

Containing Digital Extremism and Anti- State Narrative in Pakistan: The Role of State and Society

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to explore the dynamics of online anti-state extremist narratives in Pakistan and assess the effectiveness of state and societal responses to this growing challenge. Following the enactment of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) in 2016, Pakistan's cybercrime framework particularly measures addressing digital radicalization has undergone periodic amendments; accordingly, this study covers the period from 2016 to 2025. Social Identity Theory examines how extremist groups use social media to radicalize individuals, while Gatekeeper Theory provides a lens to examine how state and societal actors regulate and control online extremist content. A mixed-methods approach is employed, combining qualitative analysis of policies, legal frameworks, and case studies of online extremism in Pakistan with content analysis of extremist material and counter-narratives. The findings reveal that major social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and WhatsApp, are widely exploited for youth radicalization and recruitment by extremist groups in Pakistan. The study further identifies weaknesses in state surveillance mechanisms, along with insufficient engagement by political, nationalist, religious leadership, and civil society in promoting effective counter-narratives.

Keywords: Online Extremism, Anti-State Narrative, State, Civil Society, Pakistan

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Introduction

The fast evolution of social networking through digital platforms has substantially influenced political, ethnic, and religious discourses in Pakistan. While social media forums enable democratic participation and facilitate free speech and freedom of expression by offering various accessible channels for political and social debates, it has also become an incubator for ideologies of extremism, hate speech, and divisive narratives. Online extremism in social, cultural and ideological behaviors has emerged as a serious threat to national security in Pakistan in recent times, wherein political, ethnic and religious extremist and militant groups are using cyberspace for propaganda, radicalization and recruitment. Digital extremism manifested through inflammatory political rhetoric, sectarian propaganda, and ethno-nationalist mobilization poses a major threat to Pakistan's social cohesion and national safeguard (Al Abd, 2022). Platforms like Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube are frequently used to disseminate extremist content, attract and provoke followers of different groups, and incite violence. State and society can play a pivotal role in curbing this challenge by presenting a constructive alternative—one that advances a broader narrative to address extremism through social media.

State responses encompass internet restrictions, content removal, and legal actions in accordance with the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016. However, these measures have been often subject to debate, with critics arguing that they are either overly restrictive in terms of freedom of expression or insufficient in effectively addressing cybercrime and digital threats. Meanwhile, civil society organizations, journalists, and digital activists attempt to counter extremist narratives through fact-checking, counter-messaging, and advocacy—yet their impact remains uneven. A portion of literature identifies the limitations of counter-narratives in Pakistan while providing a detailed overview of extremism and extremist narratives (Nasir, 2023).

A discernible gap seems to have persisted since 2016, particularly in terms of fully addressing emerging challenges and developments in the relevant field. The interplay between state control and societal resistance shapes Pakistan's digital landscape, necessitating a deeper exploration of their roles in combating digital extremism. The technological limitations and diplomatic constraints inhibit the states' responses in holding the culprits accountable. The domestic political divide is another weakness being misused by the unscrupulous elements. The regional and extra-regional actors are reinforcing the prevalent domestic polluted political milieu, besides constructing new

narratives to invigorate various strands of hybrid war to harm Pakistan's vital national security interests.

Having discerned the effects on youth and long-term implications on national unity and security of Pakistan, the objective of this enquiry is to sensitize policy makers on the perils of unchecked digital extremist onslaught. In addition, the research offers a pragmatic counter to the digital crimes framework, which not only educates the youth with potential consequences but urges the concerned government departments to redouble their effort in tackling this ominous threat of misguiding youth and igniting ethno-sectarian fault lines.

This article is an attempt to exclusively evaluate the political, ethnic and religious/sectarian extremist tendencies, being precipitated for political advantage in concert with religious entities to pressure the government. Assessment of counter-narratives is also part of the research covering the timeframe of 2016-2025, so that the efficacy of PECA, introduced in 2016 and periodically amended until 2025 to combat online extremism, is analyzed in the process. State and society's role is equally important in combating the extremist trends, and plays a balancing role between regulation, censorship, and freedom of expression. This research aims to examine the dynamics of online extremism in Pakistan, besides analyzing how state policies and societal responses either mitigate or exacerbate the problem.

The authors investigate the tensions and synergies between state and societal efforts, asking; how do state policies and societal responses interact in countering digital extremism in Pakistan, and what are the implications of the online extremism for social cohesion and democratic freedoms? Before finding answers to these questions, the next step in this scientific study is to evaluate the knowledge available on the subject. As the review of literature offers a skillful perception of existing research work and identifies its gaps, this study presents a constructive review of existing literature on the topic.

Literature Review

Multiple studies have been explored on digital extremism and anti-state narratives, their causes and societal effects. Some of the reviewed literature in this article is about extremism in Pakistan and some is the general discourse of online extremism, which is somehow linked to groups involved in extremism and terrorism in the country. The slander campaign against state institutions and specifically targeting politico-military leadership in concert with hostile intelligence agencies, is a dangerous trend.

A variety of literature exists on the subject identifies social media as a key platform for the spread of cyberterrorism and hate speech. For instance, an

article described the cyber terrorism and hate speeches being transmitted using social media as a tool to an impressionable audience spreading into millions, specifically citing YouTube (Awan, 2017). The author of this piece of scholarly work termed the strategy to radicalize and prepare “cyber jihadists”. About the effectiveness of cyberspace, the article further alluded that 750 Britons who were indoctrinated through online extremism had travelled till March 2017 to Syria to fight against the Assad regime. Another section of the reachable research depicted that, radicals utilize social media platforms like Facebook, X (Twitter), WhatsApp, TikTok and other digital tools to reach out to strangers who were otherwise inaccessible, to radicalize and cajole them for committing crimes related to violent extremism (Suhaib & Adnan, 2020). This academic work specifically quoted the terrorist group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) for the dissemination of their ideology across the globe and enlarging their pool of recruitment by using digital media platforms. Thus, the authors have explored another strand of fanaticism, which could be religious fanaticism or exploitation of religious sentiment with a view to attracting extremist support for political objectives. Use of religion in Pakistani politics is, though, well established yet, religious fanatics commit digital extremism and terrorism by propagating extremist ideology through a large spectrum of social media audience, to enlarge the scope of recruitment.

Literature acknowledged that the internet became more important and useful for spreading extremist narratives of previously digitally inaccessible violent groups. Internet seems to have emerged as a powerful tool, which, in connection with offline factors, can be associated with decision making in political violence (Suhaib & Adnan, 2020). The existing literature also includes reports prepared by international organizations on various types of extremism. For example, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in a comprehensive report exposed the rise of extremism on ethnic, ideological and political grounds and recommended development strategies to overcome the scourge of such extremism and religious fanaticism (UNDP, n.d.). Pakistan has been agonized with similar menace for more than two decades, wherein factors like ethnicity, religious ideology and political agenda seem to have intermingled and are being used as a tool to extract concessions on these grounds.

The ethnic and political extremism energizes respective societal fault lines to harm national unity. Whereas ideological divide breeds unfathomable hatred and intolerance in society with deadly consequences. Literature also assessed the resurrection of terrorism committed by the violent religious extremist groups of Pakistan in recent years, but a comprehensive analysis of online political, ethnic and religious extremism and their implications in Pakistan was found scant. For example, an article investigated the significant growth of

terrorism in the country as a threat to the country's internal security in the post-2019 era, presenting the concepts of internal security from the broader perspective of human and state security (Shah & Mahmood, 2022).

Another piece of literature similarly covered one aspect of the threat of extremism to different dimensions of human security encompassing personal, political, community and economic aspects of security affected by violent extremist and terrorist organizations (Shah & Mahmood, 2023). A Europe-based policy research organization in a report, identified the internet as the primary source of online radicalization which is effective without physical contact; therefore, all social media platforms use the internet as a source for the dissemination of their agenda (Reding et al., n.d.). The statistics on internet radicalization differ, yet scholars are unanimous that the internet provides the fastest source of contact between potential recruits and the terrorist organizations or extremist entities. The current challenge of online extremism, digital terrorism and fanaticism pertains to the third generation, which acts as a lone actor by connecting to all their like-minded audience through online platforms.

Evaluation of the literature illustrates that internet use has increased during COVID-19, which has both positive and negative impacts. According to an American University's research report, COVID-19 opened a new vista of online connectivity which is prone to misuse given the available of multiple internet facilities, amplifying a new product of "mass radicalization conspiracism that relies not on alternative facts but on an absence of facts" (Ware, 2023). Online extremism and radicalization are not a straightforward conception; these are rather ubiquitous and cannot be defined by policymakers, practitioners and academics alike. The policy makers and security experts view it through the prism of threat to national security and attempt to curb it with legislation and executive orders, academic offer alternative conceptual issues surrounding the online radicalization. The approachable research highlights that the conceptualization like cognition transforming into violent belief and or violent actions beside self-radicalization on the internet, cannot be interchanged with online radicalization (Whittaker, 2022).

A section of academic work quoted scholars of security studies such as Alex P. Schmid and Klaus Neumann, who compare socio-political conventions and individual notions on the concept of ordinary or extreme (Winter et al, 2020). According to them, a social construct which varies with individual perception and interaction could change to another level depending upon motives and access to radicalize. While analyzing the online extremism with a potential to turn into violent extremism is a matter of serious debate in Pakistani Government circles and society at large. The use of social media is a means of

spreading extremism or promoting digital radicalism. In the case of Pakistan, social media has many positive aspects, but it is also becoming a means of harming national institutions and spreading negative and fabricated content by providing access to millions of opinions.

A research article highlights three interesting dimensions of online radicalization turning into violent extremism: 1) illustrate and reinforce, 2) join and integrate and 3) normalize an unacceptable views and behavior (Amit et al., 2021). In the Pakistani context, the tendency of interacting with like-minded groups and making the audience accept what is false and fictitious besides certain behaviours that drastically cross-cut the local social values and norms, stands exposed. This literature review has provided a convenient prospect to understand the existing literature on online extremism in Pakistan. The academic evaluation reveals that there is a gap in the literature that no scholarly work has collectively addressed political, ethnic, and religious extremism and state and societal responses in Pakistan's context simultaneously. This gap has been identified in the review of current academic content, and the same has been addressed in this article.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Gatekeeping Theory to analyze digital extremism and countering measures. The person's identity in society displays a social identity that's appearance, organization, movement and management remain in the heart of Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Strindberg, 2020). SIT explains how in-group and out-group dynamics on digital platforms reinforce extremist identities, fostering polarization. This concept addresses questions such as why and how a group emerges, where it gets its ideology, and how its narratives develop and emerge. The theory analyses the relationships between and among groups and brings their identities into question and the manifestation of their actions. This analysis is based on a primary source of research that really matters to a group and its members. According to another assumption of SIT, "people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, pp. 20-39). It's about the analysis of the groups possessing extremist narratives that exploit social media platforms to radicalize the individuals.

In addition, the "Gatekeeper Theory", which refers to the process of choosing and screening media content, has augmented the theoretical framework to understand how state and societal actors control online extremism. Gatekeepers are the high-level data decision makers who restrict the streaming of information in the digital social system (Gatekeeping theory, 2025). For media in political affairs, the gatekeepers determine what people should

concentrate as the agenda is set by controlling leaders and media elites (Schroeder, 2018). Application of the Gate Keeper theoretical approach in the case of online extremism in Pakistan addresses the question of how state institutions, media regulators, and social media algorithms control the flow of extremist content, acting as gatekeepers that either restrict or amplify harmful narratives. Together, these theories provide a lens to assess the psychological and structural dimensions of digital extremism and its control.

As regards methodology, a mixed-methods approach is adopted, combining qualitative analysis of policy documents, legal frameworks, and case studies of online political, ethnic and religious extremism in Pakistan. In addition, the content analysis was undertaken to assess the digital extremist content and counter-narratives. This research contributes to academic and policy discussions on digital governance, extremism, and societal resilience. By examining Pakistan's unique socio-political context, it offers insights into the challenges of regulating online spaces without infringing on fundamental rights. In this research, political, ethnic and religious extremism and use of social media for this activism, the challenging role of the state and societal counter-narratives in the circumstances have been debated separately.

Political Extremism in Pakistan: Anti-State Narratives

Political violence generally refers to violent acts which are aimed at changing or resisting changes to a country's political system. The use of various social media tools in different countries in the digital age has fueled the politics of protest and change, and its effects have spread unexpectedly (Zia, 2012). According to literature on political violence, "Political violence events are here defined as both organized political violence, such as battles, explosions/remote violence, violence against civilians, as well as mob violence which is spontaneous" (Kishi et al., 2020). Political violence is least desirable in democracies, yet political leaders often instigate their followers to commit violence to help achieve political objectives. A research piece of a British educational institution emphasized an important dimension for consideration by politicians who knowingly or unintentionally use the phrases or statements which are released by extremists for ulterior motives (Awan et al., 2019). This tendency fuels the extremist agenda, and the finding truly fits into Pakistan's environment, wherein political and virtual landscapes overlap for political mileage. The political violence and attacks on political figures are a dangerous trend threatening democracy and freedom of movement and assembly. Concomitantly, the new tendency in masses for having accepted radicalization and political violence to some degree is worrisome for any country, especially Pakistan, which is confronted with multiple threats to security to individuals, communities and the State (Weeraratne et al., 2022).

Violence in the Pakistani context since 2014 was initially aimed at changing the status quo, and in 2022, it was meant to protest over constitutional change. Then opposition leader and later being elevated as Prime Minister, Imran Khan staged a grand sit-in in Islamabad, the capital city, in 2014 to pressure and send the Nawaz Sharif government packing. Not only were unsubstantiated allegations of massive corruption used to exert moral pressure, but the politically aggressive mob also attacked buildings of parliament, state-run TV channel and law-enforcing agencies. Though the government was not de-seated, but the damage was too grave to be endured. It set the decline of Pakistan's traditional political culture and the downslide of the economy in motion. Common masses became accustomed to using foul language against political leaders, and violence against political figures was rather encouraged.

After that, Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) led by Imran Khan massively used social media in its campaigns against the government and continued to malign their political opponents while the party was in power from 2018 to 2022. Since April 2022, a no-trust resolution against Imran Khan in the parliament led to his ouster as the country's prime minister, PTI's online campaign against the government and the military has been intensified. This party particularly attempted to define the new youth-driven agitating politics by attracting Pakistani youth through publishing anti-government posts, blogs, comments, videos, etc. on social media sites such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, etc. The anti-state violent incidents of May 9, 2023, are an illustration of spreading political violence in the country, as a large number of people were politically motivated to commit such illegal violent acts by damaging the national body politics and sensitive security installations. The media termed the May 9 incidents as countrywide violent protests that saw people carrying PTI flags, attacking government and military installations (Khurram, 2024). Pakistan's military courts sentenced 85 civilians to prison, which included Imran Khan's nephew, the terms of sentences ranging from two years to 10 years, for their involvement in the violent protests.

As 2016-2025 is the timeframe of this study, in this period, Pakistan witnessed a surge in online political extremism fueled by anti-state narratives. In 2016, the PTI's digital campaign against Pakistan Muslim League leader and then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was so intense that in 2017, Nawaz Sharif was disqualified by the Supreme Court for allegations of money laundering and dishonesty based on the Panama Papers. However, in 2016, Nawaz Sharif's government brought the PECA Act to curb the anti-state online campaign. PTI during its post-2022 opposition phase increasingly used social media to amplify grievances—ranging from allegations of electoral fraud to framing the state, particularly the military-led establishment, as oppressive. While its narrative resonated with disaffected sections of society,

it also backlashed against pro-establishment voices and promoted online political extremism and violence, resulting in digital witch-hunts, censorship, and even arrests of PTI figures under cybercrime laws.

The strong political move of PTI on social media against the government and military establishment can be imagined after analyzing the party leader's messages. For instance, in a message on X, in April 2022, Imran Khan had said, "I want to thank all our social media warriors who have valiantly taken our fight against US regime change conspiracy forward on all social media platforms. Continue carrying on our movement for Pakistan's sovereignty and democracy. You are our frontline warriors" (Mehmood, 2022). As PTI called the current government an imported government, this message was spread with the hashtag #MarchAgainstImportedGovt.

During the period (2016-2025), PTI's leadership was blamed for provoking youth against the state's institutions, especially the military. Besides violent protests, including clashes with police and anti-state rhetoric and hate speech, PTI launched a massive digital campaign through social media. The state responded with a mix of coercion (blocking platforms, detaining activists) and counter-messaging, but the polarized online landscape deepened societal divisions. Civil society groups and independent media struggled to mediate, as debates around nationalism and dissent grew increasingly toxic.

Online Ethnic Extremism: Nationalist Digital Movements

Ganguly defined ethnicity as "ethnic identity is biologically given and, in this sense, human beings are born and naturally come to acquire and share with other group members the cultural attributes of the group" (Ganguly, 2009). Ethnic violence occurs when various ethnic groups assert and demand their political and economic rights using ethnicity as a tool of violence. Pakistan, being a multi-ethnic society, is prone to ethnic rivalries and extremist tendencies. The integral imbalances, the sense of political marginalization and economic deprivations whip up ethnic rivalries, particularly in Balochistan (Kucecz, 20024). Struggle for political empowerment and equitable share in the national exchequer is, though, a constitutional right as long as it is pursued peacefully (Government of Pakistan, 1973). Karachi, the cosmopolitan city and the financial hub of Pakistan, has witnessed a dreadful ethnic infighting in the 1980s and remains vulnerable to such occasional ethnic eruptions (Gayer, 2022). There are also ethnic movements within the interior Sindh province that have occasionally fueled ethnic extremism and have also been violent.

Indeed, most of studies concerning Sindh's identity politics concentrate on the era of the 1980s, when a rebellion against the state provoked disturbing military subjugation, and ethnic differences deepened the division between various groups and organizations based in the province of Sindh (Levesque,

2021). However, a dangerous trend of sub nationalism has been merged with ostensible political struggle in Balochistan province for greater autonomy and control over provincial assets, especially the minerals. Balochistan saw ethno-nationalist terrorism and violence on various occasion; however, the ferocity of ethno-nationalist extremism with the ambition for separation from the country is much greater since the 2000s. The online platform gave a new fillip to the propagation of ethnic extremism and terrorism, enhancing propaganda in favour of violent separatist movements.

From 2016 to 2025, Sindhi and Baloch nationalist movements increasingly turned to digital platforms to amplify their demands for autonomy, independence and highlight grievances against state policies, including enforced disappearances and resource exploitation. Social media became a battleground, with hashtag campaigns (e.g., #FreeBalochistan, #Sindhudesh) drawing global attention while being aggressively suppressed within Pakistan. A Sindhi militant group with political ambitions - Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army, involved in attacking the law enforcement agencies in Pakistan, has been highlighted on social media (The Centrum Media, 2020).

The militant groups in Balochistan, such as Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), exploit digital forums, including Rumble and Telegram to project their rebel activities and attract support from the Baloch public for their militant campaign (Aziz, 2024). It also examines the communication tactics of the fanatic factions, the role of encoded messaging tools by avoiding traditional media controllers, the challenges posed by cross-platform information sharing and the consequences for Pakistan's counter-rebellion efforts. There are many websites engaged in accusing Pakistani authorities of the suppression of the masses in Balochistan. For example, in 2024, a webpage titled, "Pakistan: Authorities continue to silence dissent with crackdown on Baloch and other activists, protesters and journalists," gives the impression that the state uses force to suppress voices for political rights (CIVICUS Monitor, 2024).

The state countered by blocking websites, pressuring activists, and labelling such content as "foreign-funded" subversion. Meanwhile, mainstream Pakistani media often dismissed these movements as "anti-state," deepening polarization. Despite censorship, diaspora communities, particularly anti-Pakistan Baloch nationalists and digital rights activists, kept these issues alive, making online spaces a critical—yet contentious—arena for ethnic resistance and state surveillance.

Online Religious Extremism: Terrorists' Digital Mobilization

In the debate on extremism or religious extremism in the case of Pakistan, the term "sect" merits a deeper look to identify the digital extremist tendencies. "The term sect is used in the sociology of religion to designate a particular

kind of religious group” (Sial, n.d.). Sectarianism creates distinct identities within the same religion, while sectarian violence arises when allegiance to one sect leads to hostility toward other sects based on ideological differences (Abd al-Hay, 2024).

Pakistan had long been a hotbed of sectarian extremism which was amplified manifold during 1990s Afghan Jihad (Siddiqi, 2015). The intersecting acrimony widened the hostility and claimed dozens of lives from both sides. Sectarian extremism sprouts due to hate speeches and the spread of hate material in the form of printed literature or religious education in respective seminaries (Haider, 2025). Despite the existence of laws prohibiting the spread of hate material, various sectarian organizations continue to further their sectarian agenda at the cost of sectarian harmony in the country. The internet and online platforms have multiplied the lethality of hate being accessible to millions of zealots from each sect. TTP and other terrorist activist groups in KPK are directly linked with sectarian extremism and terrorism. Sporadic unrest and targeting of minorities is also attributed to ultra-extremism by selected sectarian outfits, precipitated by online sectarian extremism and digital fanaticism.

Literature describes that social media helps militant groups spread extremist and fundamentalist ideas (Suhaib & Adnan, 2020). During the period 2016-2025, religious extremist groups like Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Al-Qaeda, and ISIS-Khorasan (ISKP) exploited social media to incite violence, recruit followers, and propagate sectarian hatred (Warraich & Mukhtar, 2023). The TLP weaponized blasphemy accusations to mobilize mass protests through viral campaigns, while terrorist groups like TTP and ISKP disseminated propaganda via encrypted apps, glorifying attacks and exploiting anti-state sentiments. According to a study, despite the Pakistani military’s successes in the security operations against TTP, it has been unable to curb this terrorist group’s propaganda on digital platforms, which uses state failures and ideological voids to radicalize minority citizens (Patil & Awasthi, 2025). Platforms like Twitter and Telegram became hotbeds for extremist rhetoric, prompting sporadic government crackdowns—often reactive and inconsistent. Blasphemy-related vigilantism surged online, with false allegations leading to mob violence. Despite states’ curbs on TLP and counter-terrorism operations, extremist narratives persisted, exposing gaps in Pakistan’s cyber-policing and societal resilience against radicalization. Before venturing into the domain of state responses consisting of legal and administrative frameworks, it is felt prudent to summarize the impact of social media propagation themes, their effectiveness and the type of platforms employed to ensure dissemination.

Social Media: Anti-State Narrative and Extremism

The content on social media platforms considered inflammatory was randomly reviewed by the authors, and findings based on accessed data are produced in the ensuing paragraphs. The term "anti-state" is progressively used as an umbrella for two very diverse categories of content: legitimate political dissent (criticizing the government/judiciary) and actual violent extremism (incitement by banned groups). Identification of anti-state content categories in the 2016–2025 timeline, "anti-state content" is identified through four primary thematic lenses, as tracked by the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) and the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA):

Content targeting the military and judiciary; this includes posts accusing these institutions of financial corruption or political biases to discredit and demonize in the public eyes. It is being executed by digital warriors of political parties which harbour grudges against military and judiciary.

Digital footprints of banned groups like the TTP (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan) and BLA (Balochistan Liberation Army) use platforms to spread narratives of mutiny and territorial secession. TTP employs Takfiri fatwa to arouse militant youth against military for targeted assaults on military installations (Rehman, 2021). Whereas, BLA propagates fabricated narrative of states' repression and usurpation of Baloch resources and drums up cause to incite insurgency in Balochistan province (Saad, 2022).

"Paid trends" identified by the state as being operated by foreign-based bots or domestic political actors to create artificial polarization. Coordinated mobilization for attacks on state infrastructure, notably cited in the May 9, 2025 incident investigations. Content from groups like the BLA or PTM highlights human rights abuses or "enforced disappearances" to mobilize regional sentimentalities against the federal government. Narratives identified by the state as "non-organic," often operated by "bots and trolls" from abroad (e.g., North America or India) to create internal divides through coordinated disinformation.

Although these groups advocate for freedom of expression and prominently employ this claim in their propaganda, their practices often raise questions about the consistency of this position. The literature presents differing views on whether freedom of expression should be accompanied by responsibility, while recognizing that the right is not absolute (Muhammad & Zakir, 2025). Independent & state reports from 2025–2026 highlight how these narratives are distributed. X (formerly Twitter), cited as the primary hub for polarizing "anti-army" trends and "non-cooperative" regarding content deletion. TikTok used for viral clips that incite public mobilization. In 2025, TikTok removed

over 28 million videos in a single quarter for community violations, including misinformation and sensitive themes.

YouTube serves as the main platform for "alternative news" channels that frequently challenge official state narratives. Channels used for "alternative news" that bypass mainstream media censorship. 27 channels blocked in 2025 for "anti-state" disinformation. Facebook used for political mobilization and "fake news" related to national economy & security. (Cheema, Chacko & Gul, 2019). It is linked to 1.06 million blocked "immoral/illegal" URLs in 2025. WhatsApp encrypted groups used for "paid trends" & distributing inflammatory audio/visuals. Central focus of "Marka-e-Haq" campaign investigations with a view to demonize top military brass and adding insult to the injury of Shuhada families; by denying deaths of their loved ones or declaring them as paid mercenaries. PTA Content Management Report (2025): Documents that 136,819 URLs (76.47% of processed links) were blocked for being "against security and defence of Pakistan". NCCIA Investigation Summary (2025) reveals that 356 registered FIRs and 789 enquiries against individuals for anti-state propaganda (Munir & Shabir, 2018).

Table: Content’s Categories, Description, Platforms, and Responses (2016–2025)

Categories	Actors	Description	Platforms Used	State Response
Mobilization Against State & its Orgs including Judiciary and Military	Political Activists Such as PTI	Alleging political bias, financial corruption and institutional misconduct	X (Twitter), Facebook, YouTube & Whatsapp	Monitored and dealt by NCCIA and PTA as anti-state content
Extremist and Militant’s Propaganda	TTP and other extremist and militant organization	Takfiri fatwas and extremist narratives encouraging militant youth	X, Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, YouTube	Investigated under anti-extremist and anti-terrorism and cybercrime laws
Separatist Narratives	Groups like BLA	Claims of state repression,	X, Facebook	Classified as anti-state and

		exploitation of Baloch resources	, YouTube	separatist propaganda
Human Rights Abuses & Enforced Disappearances Narratives	Non-profit organizations and other actors	Content highlighting enforced disappearances and alleged human rights abuses	X, Facebook, YouTube	Considered by the state as politically sensitive and potentially inflammatory
Foreign Disinformation	Enemy states such as India	Allegedly operated through bots and troll networks from abroad	X, Facebook	Monitored by NCCIA and PTA
Anti-State News Channels	Anti-Government and Anti-State activists	Digital channels challenging state official narratives	YouTube	27 YouTube channels blocked for alleged anti-state moves
Political Mobilization and Fake News	Anti-Government and Anti-State activists	Disinformation relating to national security, economy, and political affairs.	Facebook	Linked to 1.06 million blocked illegal/immoral URLs in 2025
Other Anti-State Viral Content	Miscellaneous	Videos containing misinformation and other harmful material	TikTok & other multiple online platforms	Over 28 million videos removed, 136,819 URLs blocked and 356 FIRs registered and 789 enquiries initiated

State Response to the Digital Extremism

A thorough analysis of history uncovers that fanaticism and extremism have constantly been a problematic and resulted into human losses and destructions. Fanatic-driven political, ethnic and religious thoughts have been liable for massive deaths, hatred, conflicts and dislocation in different regions - including Asia, Africa and Europe (Chowdhury et al., 2015). This is the era of digital or electronic extremism, which does not take long to spread extremist ideologies and incite physical violent extremism. In Pakistan, the government has tried to institute preventive legal framework to deter and punish offenders however, the impact had been minimal given the complexity of technical evasive strategies and favorable social media domestic laws in the West. Anti-Pakistan forces had been exploiting the anti-state sentiment by employing deceptive techniques to multiply damage without being detected. Despite concerted efforts, prevention of digital or electronic extremism in the country has become a difficult task. The technological imperatives and politico-legal constraints further inhibit government actions both at home and abroad.

Accordingly, in the country, Pakistan Electronic Media Regulator Authority (PEMRA) ACT 2002 was instituted by the government (PEMRA, 2002). With an amendment in 2007, it is a broader law and direction towards the regulation of dozens of newly launched private tv channels and FM radios (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2007). PEMRA takes action against media houses which violate the state's guidelines and telecast content considered contrary to PEMRA rules (Dawn, 2007). However, this law mainly affects the owners of the media houses and by and large its application under PEMRA has been accepted. Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 was a comprehensive legislation that explained all possible acts of electronic crimes, the role of service providers and punitive actions, including an institutional role for conducting forensics to establish the commission of an electronic crime (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2016). This law was meant to cover all electronic sources and devices. However, the latest Digital Nation Pakistan Act 2025 is probably the most biting piece of legislation as the media is making a hue and cry against the law by declaring it a draconian law (Senate of Pakistan, 2025).

Digital Nation Pakistan ACT 2025 is the amended and comprehensive piece of legislation to monitor, regulate and prosecute digital platform users committing offences under this act. This law enjoys exceptional power to overrule all previous laws if there is any inconsistency with this law. Provisions of this act supersede all other laws, should there be any discrepancy. The only concern is the transparent application of the law to

punish genuine criminals who are flouting the law of the land. All such laws are often criticized by media persons for being executive tools to curb freedom of expression. Even Amnesty International describes as “latest amendment to the draconian Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) by the National Assembly will further tighten the government’s grip over Pakistan’s heavily controlled digital landscape, if passed by both houses of Parliament” (Amnesty International, 2025). Therefore, all such laws must be applied transparently for credibility in the eyes of the public.

Since laws in this research pertain to online platforms using the internet, electronic crime laws are most relevant. However, if an individual communicates a material which falls under the jurisdiction of anti-terrorism law, then the Anti-Terrorism ACT 1997, amended from time to time, can be invoked for deterrent punishment. The Protection of Pakistan Act (POPA) 2014 is yet another law which leaves little chance of evasion for the accused person (s) (Protection of Pakistan Act, 2014). POPA holds the accused responsible for proving innocence; otherwise taken as guilty. This law was necessitated to punish hardened terrorists and their facilitators. The evidence was made permissible before the court of law, besides confession before a superintendent of police or equivalent rank officers from law-enforcing agencies. It was a major departure from the conventional law of evidence for the sake of deterrent punishment in exceptional circumstances.

Not only at the federal level, but provincial governments also enacted laws to prevent online extremism. The Sindh Apex Committee sets up a special section in the provincial interior ministry to control misuse of social media in coordination with federal government departments such as the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) (Siddiqui, 2025). Overall, in Pakistan, the state's emphasis on hard measures to combat extremism on social media is still far from the real target, which means that the state is still behind an obligatory achievement. As suggested by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the state also needs soft measures to bring tolerance and forbearance in society. UNDP proposes preventing violent extremism through inclusive development, tolerance, and respect for diversity as a development-focused response to addressing radicalization (UNDP, n.d.).

Society’s Response to Online Extremism

Civil society is one of the main actors in dealing with social issues. According to a British expert, the civil society’s role is equally important for curbing violent radicalism (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.). Persons, societal groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are progressively becoming active in preventing violent extremism by employing

different approaches besides the actions of the state, military and foreign organizations (Weiss, 2016).

Online political extremism has sparked mixed reactions from society. While some segments, particularly youth and activists, actively counter hate speech and misinformation through fact-checking and awareness campaigns, others remain passive or even complicit. Highlighting the violent competition between the state and opposition, particularly between the military establishment, the literature argues that the country's civil society suffers in this battle (CIVICUS Lens, 2023). Political polarization often leads to echo chambers on social media, where opposing groups aggressively defend their ideologies, further fueling hostility. Civil society organizations and journalists play a crucial role in exposing fake news and promoting digital literacy, but their efforts are sometimes met with backlash from partisan supporters. As a whole, there is growing concern about the impact of online political extremism on national unity, yet a cohesive societal response remains fragmented.

Online ethnic extremism has drawn strong condemnation from progressive segments of Pakistani society, particularly in urban centers where diversity is more celebrated. Human rights groups and liberal voices frequently campaign against hate speech targeting ethnic minorities, such as the Pashtun, Sindhi, or Baloch communities. However, ethnic tensions are sometimes exploited by political actors, leading to heated online debates and even incitement to violence. Despite this, interfaith and inter-ethnic solidarity movements have emerged on social media, promoting peace and inclusivity. The challenge lies in overcoming deep-seated prejudices and ensuring that legal measures against online hate speech are effectively enforced.

Religious extremism on digital platforms remains a contentious issue in Pakistan, with society divided in its response. Though many have lost faith in a state that, by and large, has abrogated its responsibility to provide for the safety and security of its citizens, but in a positive trend, local people acting within civil society groups are responding to violent religious extremism in unprecedented ways (Weiss, 2016). Conservative factions sometimes defend extremist rhetoric under the guise of religious identity, while moderate and secular Pakistanis actively challenge radical narratives through counter-speech and interfaith dialogues. The government has occasionally cracked down on extremist content, but inconsistent policies and weak enforcement allow such material to persist. Grassroots movements, led by activists and religious scholars, advocate for tolerance and highlight the dangers of online radicalization. Despite these efforts, blasphemy accusations and sectarian hostility continue to thrive online, reflecting broader societal tensions that require sustained education and legal reform to address.

Despite the significance of the topic, this study has specifically focused on online extremism being spread by political ideologues, ethno-nationalist and ethno-sectarian elements, who are out to harm national unity and social cohesion by posting poisonous material by skilfully playing with public emotions to make their propaganda palatable. However, violent extremism, terrorism and radicalization are beyond the purview of this research, have been cross-referred at places being intertwined with sectarian and political violence. Political digital terrorism, sectarian fanaticism, and misguided motives of ideological extremism are areas of special focus.

Key Findings and Implications

This study reveals some key findings such as exploitation of digital platforms, ethno-sectarian fissures in communities, political polarization, race for monetization, the internet as a source of mass radicalization and foreign interference. Major findings of the research have been elucidated in the ensuing paragraphs.

Internet is the source of exploitation of digital platforms by creating more online opportunities for the extremists to connect and become radicalized. The religious organizations and the sub nationalist groups are misusing online platforms for reaching out to their audience for recruitment and terrorism. The internet acts as an echo chamber for extremists from all backgrounds- ethno-sectarian, ethno-nationalist, political radicals or ideological extremists. A variety of social media platforms powered by internet are assisting extremist forces to blur the state narrative by offering alternative sinister agenda.

The political narrative and appeals are attractive and act as an incentive for self-radicalization. Pakistan is currently victim of this menace and the unknown vloggers are disseminating hate material from various locations, at times being hijacked by hostile intelligence agencies and acting as a proxy for hybrid war. Internally, much needed political stability for socio-economic development is being eroded with the barrage of such narratives.

The three kinds of online extremism (political, ethnic and religious) as expounded in the preceding paragraphs are causing fissures among various ethnic communities, reenergizing the sectarian fault lines and politically venomous propaganda is vitiating the desired environment for political and economic stability. Such a divide is not only causing cracks in the diverse societal canvas but is undermining the fledgling democracy in the country as well.

Beside political leverage and ethno-sectarian mileage for power politics, the atmosphere of uncertainty and political chaos is being capitalized by the anti-state elements for monetary benefits. The favorable environments attract large

pool of viewers, boosting their online ratings and enhancing prospects of monetization from social media platforms. The reactive and events driven counter extremism and counterterrorism strategies have failed to deliver. The urgency of an all-encompassing plan of action to deter anti-state activities and save the future generations from destructive digital terrorism and fanaticism cannot be overemphasized.

The internet reach and speed are phenomenal thus adding fast into pool of online extremism and digital fanaticism, supercharging the conspiracy of mass radicalism – “Relying not on substitutive reality but on an absence of facts (Ware, 2023). Discernibly, hostile intelligence agencies are pursuing hybrid war in Pakistan and digital proxies are further undermining the national sovereignty and security by augmenting the nefarious foreign agenda.

Policy Recommendations and Future Directions

Drawing on the findings of this study, this section of article outlines some actionable policy recommendations and suggests future directions to address key issues related to online extremism. The national political leadership assisted by military establishment should rise to the occasion and strive to garner national unity and political stability. Dissenting voices from provinces are destabilizing the federation.

The actions under narrative building /soft strategy need to be accelerated for effective control over digital extremism and terrorism. National consensus and inter-agency coordination, promotion of digital literacy and counter-extremism education in the country should be pursued by taking all the stakeholders on board. Any future counter digital extremist strategy should ensure a delicate balance between robust enforcement of relevant laws and acceptable standards of civil liberties and human rights.

Sectarian divide in Pakistan is an exploitable fault line by anti-state elements. Without causing an offense, the government should facilitate dialogue between religious scholars and intelligentsia to foster interfaith harmony and protect rights of minorities in the country. National Counter Terrorism Authority -NACTA’s organ like Joint Intelligence Directorate should be revitalized in concert with Federal Investigation Agency - FIA, Intelligence Bureau - IB, Inter Service Intelligence - ISI and other Military Intelligence agencies for cohesive national response to counter digital fanaticism and terrorism. The role of NACTA and lately inaugurated National Fusion and Threat Assessment Centre (NAFTAC) need to be reconciled in the best of national security interest.

Variety of digital traffic regulation laws have been enacted by the Parliament, these should be enforced with full vigor and the culprits should be brought to

justice. Law enforcing agencies like Federal Investigation Agency and National Cyber Crimes Investigation Agency – NCCIA may recommend specific laws to plug in loop holes for handing down deterrent punishment to the perpetrators of cybercrimes. A strategy based on advocacy as part of anti-terrorism and deradicalization should be pursued as long-term policy of rehabilitation. However, as a short-term step periodic online symposia for collective wisdom should be arranged by NACTA and other departments for creating awareness and sensitizing culprits on strict rules and deterrent punishments.

The controlling authorities of international digital platforms are located outside Pakistan therefore, Pakistani courts cannot not be moved. Pakistan's Foreign office along with other national stakeholders should evaluate diplomatic moves to either silence the identified criminals abroad or approach the concerned governments for repatriation.

Conclusion

The state plays a pivotal role in curbing political, ethnic, and religious extremism in Pakistan through legal frameworks, counterterrorism operations, and deradicalization programs. By strengthening law enforcement, ensuring equitable governance, and addressing socioeconomic disparities, the government can dilute extremist narratives. However, excessive reliance on coercive measures without addressing root causes—such as political marginalization, economic inequality, and institutional discrimination—risks further alienating vulnerable communities. A balanced approach combining security measures with inclusive policies, education reforms, and interfaith dialogue is essential to sustainably counter extremism.

A variety of anti- terrorism and prevention of cybercrimes laws have been enacted and the culprits are being punished by the courts. However, capacity deficits in technical monitoring, forensics and prosecution are weak links which are exploited by extremist forces and terrorist entities. The hostile intelligence agencies render technical assistance thus frustrating the anti-terror and counter extremism effort by the state. The political alienation and socio-economic disparities are being distorted to serve anti-state agenda. Weak national counterterrorism and counterextremism institutions and less than ideal coordination among federal and provincial institutions are considered major impediment in achieving desired results.

Equally critical is society's role in fostering tolerance and resisting extremist ideologies. Civil society organizations, media, and religious leaders must collaborate to promote pluralism, critical thinking, and peaceful dissent. Grassroots initiatives that bridge ethnic and sectarian divides can weaken extremist recruitment, while digital literacy programs can counter online

radicalization. Ultimately, lasting stability requires a partnership between the state and society—one that prioritizes justice, representation, and shared national identity over divisive extremism. Only through such collective efforts Pakistan can mitigate the threats posed by radicalization and build a more cohesive future.

There is enough scope for further research over radicalization and incentives for religious extremism/ terrorism and ethno-nationalist terrorism in the country. Target killing of particular ethnic and sectarian groups beside victimizing minorities over fabricated blasphemy charges offer vast scope of deeper research to understand the mindset and suggest an all-inclusive counter extremism strategy.

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