




THE ANATOMY OF TALIBANIZATION: RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN SWAT, PAKISTAN

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63544/ijss.v2i4.207>

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Article History

Received: 09.10.2023

Accepted: 15.11.2023

Published: 31.12.2023

Abstract

This study explores how religious extremism and terrorism developed until the Taliban attempted to govern in Swat, followed by the military operation aimed at countering militancy in the area. In Swat, religious extremists have effectively worked to influence people's minds to prepare them for violence and hostility against the state. The study emphasizes the role of the military in the rise and decline of extremist ideologies. It highlights some fundamental causes of religious extremism, helping us better understand the issue and develop solutions. The research approach is historical, descriptive, and analytical. Articles and books by reputable analysts have been reviewed for this study. It also seeks to provide recommendations for addressing the current crisis, with post-conflict rehabilitation, reconstruction, and recovery advancing through efforts and support from the government, the international community, and NGOs. Nonetheless, significant efforts are necessary to complete the large-scale tasks of rebuilding and rehabilitating. If these recommendations are strengthened, peace and stability could be restored, with improved access to social services and employment opportunities, and the process of repatriation could proceed smoothly.

Keywords: Terrorism, Extremism, Security Forces, Conflict, Swat, Peace.

Introduction

Extremism is an intense opinion, belief, or perspective based on an inflexible stance held by an individual. One cannot change such person's point of view when there is no tolerance, no acceptance or listening to others' opinions, no regard for pluralism, and when you believe his/her opinion is final and it is his/her duty to promote it. In extremist ideology, there is no opposition and no balance. Various psychological, religious, political, historical, and theological factors combine to trigger such behaviours.

In the district of Swat of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, religious extremists from the platform of Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariati-Muhammadi (TNSM) tried to impose their own version of Islam on people by force, challenging the authority of the state to rule. TNSM was founded in the 1990s under the slogan *Shariat Ya Shahadat* (impose Islamic rule or tie), with Sufi Muhammad as its founder. When Sufi Muhammad was jailed, the organization was led by Mullah Fazlullah (Tajik, 2011). During the start of the Tehrik-e-Taliban movement, Fazlullah was the head of the Swat chapter under the TNSM organization. The organization was operating in 37 units, each with its own assigned task. All matters and other assignments were carried out by those commanders, including judicial and financial services (Arshraf, 2009).

The rise of TNSM was not a new sight in the Swat Valley, but during the 1990s, efforts to impose Sharia law increased in the region. Sufi Muhammad believed he was enforcing Sharia through jihad, which led him to continue trying to implement it in Malakand Division, the area of his influence. On the other hand, Mullah Fazlullah supported TTP, which adopted a jihadist ideology. Under the leadership of Mulla Fazlullah, majority of local people of Swat welcomed and supported TTP both financially, morally, and strategically as



well as provided manpower. The village of Koza Bandai, closest to Imam Dherai, helped him start illegal FM radio broadcasts, with support from Habib Khan, who worked in Britain and was known locally as an active Wahhabi Jihadist (Baudet, 2020; Hussain, 2011). He gained international attention through his FM radio broadcasts and earned the nickname “FM Mullah”. He uses illegal FM radio to spread his manifesto throughout the region (Khan, 2009). The followers of Fazlullah were not only students from local religious seminaries, but many were unemployed individuals who see a better economic future by joining the organization. They primarily targeted landlords in the initial strikes, and many of them fled their homes due to terror. Their homes and land were redistributed among peasants, which is why some people joined the organization (Khan, 2015).

Religious extremism remains one of the major issues in Pakistan. It has caused significant trouble for liberal individuals and organizations advocating for peace and stability in the country. Religious political parties and other vested interest groups, supporting these Jihadi factions, are fuelling the rising wave of extremism, especially in Swat. They distort religious teachings for political gain, inciting people to harbour hatred towards the state, government, modernists, government institutions, and NGOs. Their aim is to influence people to fight against these organisations and those working for them. Given that this ongoing TTP aims to influence and radicalize Muslims in Pakistan, a crucial counter-extremism measure would be providing genuine religious education for the Pakistani population. Religious extremism is a major problem in Pakistan, which has led the country into a difficult situation in recent years, with Swat being the main region affected by religious extremism.

Research Questions

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How did socio-political, economic, and historical conditions in Swat facilitate the rise and popular acceptance of the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariati-Muhammadi (TNSM) and later the Swat Taliban under Mullah Fazlullah?
2. What were the primary mechanisms, ideological, institutional, and coercive, through which the Taliban established parallel governance and transformed Swati society?
3. What have been the lasting impacts of Talibanization and the subsequent military operations on Swat’s social fabric, education, economy, and community resilience?
4. Based on this analysis, what are the policy imperatives for sustainable peacebuilding and preventing the resurgence of extremism in the region?

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this paper are to:

- a) Provide a holistic historical and analytical account of Talibanization in Swat;
- b) Critically assess the multifaceted impacts on local society; and
- c) Generate evidence-based recommendations for post-conflict recovery and counter-extremism.

Theoretical Framework: An Integrated Approach

While constructivism offers a valuable lens for understanding how shared ideas and identities fuel extremism, a comprehensive analysis of Talibanization in Swat requires a multi-theoretical approach. This study integrates three complementary frameworks:

1. Political Grievance and Relative Deprivation Theory: This framework explains mobilization by highlighting perceived injustices, economic marginalization, and the failure of state institutions (Gurr, 1970). In Swat, the Taliban’s appeal was rooted in public frustration with a corrupt and inefficient judicial system, inequitable land ownership by Khans, and a lack of economic opportunity, grievances the movement expertly exploited by promising swift justice and social equity.

2. Social Movement Theory (Resource Mobilization): This perspective shifts focus from grievances to the organizational capacity of dissident groups (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). The rise of Fazlullah demonstrates classic resource mobilization: the use of FM radio for propaganda, establishment of parallel judicial and financial systems (Baitul Maal), redistribution of land to peasants, and the strategic recruitment of unemployed youth and criminals. These resources transformed latent discontent into an organized insurgency.



3. Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS): CTS challenges state-centric narratives and examines the role of state violence and policies in fostering militancy (Jackson, 2005). This framework prompts an analysis of how Pakistan's historical use of jihadist proxies, the Islamization policies of the Zia-ul-Haq era, and the heavy-handedness of military operations may have contributed to the cycle of radicalization and repression in Swat.

By synthesizing these theories, this paper moves beyond a mere descriptive account to explain why the ideology took root, how the movement organized so effectively, and what the dynamic was between militant actors and the state.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design to achieve an in-depth, contextual understanding of Talibanization in Swat. The methodology is grounded in an interpretive paradigm, which seeks to comprehend the meanings, experiences, and social realities of those who lived through the conflict. Data collection was conducted through two primary methods. First, an extensive documentary analysis was undertaken, reviewing both primary and secondary sources. These included government and NGO reports on conflict and rehabilitation in Swat, historical texts and archival materials pertaining to the Swat State and Malakand region, news media archives from 2005 to 2015 from Pakistani outlets such as Dawn, The News, and BBC Urdu, as well as academic literature on militancy, Pakistani politics, and Pashtun society.

Second, to ground the analysis in lived experience, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants. These included local journalists and civil society activists from Swat, educators and school administrators affected by the conflict, and displaced persons and community elders. A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to identify information-rich participants who could provide nuanced insights into the socio-political dynamics of the region. The collected data was subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis following the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved several stages: familiarization through repeated reading and immersion in the data; generating initial codes to capture key features such as "judicial failure," "FM radio propaganda," "land redistribution," and "educational destruction"; collating codes into potential overarching themes such as "State Abdication and Governance Vacuum," "The Taliban's Parallel State," and "Sociocultural Trauma"; reviewing and refining themes to ensure they accurately reflected the coded data and research questions; and finally, weaving the thematic analysis into a coherent, evidence-based narrative. This narrative is supported, where applicable, by direct excerpts from documentary sources and interview transcripts, thereby enhancing the validity and richness of the findings.

The Formation of the Taliban Insurgency in Swat

Mullah Fazlullah, the son-in-law of Sufi Muhammad, fought alongside him against US forces in Afghanistan and spent 17 months in a Pakistani jail (Yousfzai, 2007). He began preaching at a small mosque in Mam Dheri, a town in Swat (Fazlullah, 2007). His original name was Fazle Hayat, but he changed it to Fazlullah to strengthen his influence as a committed religious leader, despite not having formal religious education (Khan, 2009). He earned the nickname 'Maulana Radio,' and people supported him because he preached the fundamentals of Islam, including prayers and the rights of women and men. His influence was so strong that women in the valley even donated their earrings and bangle bracelets. He emphasized not sending girls to school, not watching television, and not listening to music. A generation has grown up under the shadow of TNSM and its strict version of Islam, giving Fazlullah a steady supply of fighters (Ali, 2007).

Fazlullah also promised a paradise life after death for social justice, along with the people of Swat. People of Swat, fed up with Pakistan's inefficient judicial system and recalling the days of their wali, saw a ray of hope for the revival of Fazlullah's speeches. Fazlullah collected about 35 million rupees from supporters to build a madrassa and run his organization; the Pakistan army later destroyed the madrassa in the spring of 2009. Fazlullah also spoke out against polio vaccination in Pakistan, claiming that it was a plot by Jews and Christians to exploit the growth of the Muslim population (Yusufzai, 2007). In September 2007, Fazlullah's followers also demolished Buddha statues and other historical sites they deemed un-Islamic in the Swat Valley (Press, 2000). According to Fazlullah himself, he burned TV sets, video equipment, computers, and digital cameras worth 20 million rupees because "these are the main sources of sin." He also said, "Now we are



working to wash our society from the evil things which are harmful to our generation, like music, dancing, and drinking alcohol' (Radio, 2008).

Most people supported Fazlullah morally, but after the Lal Masjid incident, some were ready to take up arms against the government, inspired by his FM broadcasts. These individuals were unemployed, illiterate, and mostly youth (Shahid, 2009). The amir of the Swat Taliban, Fazlullah, said that this is a war between infidels and Islam, similar to Afghanistan, and that there are partners ready to help us at any time following the deadly storming of Islamabad's Red Mosque by security forces in the summer of 2007 (Taliban, 2006). Despite initial support from the People of Swat for Fazlullah, he ordered preparations for jihad. He organized armed brigades that patrolled marketplaces across the valley, ensuring that no one could send their daughters to school. By the end of 2007, he had gained significant popularity in the region.

Some of the militants joined the organization just because of their livelihood and some of them were criminals to protect themselves from officials. The Taliban welcomed the criminals to increase its power against the Pakistani security forces as well as some local khans, who had their own armed groups in Swat.

Fazlullah's armies numbered about 5000, with others providing moral support. The second commander was Shah Dauran, who sold food items to children in the markets of Mingora, the main town in Swat, before joining Fazlullah and assisting him during his FM broadcasting service. Shah Dauran reportedly died of kidney failure in Bajaur in late 2009, and since the Taliban's organizational structure in the Swat Valley has more or less fallen apart, he was regarded as the second leader in the movement (Dawn, Newspaper, 2009). Muslim Khan was a supporter of Koza Bandai and spent many years abroad; he was Fazlullah's spokesman and is currently in the custody of Pakistani security forces. Other Taliban members are hiding in Bajaur with Mullah Faqir, the leader of the Bajaur chapter of TTP (Kakar, 2008).

Initially, the TTP chapter of Swat was not very organized or strong (Service, 2008). Fazlullah led the Shura, which had between 30 and 50 members at any given time, and served as the movement's military commander. Shura members were responsible for specific areas and controlled individual units of fighters, some of whom were designated as foot soldiers, suicide bombers, trainers, and special commandos. In 2007, Fazlullah announced his Shaheen Commando Force, comprising between 4,000 and 5,000 fighters (Khan, 2007). They attempted to ban cinemas, music markets, and markets selling women's garments (Taliban, 2006).

Table 1

Organizational structure of the Swat Taliban

Rank	Name
Chief	Mullah Fazlullah
Deputy Chief	Shah Dauran
Spokesman	Muslim Khan
Shura members	Sirajuddin
	Mahmood Khan
	Qari Mushtaq
	Nasar Khan
	Ibn-e-Amin (Ex commander of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi)
	Maulana Muhammad Alam Binori (FM channel manager)

Source: Author's illustration.

However, the Taliban in Swat under Fazlullah has been closely linked with the TTP. Fazlullah and his fighters of the Swat Taliban have declared their allegiance to Baitullah and Mullah Omar. In June 2009, the media arm of the Pakistani military released a bugged conversation in which Muslim Khan mentioned a close aide of Baitullah Mehsud regarding recent operations. The Pakistani military in Swat has begun seeking support. The TTP Baitullah aide promised to launch more attacks in cities across Pakistan and against government and military targets to divert attention from operations in Swat. Suicide bombings in Pakistan escalated after this conversation (ISPR, 2009). These groups oppose the Constitution and the democratic government of Pakistan, advocating for Khilafah movements, regardless of sectarian differences. Examples include Hizb ut-Tahrir and Tanzeem-e-Islami (Rana, 2011).



The Violent Ideology of the Taliban's Militancy in Swat

The Soviet Union's military intervention in Afghanistan on December 27, 1979, offers a unique opportunity for the United States to weaken the USSR. The U.S. provided financial aid to Pakistan to help create the Taliban, which fought against the USSR in the name of jihad or holy war. Pakistan's intelligence agency and the U.S. agency coordinated the entire situation in Pakistan, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Their goal was to protect the jobs of extremist parties JUI and JI because these groups hold jihadist ideologies and were recruiting members to fight what was primarily an American war. Generally, people from Pakistan and abroad followed and practiced the Puritan Schools of Islamic Shariah, where jihad is a fundamental article of faith (Yousuf, 2005). Extremism in Pakistan was high during Zia's rule, which brought together three main interest groups: the military, the mullahs, and the business elite, to strengthen his tenure. The Islamization policy was politicized by religious parties in Pakistan. There are three schools of thought that define extremism in Pakistan. First, those who believe that Zia-ul-Haq's policies laid the foundation for extremist tendencies in the country. Second, those who argue that it is a game played by intelligence agencies with militant groups. Third, those who attribute it to unresolved social and political issues, which made it easier for militancy to persist (Ahmad, 2003).

The Islamization of Pakistan's educational system from 1979 to 1989 turned religion into a tool for militancy within the country and influenced the population. The new education policy was crafted to promote militancy to help defeat the USSR in Afghanistan. The state exploited religion, which played a key role in fueling militancy in Pakistan. All activities were organized along sectarian lines, and religious political parties strengthened the roots of extremism in the country. Sectarian conflict was promoted through pulpits, mosques, imam bargahs, especially during Friday sermons. Most members and high-ranking officials of militant groups had previously been associated with Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) or Jamiatul-Islam (JUI) (Hasnat, 2012).

Some of the religious groups, like JI, JUI, JUP, MMA, and their allied groups like Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan and others, are connected with the Pakistani government in power. In 1993, Azam Tariq, a prominent leader of SSP, was a sitting minister. The MMA was able to win 60 seats in the National Assembly of Pakistan and form a government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa because they openly supported Taliban elements in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Some parties created a sectarian environment to increase their vote bank. This environment fueled sectarian extremism in Pakistan. Militant organizations remained safe under these parties because they served as their political arms. The educational system, which fostered more militancy, gained increased attention.

All these events sparked militancy across Pakistan. Especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA, various organizations were formed in the name of Islam to enforce Sharia, such as in Waziristan, Bajaur, Dir, and Swat. The Pakistani Muslim community has long been vulnerable to anyone with a beard or wearing a headscarf—due to widespread illiteracy, innocence, and limited understanding of Arabic. It's important to note that most Muslims in Pakistan learn to read the Quran but do not speak or understand Arabic. Much is made of the influence of Wahhabism on the makeup of Bin Laden and the extremism of his followers and supporters. There appears to be a growing potential for Taliban-style leadership in the country. This is evident from the rise of various religious movements in different parts of the province, including Tahrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat in Malakand Agency, Tehrik-e-Ulama-e-Bara in Khyber Agency, and JUI-supported extremist groups in Waziristan, Bannu, Mardan, Kohat, Chitral, the Northern Areas, and other regions. A loose alliance of religious political groups, called IMAM, has been formed in several districts to exert pressure on the government to ban cable networks and NGOs in the region. A common trait among these groups is their strict adherence to Islamic law. Recently, numerous incidents have occurred that serve as test cases demonstrating the rapid growth of extremism.

Almost all other religious groups, whether involved in missionary, sectarian, educational, charitable efforts, or militancy, are connected to or are breakaway factions of these five major organizations. More importantly, even the smaller agendas are linked to their parent organizations.

TNSM- The Black Turbaned Brigade

TNSM, or the Movement for the Implementation of Islamic Laws in the region, was launched on June 28, 1989, by Maulana Sufi Mohammad and his followers after leaving Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan. It is a



Wahhabi militant organization aimed at implementing a strict version of Islamic Shariah across the entire Malakand region, including districts like Swat, Buner, and Upper and Lower Dir. The TNSM rejects all democratic and religio-political parties that follow Western-style democracy. They seek to transform the entire state into an Islamic state and enforce Islamic laws nationwide. Ideologically, Sufi Muhammad aims to create an Islamic state and has stated: “those opposing the imposition of Islamic shariah in Pakistan are (wajibul Qatal (worthy of death)”. The TNSM rejects all forms of government and considers Pakistan an un-Islamic state. They claim: “We want enforcement of Islamic judicial system in totality: judicial, political, economic, jihad fi sabilillah (holy war in the name of Allah), education, and health. In my opinion, the life of the faithful will automatically be moulded according to the Islamic system when the Islamic judicial system is enforced,” Sufi Muhammad declared in November 2001, shortly before being jailed in Pakistan on terrorism charges.

Some segments of society, previously persecuted by the Khans and Malaks, now have a chance to seek revenge and settle scores. They have also joined the ranks of TNSM and the Taliban, which some analysts describe as a class war. (The information is from Roznama Aaj Peshawar, an Urdu daily in Peshawar, 2009.) Fazlullah plans to turn Saidu Sharif Airport (located in Tahsil Kabal or Nikpi Khel) into a military air base and establish a military cantonment in Swat, as it is near Mam dherai, where the Taliban headquarters are located. Mismanagement by successive governments, an inefficient administrative system, and the failure of nearly all government departments to provide services have not only damaged their credibility but also disappointed the people, who no longer trust the government, its departments, or the current system.

The dissemination of the Nifaze- Nizam-e-Sharia Regulation, 1994, following the 1994 insurgency, and the supposed changes it brought did not satisfy the TNSM. Due to resentment and struggles, a new regulation titled ‘Shari-Nizam-e-Adl Regulation, 1999’ was enacted, but it also failed to bring any real change; the issue continued to worsen. Meanwhile, Sufi Muhammad and his organization were busy fighting for the enforcement of Islamic laws and reforming the judicial system.

Impact of the Taliban on Swat Society

During Talibanaization in the Swat Valley, militants' field activities brutally impacted the region and the lives of ordinary people. The officials were directly targeted, and the lives of common people were endangered, plunging society into darkness.

Fazlullah has set up his own administration modelled after the Saudi monarchs. He has formed his own trained army equipped with the latest weapons and commanded by his loyal officers. A well-functioning judiciary was established throughout the valley, handling cases of various kinds, and the rulings were consistently enforced. People were attracted to these Islamic courts. He has created a Baitul Maal (treasury) and developed a system for revenue generation and collection. His commanders collected usher (one-tenth of agricultural production). Taliban also gathered skins of sacrificial animals during Eid-ul-Azha this year worth billions of rupees. Donations and war booty are also main sources of their income, (Shah, 2016).

Initially, people were very engaged in following the Taliban. Fazlullah broadcasted messages calling on people to support the promotion of Islamic laws and the implementation of sharia in the Swat region. However, poor enforcement of laws against illegal FM broadcasts encouraged the spread of militancy and strengthened the TNSM and TTP in Swat. Women were more likely to be affected by FM broadcasts. The government failed to curb militancy from 2002 to 2007 by failing to protect people and their property. This neglect led to the rise of militancy in Swat and allowed terrorists to rapidly gain the support of the local population and exploit them (Aziz, 2010).

Impact on Education

Unfortunately, Swat fell into the hands of militancy, which severely impacted the education system in Swat. A key aspect of the Taliban militancy was a systematic attack on people suspected of violating the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic principles.

In the first phase, they were not very extremist about destroying the school but gradually grew more radical through ties with other organizations. In July 2007, angered by the government's attack on the Red Mosque in Islamabad, Fazlullah led the Tehrik-e-Taliban Swat (TTS) in open revolt, gained control of much of Swat, and established Shariah courts under TTS control. Before this, he declared



war on the government in Swat in January 2006 after his brother, who was fighting with the Taliban on the frontier, was killed in a U.S. drone attack on a suspected Al Qaeda headquarters at Damadola in Bajaur agency. Fazlullah blamed the Pakistani government for aiding the U.S. and sought revenge. They regularly attacked the government and private schools, especially girls' schools.

The education system in Swat faced significant problems during the conflict. The destruction was not only in terms of material losses and damage to infrastructure but also represented severe setbacks to the overall progress and development of the education sector in Swat. The damages to educational facilities in Swat are estimated to be around PKR 2696 million. Approximately 200 educational facilities were partially or fully destroyed during the conflict, and this number increased due to additional damage caused by floods in the following year. Many schools and colleges were destroyed by the Taliban, and some were damaged by floods. Some researchers mentioned that 238 schools were devastated. The total number of primary, secondary, high schools, and colleges affected is summarized below (Bangash, 2012).

Table 2

Partially and fully damage institutes in Swat (Male/Female)

Sr. No.	Category	Swat		
		Male	Female	Total
1	Primary	19	82	101
2	Secondary	08	26	34
3	Middle	13	13	26
4	Higher Secondary	04	02	06
5	Colleges	02	02	04
The total institutes that were destroyed in the Swat Conflict.		46	125	171

Impact on Social and Cultural Systems

In the past, there were one or two Hujras of Khan in every village where guests, whether local or foreign, were housed and fed during their stay. The village landlord was responsible for providing hospitality to guests or strangers and to anyone seeking asylum. During group discussions, respondents from both villages stated that this system was dismantled, thereby weakening social networks related to law and order and to collective decision-making regarding village protection and development. In early 2005, militants were considered guests and strangers, but due to weak social cohesion within and between villages, the Taliban easily found ways to settle in different areas, either by force or with the consent of some households (Elahi, 2015).

Historically, Khans who held most of the land in Swat were socially and politically powerful, and smaller groups depended on them. The Taliban targeted these landlords and anyone opposing them early on to weaken their influence, but defending their lands and property was a matter of pride for the khans.

The landlords interviewed indicated that the Taliban succeeded to some extent in breaking the political network between khans and tenants, as well as other dependent groups, by motivating them through slogans of land equal distribution and incentives such as paying young men PKR 10,000-15000 per month to join the militant group. Additionally, many khans left the area due to low government control and personal security concerns, which further weakened their political and social networks in their localities (Khan, 2016).

Terrorism has severely affected people's lives in various ways. The social situation in Swat has changed significantly due to increasing terrorism and military operations. Religious groups have introduced a new interpretation of Islam through literary means of the holy Quran. Social life in areas controlled by militants was completely disrupted. While extremist groups promoted radicalization across the country, women, in particular, suffered uniquely because of the radical religious ideology of terrorist groups. Fazlullah warned people through his FM radio not to give polio drops to their children, claiming the drop is part of a US-Zionist conspiracy to make them sterile (Mir, 2006).

Its impact on the culture of Swat, especially Pukhtun culture, is that people no longer trust anyone who



is a guest or a foreigner. The army also detained many people for this reason, accusing them of giving asylum to unknown individuals. There are still many people in custody for providing sanctuary or hospitality to strangers during the militancy in Swat. Most of the people in prison are innocent, with some spending 6 to 8 years behind bars, but their families did nothing to inquire about their children. Moreover, the army does not follow proper procedures and often detains innocent people of Swat.

The most vulnerable members of society in a conflict are women and children, as they are the easiest targets. Militants in Swat initially had the support of the local people in general, especially women. Fazalullah effectively used his FM radio broadcasts to gain women's support in Swat. At first, women compelled men to support Fazalullah and donated their jewellery and valuables for his cause (Fleischner, 2011). The government declared that it was time to take decisive action against the militants in Swat. In his national address, Pakistan's Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani stated that the militants would lay down their arms after the enforcement of the Nizami-i-Adl, but this did not happen. He emphasized that the time had come for the nation to unite against those who wanted to hold Pakistan hostage at gunpoint and were determined to jeopardize the country's future.

"Nobody can be allowed to challenge the writ of the government," he remarked. He said the country was facing two major challenges today: national security and economic progress. These two are interconnected because economic and industrial growth cannot happen without peace and security. The PM also mentioned that people who cooperated with security forces were victimized, and hundreds of thousands were forced to migrate to other areas. He said girls were being prevented from going to school, public and private properties were occupied and damaged, women were subjected to shameful treatment, and to add insult to injury, all these steps were taken in the name of Islam."

He stated that the army had been deployed to eliminate terrorists and ensure the safety of people's lives and property in Swat. He mentioned that Rs1 billion had been allocated for the rehabilitation of displaced individuals. One member from each family that lost a breadwinner would be given a job. He appealed to all politicians to support the government's efforts. He also urged ulema to emphasize the true face of Islam, which opposes suicide attacks and oppression. Additionally, the prime minister called on the international community to assist Pakistan in rehabilitating displaced persons and to strengthen the capacity of its security forces to combat terrorism (Nation, 2009). During the Swat operation, 3423 militants were killed, 1083 wounded, and 2071 surrendered, while 193 security personnel lost their lives (Army, 2015).

Impact on Swat youth

Young boys were recruited for operational activities by militants in Swat. They were enticed by offers of salaries, since most of them were unemployed (Gul, 2009). The youth of Swat were eager to join Fazlullah's army, and after passing their metric and second-year exams, they often had three to four months off. During that time, they went for training with the Taliban, and most of them did not return because they were encouraged to stay and fight for Islam. I have seen some friends who went for training and never came back; they died during the war with the army. Back then, it was considered a source of pride to join the Taliban organization.

When I was in eighth grade, three of my friends, Zaffar Ali, Yaqub Khan, and Hazrat Ali, were playing together and had a good friendship. I was in a private school, and they were in a government school, but their families didn't have any checks or balances on their actions and behaviour. They were free from family restrictions to go anywhere and enjoy their lives however they wanted. However, I was completely restricted by my family from going anywhere without their permission.

They gradually became inclined toward the Taliban, and most of their time was spent with them. When I went to the hostel to prepare for my exam, they were in the village. I returned after four months, when they had gone for training and joined the Taliban group. One day, I met Hazrat Ali, and he told me that it was his last time coming here to see his family. I asked him why he wouldn't come back home. He replied that he was going for a suicide attack on the Pakistani army, and I was shocked to hear such things. They were trained for suicide attacks against the Pakistani army. The Taliban instilled the idea of Jannah in their minds. Moreover, young people believed they were protecting Islam and sacrificing their lives for Islam. The suicides were called the family of Fazlullah, and they



spent their lives with Fazlullah. Later, the Taliban released videos of their suicide attacks in Swat 1, 2, and 3 CDs.

Gendered Dimensions of Talibanization and Resistance

The Taliban's project in Swat was profoundly gendered, seeking to redefine the public and private roles of women as a cornerstone of their envisioned moral order. Fazlullah's FM radio edicts specifically targeted women's mobility, education, and health, framing female seclusion as a religious imperative. This resonated with some women initially, who donated jewellery hoping for a more just Islamic society (Fleischner, 2011). However, this support was often rooted in a desire for stability and justice, not necessarily for the Taliban's misogynistic restrictions.

The militant ban on girls' education became the most visible symbol of this gendered oppression. Yet, it also sparked localized and global resistance. The story of Malala Yousafzai is the most prominent, but it represents a broader, often unheralded defiance by families, female teachers, and community leaders who secretly organized home schools. This resistance underscores that women in Swat were not merely passive victims but also agents of resilience (Richardson, 2011). Post-conflict, the restoration of girls' education has been a key benchmark of recovery, though deep psychosocial scars and persistent conservative pressures continue to challenge full gender equality.

Infrastructure

The Swat conflict has severely damaged the region's social infrastructure. Not only did militants destroy many public and private buildings, roads, bridges, and shops, but the subsequent military operation also caused significant destruction. This situation placed enormous stress on Swat's economy. The number of houses fully or partially damaged in the conflict varies across different surveys, with estimates ranging from approximately 8,000 to 10,500. Likewise, the communication sector, an essential part of economic development, including roads and bridges, also suffered greatly. Forty-three (43) bridges were either completely or partially damaged in Swat district, with total damages estimated at around PKR 251.9 million. Additionally, approximately 663 Kilometres of roads were damaged, with repair costs estimated at about PKR 138.7 million. The energy and power infrastructure also sustained damage, with repairs costing up to PKR 300 million, dealing a severe blow to local industries, especially farming and mining in Swat district (Development of Profile Swat District, 2015).

Impact on Tourism

Swat Valley is a unique, beautiful, and sparkling gem created by Allah Almighty, resembling the majestic mountains of Switzerland. Most of the towering mountain ranges surround this expansive and charming valley. It is undoubtedly a paradise for nature lovers, where they can enjoy the diverse gifts of nature, from densely forested mountains to winding rivers and torrents. Swat Valley, which fell to pro-Taliban fighters in July 2007 and became a site of death and destruction, was once considered the most beautiful and scenic valley in southern Asia. The people were liberal in attitude and lifestyle, embracing their culture and traditions (Buneeri).

The pro-Taliban fighters had destroyed tourist areas like hotels, parks, museums, and other scenic places where foreigners and locals went to enjoy their holidays. Taliban bombed government hotels and sold all the hotel equipment at very low prices in Bara Bandai, Koza Bandai, Dherai, and many other bazaars in Swat. Abdullah was in charge of all the government staff taken from hotels, as well as from homes of Khans and Malaks; they sold these items at very low prices. As a result, fear was instilled to deter tourists from visiting Swat, which harmed the region's economy (Khan, 2016).

Conclusion

The sudden appearance of Mullah Fazlullah in the Swat region and the illegal establishment of FM radio, through which he spread his version of religion based on extremist beliefs, helped TTP gain mass support in the area. The organization began illegal armed patrols for freedom in Mom Dherai, and even the then-Commissioner of Swat, Syed Javed, used to offer Friday prayers in the Mom Dherai mosque behind Mullah Fazlullah. This was not a sudden or abrupt change. However, security agencies did not take timely action to control the militancy.



From where did the modern weapons and wireless communication sets in the Swat district originate? Fazlullah recruited people to implement Islamic laws, but where were the government officials at that time? The Taliban were controlling every village, then the entire district, and gradually started to take over Shangla, Buner, and other neighboring areas. However, the government did nothing to stop them. When the situation became dire, the government launched military operations, deploying helicopter gunships. Yet, they did not see where the Taliban were coming from, nor did they capture or target the Taliban commanders. Later, they claimed in the media that the Taliban had fled Afghanistan. People are in great danger because they do not understand the true facts. Many questions have arisen regarding the Taliban's influence in the region. Such militancy was also observed in the past. On November 2, 1994, Maulana Sufi Mohammad's TNSM activists occupied the district courts and the airport in Swat, paralyzing local administration. However, security forces retook control within two days, and there was no bloodshed.

During the Talibanization in Swat, it could not be proved that there was any foreign element present in the region. Proof of cruelty in the region by security forces lies in the bodies of more than two hundred people who died in custody and were from Swat. All these 'coincidences', being labeled as deaths from unknown diseases and heart attacks, are suspicious. Hidden forces were making conditions favorable for establishing a cantonment in Swat, which led to a military operation that significantly changed the region through grace and resilience. If the state had acted earlier, Fazlullah and his so-called followers could have been detained, but this was not done due to strategic reasons. It is also said that this is a war to defend Pakistan's sovereignty, and the people of Swat have sacrificed to protect their land, for which they will be rewarded. However, during the Swat military operations, the area was occupied by forces, and each step was monitored at checkpoints where every movement was scrutinized, revealing a lack of trust.

Thus, the people of Swat are very religious and love Islam; this is why they were easily deceived into falling for Talibanization. But when they realized that the way these militants run the organization and teach Islamic laws is not vital, they severed all relations and never supported the so-called Taliban.

Funding

This study was conducted without any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Informed Consent Statement

Every participant in the study gave their informed consent.

Statement of Data Availability

To protect participant confidentiality, supporting data are not publicly available. Data may be made available by the corresponding author, subject to a reasonable request and ethical considerations.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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