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India Needs a Deradicalisation Strategy in Kashmir and Beyond – Here's One

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Wed, 09/11/2019 - 10:13

Paper No. 6492 **Dated . 11-Sept-2019**

By Moorthy S. Muthuswamy

(The views expressed are author's own)

It appears that the BJP-led government's decision to abrogate Article 370 has garnered broad-based support. Not surprisingly, the Hindu and Buddhist majority regions of the erstwhile state of Jammu & Kashmir have welcomed the move. The initial curfew in these regions quickly gave way to normal life.

However, the story is different in regions of the state where Muslims dominate. For instance, in the overwhelmingly Muslim-dominated Kashmir valley, restrictions ^[1] continue to be in place. They have resulted in hardships – from want of medicines to baby food.

In a measure of the resistance to the abrogation and subsequent military clampdown, in many Muslim dominated areas, parents refused to send their children to school ^[2]. The apprehension and indignation felt by the Kashmir valley Muslims is palpable, as they were a privileged community. This community held power through a disproportionate number of seats in the state's elected bodies and had access to a disproportionate number of government jobs. Its land was protected from outside ownership, while its members could buy land anywhere in India and settle down. It also received generous subsidies. Even so, the thinking in New Delhi is that by embarking on massive investment and job creation ^[3] in the former state, it will be able to win over even the alienated communities.

However, it is far from clear if the Muslim majority in Kashmir is willing to play ball with New Delhi, even if it would appear that it is in its interests to do so. Influential voices are calling on the Muslims to resist rather than cooperate by stoking the fear of religious marginalization ^[4]. Unfortunately for Hindu-majority India, such forces may be poised to dictate the actions of the Muslim Kashmiris for the foreseeable

future, if not countered by a new Indian strategy.

The Indian government itself has been aware of the role of conservative religious forces – in the form of maulvis [5] – in radicalising and alienating Kashmiris. As a result, since the revocation of Article 370, the government has dictated that the maulvis in Kashmir deliver the sermons [6] prepared by it. The government has also demanded that the Kashmiri children go only to the regular schools [6], but not to the community schools run by maulvis.

While these steps are in the right direction, they do little to undercut the standings of maulvis who instigate Kashmiri separatism. I argue here that India needs a new deradicalisation strategy to discredit such maulvis and help integrate Kashmiri Muslims into the Indian union.

The maulvis who operate in Kashmir, as elsewhere in India are typically graduates of the influential *Darul-Uloom*, an Islamic seminary located in Deoband. In this context, two questions come up: one, what is the underlying ideology the Indian maulvis believe in and two, what platform they use to exert influence over their community? Around 2008, the Indian public wanted maulvis to weigh in on the involvement of members of the minority community in the ongoing terrorist attacks [7]. In response, the Deoband seminary convened [8] “All India Anti-Terrorism Conference, attended by the representatives [an estimated 10,000 Maulvis] of all Muslim schools of thought.” The conference declaration [8] absolved the minority community in terrorism involvement, despite the ongoing investigations and failed to take note of (Muslim-majority) Pakistan’s sponsorship of terrorism in India [9]. Instead, it blamed “the tyrant and colonial master of the West [the U.S.]” and that its “aggression, barbarism and state-sponsored terrorism – not only in Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan but also in Bosnia and various South American countries – have surpassed all records known to human history.” The declaration went on to recommend Indian Muslims to “spend their lives... following [the] Islamic Shariah and teachings with full confidence.”

Thus, the weight of the conference declaration favors the view that Indian maulvis are advancing an ideology that stokes pan-Islamic solidarity at the cost of integration while not being helpful to their community in dealing with terrorism issues. Moreover, that the underlying dynamic is such that India would be well-advised to view radicalism in Kashmir and the rest of India as two sides of the same coin.

It seems that maulvis derive their influence in a community by commonly asserting that their interpretation of Islam, called “sharia,” is deemed all-encompassing “divine law” and an essential guide to life. As seen above, it is in their self-interest to promote sharia.

In a new study [10], I used 2013 Pew global Muslim poll report [11] to unearth the power of the sharia platform. Compared to those who do not favor the idea of sharia as the law of the land, those who do are far more likely to be supportive of maulvis and their radical agendas. It is no stretch to say that maulvis’ world view come in the way of their followers embracing modernity and plurality – two of the prerequisites for empowerment and integration.

To be sure, maulvis’ sharia interpretations are often contradictory [12]; and at times, are deemed strange [13] even by the local religious

authorities. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to assert that far from being divine law, maulvis' sharia interpretations are merely their opinions.

Thus, the self-serving sharia platform can be undercut and a wedge can be driven between maulvis and their followers, without speaking ill of Islam. These steps could be among the important ones in getting the minorities to embrace the development philosophy and integrate with the rest.

It is not as if India has a choice in this matter, because the very dynamic present in Kashmir is also increasingly radicalising the minorities in its heartland – and is driving Pakistan into taking an increasingly confrontational stance.

Seen in this context, religious and human rights are not necessarily advanced by sympathising with those who have embraced maulvis-influenced exclusive world view by opposing the secular Indian rule in Kashmir, but rather by ensuring that Kashmiris think and act freely, without being dictated to by religious leaders.

Revocation of Article 370 is a start, but an integration of the minorities awaits robust deradicalisation strategies.

(The author is a Portland based NRI and has done extensive studies on Islam)

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- [5] <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/how-mosques-and-mobiles-are-radicalising-kashmir/articleshow/59507200.cms>
- [6] <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/vanishing-food-medicines-kashmirs-grim-reality/cid/1700547>
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- [12] <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/04/17/fatwa-overload/>
- [13] <https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2010/08/saudi-arabia-authorities-tighten-crack-down-against-clergy.html>
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