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## The Evolution of Religious Elite in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: From Tribal Elders to Modern Ulema

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims at analyzing the transformation of the religious elite in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from the traditional tribal elders to the contemporary ulema. Pashtun society in the past was patrilineal and tribal, the heads of tribes being both political and religious figures. However, in recent decades, the growth of formal religious education, especially in the madrasahs inspired by the Deobandi movement, has led to the emergence of a new class of ulema who gain religious power through education and increasing political influence. This social change has profound consequences on Pashtun culture, politics, and social setting. The contemporary ulema who are well educated in Islamic theology have gradually emerged as the religious and political leaders who do not only set the religious agenda but also the political one in the region. Although they have played a positive role of fostering peace and societal cohesiveness through solving commoner's disputes, some parts of the religious elite have been associated with radicalism, which is a hindrance to peace and development. The paper analyzes the influence of the external factors including British colonialism, state centralization and the global Islamic movements influencing the course of the religious leadership in the region. It also looks at the problem of the religious elite in today's society, such as the role of women and children within a religion. The paper explores the prospects for reformist voices within the ulema who wants to solve modern problems including education, women's rights, and governance, based on Islam. In conclusion, the author underlines the necessity of future investigations into the more complex role of the ulema in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the face of modernization and globalization processes. This knowledge is important in order to understand the general socio-political trends of the region and the possible future role of the religious authorities in the formation of peace, government, and development.

**Keywords:** Religious Elites, Ulema, Tribal Elders, Pashtun Society, Pashtunwali, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

### Introduction

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), formerly known as the North-West Frontier Province, is one of the four provinces of Pakistan located in north-western part of the country, and has a significant historical importance in the socio-political life of the country because of its geographical position as part of the greater Pashtun region. KP is located in the north of Pakistan and shares its western border with Afghanistan, and therefore, maintain a crucial geopolitical role especially during conflicts such as the Soviet-Afghanistan War (1979) and the war on terror. The region has been inhabited by a mainly Pashtun ethnic group with a social structure based on tribal systems and the

Pashtunwali laws, which are the codes of conduct for individuals and communities (Ahmed, 2016). In this framework of tribalism, the elders commonly called Malik's had various responsibilities, which included not only the settlement of disputes and the dispensation of justice but also had a say in all the social, political, and even religious aspects of the community. In the past, KP had been governed within the framework of tribal leadership and religious authorities.

In the context of KP, religious authority or leaders like local mullahs were not as influential as the tribal ones. Mullahs, despite their religious education, mainly had spiritual and ritual roles in society, including reading the prayers and performing other religious functions (Hussain, 2018). They were relatively less political as compared to the Tribal Malik's who wielded political power along with social prestige and control over land and other resources. However, this dynamic has changed over the past century, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. There are several factors local and international that facilitated the gradual emergence of the ulema as a unique and influential religious class. These scholars trained in the formal religious institutions called madrasas started to gain not only religious legitimacy but also political power which changed the dynamics of KP society.

Among the factors that have led to this transformation is the shifting socio-political environment in KP, an area that has undergone drastic political transformations due to global and regional conflicts in the near past. For instance, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a major turning point in the history of KP because the area turned into the battlefield of the Afghan's Mujahedeen with the support of the United States, allies, and Pakistan. This period witnessed a large influx of Afghan refugees in KP and most of them were accommodated in refugee camps where Islamic education especially of Deobandi sect started getting patronage (Khan, 2017). These camps and the madrasas set up to accommodate them turned into nurseries for a new crop of religious scholars who would in the future become important figures in the religious and political arenas. The combination of religion and politics in this period, with the support of outside actors, greatly raised the position of the ulema in KP.

At the same time there were internal factors in Pakistan that enabled the religious scholars to gain more influence in KP. The Islamization process of the Zia-ul-Haq military regime in 1980s that aimed at integrating the Islamic principles into the Pakistani state and society has offered the formal religious institutions a formal recognition (Rahman, 2019). The growth of new madrasas during this period along with the state support has given rise to a new class of ulema who were formal Islamic scholars in law and theology unlike the local mullahs of the pre-colonial period. This transformation was part of a wider social change in Pakistan where Islamic learning was becoming more formalised and where scholars had a more authoritative influence over religious practice and understanding.

It is also a shift from the traditional tribal elders to the modern ulema, which is another phenomenon observed in KP's political dynamics, where formal education in religion has become a major authority. While the tribal elders acted as the authority figures on the basis of their genealogy and as the conflict solvers in local disputes, the modern

ulema relies on the knowledge of Islamic laws, which is gained by years of education in the madrassas (Hussain, 2018). This has occurred hand in hand with the general weakening of the traditional tribal systems as the Pakistani state has attempted to exert a more centralized authority especially in the erstwhile semi-tribal regions. Thus the modern ulema not only have taken the religious vacuum left behind by the diminishing influence of tribal sheikhs, but they have also assumed an important role in the political and social struggle of the Islamist parties and militant groups.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the changes that took place in the role of religious elite in KP, particularly in shifting from tribal leaders to the contemporary Ulema. It contends that this change is a response to the evolving socio-political environment in the region due to domestic and global factors. The paper will also explore how this formal process of religious education has helped in emerging the ulema as a new religious elite, eliminate the pre-existing traditional tribal elite and brought new power dynamics to KP. In doing so, the paper aims to examine the socio-political factors that led to this shift, and hence, make a contribution to understanding the role of religious elites in determining the contemporary socio-political realities in KP.

### **The Role of Tribal Elders**

In Pashtun Culture, Tribal Leaders or Malik's traditionally played a dominant role in the society, enforcing the uncodified moral code called Pashtunwali which regulated many aspects of tribal life. These elders had authority in the resolution of conflict, in dispensing justice, and in presiding over the tribal council or Jirga, which was the central institution in the governance of tribal society. The elders' power was political and social and stemmed from lineage, wealth, and personal appeal; the chiefs were hereditary rulers who commanded both political and social power. They were fully charged with the duty of upholding important cultural norms like hospitality, honour, revenge among other norms that are well embraced in the Pashtun people (Banerjee, 2000). The Jirga system helped in democratic decision making where the elders were deemed to have the experience and knowledge that is required to solve disputes and maintain unity in the society. Thus, tribal elders had a very important role not only for sustaining the conservative values, but also political stability among the Pashtun people.

In the religious domain, the elders also wielded considerable power despite not being Islamic scholars or ulema. They often coordinated with local mullahs to dictate religious matters, to explain to their community the provisions of religion and culture in accordance to the Pashtun way of life (Tahir, 2009). Tribal elders were not religious scholars, but they had authority in both religious and cultural aspects because of their capacity to apply Islamic law alongside the customary law. Their religious duty was symbiotic with the political authority hence enhancing their authority in other aspects of the community. However, the ulema was a group of scholars who were formally educated in Islamic tradition while the elders were entitled to balance between religion and tradition. This placed them in a very strategic position where they were very valuable to their respective tribes in both the religious and the secular realms.

The power of the tribal elders gradually diminished over time as a result of several reasons. One important factor was the introduction of centralized administration, especially during the British colonialism in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The British who wanted to bring state control on the frontier areas therefore brought changes in administrative and legal systems that altered the social fabric of the regions. Many of the tribal functions were supplanted by state structures, and they started to directly administer territories that were previously regulated by tribal assemblies (Nichols, 2013). Besides, the introduction of Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) enabled the colonial administration to dominate the area as it reduced the decision-making authority of Jirga's and their elders. The change from tribal governing arrangements to a centralized state system altered the status of Malik's in the society as they lost much of their authority over social and political affairs of the community. Another potentially significant reason for the weakening of tribal authority was the shift towards the institutionalization of religious learning and the growing role of religious clerics. Scholars of Islamic law and Islamic theologians trained in the newly established madrasas and possessing formal education and knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence started questioning the traditional religious authority of the tribal chiefs. Due to increased religious education especially in the 20th century, the authority moved to the religious scholars who were in touch with other Islamic movements (Rashid, 2001). This change was further propelled by geopolitical factors including the Soviet-Afghan War that brought in radical religious and militant culture into the region. While the ulema received legitimacy due to religious knowledge, they displaced the elders as major players in both the religious and political domains, consequentially diminishing the authority of traditional tribal structures.

### **The Emergence of Formal Religious Education**

For centuries, madrasas have been institutions of Islamic learning that offered education in Quran, Hadith, Fiqh and other religious subjects. In the traditional Islamic world, the madrasas were important in educating scholars and other religious figures known as the ulema who were entitled to interpret the Islamic laws and also in providing guidance to the Muslim society. Madrasas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province were more common during the end of the nineteenth and the twentieth century with introduction of Islamic movements such as the Deobandi movement. These institutions offered not only religious teachings but also education alongside the state secular schools making them the core of religious, social and political life in the area (Rahman, 2010).

The Deobandi Movement that started in India in the mid-nineteenth century was particularly instrumental in founding and growth of the madrasas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The movement was based on the principles of Quran and Sunnah, and thus rejection of bid'ah, meaning un-Islamic practices. In this way, the Deobandi madrasas took the responsibility to train scholars who could continue the tradition and safeguard the religion from the colonial and modernisation forces (Metcalf, 2002). When the movement entered Khyber Pakhtunkhwa it had easy access to the Pashtuns especially in the political crises such as the Soviet-Afghan War. The Deobandi

movement was attractive to many Pashtuns because of the perceived purity of its Islamic doctrine, its anti-Western sentiments, and its encouragement of the expansion of madrasas in the area (Bergen, 2001).

There were a number of reasons that led to the rising trend of madrasas among the Pashtuns in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. One of the main reasons was people's thirst for knowledge and the need to protect the Islamic religion and its values. When British colonialism and later state modernization began to alter the structure of the Pashtun society, the Pashtuns sought solace in madrasas in order to regain their bearings and return to their religious culture (Marsden, 2005). The madrasas offered these people a rigid and systematic form of religious training that interested people could enrol in to get the moral and spiritual direction they wanted while dealing with the social transformations. Also there are economic reasons as many families of low income considered madrasas as free education for the children and better than expensive secular education system available in the region (Zaman, 2002). Another factor that contributed to the rise of madrasas was the loss of classical tribal power and influence. With the decline of tribal authority and of elders especially under colonialism and with the emergence of central state authority many among the Pashtuns turned to Islamic scholars trained in the madrasas for direction. This transition from the tribal to religious authority also reaffirmed the position of madrasas in Pashtun society and made them one of the most important institutions that dictate both the religious and political spheres of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

### **The Rise of Modern Ulema**

The term ulema is used to address the Islamic scholars who received their education in the religious sciences including Quran, Hadith, Fiqh or Islamic law, and theology. In the past, the ulema have always been as key players in Islamic societies as legal scholars and as ethicists and spiritual leaders. Their authority comes from the fact that they are the scholars who have the knowledge of the Holy books from which they issue decrees concerning religious and legal issues referred to as the fatwas. In the modern Islamic state especially in areas like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the ulema have not only retained their religious power but also gained social and political power as they have becoming major players in the society and the government (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996).

The modern ulema in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have attained a significant social power due to education, religious knowledge and political association. While earlier local religious leaders were mostly unlettered or received very limited religious education, the modern ulema are graduates of more structured and organized religious schools, many of which are madrasas associated with the international Islamic movements of Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith movements. These ulema have extensive knowledge of Islamic law and beliefs, which entitles them to religious leadership and power (Haqqani, 2005). Their education allows them to have highly developed discursive practices concerning the interpretation of Islamic law and its use for contemporary society and therefore they construct themselves as the interpreters of religion in private and public domains. Moreover, their role has increased as they have turned

political and support Islamic political parties and movements that campaign for the introduction of the Shariah at the state level.

The emergence of the modern ulema in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has also been influenced by socio-political factors of the region. The events such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December, 1979 and the Afghan refugees' issue influenced the religious and political changes of the province. During this period, the numbers of madrasas grew rapidly with state sponsorship from the Pakistani government and with outside support from Saudi Arabia and USA which had their interest in Islamic resistance against the Soviet Union. These madrasas produced the ulema who played a significant role during Afghan jihad and the authority of these ulema was further established in the post war era (Nasr, 2000). The roles of ulema in this fight gave them political advantage, and helped them shift from religious scholars to political players. These affiliations with Islamic movements that had linkages with global networks also enabled them to access sources and channels for propagating their political ideologies domestically and in the foreign world.

There are common tendencies and sources that influenced the modern ideology and practices of ulema in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, such as global Islamic movements and the confrontation with modernity. It is noteworthy that the modern ulema of the region was formed under the influence of such Islamic revivalist movements as the Deobandi and Salafi movements. These movements call for a restoration of the 'true' Islam and the repeal of any practices which the movements deem as un-Islamic (*bid'ah*). They also support the creation of an Islamic state that will be run according to Sharia laws and this is an aspect that is well supported by the ulema because the secular state is seen as a danger to the Islamic culture by most of them (Metcalf, 2004). It is in these movements that the modern ideological inclinations of the ulema have been shaped by the global spread of such movements through the financing of madrasas and the spreading of religious literature.

On the other hand, the ulema of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are struggling to cope with modern world problems especially in finding how to harmonize the Islamic code of ethics with the modern culture of the world. Aspects like education, women's rights, economy and politics put the ulema in a situation where they have to balance between religion and the modern world. Some of the ulema have remained rigid in terms of the traditionalist approach to the Islamic law while others have tried to find ways of interpreting the Islamic teachings in order to fit into the contemporary world challenges (Zaman, 2007). This diversity of approach is a reflection of the general conflict in the Islamic world between continuity and change, and it has affected the various degrees of integration of the factions of the ulema.

Furthermore, the increasing globalization and the development of media technologies have also affected the responsibilities of the contemporary ulema. In the recent past, many ulema have adopted the social media and satellite television as a means of reaching out to other people through preaching, lectures and issuing of fatwas among other activities. This has enabled them to get to other people and other groups, both in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and in the rest of the world. But it has also exposed them

to increased attention as the world at large, both friends and foes, can now read what they have to say about Islam. This fluidity and dynamism is one of the reasons why the ulema has proved capable of adapting to the contemporary era as we witness it in the twenty-first century (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003). Thus, the modern ulema in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has been influenced by their religious education, political activities, and the global Islamic movements, which have an impact on their thought process. Their capacity to remain relevant to the new age complexities while retaining the mantle of religious leadership has given them a place in both the religious and political domain of the Pashtuns. However, the conflict between tradition and modernity is still an essential part of their activities and beliefs as they try to adapt to the new conditions.

### **The Impact of Religious Elite on Pashtun Society**

Pashtun society has been shaped by religious elites especially the ulema in different ways including culture, politics and social life. Pashtun society was traditional in many ways and was based on tribes that followed Pashtunwali which was an informal code of conduct and laws which were overseen by the tribal chiefs. Nevertheless, with time, the religious class rose in status especially as they were involved in the management of madrasas and mosques, they emerged as key players in the socio-political evolution. In this respect, while the ulema have created an Islamic identity that is compatible with Pashtun culture and Islamic values, they have also played a key role in shaping the Pashtun Muslim identity. In doing this, they have in a way preserved some of the cultural values of Pashtun such as hospitality and honour but at the same time they have rejected or tried to change some of the cultures that they deemed un-Islamic hence adopting a hybrid culture of being both tribal and religious.

In the political dimension, religious elites have participated as key actors in both the official and the parallel political structures in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Traditionally, the ulema have supported political parties that aim to establish Shariah as the state law and see the application of Islamic law as a way to restore order and justice in society (Haqqani, 2005). Political parties with religious affiliation have been dominant in this region and particularly the Islamists for instance the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI). These parties most of the times led or influenced by the ulema have been actively engaged in the electoral processes and have been major actors in the political arena of the respective regions and the entire country. The ulema has been active in the political process not only in the formal political arena but also in the informal conflict resolution processes by being involved in the Jirga's that resolve disputes and conflicts in the society and their decisions are acceptable due to the authority given to them by religion (Marsden, 2005). Thus, religious elites have transposed themselves into the position of religious experts and politicians all at once.

Nonetheless, religious elites have had a bipolar role in the Pashtun culture regarding the aspect of peace and development. On the positive side, some of the religious leaders have been very much instrumental in the promotion of peace, particularly where they have assumed the role of the reconcilers where conflicts have arisen from among the tribes. Some of these ulema have been able to negotiate for ceasefires that

bring groups that are at odds with each other to agree to end and reconcile because it is against Islamic teachings to kill fellow human beings (Bergen, 2001). On the other hand, some of the religious elites have been associated with radicalization and extremism especially during the soviet Afghan war and the subsequent emergence of the Taliban in the region. The religious leaders who either supported or were associated with militant organizations have played part in perpetuating violence and oscillations that have not been helpful in the cause of peace and progress in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Nasr, 2000). Compliments of their role in the propagation of militant agendas wrapped in jihad, they have caused significant setbacks to the social-economic fabric of the region.

The problems, which are faced by the religious elite in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the contemporary world, are complex. One of the most significant issues is the problem of the growing conflict between the religious tradition and the modern world. The younger generation in the region is also least likely to submit to the authoritative views of certain factions of the ulema especially those who have been educated in secular schools and who have access to modern communication technologies (Zaman, 2007). In this regard, the religious elite is faced with an increasing tension between traditionalists and those who search for liberal, modernist Islam. This tension has caused some ulema to modify the interpretation of Islamic teachings to suit the modern day issues like education, women rights, and economic development in order to allow a reformist voice in the religious elite.

Another major factor that can be regarded as disadvantageous is the socio-political fragmentation of the religious elite. Some ulema are moderate and strive to bring about change to support the cause of development and peace in line with the moderate interpretation of Islam while others are hard liners or militants, thus dividing the leadership of the religion (Mehmood, 2012). These divisions have also been compounded by external factors, such as funding from other countries and international Islamic organizations that bring in divergent religious as well as political beliefs. This fragmentation hampers the unity of the ulema and makes it difficult for them to have a coherent stand concerning issues of peace, governance, and development.

However, there are also some positive points from where religious elite of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa can contribute towards the development of the region. One such opportunity is in the role they play as negotiators and the community's source of authority. Where state institutions are frequently fragile or non-existent, the Ulema's power can offer an effective way of managing conflicts and restoring order. In addition, the religious leaders who support education, economic development and social justice and use the Quran to back their stand can play an important role in enhancing sustainable development in the region (Marsden, 2005). In this regard, the ulema can act as a link between tradition and modernity in Pashtun society as they are seen as the defenders of both religion and material advancement.

## **Conclusion**



The political and religious systems of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have transformed the religious elites from the traditional tribal leaders who were not only hold the authority of tribes but also acted religious scholars to the contemporary ulema who are educated in religious schools and seminaries. This article has analysed the historical background of this change, the emergence of madrasas under the influence of movements such as Deobandi Movement, and the current threats and prospects for the religious elite. The religious elites have not only dominated the religious sphere but also intruded in to the social and political arena of the Pashtuns. They have fulfilled the role of the middleman, maintaining some traditions of the Pashtun culture while being influenced by Islamic tradition and becoming a part of it, thus having a rather rich and layered cultural and religious background. Nonetheless, they have left a mixed legacy, as while some ulema have supported the processes of peace and development, others have hampered them with the help of their allegiance to radicalization. With regards to the future of the religious elite in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, one can expect that its influence will persist, but its form will depend on how the religious elite adapts to the challenges of modernization, globalization, and internal fragmentation. This is due to the availability of secular education and the information communication technologies that are making a new generation of Muslims with a different perception of what Islam entails. The extent to which the ulema are able to respond to these changes while preserving their religious influence will define their role in defining not only the religious life but also the socio-political and economic destiny of the area. Furthermore, as the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa area remains in dealing with questions of extremism, development, and state consolidation, the role of the ulema as a power that can regulate conflicts and guarantee stability might be even more essential. Further study about the role of religious elites in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is required and especially in the fields, which are included religious, political, and development studies. However, most of the present day studies have been confined to historical and political ascendancy of the ulema and therefore, further research work should explore the new dimensions of the ulema in the light of modernity, globalization and socio-economic change. For instance, research could be devoted to how the young and liberal-minded ulema are approaching such issues as education, women, and governance, as well as social media and international Islamic connections. Comparative analysis can be made between different provinces of Pakistan and their religious scholars to understand the dynamics of the role of ulema in certain regions. By adopting a wider perspective of research, scholars can help in expanding the knowledge regarding the religious elite's present contributions in the socio-political domain of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the region.

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