism, entailing continuous and prolonged military engagement between insurgents and security forces. India is home to many insurgent movements and internal wars. The Northeast region has recorded many such movements particularly involving the NSCN in Nagaland and the ULFA in Assam. Until the mid-1980s, Punjab remained a hot spot of terrorist activities and the Indian government mobilized its force to defeat them. Kashmir continues to experience an organized militancy. Until 2009, Sri Lanka had an internal war between the government forces and the LTTE. Though the war was fought in the island’s Northern and Eastern provinces, it had engulfed the entire nation. Pakistan fought the Baloch rebels till recently and the Mohajir armed movement earlier. The civil war in Nepal and the Maoist insurgency in India have been the most formidable ideological movements, seeking to challenge and change the states by using violence and armed operations. Insurgency in the CHT of Bangladesh turned to be an internal war as the government used its military for a prolonged period. For a brief period, Bhutan was faced with a limited insurgency movement launched by the Bhutanese of Nepalese origin. A striking South Asian experience is that mainly ethnic and ideological extremists have launched organized armed movements; religious extremists have resorted to general violence that has often attained terrorist dimensions when the civilians have become the principal victims.

The outcomes of extremism have been serious. It has caused dehumanization, human insecurity and militarization of the society. Furthermore, it has threatened national and regional peace. South Asia is a killing-field, where innocent civilians are subjected to death and destruction. Violence has a dehumanizing effect. It has become a popular culture in many
parts of South Asia. It is a part of everyday life of the people in the strife-torn societies where abnormality and chaos are imposed as the norms of the society. The culture of violence is reproduced, as the victims often turn against the perpetrators of violence to make them victims in the same manner. With insecurity becoming the hallmark of most of the societies both the powerful and the powerless alike live under the constant fear of death and destruction. Both the governments and extremists have brutalized the civil society - especially in Sri Lanka’s Northeast; Pakistan’s Balochistan, and India’s Northeast and Kashmir - leading to the emergence of a new community of ‘unfortunate people’, comprising widows, orphans, destitute and refugees. Indeed battered communities find no solace and the de-humanizing behaviour of the extremists has totally destroyed the sanctity of family life of a large chunk of population.

If the culture of violence has a super-imposed structure, it means society itself is thoroughly militarized. A number of regions in some of the South Asian countries have been under military control for many years. In the absence of a civilian administration in strife-torn regions like Sri Lanka’s Northern Province and the CHT of Bangladesh, the military carried out both civil and military functions simultaneously. It has also provided crucial support for the civil administration to function in a number of conflict zones in India and Pakistan. India and Sri Lanka have never experienced military rule at the national level, but a large chunk of their sub-national population has been under the control of the army. The proliferation of small arms and their availability to civilians is a new reality emerging out of ethnic militarism in South Asia.

The wider strategic significance of extremism lies in the experience that the armies of the region have gained from their operations against the extremists. Only the armed forces of India and Pakistan have had the distinction of fighting external
Mapping Extremism in South Asia

wars in South Asia, whereas the rest have grown exclusively in the context of internal security situations. The rise of extremism has given them the chance to demonstrate their firepower, not against an external adversary but against their own dissident population. Internal war is a new experience for both the Sri Lankan and the Bangladeshi armies and their growth has been justified by the ruling elite. The frequent and prolonged deployment of regular Indian and Pakistani troops for internal security duty has given rise to strategic concerns. It is feared that their prolonged use in combating internal resistance may lead to a breakdown in military training and readiness for tackling external threats. Also, there is a growing concern in some of the countries over the excessive reliance of the state on the army to ensure its survival and maintain civil order. The fear is that the army will in the long run might behave in a manner threatening to the democratic principles and institutions and ultimately undermine democracy. In India, the mutiny of Sikh troops following the Indian Army’s entry into the Golden Temple in Amritsar in 1984 to flush out the Khalistani militants had been a cause for serious concern.

The bilateral or regional dimension of extremism has caused inter-state and regional tensions. No internal conflict in South Asia remains internal always. It inevitably takes a bilateral or regional dimension. Given the Indo-centric nature of the region, India is often drawn into its neighbouring state’s internal conflict. Almost all ethnic groups have enjoyed cross-border support at varying levels and in a variety of forms. This external support has played a critical role in the outbreak of conflicts. For long, the Sri Lankan Tamils had enjoyed the ideological, political and material support of their brethren in Tamil Nadu. In their conflict with the Drukpas in Bhutan, the Lhotshampas looked to Nepal for political and material support. While India was expectedly the principal source of support for
the East Pakistanis, the Baloch and Pakhtuns had relied on Afghanistan. As regards the ethnic movements in India, Pakistan’s involvement in Kashmir has been an important factor behind the growth of insurgency. Whereas the cross-boundary ethnic linkages facilitated external involvement in the case of Kashmir, the conflict-groups in India’s Northeast and Punjab capitalized on the regional power politics to win foreign patron support, especially of Pakistan and China. Similarly, Pakistan’s role in fomenting Islamic extremism and terrorism in India is allegedly strong. The cross-border involvement of states in extremism has impacted their bilateral relations. For instance, in the 1980s, India’s role in Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict became a major bilateral issue threatening to derail their relations. In the wake of several terrorist attacks in India, New Delhi’s relations with Islamabad came under severe stress. In 2001, both countries had even resorted to mobilize their forces against each other, raising the fear of war in the region. As a counter-measure and pressure tactics, India has often developed a tendency to break off its political engagements with Pakistan whenever there is a terrorist attack on its soil.

**Countering Extremism**

The South Asian states have employed a variety of counter-extremism strategies, which yielded mixed results:

*Law and Order Approach:* This remains the first-tier (immediate) and the most dominant strategy. It includes crack down (arrest, detention, etc.) on extremists and banning their groups. In this context, the South Asian states have enacted a variety of legislation to provide legal bases for counter-extremism activities. Bangladesh enacted the Special Powers Act (1974) and the Curbing of Terrorists Activities Act (1992). Sri Lanka has extensively used the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1979, amended in 1982) and Emergency Regulations. India’s
counter-militancy legislation have been the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act (TADA) (1985), Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) (2002), National Security Act (NSA) and Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958 & 1972). The TADA was allowed to lapse in 1995 and the POTA was repealed in 2004 by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. It amended the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) (1967) to incorporate some of the provisions of POTA relating to the punishment and penalties for terrorist activities, and procedures including the banning of terrorist organizations and interception of communications. Pakistan has enacted the Defence of Pakistan Rules, High Treason Act, Prevention of Anti-National Activities (Special Courts) Ordinance of 1974 and Pakistan Armed Forces (Acting in Aid of Civil Power) Ordinance. All these legislation and ordinances have provided extensive powers to police, paramilitary forces and military to arrest and detain anyone without trial.

Use of Coercion: A large-scale use of police, para-and military forces against extremists has been the second-tier (middle) strategy. The purpose is either to defeat or weaken them so that they accept political negotiations. Their coercive operations have often brought to the fore the issue of gross human rights violations. The Indian government has extensively used coercion in Northeast and Kashmir; the ending of the Punjab conflict can be attributable to sustained police, para-and military operations. Commando forces are deployed in response to terror attacks. In Sri Lanka, the widespread and intense use of military has resulted in comprehensive defeat of the LTTE. The cost of such operations became immaterial for the government. Nepal mobilized its military forces to wage a war against the Maoists, which ended in a cease-fire. Bangladesh carried out massive operations against the Chakma rebels in the Chittagong Hill Tracts until
they agreed to negotiate a peace deal. Bhutan has virtually ended ethnic extremism through force. Pakistan has been in the forefront of waging a war against extremists, be there in Balochistan and Northwest Frontier province. Its recent military operations against both the Taliban in Swat valley and Balochi rebels have revealed the Pakistani government's determination to use force to any extent to end resistance and challenges to the state. In conjunction with their coercive strategy and to cushion it, the governments have also embarked on various political and socio-economic measures. They are intended to wean away the people from extremists and erode their support base necessary for sustaining their activities. Granting concessions to the concerned communities and undertaking developmental work in the affected areas form part of the governmental approach to 'wining hearts and minds of people' in South Asia. For instance, of late, the Indian government has initiated steps to develop the tribal regions across the country as part of its strategy of defeating the Maoists.

**Negotiating with Extremists:** Governments tend to adopt this approach when other strategies fail or create conditions for negotiations. Political negotiations with extremists are hard to initiate and successfully conclude. In many cases talks are offered conditionally. Governments in South Asia often insist on surrender of arms or cessation of hostilities before they agree for peace talks with extremists. Yet, there are several instances of states and extremists striking peace deals. Ethnic peace accords are many in South Asia; India has a maximum number of such deals. The Mizo accord (1986) has been the most successful one. Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have also negotiated ethnic agreements with their ethnic extremists. In Nepal, the 2006 peace accord with the Maoists has been a rare and significant deal that any government in the region has concluded with a left-wing group. Of late, India has shown
interest in negotiating with the Maoists, but only after they end their violence. In Pakistan, the peace deal that the provincial government of the Awami National Party in the NWFP entered into with the Swat-based Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) in February 2009 is also a unique case. It reveals that the governments in the South Asian region do make negotiated peace deals mostly with ethnic extremist groups when their counter-strategies fail to end extremism. At the same, political negotiations with religious extremists are rare and uncommon.

Conclusion

The chapter underscores that extremism remains the most pressing challenges facing South Asia in the contemporary period. Despite various measures and countermeasures, there is no end in sight of extremism. In this context, the following points are made: First, since extremism is 'politics by other means', it is perhaps amenable to moderation but not to permanent ending. Therefore, the possible democratic agenda should be one of ameliorating the conditions that have given rise to extremism rather than trying to defeat it. Second, since extremism is symptomatic of breakdown of 'normal politics', normalization of the politics requires conflict resolution. Third, extremism in South Asia is more than a national issue, whose inevitable regionalization has been a major cause for deep security concerns. Fourth, extremism by both groups and state reinforces each other's behaviour and ideologies. Peace requires moderation in policies and strategies of both the actors. Fifth, South Asia has a poor record of moderating extremism through political means and also of developing the culture of preventing violent extremism. Finally, as human insecurity (defined in broad terms) is factored at least in some forms of extremism, the human security approach holds relevance to addressing the challenges in the region.
Endnotes


5 The US government has identified over a dozen forms of extremism. Besides the prominent ones like ethnic, religious, left-wing and right-wing extremism, the list includes animal rights, anti-abortion, anti-immigration, anti-technology and environmental extremism. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Intelligence and Analysis, *Domestic Extremism Lexicon*, available at http://www.fas. org/irp/eprint/lexicon.pdf


9 For a succinct analysis of such conflicts in a South Asian comparative perspective, see P. Sahadevan, “Ethnic Conflict and Militarism in South Asia”, *International Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2,


It is recorded that every year at least 700 people die in the Maoist-related incidents. The number includes many civilians, security forces and extremists. See "Fatalities in Left-wing Extremism", available at: [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/database/fatalitiesnaxal.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/database/fatalitiesnaxal.htm), accessed on 24 December 2009.


For details see Sahadevan, "Ethnic Conflict and Militarism in South Asia", *op. cit.*, pp. 104-117.

These factors are elaborated in Sahadevan, "The Rise of Islamic Extremism in South Asia", *op. cit.*


Sahadevan, "The Rise of Islamic Extremism in South Asia", *op. cit.*

Prime Minister Manmohan himself acknowledged the reality. He said: "Some people are induced to join the ranks of Naxalites because the level of development they experience is inadequate and they feel that their lives are not getting better as compared to the rich and the super rich. That leads to alienation". *Hindustan Times*, 14 November 2009.

See International Crisis Group, "Nepal's Maoists: Their Aims,


