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THE EVOLVING IDENTITY OF RELIGIOUS PARTIES IN PAKISTAN'S POLITICAL ARENA

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamic role and evolving identity of religious parties within Pakistan's political landscape. As pivotal players in Pakistan's democracy, these parties exert significant influence on both governance and social norms. The study examines the transformation of religious parties from peripheral actors to central figures in the political arena, particularly their involvement in legislative processes and their impact on public policy. The analysis begins with a historical overview, tracing the origins and ideological foundations of major religious parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam. It highlights how these parties have capitalized on Pakistan's complex socio-political environment to gain a foothold in both national and regional politics. The paper also discusses the strategic alliances formed by these parties with secular political entities, illustrating their tactical adaptability. Further, the article assesses the dual role of religious parties as both proponents of conservative religious norms and as political entities seeking broader influence. It examines the implications of this dual role for Pakistan's policy making, especially in areas like education, law, and human rights. The study also addresses the impact of these parties on sectarian tensions and national unity. In conclusion, the article provides insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by religious parties as they navigate between traditional religious values and the demands of modern

political engagement. Recommendations are offered for policymakers and political analysts on engaging with and understanding the evolving role of these parties to ensure a balanced political discourse.

Keywords: Religious Parties, Pakistan Politics, Political Transformation, Ideological Influence, Sectarianism, Governance, Policy Impact, Jamaat-E-Islami, Jamiat Ulema-E-Islam, Political Alliances.

1. Introduction

Religious parties and the seminarians associated with these parties have become a potent force both in terms of street power and at the electoral polling booth in Pakistan. Over the past decade, especially, their influence has permeated into new layers of Pakistani society. Since Imran Khan has come into power and inaugurated 'Naya Pakistan', the role and presence of religious parties have started to evolve in line with the requirements of the day. Against this background, this essay seeks to explore the answer to the question: Who are the religious parties in Pakistan today? It looks at the changing identity of religious parties in Pakistan in a political and socio-historical context of meaning and national identity and asks where religious parties can go from here. An overview of the themes covered will include: Ideology; the have-nots; Building Utopia; Governance; Old Soldiers Never Die; Protests and Propaganda; Actor Friction. The essay will conclude by asking whether religious parties can bring about change and what potential they have in a month and year to bring about long-term change (Naheed et al., 2024).

From their infancy, religious political movements in Pakistan have arguably been motivated by two fundamental factors. Dominant political and ideological themes of the time originated from religious base movements: political autonomy and economic freedom in the face of an elite class that holds most of the power and wealth. Regardless of which religious party or movement comes to prominence, these concerns are shared by most, even if they provide no 'release' or policy option; socio-political dynamics need change for the better. As a result of the socio-political identities that underpinned these parties, we can look at who they address, where they agitate, and how they seek to improve governance (Tunio & Nabi, 2021). An area that needs more investigation is the extent to which these parties actively try to shape policy

frameworks as age and state dynamics change. These questions do have an impact on the national identity of Pakistan and the policy framework. However, to conclude, it is only right to predict that while the expanding identity of religious parties in Pakistan provides hope, it also presents new obstacles to face.

2. Historical Background of Religious Parties in Pakistan

One of the most striking features of Pakistan is the appearance of religious parties on the political scene soon after its inception in 1947. This is significant for two reasons. It suggests that the politicization of Islam took place at least sometime before the establishment of Pakistan. Alternatively, the Islamization of the political aspirations of the vast majority of people was seen as the best way to protect their interests in the newly created state. Since religion was the most potent force at the time that could be exploited for political ends, many factions that otherwise had little in common other than wielding state authority under the defunct Mughal Empire or consisting of tiny religious minorities began to glorify Islam. Once aggrandized to this status, most of the leaders found that it could also become a lethal weapon in their hands to defend their social, political, and economic interests from the threats posed by other Muslim sects that they viewed with suspicion because of their rivalry for state resources (Hajjaj, 2022).

However, it was not until the early 1950s, particularly during the years of 1953-54, that the pace of this Islamization started to quicken. The main reason behind the sudden surge in the growth of a variety of religious parties was the prolonged absence of the country's first Prime Minister. The vacuum in which the central government was left as a result gave encouragement to religious political movements to ignite the dormant anti-Ahmedi feelings, as other forms of protest, like strikes and demonstrations against the military dictatorship, had failed to achieve their purpose. Thanking religious groups for such bold sacrifices in active politics, General Ayub then decided to return to civilianism in 1962 (Malik & Khaki, 2021). Political activities, political parties, political slogans, the Indian factor, and Islamic symbols, including these religious groups, were banned. In the absence of these vaguely described ideological principles, Islamic symbols, values, and morality were to be inculcated in the officer corps at all three service academies or after long, tedious, and finally hopeless discussions in a few political parties well known for their collaboration with, and often subservience to, the military.

3. Factors Influencing the Rise of Religious Parties

The rise of religious parties in Pakistan has indeed been significantly influenced by the convergence of a multitude of factors. The existing socio-economic situation prevalent in the country renders a large segment of the populace particularly susceptible and vulnerable to the appeal of religious ideologies. Pakistan stands as one of the poorest Muslim nations in the world today. The levels of poverty and illiteracy are alarmingly high, which poses a serious challenge to any attempts at promoting education and awareness among the masses. Additionally, the ongoing political instability, consistent governance failures, and various forms of state repression have all played a substantial role in contributing to public disillusionment with the political process in its entirety. The negative sentiment that has developed against the so-called secular political alternatives has, over time, made religious parties appear as a more attractive option for many. As a result, the public has not hesitated, at different points in time, to elect those religious parties in hopes of providing them with an opportunity to govern and demonstrate their capabilities in leadership roles. This complex interplay of socio-economic realities and political dynamics continues to shape the political landscape in Pakistan (Bonnet et al.2021).

Global events and regional conditions have also played a role in the institutionalization of religious parties and religious discourse. The involvement in the 'war on terror' has been detrimental for MMA but proved to be useful for drawing sympathies of the public. Political activism and grassroots organization of the religious parties have also allowed these parties to best manage the changing political scenario. The religious right has exploited the demographic shifts in which urbanized citizens have tended to favor religious parties in a bid to secure their wealth. Influence from the Islamic social and class movement has also influenced the way Islamist movements approach social politics, which has allowed them to be more engendered in the mainstream Pakistani society. Religious parties have indicated skill in mobilizing a cadre of dedicated followers, frequently part of particular professional groups, whose economic interests they represent, quantify, and deal with in their party manifesto.

4. Case Studies of Key Religious Parties in Pakistan

4.1. Jamaat-e-Islami

In Pakistan, the Jamaat-e-Islami was founded by Abul A'la Maududi, who philosophically advocated the idea that Islam, as a complete and independent socio-political system, can deal with all problems of modern society, including politics, economics, society, technology, and trade. The Jamaat-e-Islami considered the creation of Pakistan as the first phase of establishing an Islamic state, which should act as a model for all Muslim countries. The party aimed at creating an Islamic society based on the Quran and Sunnah. It propagated that, as Islam covers all aspects of human life, it would lead to the continuation of the state, economy, judiciary, and all national and international aspects of human life in a true sense. The Jamaat asserted that any national or international effort towards the existence and progress of separate states was unacceptable. They lent their constant support to the establishment of an Islamic state in Pakistan and tried to resist any conciliatory attempt by politicians or ruling elites. In 1953, the Jamaat-e-Islami launched the Anti-Ahmadiyya Movement, demanding to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslims (Khan, 2023). It thought that creating sectarian division among Muslims would make them a stronger entity and the Jamaat-e-Islami would emerge as the supreme financial and political power. The Punjab provincial government passed the Anti-Ahmadiyya Act in 1953. In 1974, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto declared Ahmadis as non-Muslims through a constitutional amendment. The Jamaat-e-Islami never organized an effort to oust Bhutto from power, as it needed to maintain its political position in Pakistan. Islam was looked upon as a set of laws providing outlooks for personal and social life, including economics, politics, and contracts. Maududi's idea of a dual party system adopted two institutions for Muslims concerning their political relations with non-Muslim countries, holding that one should work for and on behalf of Muslims within Islamic states, and the other is a part of the united political and constitutional life of non-Muslim countries. Maududi believed that creating arrangements for Muslim relations with socialist, democratic, and military coalitions was the only way to secure the interests of the Muslim world (Khan, 2023).

4.2. Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F)

In JUI (F), Maulana Fazlur Rahman ascended as the Central President of the party through the intra-party democratic norms. The party is against militancy and its prime importance is resolution of public issues. Their support for dialogue does not mean surrender. Whatever had been resolved to the benefit of the country needs to be honored, but as it is the right of every citizen to refuse unilateral proposals so it is the right of the TTP to do so. It is also the

realization of the fragility of the post Swat operation scenario, such as distrust of the army by the common people, the possible breach in the regime of sucking up internal/external financial support and that internal harmony could be restored only after dialogue that leads in reduction of animosity. JUI (F) has good working basis with the PPP led federal and ANP led provincial governments. In the 18th amendment process they repeatedly advised that the then government never included religious scholars in process of bill yet they were eager to meet it as and when their advice was taken (Hussain & Alvi, 2023). Massive public resentment about the broken social contract on important issues such as energy, price rise, gas curtailment, both parts on political unrest, and suggestions regarding the line of action were discussed in these meetings.

Their stance on issues like drone attacks on their office or facilities – such as their residence or place of meeting - was very clear and firm. Contacts with the US government and Jewish lobbies are not considered as alien or against the benefit of the people. They adopted a give and take policy on the levies act and enforcement of Islamic laws. APP's importance in the eyes of the people in the tribal areas and/or the hard working people – serves a wake up call for an introspection of the moral values of the politicians of the CPI, and possibly APML, a CPI – led coalition. Despite the recent discords, with religious right in today's scenario has the capability to sustain a double figure majority among the religious minded parliamentarians (Pyykkö et al., 2021). Their strategy was not confrontational; with 37 placed opposition, they are at better place for decision making. The rallying cry of the 2008 – restore the judges – did not particularly resonate with the TTP as a condition for legitimacy of the 2008 election result. They think it is the power of the people – a unique way of Islam guiding them to make their choice of representation in the parliament – which determines the decision. It is unfortunate that today – Islamic law – is appreciated and adhered by a few. The creators and maintainers of the western democratic model have acquired first mover advantage that has propelled the developing countries citizens in imagined chains of universal salvation. The political scientist's today struggle to put the genie back in a bottomless bottle. This or other road maps, if pursued violently and/or under the pretext of threat to internal security are not acceptable. In the current national situation, there is no room for maximalists or 'let us dictate to others' attitude. All policy proposals in national interests would be guided in line with the constitutional provisions.

5. Shifts in Ideology and Strategies of Religious Parties

One of the distinctive characteristics of religious parties in Pakistan is their ideological versatility. They shift their Islamic frameworks in tune with the prevailing political and global socio-economic and technological environment. To remain relevant in the evolving political environment, religious parties have been modifying their conventional political narratives. In doing so, they do not disown their original versions of Islam, but they largely neutralize them in parliamentary politics. While retaining the Islamic identity, their new ideological formulations are being devised in line with the changing global and regional political environment.

One of the main reasons for the ideological shifts of these parties is the gradual incorporation of the virtues of technocratic secularism into the religious narratives. In increasing their appeal with the younger voters, these parties are trying to balance their religious credentials with modernized rhetoric. Women's rights and economic development have started greatly replacing the religious injunctions of the old discourse. In the socio-political landscape of the country itself, they contribute to building consensus among the parties. They modernize their ideological as well as political strategies. With the introduction of social media and the involvement of the young generation in politics, religious political parties started readdressing and redefining their constituencies largely by using social media and information technology (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022). With a view to enhancing their acceptability and electoral base, they mix politics with religious teachings and beliefs on digital and virtual platforms.

However, sometimes they face challenges in dealing with secular-political forces and extremist factions among their own ranks. This tug of war sometimes leads them to readapt their religious and secular narratives. Thus, changing political, regional, and international environments and electoral strategies compel the religious political outfits to accommodate their ideological paradigms in the wake of the changing political scenario. Compliance with the dynamics of the political system by religious political actors suggests that political and social pragmatism has been setting the direction of their ideological navigation. They essentially rely on a vehicle to attain power. The apparent Islamization in their manifesto is only a medium of political relevance. At the same time, the use of technology in religious politics in the country reinforces their positions. A significant percentage of religious parties try to mix their politics with their religious narratives on digital and virtual platforms. Social media is a prerequisite for

interacting with the public. Today, most political communication takes place through social media platforms. Ultimately, the religious orientation in politics should not be taken as a liability. This could be a potential point for the socio-political uplift of the religious political parties in Pakistan (Maula2023). In a word, it can be said that the parties are not only surviving in a changing understanding of secularization and Islamization and the shifting Islamic order, but they are conceptualizing and redefining their mission with the changing dynamics of religion and politics.

6. Role of Religious Parties in Legislation and Governance

Since their first entry in July 1947, religious parties have sometimes been involved in legislative processes in Pakistan. Their number and impact have, however, varied over different periods. In some years, their anxieties about 'Islamic laws' brought them to the polls; in others, they boycotted elections or secured entry to legislatures through political alliances. A few religious parties have been active over the past decade, following which the role they perform has shifted from serving as the face of ideology to addressing immediate policy concerns. There are few concrete statistics available on the average number of religious party councils per site in rural Pakistan. However, the data collected give the impression that between 2008 and 2012, religious parties took the lead in ten percent of the villages visited, facing multiple domestic and external problems, and then twenty percent through the second half of 2008, again picking up after 2010 (Village & Francis).

Inspired by the IPPs, religious parties have, with increasing regularity, entered into informal agreements to work at local tiers of government within mixed, mainly coalition, governments. Their status at the national and provincial levels, however, does not necessarily reflect the reality at the local level. Local councils servicing traditionally conservative communities often have religious party politicians in leadership roles, and/or representing localities in those councils. Access to localities by researchers was facilitated by several factors, including approval from the Foreign Office and the support of an influential personality in Muzaffargarh district, who linked local leadership. Notwithstanding, the primary facilitator was the arranged collaboration between local campaign organizers from Jamaat-e-Islami, variously operating outside the party and independent of each other. In some peri-urban settings, this impeded access to party strongholds based on informal agreements between elements of Jamaat-e-

Islami and the bureaucracy. However, in more remote and village circles, the contacts provided an opportunity to facilitate entry into mixed governance settings (Saiz, 2021).

7. Challenges and Controversies Surrounding Religious Parties

In many ways, religious parties in Pakistan—who are expected to pursue issues relevant to the religious public in Pakistan—face various challenges and controversies within as well as outside the organization that conceivably make it difficult for them to function as an organized political force within the country. Some of the main challenges for religious parties today stem from the internal factionalism that thwarts them, as do leadership struggles and the inability to reach a pragmatic consensus about the principles of religious politics to be pursued at home. Similarly, the influence of extremist elements on parties is considered to be the main obstacle to achieving the leadership agenda, which is why our people vote for and support political groups. Today, however, official involvement is seen in favor of political motives that may be alien to the organization, as the urban public has linked religious parties to violence and hostilities in Pakistan (Javaid, 2022).

Thus, the likelihood of a court-nullifying relationship may deter the people from joining the party, and some leaders have faced opposition from civil society, the media, and other organizations, making it difficult for them to advance the religious agenda. The state has also been aware of the strong organizational structure of religious parties and has sought to limit the practice of banning the formation of local and home-based teams. Despite all this opposition, the party maintains certain local leaders, who are now limited to carrying out legal and political obligations that are largely tantamount to any kind of activity that can generate additional funding. Despite the establishment of state constraints from time to time, the expansion of national and local religious parties within conflicts is affected by the views of neighboring countries and various regional issues, as well as a variety of academic concerns and civil society activists. Military and intelligence agencies play a serious role in foreign affairs (Davidson & Schragger, 2021). Moreover, political parties face security forces, strict bans, and political instability, which is due to the fact that this becomes a great shock to the establishment of democracy in the country. Similarly, the role of secularism and the strengthening of nationalist tendencies also create a new set of restrictions for religious parties. Because of these issues, religious parties are needed to change their ideological

identities and make them more attractive and peaceful in order to be able to win seats in Pakistan. Religious parties and organizations play a crucial role in Pakistan's social and political atmosphere.

8. Comparative Analysis with Religious Parties in Other Muslim-Majority Countries

An international comparative perspective can provide valuable insights on the trajectory of religious parties in Pakistan. Several detailed case studies have been carried out, charting, for instance, the political participation of religious movements in various countries. Of these, one country's experience illuminates a number of parallels with the Pakistani case. Both parties formulated and incorporated a moderate brand of Islamism, emphasizing the ideals of democracy and political pluralism. Both also initially attempted to appeal to and attract a wide range of voters well beyond their core Islamist base by formulating a number of non-Islamist policies. Their spectacular electoral successes were possible due to the widespread public disenchantment with the mainstream secular parties, which were widely perceived as corrupt and inefficient. At the same time, important differences can also be highlighted. One country's experience also illustrates that the degree of criminalization of religious parties can vary according to the ideological bias of the constitutional court (Sutrisno et al., 2022).

Even though Islamic political movements have been criminalized in some regions and many of them put under tight restrictions, both regions have seen a greater degree of infiltration and influence of these movements in other sectors of the state and society. The system of governance in another region and the different social, historical, and political context of one sect, as opposed to another, provide less relevant lessons. Two other case studies provide a wealth of information on the trajectories of, respectively, a religious party in Pakistan and a religious party in another region. At the time of their writing, both were banned parties which, despite repression and harassment, enjoyed broad public support. These studies suggest a tempered optimism about the potential role of religious parties in fostering democratic practices and representation. In the absence of valid channels to legitimate their ideas, militants' ideologies were less likely to evolve and succumb to violence. Readers are justified in asking what crucial lessons can we draw from these relatively well-researched case studies? The experiences of such widely different religious parties illustrate the historically changing fortunes of Islamist parties. The political strategies of such movements and the political culture

they seek to impact depend upon local, historically specific, cultural, and class factors. Modernist Islam is a class reform movement with only a shallow ability to capture the political mainstream (Cesari, 2021).

9. Impact of Religious Parties on Pakistan's Foreign Policy

Religious parties have directly and indirectly influenced Pakistan's foreign policy choices. Their emphasis on Muslim identity and solidarity informs not just their stance on Islamization, but also relations with neighboring Muslim countries and alliances with global Islamic movements. Periodic unity of Islamic world conferences has been a welcome venue to articulate their position on international conflicts. At the popular level, when it comes to neighborly relations and any wars and conflicts involving Muslim countries or conflicts more broadly involving world or regional powers, religious parties have been influential in shaping public opinion.

With the transnational influence of Islamic millenarian movements, collective efforts and actions to project and promote changed official foreign and security policies domestically have become extensive in Pakistan. An often-asked question is whether or not religious forces are likely to change their domestic policy as a result of regional or global influences. A related move is to see how they perceive, based on their Islamic ideology, Pakistan as a nation and its identity, a perspective that directly influences its regional and global posture. Among all these issues, religious parties have played a significant role in defining Pakistan's stance on terrorism, linkage with the war on terror, and developing the country's counterterrorism strategy. Considering this array of foreign policy issues, it is hard for religious parties to be pragmatic while also presenting their identity as representatives of the religion. This particularly becomes visible when it comes to them distinguishing themselves on this stance both from the military and civilian ruling elite regarding security policy (Abbas & Syed, 2021).

The religious parties have been instrumental in shaping Pakistan's identity in the domain of foreign relations, notably by bringing an Islamic character into foreign policy during the regime, which largely continues to be in vogue as part of the larger Islamic identity of the country, including the principle of giving priority to relations with Muslim countries. They also have an informed and independent say in the formulation of foreign policy, having opposed Pakistan joining the coalition against terror and sending the air bases, although they had a softer stance

on the flights landing for refueling. The major religious parties in Pakistan have shown restraint in publicly opposing the strategic interests of the security establishment in their policies, such as support for the Taliban during their time in Afghanistan over the last two and a half decades and close ties with Islamabad.

10. Future Prospects and Trends for Religious Parties in Pakistan

Pakistan continues to be an Islamic state, and its society is based on the kinship system; there is no doubt that the religious elders will have a significant impact on the people. Their acceptance of the electoral process or parties is an exception rather than a rule. The current trends, however, are showing changes in the public attitude or receptiveness, reflecting the impact of the processes of modernization. The majority of the population today believes that the economic system and social justice can be achieved under a membership in Riba-Free Banking and profit/loss-sharing mode modern economic and housing system, in line with the principles of Islam, even though they do not wear the so-called religious party's 'colors' too openly.

In more ways, the society has been overtaken by a younger generation which has little love for these religious leaders. In the next decade or so, the rise of a massive middle-class population, who will have no time or the inclination to join the mullahs of any sort, may democratize the country in this way, cementing Pakistan's secular credentials. Technology has made the youth around the world connect and see what is right and wrong. This new wave of the future knows that there are movements in other countries, yet their lifestyle does not change, nor will their government alter its policy on the treatment of Muslims, so why should we embrace certain parties? This situation also brings inter-party realignments in tandem with the new groupings. The emergence of certain parties has further complicated the situation, which is still in the process of organizational and ideological perfection. It will establish its legitimacy in the long run, plus the issue of sympathy or support till now is specific and articulating it around a single personality or one with a cause célèbre. However, its agenda is as Islamic as the others, and it has yet to map things on the ideological landscape. The elections will remain problematic and complex. So far, the diversification in the ideological positioning points to color in the aura of the right's Islamic parties, making them the ultimate future power players. With shrinking state tendons, it will become difficult to deal with them, requiring possible talks. Again, electoral reforms may intensify the appeal of religious parties in the development of a coherent

ideological narrative (Munir and Khalid2021). Economic changes, particularly the mainstream parties' integration into interest-group politics, provide religious parties with an opportunity to present themselves as an option for practicing politics in line with constitutional morality. Social changes, particularly the motivation of middle-class youth and fresh minds by religious mobilization, blind to dualistic moral life, may help these limited concerns in associated trends. Socio-economic and techno-economic variables form the basis for developing religious parties' electoral strategies. There appears little doubt that religious parties share a complex but monitoring relationship with law. Curtailing the law will involve victorization, whereby the worldview regarding the nature of the Islamic state is effectively preempted by the religious parties.

11. Conclusion and Summary of Key Findings

Conclusion: The political identity of religious parties in Pakistan has evolved over time. Although this was once motivated by states' efforts to co-opt them and by how Pakistan's Islamist exclusivist identity has shifted, the multiple—and sometimes competing—motives for given policies likely have long, evolving, and at times contradictory impacts on these parties. Acting against religious parties is unlikely to result in their elimination, since what determines how successful they are is not their religiousness but their capacity to perform politically at given historical moments. It may, on the other hand, make the existing parties turn inward, focusing more on social services and educating the public according to their interpretive frames. This could also lead to a kind of diversification of religious parties, as some elements try to double down at the political level while others engage or re-engage with more medium and long-term public education.

Despite any progress made in mainstreaming political parties in the last 25 years, religious parties have in fact gained power in the legislature and at the provincial level. Foreign Islamic financing, formerly a big funding source for these parties, has mostly dried up, and the NGO crackdown, the terrain change in Pakistan, and efforts to regulate the religious sector more tightly for security and political reasons are obstacles in the way of reconstruction. But this study also finds areas of potential adaptability and innovation among religious groups. Most obviously, TLP itself moved from a nationwide network of religious scholars to a fully-fledged political party. Second, religious parties continue to be able to build networks of social

provision from which they can draw organizational support. Third, in contrast to TLP and to religious parties that have chosen to reject electoral politics as a matter of principle, pragmatists favor engagement with the political system. Despite their relative marginality, discussions with these individuals could illuminate possible, perhaps even likely swings over time, as the state and society in which they operate are unlikely to remain stagnant. Religious parties have, despite claims to the contrary, neither been crushed from abroad nor have lost substantial public ground. They are not quite the tools of the establishment the media and most observers make them out to be either, but are rather a dynamic and evolving force. These are the facts upon which the study of religious dynamics in the political field in Pakistan rests today. Tending the fundamentalist garden of Pakistan until its extinction would cost countless lives and trillions of dollars better spent elsewhere. More research, and in-depth research, on religious politics needs to be conducted in Pakistan on a more regular basis. Participants should include religious parties, NGOs, international organizations, embassies, and the public as a result of any such study. Mini-studies on the main players can be underpinned by qualitative research in field context to acquire a deeper awareness of party organization and leadership philosophy. This would capture the dynamic and complex way in which respect has been regained by these political actors, often despite them always appearing to be in the wrong when viewed from the western liberal perspective.

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