

## **Beyond moderation: dynamics of political Islam in Pakistan**

Joshua T. White\*

*South Asia Studies, The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, DC, USA*

Concerned with a rising tide of religious radicalism within Pakistan, many observers have wondered why moderates do not speak out against militancy. This article explores that question, arguing that the term ‘moderate’ as used in Pakistan has conflicting meanings and is both more complicated and less useful as a tool of analysis than it once seemed. In particular, the inadequacy of extant definitions is best reflected in the reassertion of a radical Sunni Barelvi subculture and in the growing rift between some leading Islamist parties and the Pakistani Taliban. This article argues in conclusion that ideological factors are typically given undue weight in explaining why and when Pakistanis choose to ‘speak out’ against militancy and that a narrow, minimalist rendering of ‘moderate’ provides the most useful definition for those trying to understand the new fault lines emerging within Pakistani Islam.

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A consistent refrain has emerged from discussions of Islamic militancy in Pakistan in recent years: ‘Why don’t the moderates speak out?’ Given the seeming silence of Pakistanis to the rise of militant groups, the perfidy of state institutions in sponsoring regional proxy forces, and the continued marginalization of religious and sectarian minorities, the question is an eminently reasonable one. Embedded within it are several assumptions often left implicit: that there is a widely accepted definition of who qualifies as a ‘moderate’; that we know who these moderates are; that, while they are vast in number, they are generally silent; and that they are the surest social and political counterweight to a rising tide of radical Islamic militancy that threatens the stability of Pakistan and the region at large.

Increasingly, however, there are reasons to believe that the notion of ‘moderates’ in Pakistan is both more complicated and less useful than it once seemed. Much has happened in the last several years to invite a more realistic assessment. Prominent members of a Sunni Muslim school of thought once seen as the archetype of Islamic moderation in South Asia, the Barelvis, countenanced the vigilante assassination of a senior government official, Salman Taseer. An Islamist alliance, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) – far from exemplars of liberal democratic values – exerted at times moderating influence against a radical fringe that has stepped up its challenge

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\*Email: [contact@joshuatwhite.net](mailto:contact@joshuatwhite.net)

to state authority. And some Islamist parties that regularly praised the Taliban, such as the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F), were, to the surprise of many, themselves attacked by the Taliban, calling into question the reliability of rhetoric as an indicator of who is properly moderate and who is not.

In light of such trends, there is ample reason to revisit the assumptions about ‘moderates’ set out above. This article begins by outlining competing definitions of moderation that are commonly used in the Pakistani context. It goes on to examine the ways in which certain of these definitions have been challenged by the changes taking place within the Sunni Barelvi community and among Pakistan’s dominant Islamist political parties. It concludes by arguing, first, that ideological factors are typically overweighted – and strategic factors ignored – in explaining why and when Pakistanis choose to speak out against militancy and, second, that a narrow, minimalist rendering of ‘moderate’ in fact provides the most useful definition for those trying to understand the new fault lines emerging within Pakistani Islam.

### **Whose moderation?**

Given the frequency with which it is employed in discussions of Pakistani Islam, the term ‘moderate’ is rarely defined. Even the simplest definitions have to grapple with a basic definitional problem: moderate in comparison to *what*? This question can be answered in a variety of ways, each of which involves some kind of normative claim. The simplest approach is a scorecard that defines a moderate based on an explicit set of liberal social and political norms as enshrined in modern international covenants.<sup>1</sup> Those Pakistanis, in other words, who embrace *in toto* universal norms of human rights are moderate; those who take issue with some aspect of those norms – for example, on gender rights within the home, or the legitimacy of conversion, or freedom of speech on matters of religion – are not deserving of the label.<sup>2</sup> This approach has the virtue of clarity and often presents an internally coherent philosophical or theological narrative to explain its normative judgments. But it largely denudes ‘moderate’ of its comparative meaning and can easily smack of cultural hegemony or outright presumption.

Others have sought to avoid a checklist approach, making instead reference to theological reasoning, and in particular to hermeneutic questions about the degree to which one is willing to reinterpret the Qur’an in light of modernity.<sup>3</sup> This approach has the advantage of capturing underlying reasoning but elides the fact that innovative modes of interpretation do not themselves necessarily lead to middle-of-the-road, much less liberal, outcomes. The Ahl-e-Hadith (Wahhabi) hermeneutic, for example, is arguably progressive, in that it casts off hundreds of years of Islamic legal reasoning, but has ended up fixated on an imagined past that is seen to provide a moral mandate for an unusually austere and illiberal expression of Islam (Vogel 2011; for a revisionist view, DeLong-Bas 2004).

Still another approach focuses on a subset of international norms, namely, the relationship between religion and the state. Adherents of this approach construct a definition in reference to the literature on secularism and religious pluralism, with the majority community’s social and political accommodation of minority religious groups seen as the *sine qua non* of moderation (e.g., Rumi 2011). Here, the definitional touchstone is the vision of Pakistan’s founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah.<sup>4</sup> To some extent, this vision is a concrete one, drawn from Jinnah’s none-too-austere personal religious practice and his famous 11 August 1947 address to the constituent

assembly calling for religious non-discrimination in the new state of Pakistan ('You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques . . .'; Quoted in Allana 1969, 407ff). It is also, however, in part a vision imputed to Jinnah by those who seek a standard-bearer for a vision of Pakistan that is not wedded to a narrow reading of Sunni Islamic history.

A fourth approach uses as its critical test of moderation a group's embrace of the democratic electoral process. This, like the preceding, is narrower than a full checklist approach of international liberal norms. It has the virtue of focusing attention on political behavior and adherence to the formal rules of the electoral game but leaves within the 'moderate' fold democratic groups whose stated agendas run counter to international human rights norms. There continues to be robust debate in the academic literature about whether or not such process-oriented definitions provide an improper aura of legitimacy to Islamic political parties such as the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt and the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) in Pakistan – parties which may, it is argued, cast off their democratic commitments and rewrite the rules of the game if and when they are elected to power (Esposito and Voll 1996; Haqqani and Fradkin 2008; Tibi 2008; Tezcür 2010).

A fifth approach to defining the community of moderates relies on scoring articulated preference sets regarding other, presumably radical, organizations. The assumption is that if someone holds a favorable opinion of, say, Lashkar-e-Taiba, he or she cannot properly be called a moderate. On some level this approach makes sense, since sympathies for such groups probably reflect an underlying set of norms about the legitimate use of violence in Islam. But one should not read too much into these preferences; knowledge about some militant groups in Pakistan is quite low among the population at large, and most surveys suffer from severe selection bias and other methodological problems (Fair, Malhotra, and Shapiro 2010). Most importantly, however, groups which Western observers are likely to see as radical and illiberal are often viewed quite differently by the Pakistani public – for example, as charities, or altruistic freedom fighters. The most rigorous surveys of public opinion on this front have shown that the public differentiates in sophisticated ways among such groups (for example, supporting Kashmiri organizations more than sectarian ones) and does so in ways that defy Western categories (Shapiro and Fair 2010). These preference sets, moreover, seem to be correlated to political judgments about the groups' intentions and are likely influenced by state messaging at least as much as they are by underlying political or philosophical considerations.

Lastly, one can construct a definition based upon whether a given person or group recognizes the state as the only institution which can exercise a legitimate monopoly of violence. This is the narrowest of definitions and does not address the substance of what most commentators consider moderate; ignoring questions of democratic process, theological interpretation, and political pluralism, it concerns itself solely with the question of who can rightly take up the enforcement of law. Despite this narrow focus – or perhaps, because of it – such a definition arguably has utility for those concerned with basic questions about the stability of the Pakistani state. Who, for example, is likely to countenance a forcible challenge to state authority on the basis of religion? Who will endorse a Taliban-style movement that champions a vigilante *shariah* at the expense of the state?

These varied definitions of who is a 'moderate' – based on, respectively, liberal social norms, hermeneutics, political pluralism, democratic process, organizational affinities, and views of state legitimacy over the monopoly of violence – are by no

means exhaustive. But they illustrate in capsule form the fierce competition that exists over laying claim to this term, and the inherent difficulties in defining who the ‘moderates’ are, much less why they do or do not ‘speak out.’ In light of this competition, we will examine in brief two realms in which contrasting definitions have surfaced in recent years, and in which assumptions about moderates and moderation have been challenged, and at times upended.

### **The mostly moderate Barelvis**

One of the most surprising developments of the last several years has been the reassertion of a visible, outspoken, radical Barelvi subculture within Pakistan. Barelvis is a school of Sunni Islamic thought and practice that nominally traces its roots to the writings of Ahmed Raza Khan Barelvi (b.1856). In broader terms, it represents a segment of Islam that embraces popular devotion and mysticism and is closely associated – though not synonymous – with adherence to Sufi brotherhoods and ritual participation at Sufi shrines.<sup>5</sup> Although no reliable figures are available, and although Pakistanis tend not to self-identity as ‘Barelvi’ (preferring the generic Sunni label *Ahl-e Sunnat Wal Jamaat*), the school is widely believed to represent the majority of the Pakistani population, with particular concentration in Punjab and Sindh provinces (see Fair, Malhotra, and Shapiro 2010).

To their supporters, Barelvis are seen as the moderate, silent majority. By and large, they reject violence; condemn the neo-traditionalist interpretations of contemporary Taliban groups and their austere social ethic; adopt a tolerant view toward other Sunni sects, Shi’a, and those of other faiths; embrace the role of music, dance, and celebrations of spiritual saints; are deferential toward state authority; and do not get overly exercised about theological difference.<sup>6</sup> To their critics, the Barelvis are syncretists who blend questionable Sufi practices with old Hindu traditions; display a disconcerting devotion to the Prophet Muhammad that borders on *shirk* (polytheism); pay insufficient attention to the early traditions of the ancestors; and seem uninterested in defending the faith from internal and external adversaries alike.<sup>7</sup>

Quite understandably, there have been efforts to promote Barelvis as a counterweight to both the ideology and influence of Taliban-style groups. Often making reference to the ‘silent majority,’ Pakistani writers have lamented the fact that foreign observers frequently mistake the country’s assertive Deobandi leadership as speaking for Muslims at large, and ignore the deep history of pluralistic, Sufi-influenced practice in the subcontinent (Associated Press of Pakistan 2004; Siddiqi 2011). Western commentators, for their part, have championed the cause of the Barelvis, arguing in practical terms that they were being outspent by rival sects who had access to funding from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states and that, in a competition for *madrassah* students, they were falling behind and deserved support (see Kamran 2009; Mirahmadi, Farooq, and Ziad 2010).

These arguments received considerable attention in the US government circles. The US consulate in Lahore initiated an outreach program to Barelvi clerics in Punjab and funded the restoration of shrines in the province.<sup>8</sup> The US even funded the Sunni Ittihad Council, a Barelvi umbrella group, to organize an anti-Taliban rally in 2009 (Associated Press 2012). The US military also took an interest, encouraged by presentations that framed the Barelvis as a movement that might dampen extremism in a region such as southern Punjab.<sup>9</sup> Much of this interest was

driven by simplistic narratives – Ayesha Siddiqa and others have argued, for example, that Western analysis of Barelvis unhelpfully conflates the formal structure of the Sufi orders, the informal political economy of the Barelvi shrine culture, and the politics of competing *madrassah* networks – and it is questionable whether, to say, funding shrine restorations could materially change the balance of influence between Barelvis and their sectarian competition (Siddiqa 2008, 2009a, 2009b). Such nuances aside, the Barelvis have enjoyed a reputation as the standard-bearers of a ‘moderate’ Islam that holds the prospect of reining in the growing hold of Taliban influence in Pakistan’s heartland.

That narrative began to erode on 4 January 2011, when the governor of Punjab province Salman Taseer was assassinated by one of his own guards in an upscale market in Islamabad. His killer was Mumtaz Qadri, a Barelvi.<sup>10</sup> Qadri immediately confessed, justifying his killing of Taseer on the basis that the governor had supported revisions to the country’s blasphemy laws – provisions of the criminal code which are notoriously used to accuse Muslims and non-Muslims alike on the basis of scant or nonexistent evidence. Commentators were shocked that a Barelvi would carry out such a brazen act of vigilantism.<sup>11</sup> The sense of astonishment deepened even further when Qadri became something of a hero (Khan 2011). He was showered with rose petals at the courtroom, lawyers flocked to represent him at trial, Islamic leaders rushed to defend his actions, and hagiographical books praising him as a defender of the faith appeared in bookstore windows across Lahore.<sup>12</sup>

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the public reaction to Taseer’s killing was something of a watershed, particularly for elite Pakistanis. One wealthy businessman, interviewed in Lahore, was horrified to hear his longtime *chowkidar* – whose duty it was to guard his house and watch his children – casually endorse the killing of the ‘blasphemer’ Taseer. A politician in Islamabad similarly expressed a fear that he could not openly discuss theological topics in front of acquaintances, lest he open himself up to accusations of blasphemy, and risk vigilante violence. The arbitrary nature of many blasphemy claims reinforces this fear; people have been cited for accidentally throwing away a newspaper containing the name of the prophet or misspelling his name on a grade school exam (Sadaqat 2011).

The public response to Taseer’s killing prompted a simple question: what happened? Were the assumptions about the Barelvis’ moderation unfounded? While it is too soon to draw definitive conclusions, some provisional judgments are possible. In the first place, it seems clear that some champions of the moderate Barelvi cause were guilty of projecting the Barelvis in their own image, that is, as liberals concerned primarily with religious expression, sympathetic to secularism, and willing to engage in frank discourse about religious beliefs. If indeed Barelvis represent a plurality or even a majority of Pakistan’s Sunni community, it should have been clear that some of these assumptions were questionable on their face. Top-line results from surveys of the Pakistani population show strong support for *shariah* and the (admittedly vague) notion of an Islamic state (Terror Free Tomorrow 2008). And there is abundant anecdotal evidence to suggest that discussion of issues like blasphemy, conversion, and minority rights are highly sensitive across sectarian and regional lines.

Surprise at the willingness of some Barelvis to engage in, publicly defend, and indeed champion violence over the blasphemy issue also speaks to a failure by observers to take theology seriously.<sup>13</sup> Broadly speaking, Barelvis hold a very high view of the Prophet Muhammad, believing that he is *noor* (light), and considering

him as occupying an interstitial space – greater than man, but less than God. Barelvis commonly celebrate the prophet’s birthday, summon his presence to solicit healings, and occasionally recount matter-of-fact stories about his teleportation and appearances in modern day Pakistan.<sup>14</sup> These views are commonly rejected by Deobandis and other traditionalists as intimations of polytheism, or worse. But they are relatively mainstream among the Barelvi community. The Barelvis’ high theology of the prophet explains in part why they responded with such public antipathy to proposed revisions of the blasphemy laws. While virtually all Muslims hold Muhammad in the highest regard, the particular Barelvi veneration of the prophet countenances – or at least facilitates – a more forceful public response to measures that can be seen as demeaning his stature.<sup>15</sup>

Observers also likely underestimated the potency of political competition in the Sunni religious domain. The locus of Barelvi organizational power arguably resides with the shrines and secondarily with the *madrassah* network overseen by the Tanzeem-ul Madaris educational board. The largest Barelvi political party, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan, is small and electorally insignificant (Philippon 2011). The Deobandis, by contrast, field a modestly sized but politically significant party; oversee an expansive *madrassah* network; and can rely on a host of loosely affiliated Deobandi *jihadi* organizations to protect Deobandi institutions, recruit new talent, and serve as vehicles for foreign fundraising. The Barelvis, in this sense, are under-institutionalized relative to their numerical size. Some have speculated that segments of the Barelvi leadership in Punjab – particularly those in the Sunni Ittihad Council – saw the blasphemy issue as an opportunity to buttress their own standing within the Barelvi community, and to raise the profile of the Barelvis vis-à-vis their Sunni competition by exploiting an issue that played well with both their own constituency and with the Sunni public at large.

All of this simply suggests that one should be careful not to assume that liberal values necessarily take the form of bundled goods. On a host of political, hermeneutic, and social issues, the Barelvis do indeed comport rather closely with the Western liberal ideal. And in many respects, they are more tolerant and pacific than their Sunni brethren. But they might also argue (and indeed, they have) that *shariah* is a universal good, that blasphemers unquestionably deserve death, and that there can be no ‘moderation’ with respect to one’s defense of the prophet (e.g., Tanveer 2010; *Nation* 2011). The favorable response showered upon Taseer’s killer was particularly troubling because it suggests that many Barelvis transgressed even the narrowest definition of ‘moderation’ proffered above, that is, the willingness to recognize the state as the sole legitimate employer of violence. In the name of the *shariah*, Qadri took the law into his own hands and was praised for it. At the very least, that ought to chasten those who believed that there was a vast, coherent block of Pakistani liberals just waiting to be mobilized.

### **The modestly moderating Islamists**

If one of the lessons of the last several years has been that Pakistan’s so-called moderates were not quite as liberal as the West had hoped, there has been a complementary lesson as well: at least some of Pakistan’s Islamists were not quite as radical as the West had feared. Pakistan’s leading Islamist parties, despite their relatively small size and consistently poor showing at the polls, have been widely assumed to be significant facilitators of militant Islamization. These parties, most

notably the modernist JI and the clerical Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazlur faction (JUI-F) and Sami ul-Haq faction (JUI-S), are believed to have agendas that mirror those of the Afghan Taliban or other militant groups and would behave like them if only given the opportunity. The conventional wisdom suggests that these parties are stalking horses for militancy, providing both indirect and material support to those who would Islamize Pakistan by force.<sup>16</sup> They do not, in other words, merit the label of moderate by any estimation.

There is ample reason to believe this. Each of these parties has an extensive history of linkages with groups that legitimate and employ violence in the name of religion. The JI openly supported the Hizb-e-Mujahideen's militancy in Kashmir throughout the 1990s, with its affiliate the JI Jammu & Kashmir playing a major role in sponsoring its activities (Sikand 2002). While the party has in recent years distanced itself from the Hizb specifically, and Kashmiri militancy more generally, many party members continue to express sympathy for the group, and there is evidence that the Jamaat's ties with Kashmiri organizations have not been completely severed.<sup>17</sup> (The author discovered a large cache of 1990s-era Hizb-e-Mujahideen propaganda posters for sale at the bookshop at JI's Mansurah headquarters, May 2011.) A number of al Qaeda operatives since 2001 have also been captured at houses affiliated with the JI, suggesting at a minimum that lower-level party operatives are sympathetic to the movement.<sup>18</sup>

The two major JUI factions, for their part, are open about and indeed proud of their historical connections with the original Taliban movement and regularly boast that they retain relationships with the Afghan Taliban as well as other self-described Taliban groups operating in the Pakistani tribal areas.<sup>19</sup> The JUI factions have cultivated close relationships with a host of militant organizations in the Deobandi family, including Kashmir-oriented groups like Harkat ul-Mujahideen and sectarian-oriented groups like Jaish-e-Muhammad, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and Sipah-e-Sahaba. The JUI factions, in particular, have repeatedly shown themselves eager to serve as mediators between the Pakistani state and Taliban groups, both those in the tribal areas and those in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> In sum, the evidence of complicity between the Islamist parties and militant groups, though largely circumstantial, is nonetheless compelling.

Notwithstanding this evidence, the consensus view of the Islamist parties as resolutely 'immoderate' has been complicated somewhat in recent years. The first impetus for reevaluation of their role was the victory of the MMA Islamist alliance, the largest members of which were the JI and JUI-F, in the 2002 elections in the erstwhile North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).<sup>21</sup> The 5-year tenure of the MMA in NWFP effectively afforded scholars the first opportunity in Pakistan's history to evaluate the ways in which Islamist parties behave in a governing role, rather than simply as opposition figures.<sup>22</sup>

The limited literature which does exist on the MMA period is, by and large, damning of the alliance's governance, framing its tenure as a severe setback for liberalism and a means by which the Pakistani Taliban took root in the frontier areas. Unfortunately, this literature is relatively unsophisticated in its analysis. Much of it uncritically takes the MMA's rhetoric at face value; credits the alliance's success almost entirely to state manipulation rather than political and social factors; implausibly and ahistorically attributes to the alliance virtually all 'illiberal' activities which occurred during its tenure; is based on very limited fieldwork; and was written in the early years of the alliance's tenure, before a full assessment could properly

be conducted. [Representatives of this genre are International Crisis Group (2003), Misra (2003, 2006), Brohi (2006), and Grare (2006). More sophisticated analyses include Weiss (2008) and Waseem and Mufti (2009).] With the benefit of several years' hindsight, a somewhat more complex picture of the MMA can now be seen, one in which the alliance was neither an insidious stalking horse for Taliban-style radicalism, nor an innocuous political actor whose motives and activities can be dismissed out of hand.

The reality of the MMA's tenure was in fact quite complex. Many of its activities were incontestably illiberal. The alliance used its influence to restrict public cultural activities that it considered to be un-Islamic and publicly encouraged stricter gender norms. It fiercely resisted federal oversight of religious institutions. It tolerated episodes of vigilantism, such as the defacing of billboards in Peshawar depicting women. It included in its ranks politicians who sought to further marginalize minority religious communities such as Shi'a, Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. It put forward a major piece of legislation, the Hisbah bill, which would have created a new 'accountability' institution with a vague but sweeping mandate to enforce Islamic norms. And it consistently opposed any military action against Taliban-style groups. These actions, not surprisingly, were deeply troubling to those Pakistanis and foreign observers who feared the further Islamization of state institutions, and the creation of a social and political environment conducive to radical Taliban-style movements.

These actions, however, were usually more calibrated than portrayed in the literature. Much of the MMA's influence over public cultural activities and norms was accomplished through informal signaling and calculated ambiguity, not through permanent regulation or legislation that would have had long-term consequence. (The 'ban' on public music, erroneously believed by many to be the result of a formal edict, was one such example.) Its opposition to government interference in religious institutions such as the *madaris* was consistent with the longstanding policies of the Islamist parties, who were so wary of government co-option that even when in power in NWFP they refrained from doing what they easily could have done, *viz.*, expanding formal funding mechanisms to direct state funds to the religious institutions. The episodic tolerance of vigilantism, far from being a consistent policy of the MMA government, in fact revealed to close observers substantial fissures within the alliance, principally between those who held governance roles and sought to portray their government as responsible and credible, and those who remained in lower-level party positions who felt that they had little to lose in taking their agenda to the 'street.' The MMA's outreach to minority groups, while consistently clumsy, was nonetheless effective; virtually every major leader of the NWFP minority communities expressed satisfaction with the policies and responsiveness of the MMA leadership, some claiming that they even preferred the MMA to previous governments.<sup>23</sup>

Even the MMA's signature piece of legislation, the Hisbah bill (struck down – twice – by the Supreme Court on grounds of being unconstitutionally vague), was both more and less than it seemed. It was effectively designed as a political tool, to show that the government was serious in carrying out its vague *shariah* platform from the 2002 elections, but it risked the creation of an unaccountable 'accountability' force that could become a power in its own right and, like the *shariah* courts, over time expand its functional authorities (see Khan 2003). On balance, however, the bill was probably less nefarious than many suggested; clumsily written, its primary substantive objective seemed to provide a large number

of public-sector employment opportunities to *madaris* graduates, a key JUI constituency.

The long-term effects of the MMA's tenure in government are still unclear. But there is some evidence that the Islamists' experience will cut both ways. Much is made in the literature about how the MMA's sustained exposure to public office allowed it to pursue a retrogressive agenda, but there has been comparably less attention to the ways in which that experience also reined in the behavior of the religious parties and reinforced their role as stakeholders in the democratic process. Over the course of its tenure, the MMA leadership had to focus significant energies on securing both federal and international support for provincial development and, in a number of cases, came to compromises with international lenders on issues of family planning and education policy.<sup>24</sup> The leadership also became quite concerned about its reputation and worked to reach out to minority communities, and simultaneously to rein in party cadres who might take to the streets or engage in vigilantism. While this experience has had little noticeable effect on the Islamists' rhetoric, the MMA's experience of governance did arguably serve to empower those elements among the Islamist parties who had actually incentives to behave responsibly, work with the international community, and limit the parties' interactions with more radical movements. The institutional effects of this within the parties themselves remain to be seen.

Many commentators have further suggested that the MMA's tenure, combined with its strident opposition to army action against self-described Taliban groups, combined to create an environment conducive to the return of militancy throughout Pakistan's frontier, particularly in the years between 2005 and 2007. There is little doubt that this is true, at least in part. The MMA took a hands-off policy toward local Taliban groups, though the fact that its successor government, the relatively liberal Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party, endorsed a sweeping and one-sided peace deal with Taliban groups in Malakand division in 2009 suggests just how politically untenable a military solution had become.

The larger point is that the MMA's tenure in government coincided with its growing ambivalence – and, at times, outright opposition – to some Taliban movements then emerging in the province and the adjoining tribal areas. This, broadly speaking, is the second and convergent trend line that has prompted a measure of reevaluation of the Islamist parties' role vis-à-vis radicalism. Beginning about 2005, the JUI-F, in particular, began to become increasingly worried about the antidemocratic and anti-state orientation of some of the new Taliban groups gaining strength in Pakistan (Schmidle 2008). (Not surprisingly, the JUI-F was the party with perhaps the closest relations to the political establishment in Islamabad.) In part, they were worried that Taliban groups would turn the voting population against elections, thus electorally disadvantaging the religious parties over the long term.<sup>25</sup>

But more substantively, the JUI-F leaders and associated clerics – to their great surprise – began to be apostatized and targeted by the Taliban groups as un-Islamic sellouts to the democratic process. Islamist leaders were appalled when Maulana Hassan Jan, a deeply conservative, pro-JUI cleric, in Peshawar was assassinated in 2007.<sup>26</sup> More recently, this trend has continued with high-profile attacks on JUI-F leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman, attacks which the party has traced to Taliban factions in Waziristan (e.g., White 2011). In a development that some Western observers find ironic, the JUI-F leaders admit in private that they feel deeply

threatened by the radicalization and anti-state agitation of the Pakistani Taliban and by the prospect of losing both electoral influence and the support of lower-level *madrasah* cadres to these new more ‘dynamic’ movements.<sup>27</sup>

The lesson here is not that the Islamist parties somehow become technocrats when they govern or that they represent a liberal center within the Pakistani polity. They do not. It is, rather, that a frank assessment of the last several years points to the conclusion that the definition of who is considered a moderate in the Islamist space has been shifting – in some cases, quite rapidly. While the aforementioned Barelvis may be moderate with respect to certain tenants of social liberalism, or hermeneutics, or philosophy of religion and the state, some among them are decidedly immoderate in their views of the state’s legitimate monopoly of violence. Certain leaders in the Islamist parties, by contrast, fail most substantive tests of modern liberalism and strongly believe in the further Islamization of state institutions, but have political incentives to be seen as legitimate players in the democratic system, and are increasingly uncomfortable with the antinomian and vigilante impulses that characterize the so-called Taliban fringe. These characterizations are, of course, painted with a broad brush; there are significant nuances both within the Barelvi community and among the Islamist parties. But the trends of the last several years do point to the fact that contextual definitions matter and that, to the extent that ‘moderate’ remains a useful term, its definition should be qualified to account for these trends.

### **Rhetoric and realism**

Both of these macro trends, but particularly the second, lead us back to the opening question: why don’t moderates speak out? This is a question that deserves a more robust treatment than can be provided in this space, but in brief we might identify several basic explanations. The first, and most simplistic, is a sociological observation, namely, that those in the center of the political or religious spectrum are less likely by disposition to get involved in movements (or, conversely, are more difficult to mobilize) than those at the extremes. This is true around the world, and it should be no surprise that the general pattern obtains in Pakistan as well. A somewhat more sophisticated version of this argument might be made by adherents of social movement theory, who would suggest that the ‘opportunity structures’ for mobilization of moderates are in short supply due to preexisting social cleavages, perverse political incentives for the major parties, weakly institutionalized civil society organizations, and the lack of a concrete and focal cause around which to rally mass support (e.g., Tarrow 1994; Wiktorowicz 2004).

The second explanation, referenced above with respect to the Barelvis, is that people do not always believe quite what we think they believe and thus are disinclined to speak out against activities that – by an outside logic – it is assumed they ‘ought’ to reject. Pakistanis see local organizations through a complex set of filters, informed by political discourse, education, state messaging, the media, and their own experiences. The propensity of some outsiders to expect highly correlated ‘bundled goods’ of liberal values has obscured the fact that, for many in Pakistan, for example, freedom of speech is seen to be opposed rather than complementary to freedom of religious practice.

Third, the presence or absence of rhetoric by a ‘moderate’ is often a better indicator of that person’s perceived security environment than it is of the

fundamental political or religious issues at stake. This is an elementary observation, but one that receives appallingly little attention in the discussion over religious discourse. Individuals and organizations face a host of inputs to their decision about whether or not to speak out against a group or an ideology with which they have substantive disagreement. Like the politician who began to self-censor after the Taseer assassination, or the JUI-F official who refused to comment on the record about the assassination attempt against the party's leader, many people make a simple security calculation that speaking out would needlessly endanger themselves or their organization (Tufail 2011).

Fourth, observers frequently fail to appreciate that rhetoric is often used strategically. Take, for example, a simple statement made by JUI-F leader Maulana Fazlur Rahman, at an election rally in Dera Ismail Khan district on 21 March 2010. He praised those fighting American forces in Afghanistan as *mujahideen* and said that he supported their cause (Geo News 2010). Why did he make such a comment? Perhaps, to draw on the easiest explanation, he and his party wholeheartedly endorsed the Afghan Taliban's ideology and agenda. Or perhaps he wanted the party members or possible constituents to *believe* that he wholeheartedly endorsed the Taliban's ideology and agenda. Or perhaps he was trying to build or solidify a material relationship with the Taliban. Or perhaps he was trying to signal to *other* Taliban-sympathetic organizations that he is open to building such a material relationship. Or perhaps he feared Taliban influence and decided that public praise offered an insurance against defection of members of his own party. Or perhaps he feared Taliban pressure and decided that public praise offered an insurance against direct retribution by the Taliban itself. The list could go on.

There is some evidence to suggest that the Maulana's seemingly forthright comment on this particular occasion was something other than a fully heartfelt endorsement of the Taliban's ideology and agenda (both of which, on other occasions, he had criticized in muted terms). Not only was he at a campaign rally, in a region where various Taliban groups had gained considerable favor, but just hours after his speech the JUI-F's election office in Dera Ismail Khan was attacked by hand grenades, killing 1 and wounding 11 others (*Daily Times* 2010). In such an environment, public praise of the Taliban served a number of useful ends, not least of which as a hedge (in this case, an unsuccessful one) against direct retribution.

It is plain that even when an individual is provisionally identified as 'moderate,' he or she faces a staggeringly complex set of choices about whether or not to speak publicly about religion, state, and the legitimacy of various Islamic movements – choices whose utility varies depending on context. By and large, this dynamic is poorly understood and poorly appreciated. Some, in the Barelvi establishment, face incentives to publicly acknowledge the most tolerant and liberal aspects of their religious practice, but also simultaneously to highlight the fact that they will take vigilante action against supposed blasphemers. The leading Islamist parties, for their part, face incentives to publicly praise the Taliban with one breath and criticize vigilante activity with the other.

### **A qualified moderation**

Robust definitions of 'moderation' that reference the full sweep of liberal democratic values – and demand liberal rhetorical commitments – have an undeniable appeal. Such definitions make the case that certain values are universally applicable, but also

that they are fundamentally linked. They argue that freedom of speech on matters of religion (such as the freedom to criticize religious figures) is a right without which freedom of speech on other, political, matters cannot sustainably be ensured. And they suggest that these values pose no contradiction to Islamic values, properly understood.

These contributions notwithstanding, fulsome definitions of moderation are less useful than they once seemed to be in evaluating Pakistan's religio-political landscape. For one, rhetoric alone is an abjectly unreliable indicator of 'moderation' when Islamic groups face concerns for their own security. Since Islamist parties, for better and for worse, are rarely given opportunities to translate their rhetoric into actual governing policies, it becomes difficult to evaluate whether they would behave according to liberal norms if given the chance.

On a deeper level, however, the two cases reviewed in the course of this article reveal that expansive definitions of moderation bundle together in theory values that do not always appear together in practice. To the confusion of some liberal observers, a Barelvi leader might have a *laissez faire* attitude toward Islamic devotional practices, yet be willing to justify the killing of a government official on a particular point of theology. Conversely, a Deobandi leader might be rigidly committed to the idea that music or prayer at shrines constitutes idolatry, but equally opposed to the idea that a fellow cleric can legitimately take the enforcement of *shariah* into his own hands.

Framing the debate over Pakistan's future as a grand clash between liberal political and social ideals on the one hand, and runaway religious fanaticism on the other, is thus too often a form of wishful thinking. The lines of debate are not so clearly drawn. Far more useful to those studying Pakistan are definitions of moderation that focus narrowly on a particular matter of dispute and help one to identify who is moderate *relative to the community* in which he or she is embedded.

Today, for example, the most vigorous and arguably important debates within Pakistani Islam have to do with how one perceives the role of the Pakistani state. Islamic leaders and ideologues are debating questions such as, 'Is the Pakistani government truly Islamic?' and 'Is it appropriate for a Muslim to commit violence in the name enforcing *shariah*, eliding the authority of the state?' A definition of moderation constructed around these questions would consciously try to identify and isolate that form of immoderate politics which is most likely to directly threaten the authority of the state. It would, perhaps, define moderates as those who accept the state's exclusive role in using force to carry out the precepts of the *shariah*.

Admittedly, such a narrow definition might result in a motley collection of moderates: Barelvis who believe that violently challenging the state violates the classically deferential postures of both the ulema and the Sufi brotherhoods toward political authority; Deobandis who embrace aspects of the reactionary Taliban ideology, yet nonetheless worry about the ways in which Taliban-style vigilantism might give the government a pretext to control their *madrassah* networks; Islamist parties dependent upon the patronage that comes from being loyal to state elites; and, of course, the social liberals who view the state as the best bulwark against an aggressive Islamism that is trying to roll back basic individual liberties.

However incongruous the outcomes it produces, a focused definition has the virtue of making 'moderate' a category that points to actual, concrete political behavior. It provides a starting point for asking a practical question: will a given Islamic group find common cause with those challenging the government over

*shariah*? There will hopefully come a day when that is no longer a relevant question to ask about Pakistan, and when a narrow definition of moderation focused on the role of the state no longer delimits an active ideological fault line. Until that day comes, however, such a definition is far more useful than the trope that pits millions of silent ‘moderates’ against ‘extremists’ in an all-out battle for Pakistan’s soul.

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### Notes on Contributors

Joshua T. White is a Ph.D. candidate at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and a Jennings Randolph Peace Scholar at the U.S. Institute of Peace.

### Notes

1. See, most notably, the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted 1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).
2. This is essentially the approach adopted in the oft-cited RAND report, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (Rabasa et al. 2007).
3. Here reference is often made to the work of the Pakistani scholar Rahman (1982), although he was more critical of the modernists’ hermeneutic than they often seem to recognize.
4. Most notably, the argument by Ahmed (1997) for Jinnah as an archetypal Islamic modernist.
5. The casual conflation of Barelvis and Sufism by those writing on Pakistan is both simplistic and misleading and often derives from the view that Barelvis are the sole inheritors of the Sufi tradition in the subcontinent. This overlooks the fact that many of the early leaders of Deobandism (now seen as the Barelvis’ chief sectarian rival) belonged to Sufi orders and that a significant minority of Deobandis in Pakistan continue to hold such affiliation (Metcalf 1982; Reetz 2007; author’s conversations with staff at Jamia Ashrafiya, Lahore, June 2011).
6. One oft-quoted champion of the Barelvis is the World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE; Mirahmadi, Farooq, and Ziad 2010).
7. These arguments have often been made to the author by Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith clerics in Pakistan. For background to these debates, see Tareen (2009). For an impassioned polemic against the Barelvis, refer to the lecture given by the popular Jamaican-born cleric Shaikh Abdullah el-Faisal, who taught in the UK until his incarceration and subsequent deportation in 2007 (el-Faisal 2011).
8. Interviews by the author with the US government officials in Islamabad and Lahore, 2006–2009. See also Bakhtiar (2011).
9. WORDE is in fact explicit about its interactions with the US military. See ‘Department of Defense Federation Forum/Pakistan-Afghanistan Coordination Cell,’ <http://www.worde.org/?p=829> (accessed November 1, 2011).
10. Reports suggested that Qadri was linked to the generally quiescent Dawat-e Islami party (Ashgar 2011).
11. The Taseer killing did not mark the advent of Barelvi radicalism, but rather a new and more visible phase in its development as a public movement. The Sunni Tehreek, a militant Barelvi organization, was founded in 1990 in Karachi ‘to counter Deobandi and Ahle Hadith antagonism and ascendancy,’ and has been intermittently active over the last two decades (International Crisis Group 2011, 16ff).
12. Observation of the author, Lahore, May 2011.

13. The Barelvīs were not the only supporters of Qadri, but they were generally more vocal and aggressive in promoting the issue than Deobandis, or members of the JI and other parties.
14. Observations by the author, from conversations with Barelvīs in Lahore and Rawalpindi.
15. Devji (2011) argues, in typically contrarian fashion, that the impulse to defend Muhammad emerges from the fact that he has come to be ‘secularized’ and seen as a mortal in Sunni circles. This is an intriguing argument but does not comport with the balance of the literature, nor with this author’s experience.
16. For an informative but at times overly critical look at the Islamist parties, see International Crisis Group (2011).
17. Interviews by the author with numerous JI party workers, 2006–2011.
18. Most prominent among these was Khalid Sheikh Muhammad. See Raman (2003).
19. Since ‘Taliban’ has become something of a franchise term, we will generally refer to ‘Taliban-style’ groups operating in Pakistan that either adopt the Taliban name and mantle or reflect characteristics of the original Taliban movement from the 1990s.
20. This conclusion is drawn from numerous JUI-F and JUI-S public comments, as well as from private discussions by the author with JUI-F leaders.
21. The province was renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2010.
22. Prior to 2002, formal experience by the Islamist parties in government was limited to their participation in several national coalitions, in which they were given a limited number of cabinet positions (e.g., the JI during the Zia-ul Haq era of the early 1980s and the JUI-F during Benazir Bhutto’s governments in the 1990s), and a very brief episode in 1972 in which the JUI governed NWFP in coalition with the Pashtun nationalist National Awami Party.
23. For detailed analysis and citation of these actions by the MMA government, and a broader assessment of its tenure in government, see White (2008, 47–84).
24. In particular, the MMA negotiated intensely with the World Bank over girls’ education and the opening of family planning centers. Interviews by the author with MMA and World Bank officials, 2006–2007.
25. Interviews by the author with JUI-F leaders, Peshawar and Islamabad, 2005–2007.
26. Hassan Jan was outspoken in his support for the Afghan Taliban and was staunchly conservative on social issues. He opposed even the notion that women should be permitted to enter the provincial assembly building in Peshawar. Interview by the author, Peshawar, 2007.
27. Interviews by the author with JUI-F officials, 2009–2011.

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