

Commercialization of Religion in Pakistan

Rana Ejaz Ahmad

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science

University of the Punjab

Lahore, Pakistan

Abida Ejaz

Assistant Professor

Institute of Communication Studies

University of the Punjab

Lahore, Pakistan

Abstract

In the twenty first century religion has been commercialized for the vital interests of the few people in the world, may be called as so-called ulema or shrewd political demagogue. They use religion for their purpose not to unite people but to disunite them. This unhealthy attitude of the politico-religious flavor gives rise to commercialization in religions. This commercialization of religions is found in every corner of the world. This paper is focusing on Pakistan only that how politico-religious forces have demolished the binding force of the religion and disunited the society on the grounds of petty issues. First partition of India in 1947 propagated under the concept of two nation theory (TNT) based on religions. Second, the East Pakistan was separated from the Western part of the country on the basis of misinterpretation of religion in 1971. Since then to date, politico-religious factor in Pakistan has been very important in the destiny of the country. In Pakistan religious exploitation is a strong force for disintegration rather a binding force. The politico-religious aspect always kept the so-called ulema and political demagogue in action for employing people for their vital interests. I regret to say that the binding nature of the religion has been demolished by the so-called ulema and political demagogues in Pakistan. This paper is going to explore the commercial nature of religion in Pakistan. The empirical analysis is the essence of the paper. The deductive and inductive approaches have been used to explore the reality.

Theoretical perspective

Commercialization is a relative term. It can be defined in many ways, an integral part of the capitalist society to increase the profit through cosmetic and gaudy advertisement/marketing in the process of introducing or launching any product. It usually enhances the value of the product. The quality of advertisement/marketing may damage the value of the same. Religion on the other hand is a set of values; determine the quality of life in any community and kept the society integrated. It sustains the human beings in the time of distress and helplessness. Today, religion is propagated as a disuniting force just to materialize commercial plans. The ongoing war against terrorism is based on the commercialization of religion by the developed world as well as developing world.

Pakistan is a plural country with diverse cultures, languages, and religions. It is composed of communities believe that they are living in a country that gives them utmost freedom of religion. That extreme freedom of religion gives liberty to the so-called religious leaders to interpret rather misinterprets the religion in their own perspectives. Pakistan is located in South Asia where people usually follow Imam Abu Hanifa whose real name was Hazrat Nauman. South East Asia usually follow Imam Shafai, as in Malaysia, people followed him.

Focusing on Pakistan, commercialization of religion is of two types: one is for the awareness of the people for practicing religion; Peace TV is the only channel that is working well. Second type is for the exploitation and monopolization of economic resources, for example, Shia Sunni conflicts, supporting opposition, protests, demonstrations, Hajj and Umrah contracts (ministry given to relatives or party supporters), befooling superstitious people through amulets, and making alliances for toppling governments.

Operational Framework

The commercialization of religion is not only happening in Pakistan but also in the other parts of the world. For example, George W. Bush said in his speech after the 9/11 incident that it was a crusade war, just to realize people that it was a war between Muslims and the Christians. He used the name of religion shrewdly and cunningly.

Most of the western Tv channels get their programmes rating up by using the religion against humanity and get more advertisements for their programmes and channels. For example, ‘Allahu Akbar’ means Allah is Great but tv channels especially news channels in the west believes that every terrorist use this ‘Allahu Akbar’ for any terrorist attack. This is how media is creating a hype of terrorism connecting it with religion. One of the restaurants of the U.S. in Queens Maspeth named as “Chinese Halal Food” that attracts the Muslim population for eating Halal food. By entering in the restaurant the customers would also see the pictures of Muslim holy places like Makkah, Masjidulharam, Masjid-i-Nabvi etc. All these are the tactics for commercializing the religion. What is happening in Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia, is more commercialization of religion than politicizing the religion. The western propaganda against Jihad and Islamic values in fact more prevalent in commercial activities as it is mentioned by Benjamin R. Barber in his book *Jihad vs. McWorld*.

Out of two types of commercialization of religion, the first type is concerned with preaching the essence of Islam objectively through tv channels. This research paper is more focused on the second type that based on monopolization. This monopolization is all about capturing economic resources of Pakistan. Pakistan as mentioned earlier that composed of diversity of peoples who follow different imams. Two major sects, Shia and Sunni-Sunni are in majority further divide in other Alwahabi, Brailwi, and Deobandi sects. Therefore, so called ulema in Pakistan started interpreting the religion in their own way and making innocent people fool. They do not stop there but started influencing the political system in the name of religion. These so called ulemas take gratifications from the political demagogue and work for their objectives.

Jamiat-i-Ulmai Islam (JUI-F) leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman and general secretary of Muthida Majlis-i-amal (MMA) used to take benefits from the ruling parties. In 1993-96 general elections Maulana considered the woman ruler of the country as un Islamic but when he appointed as the chairman of one of the committees in the national assembly, became silent on the same issue. It does not ends here but he was also benefited with a huge quota of diesel fuel and popularly known as Maulana Diesel.¹ He supported the ruling party out of the way for taking those licenses. This name was purely given for his commercial activities in the name of religion. He had been interested in ruling the country as a prime minister. The sources of wiki leaks said, “Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam chief Maulana Fazl-ul-Rehman has sought support from the U.S. ambassador in Pakistan in 2007 to assume the office of Prime Minister ship, leaked U.S. diplomatic cables...”² In the present government he is again with the Zardai government and always talks about reconciliation considering it in the favour of Pakistan. In fact he intends to escalate his national assembly tenure. Fazlur Rehman has total 20 seats in the parliament and 13 positions in different status in the house. For example there are four ministers in the national assembly, Rehmatulla Kakar, Federal Minister for Housing and Works, Maulana Ataur Rehman younger brother of Fazlur Rehman, minister for tourism, “Of all the portfolios, Maulana Ataur Rehman has reportedly been given science and technology.

Someone said he should have been made minister of religious affairs, Hajj and Auqaf.”³ The JUI-F used to take lucrative ministeries for the family members in the past too, for example, “This isn’t the first time that Maulana Fazlur Rehman has preferred someone from his family to land a prized position. During the rule of the Muttahida Majlis Amal (MMA) from 2002-2008, he and Maulana Ataur Rehman were serving as MNAs. His two sisters-in-laws, Shahida Akhtar Ali and Rehana Ismail were elected lawmakers on the seats reserved for women. The former was an MNA and the latter MPA.”⁴ Azam Khan Sawati, minister for science and technology. There were other seats like chairman of ideology council and many other parliamentary committees. He was also involved in land scandal in the NWFP (Now known as Khyber Pukhtunkha) during Pervaiz Musharaf era 2006-7. The religious ministry is in troubled water for the Zardari government as Maulana Fazlur Rehman has always been interested in that ministry but it went to Mr. Hamid Saeed Kazmi. Who remained as Federal Minister for Religious Affairs MNA NA-192 (Rahimyar Khan-I), belongs to Pakistan People’s Party Parliamentarians.

¹ <http://reformistani.wordpress.com/2010/06/26/who-needs-enemies-when-you-have-leaders-like-these/>. Website visited on 26-12-10.

² Rehman, Hafeez. (2010). Maulana Fazl-ul-Rehman sought US support for Pakistan’s PMship. <http://www.allvoices.com/contributed-news/7491241-maulana-fazlurrehman-sought-us-support-for-pakistans-pmship>. Website visited on 26-12-10.

³ Yusufzai, Rahimullah. (2009). True to form, Maulana Fazlur Rehman assured ministry for brother. <http://criticalppp.com/archives/835>. Website visited on 26-12-10.

⁴ Ibid.

He sacked by the prime minister Sayyed Yousaf Raza Guillani on the charges of corruption in Hajj affairs in December 2010. Besides him Mr. Azam Khan Sawati Senator JUI (F) Muttahida Majlis e Amal was also dismissed from the ministry of science and technology. His total declared assets are US\$20.5m (about Rs1.6 billion). He is considered the richest senator in the history of Pakistan. The tug of war for the ministry of religious affairs is still on in Pakistan shows that how the religion is used for lucrative purposes. Maulana Fazlur Rehman has announced separation from the ruling party PPP and sent the resignations from all ministries to the speaker national assembly. The president, prime minister, federal interior minister, chief minister of Baluchistan and other ruling party elite have tried their best for reconciliation with Maulana Fazlur Rehman but all in vain. "Following the exit from PPP led coalition government, JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman has refused to meet prime minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani in connection his party reservations."⁵

Another pertinent example is of the Jamait-i-Islami (JI) is known for its support to military governments and used the name of religion for taking more Zakat, goat skins, and donations from the people. It has always instigated the youth for fighting against India in Kashmir and kept the people support in its favour on the one hand and monopolization of resources on the other. May be it would be very difficult for the people to say that what type of monopolization the JI has in Pakistan. There are many examples in this perspective. In the 1970s-90s, it abducted the academic institutions of Pakistan. It also includes University of the Punjab and Islamia College Civil Lines Lahore that has been centre of power for the JI. In these institutions the Islami Jamiat Tuleba (IJT) that is a sub group of the JI and a support for the party agitations and demonstrations against any political party. For example, JI appreciated the military takeover in 1999 and popularly known as Musharraf's 'B' team as it usually agitates Musharraf but support the cause of the same. It was just like Osama Bin Laden who is considered the biggest U.S. enemy and supporter of Muslims but happening otherwise. It is the Osama Bin Laden that really harmed the Muslim community in the world and benefitted the U.S. for entering in any country in his name. Hence one can say that the so called religious parties are basically serving the purpose of the enemies of Pakistan. They are not favouring the national interests and entirely undermining not only the economy of the country its very existence.

Mr. Lateef Khan, former principal Government Islamia College Civil Lines Lahore said in a speech during a meeting with the faculty of the college (I was present in that meeting) "the IJT forcefully withdrew Rs. 200000 from masjid fund and Rs. 100000 from hostel telephone for the JI agitation against the government." This is how these so called Islamic groups are terrifying the administrations of the academic institutions and use the money for their specific objectives.

Allama Tahirul Qadri is a leader of Pakistan Awami Tehrik (PAT), a political party that believes in democracy and unity of different religious sects that was why he also made a pact with Tehrik-i-Jafria. He was an elected MNA. He usually conducts a Shahr-i-Aitakaf in every Ramazan in Lahore and shows his strength as a religious leader.

In Bajore Agency so called Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan spokesperson Maulvi Umar said that he and his accomplices never paid for the petrol, electricity, gas and other utility bills so they need such type of monopolization for their easy going life affairs. The government has arrested Maulvi Umar but has not sentenced him yet and nobody knows about his whereabouts. It shows that in Pakistan there are many individuals who are using the name of religion for their own benefits.

There are many so called astrologists and Pirs sitting in different areas of Pakistan and making money by looting innocent and superstitious people. These Pirs and astrologists usually used the name of religion to make their customers satisfied for their fake knowledge. The videos for such Pirs and astrologists are available as a verification that how they use the religion for their purpose. Interviews are conducted only in the city of Lahore Pakistan. These Pirs and astrologists usually use women influence for their popularity. Mostly women talk about the authenticity of these Pirs and astrologists. Interestingly, these Pirs are so illiterate that they do not know the basics of the religion.

⁵ Turk, Umbreen. (2010). JUI-F wobbles political arena, <http://dailymailnews.com/1210/16/FrontPage/index.php?id=1>. Website visited on 26-12-10.

These Pirs in Pakistan not only grabing the money of innocent people but also raping women, burying them alive are common precedents in Pakistan. “Pakistan a Fake Pir burned alive 2 women.”⁶ In Karachi there was a true story about raping a woman by a Pir.⁷ Making fool of the people for convincing them that there are evil spirits in their bodies and they can eliminate it by adopting special Mantras. For all that process they have to pay heavily to those Pirs. These Pirs are not only looting innocent people but the selfish political demagogues also visit them for asking their ruling term. It is very much popular that Nawaz Sharief and Benazir Bhutto were used to visit such Pirs for asking the length of their rule. Few people said that if the Pir or babba ji hit them with his stick twice or thrice, they believed they would rule for the two and three years.

In the same way few political Pirs are raping the economy of Pakistan, among them Pir Pagara is a well know politician in Pakistan who used to predict about the political shocks and setbacks in Pakistan. He also makes alliances of different groups to influence the ruling party. Lately, he makes a Mutahida Muslim League group in which different political demagogues showed their allegiance towards him. “Four factions of Pakistan Muslim League - Pakistan Muslim League Functional (PML-F), Pakistan Muslim League Awami, Pakistan Muslim League Zia-ul-Haq (PML-Z), Pakistan Muslim League Like-minded group and senior Muslim Leaguers of the country - have agreed to form an alliance at a meeting at Kingri House.”⁸ Among those political demagogues, Chaudhary Shujaat Hussain, Pervaiz Ilahi, Mushahid Hussain, accepted the leadership of Pir Pagara but did not attend the opening session of the alliance. Pir Pagara who is the a unanimously selected president of this Mutahidda Muslim League appointed a committee whose members are Mir Zafar-u-Allah Khan Jamali, Hamid Nasir Chattha, Salim Saifullah Khan, Pir Saddaruddin Shah Rashdi, Ijaz-ul-Haq, Makhdoom Ahmed Makhdoom, Shaikh Rashid Ahmed, Humayon Akhtar Khan and Jahangir Tareen, would see the future activities of the alliance. This alliance is made just to dismantle the ruling and opposition groups in Pakistan.

Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Giuliani also belongs to the city of saints-Multan, where Makhdooms, Giulanis and Shahs are well known Pirs and saints. They play an important role in the politics of Pakistan through their commercial activities like they use the name of religion for starting any business, or projects but they never practice religion in their life as a code of life.

Conclusion

The religion in Pakistan is used for legitimizing the rule of the ruler therefore it can be said that religion is politicized and commercialized in Pakistan by the individuals at large. One thing that is very much used in Pakistan mistakenly the connotation of “religious party.” The question is there any non religious parties or secular parties do exist in Pakistan? It exposes the nature and objectives of the commercial form of the so called religious parties in Pakistan. This nature of such people not only defamed Pakistan but also engulfed it in corruption for years. Second may be the reader of this paper is going to understand that religion in Pakistan is politicized, certainly it is done but ultimately the political demagogue in Pakistan earn money in the name of religion. The masses in Pakistan are under the influence of religion do not talk against religious figures and governments use them for strengthening their rule. Pakistan will remain in trouble unless theses insincere people were sent behind the bar with proscribing their all assets in the favour of the government. The accountability of the ruling class is the only way out to sustain Pakistan on strong footings in future. The socio-political and economic condition of Pakistan will improve with the state dictated religious values as it is done in the Kingdome of Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.

⁶ <http://www.uscops.com/videos-pakistan-a-fake-pir-burned-alive-%5BVZapO-bMd2U%5D.cfm>. Website visited on 30-03-11.

⁷ http://wn.com/Karachi_fake_Pir_raped_women_took_nude_pictures__A_true_story. Website visited on 30-03-11.

⁸ <http://www.brecorder.com/news/latest/14889:muttahida-muslim-league-alliance-headed-by-pir-pagara-formed.html>. Website visited on 30-03-11.