

## THE USE OF RELIGION FOR POLITICAL LEGITIMACY BY MILITARY REGIMES IN PAKISTAN: A STUDY OF ZIA-UL-HAQ AND PERVEZ MUSHARRAF

**Naveed Ahmed**

(Lecturer) Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto University of Law, Karachi,

Email : [Naveed.ahmed@szabul.edu.pk](mailto:Naveed.ahmed@szabul.edu.pk)

**Dr. Hafiz Ali Sher**

Lecturer Cadet College Steel Town Karachi

Email : [hafizalisher89@gmail.com](mailto:hafizalisher89@gmail.com)

**Noor Mustafa Barkati**

(PhD Research Scholar)

University of Karachi, Karachi.

### Abstract

*Military governments in Pakistan have relied heavily on religion as an instrument of political legitimacy due to their lack of any democratic credentials in terms of electoral legitimacy. This paper aims to analyze the use of religion as an instrument of political legitimacy by two military rulers in Pakistan. The study will compare the strategies of the two military leaders to examine the ways they instrumentalized religion to legitimate their non-democratic rule.*

*Through a qualitative comparative study of existing literature, documents, and data, the research aims to assess the use of religion in legitimizing political authority. The study is based on theoretical perspectives on political legitimacy, instrumentalism, and civil-military relations in politics. Additionally, a comparative framework is employed in this research to provide a broader context for the study by analyzing other countries' use of religion as an instrument of political legitimacy.*

*The research found that General Zia-ul-Haq pursued an ideology-based Islamic policy to legitimize his non-democratic rule. However, his successor, Musharraf, adopted an instrumental approach to use religion for political gains. Despite these differences, it is shown how military rulers used the institution of religion to strengthen their non-democratic rule.*

*It is evident from the study that the use of religion as an instrument of political legitimacy has caused many problems for the political system of Pakistan. Thus, the paper suggests that for sustainable political development, the relationship between religion and politics needs to be transformed through institutional reforms.*

**Keywords:** Political Legitimacy; Religion and Politics; Military Regimes; Pakistan; Zia-ul-Haq; Pervez Musharraf; Islamization; Civil-Military Relations; Authoritarian Governance; Instrumentalization of Religion; Ideological Legitimacy; Sectarian Politics;

### 1. Introduction

The interplay between religion and the exercise of political authority has been an important field of inquiry into governance processes in various societies around the world. In Pakistan, the relationship between religion and political legitimacy is complicated due to the country's ideological underpinnings, as well as its political history. Although religion played a vital part in the formation of the Pakistani state, its role in ensuring legitimacy has changed over time. Particularly, religion has been heavily relied upon as a source of legitimacy in times of military rule.

Legitimacy of political authority denotes its acceptance by citizens, which is usually ensured through democratic processes, efficient institutions, and adherence to constitutional procedures. Nonetheless, when there is a lack of democratic legitimacy, alternative bases of legitimacy emerge, as seen in the case of Pakistan, which is riddled with episodes of military takeover of political power.

While the use of religion to ensure legitimacy may seem like an easy way out, it is far from being the case. In fact, military rulers utilize religion as a basis for their legitimacy through its ideological aspects. Thus, it becomes evident that religion plays an important role in ensuring

the legitimacy of political rule in Pakistan through moral reasoning and social construction of political legitimacy.

The reason for the importance of religion in Pakistan's politics lies in the ideological nature of the country. As a state that was founded in the name of religion, Pakistan has experienced many instances of ideological conflict and political strife between secular and religious elites in its governance processes. Religion continues to be a powerful political tool in the Pakistani political environment.

In turn, the military plays a key role in the Pakistani political landscape, as evidenced by several military coups since the state was formed. Military takeovers of political power entail the end of democratic processes and the transfer of executive powers into the hands of generals. As a result, it becomes difficult to establish legitimacy through democratic processes and thus the need for alternative strategies emerges.

The most prominent of Pakistan's military rulers include General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq and General Pervez Musharraf. The former held power between 1977 and 1988, while the latter took office in 1999 and ruled until 2008. While the strategies employed by both leaders were quite different in terms of ideology and implementation, they were based on similar political considerations. Both Zia-ul-Haq and Musharraf sought religious legitimacy, which made them two interesting cases.

Zia-ul-Haq is considered the father of Islamization of Pakistan's legal and political frameworks. His actions towards introducing religious ideologies in politics are viewed as a means to construct a political legitimacy in Pakistan. Musharraf is known for his policy of enlightened moderation, which implied Pakistan's promotion as a moderate state that adheres to Muslim ideologies and principles.

Both cases offer an example of the role of religion in constructing political legitimacy among authoritarian political elite. By comparing the strategies of these two regimes, one could shed some light on why religion is important for Pakistan's politics.

This research seeks to investigate the use of religion in building political legitimacy by comparing cases of Zia-ul-Haq and Musharraf. In addition, the study will discuss how this process occurs in other states.

In this paper, it is assumed that the use of religion in ensuring political legitimacy in Pakistan does not reflect its inherent features but is rather a strategy aimed at ensuring institutional and political goals.

## **2. Literature Review**

The application of religion in politics to derive legitimacy is another topic of interest for many political scientists and South Asian scholars. Researchers have examined such phenomenon from different angles: political mobilization, institutionalism, and governance.

For example, Vali Nasr proposes an influential idea according to which religion was often used as a political resource in Pakistan. Namely, religious identity is employed to attain political goals, especially when the country faces instability. The idea of instrumentalism in religion is also expressed by Hassan Abbas, who emphasizes that during the era of Ziaul-Haq, state authorities aimed at consolidating their position by resorting to political Islam. It is believed that Islamization became one of the methods to undermine the political opposition.

From the institutional perspective, one might consider the contribution by Ayesha Siddiqi, who points out the dominance of military institutions in the political life of Pakistan. In addition, it is argued that the sources of legitimacy in such regimes are non-democratic, which explains why religion plays a significant role in them.

The theories on political legitimacy can also add to the discussion. For example, Max Weber distinguishes three types of authority that correspond to different sources of legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. The concept can be applied to Pakistan in order to

understand that religion serves as traditional and ideological legitimacy for the military regimes.

As to the recent scholarly works on religion in politics, researchers pay attention to the dynamics of the process in question. Namely, the Islamization of the country has become less pronounced; however, religion continues to play a major role. It appears that the regime employs religious discourse in order to strengthen its position and engage particular social groups.

Another aspect concerns comparative studies that help to learn about other countries and regions. There are works dedicated to the application of religion for political legitimacy in the Middle East. They show a diversity of practices, from institutionalization of religion within the government structures to the instrumentalist approach.

Finally, although there are many studies on the topic, it seems that there is still a lack of comparative research into the ways religions were exploited for the purposes of deriving legitimacy in various regimes. It becomes even more important when one considers regional specifics of the process in question. The study seeks to fill this gap in the literature.

### **3. Methodology**

The current study will adopt an analytical and comparative research design to investigate how religion has been used as an instrument in constructing political legitimacy under the Pakistani military regimes. Being interpretive in nature, a qualitative approach to analyzing religion's role in justifying political power is appropriate since it allows an extensive evaluation of political strategies, policies, speeches, etc.

#### **3.1 Research Design and Rationale**

The research design consists of three main components:

1. Historical analysis to determine how a particular regime came into power, the conditions it had to face, and the sequence of the use of religious arguments in its justification.
2. Institutional analysis to identify ways through which a regime has included religion into various political, economic, and social institutions (courts, schools, bureaucracy, laws, etc.).
3. Comparative analysis in terms of political strategies pursued by the regimes in their religious justification of power.

#### **3.2 Data Sources**

The data will be collected through the use of triangulation that involves academic literature, official documents, historical records, as well as international reports and evaluations related to Pakistan's political history, its civil-military relations, and Islamicization.

#### **3.3 Analytical Framework**

For the purpose of systematic evaluation of two military regimes, four criteria for comparison will be used:

- Legitimacy strategy: ideological vs practical use of religion as the tool of gaining legitimacy;
- Policies: instruments utilized in the course of implementation of religious policies;
- Political coalitions: involvement with different political groups (religious and others);
- Consequences of implementation: consequences for the state's rule of law, inclusiveness, stability, etc.

#### **3.4 Limitations**

First, this study uses only secondary data and does not include personal interviews and other primary research methods. Second, two military regimes, only, are compared here and no attention is paid to civilian governments.

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1 Zia ul Haq – Institutionalized Islamization

The military dictatorship of General Zia ul Haq (1977-1988) is an example of the fullest attempt at institutionalizing religion as the basis for political legitimacy in Pakistan. Lacking any form of political legitimacy by virtue of its military nature, the regime attempted to legitimize itself ideologically through religious means.

#### 4.1.1 Legitimacy Strategy

To do so, Zia attempted to convert political legitimacy into ideological-religious legitimacy. Presenting his regime as the realization of the religious principles of the country's founders, Zia claimed that Islamization was a remedy for past errors and a fulfillment of the state's ideological mission.

#### 4.1.2 Policy Instruments and Institutional Embedding

As a result, Zia's regime implemented several important religious changes:

- **Hodood Ordinances (1979):** The introduction of religious punishment into criminal procedure, moving away from a purely secular legal framework to a religious one.
- **Federal Shariat Court (1980):** This body was authorized to examine legislation against Islamic injunctions and establish an alternative site of constitutional power.
- **Zakat and Ushr Ordinance (1980):** The creation of religious taxation by the state.
- **Education and media reforms:** The emphasis of state institutions on religious teaching and media.

All of the above contributed to embedding religion within the workings of the state rather than just its ideology.

#### 4.1.3 Political Coalitions and Social Base

The dictator attempted to gain political allies from religious parties and the Muslim clergy. These efforts were made both to build a broader support base for his regime outside of the military and to create new stakeholders in the process of Islamization. At the same time, political opponents, especially secular parties, remained limited.

#### 4.1.4 Governance Effects and Long-Term Consequences

In general, Zia's policy yielded some long-lasting consequences for Pakistan's governance:

- The use of religious criteria in public policy that complicated the task of legal reform later.
- Politically active religious movements as a challenge to governance.
- Conflicts between different interpretations of law leading to enforcement difficulties.
- Increased sectarianism as a consequence of changing relations between religious groups.

In terms of political legitimacy, Zia managed to achieve ideological consolidation, but this had the cost of increased institutional inflexibility and social divisiveness.

### 4.2 Pervez Musharraf: Pragmatic & Selective Religion as Instrument of Strategic Legitimacy

Pervez Musharraf regime (1999–2008), by contrast, entered an entirely new environment—domestic and international. Post-9/11 context imposed additional pressures for moderation on Pakistan. Musharraf regime thus sought to balance external pressure with internal politics realities.

#### 4.2.1 Legitimacy Strategy

Musharraf introduced an ideology of “enlightened moderation,” positioning his regime as a link between identity (Islamic) and modernity. Musharraf regime's ideology was more pragmatic, targeted and balanced as opposed to Zia's:

- **Externally:** message of moderation and cooperation against extremism.
- **Internally:** non-confrontational stance towards religious forces.

Religion thus continued playing an important role—but as a strategic tool rather than the ideological base.

#### 4.2.2 Instruments of Policy & Selective Cooperation

Musharraf pursued a selective approach to the use of religion-based policy tools:

- Regulatory policies to curb extremism (implemented selectively).
- Spatial and temporal flexibility in using religious parties in coalition with international allies (electoral support).
- Public rhetoric about enlightened moderation, without deactivating religion-based establishments.

#### 4.2.3 Coalition Politics & Balance of Forces

In coalition politics, Musharraf pursued a policy of balancing:

- Deliberate engagement of religious forces to avoid their opposition.
- Tight relations with international supporters who require him to show moderation.
- Controlled political participation of his opponents by granting religious groups political room.

In such way, religion becomes another tool to establish the required level of influence.

#### 4.2.4 Results of Governance & its Consequences

As a result of such a policy, Musharraf regime has achieved:

- Some temporary stability through coalition building and controlled liberalism.
- Irregularity in policy decisions as a result of competing pressures.
- A presence of religion within political sphere despite selective policies.
- Lack of credibility due to lack of coherence between rhetoric and actions.

Legitimization-wise, the regime was able to acquire only situational legitimacy.

#### 4.3 Comparative Analysis: Models of Religious Legitimacy

A comparative analysis of the two models allows us to draw some conclusions on how each regime compensated for its democratic deficit through religion, yet based on different premises:

Dimension	Zia-ul-Haq	Pervez Musharraf
Core Strategy	Ideological Islamization	Pragmatic, selective use
Role of Religion	Foundational to regime legitimacy	Instrumental and audience-specific
Policy Depth	System-wide legal and institutional embedding	Targeted engagement and regulation
Coalitions	Strong alignment with religious actors	Balancing between religious and secular forces
International Posture	Limited constraint from external norms	High sensitivity to global expectations
Durability of Effects	Deep, long-term institutional imprint	Short- to medium-term, reversible impacts

##### 4.3.1 Converging Insight

Even though they are using different strategies, both systems reveal one common trend: religion functions as an alternative currency of legitimacy where electoral legitimation is lacking. The only thing that differs is their level of institutionalization and instrumental application.

##### 4.3.2 Implications for the Political System in Pakistan

- Consecutive use of religion as the source of legitimacy enhances its place in politics, irrespective of the nature of the regime.
- Embeddedness of religion in institutions (Zia) brings path dependency to future policy choices.

- The instrumental application of religion (Musharraf) renders religion a normative tool of political maneuvering.
- The convergence of these processes makes it increasingly difficult to restore the balance to democracy and lawfulness.

#### **4.4 Synthesis: From Ideology to Instrument and Back**

The two examples together highlight a continuum from:

- One end where ideological integration (Zia) aims to unify the state and religion for permanent legitimacy;
- To the other where strategic instrumentalism (Musharraf) utilizes religion to deal with challenges and audiences.

The case of Pakistan indicates a shift along this continuum, not a rigid pattern. There is an escalation danger, whereby instrumental exploitation may become structural dependence over time.

#### **5. Comparative analysis: Religion as a Source of Political Legitimacy in Pakistan, Libya, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and Syria**

The comparative approach will be useful in illustrating the general trend of rulers' tendency to resort to religion in cases when rulers operate in non-democratic or fragile contexts. The variable components in this case will include the degree to which religion is institutionalized, the nature of actors involved (the state vs. non-state) and their effect on political stability.

##### **5.1 Pakistan: Instrumental Legitimacy Under Military Rule**

In the case of Pakistan, illustrated by such figures as Zia-ul-Haq and Musharraf, religion serves as a political instrument, used to supplement the lack of democratic legitimation of regimes, and as a source of increased support. In this case, one can observe the alternation between religion's institutionalization and instrumentalization.

Key characteristics:

- Religion as a flexible political tool
- Shift between institutional embedding and strategic use
- Legitimization through moral and religious means to compensate for the democratic deficit

##### **5.2 Libya: Fragmented Religious Claims to Legitimacy**

As far as Libya is concerned, the post-2011 crisis in Libya resulted in a proliferation of groups that justified their territorial and political power with religious legitimation. The main difference from Pakistan here consists in the fact that in the latter state religious legitimation was conducted by the state, in Libya – religious legitimacy is decentralized.

Characteristics:

- Militias and factions use religious narratives to justify their claims
- Nobody has monopoly on religious legitimation
- The issue becomes highly competitive and fragmented

Conclusion: Where there is no central power, religious legitimation will not lead to stability; it will become highly contested.

##### **5.3 Iraq: Structural Legitimacy Based on Religion**

In Iraq, following the 2003 restructure, the religious legitimacy became institutionalized in the political system of Iraq, thus becoming structural in nature. In this context, religion serves as the basis of structural legitimacy:

- Legitimate power comes from representing specific communities
- There is an institutional embedding of religion in politics
- Religion as a permanent principle of politics

**5.4 Ideology/religion is not an instrument here; rather, it forms the very basis of state legitimacy in Iran. The principle of Wilayat-e-Faqih makes the following assertions:**

- The sources of political legitimacy are religious
- Religious legitimacy is the foundation of leadership
- State policy works towards fostering ideological identity

Outcome: It is a highly coherent model that lacks pluralism and links political legitimacy closely with religion.

**5.5 Yemen: Religious Legitimacy in Context of Civil War**

In Yemen, religion is employed as an instrument of legitimation in conflict situations. Competing groups, in particular Houthi, seek to draw religious legitimacy for their rule:

- Religion provides justification for resistance and governing authority
- The use of sectarian narratives by external parties exacerbates tensions
- Rule is militarized, and authority is challenged

Conclusion: In weak and failed states, religion serves to legitimize non-state actors, thus contributing to conflict escalation.

**5.6 Syria: Situational Use of Religious Narrative under Authoritarianism**

The state was traditionally a secular entity, but Syria has been using religion as a justification of its policies during times of crises:

- The regime presents itself as a guarantor of minority rights
- The regime employs religious narratives to foster loyalty and deter opposition
- The opposition also resorts to religion-based narratives of legitimation

Conclusion: Religion becomes an ad hoc tool used by regimes to survive politically (similarly to Pakistan), although under conditions of long-term conflict.

**5.7 Comparison and Synthesis**

Overall, the following four models can be identified in these examples:

1. Instrumental Model (Pakistan, Syria)  
The regime uses religion to legitimize itself when necessary.
2. Ideological Model (Iran)  
The religion is an essential component of the political order.
3. Institutionalized Sectarian Model (Iraq)  
Religion is deeply entrenched in politics and governance.
4. Multifaceted/Militarized Fragmented Model (Libya, Yemen)

Several actors utilize religion for their purposes of legitimization in weak state environments.

**Important Lesson for Pakistan**

Pakistan appears to lie somewhere between instrumental and partly institutionalized approaches. If continued use of religion to bolster legitimation continues, Pakistan may move towards institutionalization and further impede democracy building.

**6. Implications for Policy**

The analysis implies that Pakistan's constant dependence on religion as a source of legitimacy is not an inexorable outcome but can be altered through specific policies.

**6.1 Realigning Sources of Legitimacy**

- Constitutionalism, rule of law, and good service delivery should form the primary sources of legitimacy
- Less dependency on religion as the basis for executive legitimization

**6.2 Institutional Safeguards**

- Define boundaries for religious advisory councils versus legally binding state power

- Ensure that the process of reform is systematic and does not undermine fundamental rights

### 6.3 Political Incentives

- Encourage non-sectarian and non-religious electoral politics by enforcing existing laws
- Shift toward policy-oriented politics through financial regulation of political parties and debating culture

### 6.4 Education and Counter-Narratives

- Redefine education system to focus on pluralism, constitutional citizenship, and critical thinking
- Help construct credible counter-narratives separating religion from its politicization

### 6.5 Civilian-Military Congruence

- Formulate normative codes under which military institutions should not use religious narratives for political purposes
- Empower civilian institutions to earn legitimacy based on governance and not ideology

## 7. Conclusion

Religion has played an adaptable yet significant role in providing political legitimacy for Pakistan's military governments. While Zia-ul-Haq's program of institutional Islamization attempted to transform political authority into ideology, the strategy of enlightened moderation used by Musharraf illustrated the adaptive nature of religious legitimacy. Notwithstanding their differences, the common feature of these strategies is that both regimes have used religion to cover up the lack of democratic legitimacy.

As the comparative analysis illustrates, the situation in Pakistan is only one example within a wider range. From the ideological reliance of Iran, institutional sectarianism of Iraq, through to Libya's fragmented legitimacy, up to that of Yemen, there is variation in religious legitimization depending on the state capacity and the type of governance system. Pakistan's case is located between those two extremes and thus involves both risks and opportunities.

A change in the paradigm is needed if sustainable development of political legitimacy is to be achieved. The current paradigm of the strategic use of religion for legitimacy is unlikely to provide sufficient grounds for political institutions.

## References

- Abbas, H. (2010). *Pakistan's drift into extremism*. Routledge.
- Ahmed, I. (2013). *The Pakistan military in politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Fair, C. C. (2014). *Fighting to the end: The Pakistan Army's way of war*. Oxford University Press.
- Gause, F. G. (2014). *The international relations of the Persian Gulf*. Cambridge University Press.
- Haddad, F. (2011). *Sectarianism in Iraq*. Oxford University Press.
- International Crisis Group. (2017). *Pakistan: Stoking the fire in Karachi*.
- International Crisis Group. (2020). *Iraq: Managing sectarian tensions*.
- Jalal, A. (2008). *Partisans of Allah*. Harvard University Press.
- Juneau, T. (2016). Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. *International Affairs*, 92(3), 647–663.
- Nasr, V. (2000). The rise of Sunni militancy in Pakistan. *Modern Asian Studies*, 34(1), 139–180.
- Phillips, C. (2016). *The battle for Syria*. Yale University Press.
- Siddiq, A. (2007). *Military Inc*. Pluto Press.
- Talbot, I. (2012). *Pakistan: A modern history*. Hurst.
- Valeri, M. (2009). *Oman: Politics and society*. Columbia University Press.
- Wehrey, F. (2013). *Sectarian politics in the Gulf*. Columbia University Press.
- Zaman, M. Q. (2018). *Islam in Pakistan*. Princeton University Press.