

Gallup Pakistan History Project - **Weekend Read 20** **‘Religious Influence in Pakistan: Grassroots Stakeholders’**: by Murad Javed (Research Fellow, Gallup Pakistan History Project)

Scholars from multiple disciplines have conducted copious amounts of research to unpack and interpret the underlying thrust behind individual perceptions, decision-making, and actions. From political scientists attempting to unmask incentives and decisions undergirding voting behaviours, to sociologists trying to understand the influential opinion-makers in communal and social networks, to psychologists grappling with the mystery of what external loci and agents formulate internal psychological structures – understanding human actions and perceptions is a central agenda in scholarship and practice. Various experts have posed questions ranging from: What factors and agents drive peoples’ opinions and choices at the grassroots levels? What driving forces mould individuals’ knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions? Where do people turn in their local communities for guidance and instructions when confronted with challenges? Who formulates religious beliefs and ideologies? Answers to these varied and inter-connected queries are at the heart of our knowledge of any society. Crucially, an accurate assessment of the most pertinent and potent influential individuals and factors at the grassroots levels is of immense value to policymakers and development practitioners. By understanding the core driver(s) of perceptions and behaviors, policies and development interventions can increase their effectiveness and impact manifold.

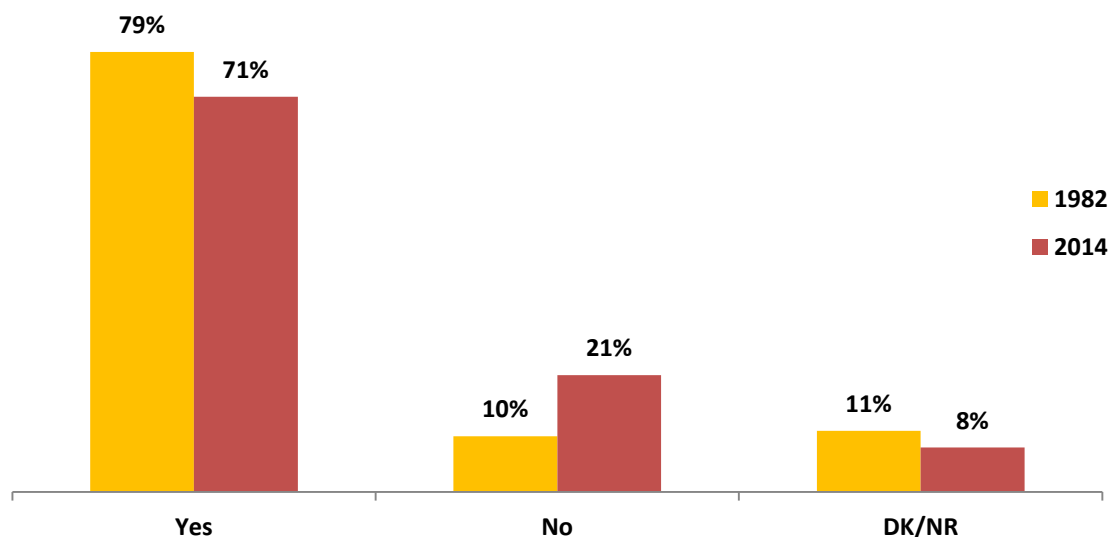
Pakistan’s society has always been interpreted through myriad intriguing lenses and approaches. The country is home to a large population that has cross-cutting ethnic, tribal, sectarian, linguistic, and cultural identities. Pakistan’s diversity is often also a major challenge for those within and outside the country attempting to delineate an accurate representation of the place and its people. In particular, for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners in every field, the understanding of who motivates an average Pakistanis’ behavior has profound implications. Public opinion analysts and researchers have equally applied research techniques and methodologies to understand Pakistanis’ perspectives, and more crucially, who and what influence such opinions. For many students of Pakistani state and society, the complexities of understanding the sources of and influential stakeholders impacting an average Pakistanis’ beliefs and perceptions are indicative of the incredible diversity prevalent in the country. So who/what influences an average Pakistanis’ perceptions? Where do Pakistanis draw their religious knowledge and practices from? And which stakeholder holds considerable overriding control over public opinion? For some observers and analysts, religion is the single most unifying and dominant narrative in Pakistan. This interpretation maintains that Pakistanis are deeply motivated and influenced by their religious beliefs, and the core of this influence is driven by religious clergy i.e. local clerics, religious scholars etc. Is there enough empirical evidence to support this claim?

Gallup Pakistan has been conducting extensive public opinion research in Pakistan for over three decades. As an organization interested in and disseminating Pakistanis’ perceptions and opinions on a constellation of subject matter, Gallup has attempted to collect longitudinal evidence on the stakeholders that influence and structure Pakistani perceptions. More crucially,

the organization has also attempted to map and chart the identities of agents whose opinions are instrumental in feeding into and constructing larger public opinion.

Gallup Pakistan invaluable historical archive of public opinion polling provides us with answers to some of the aforementioned queries. The organization has collected longitudinal public opinion data on whether local clerics i.e. *Imam-e-Masjid*, retains any influence in constructing religious knowledge and beliefs in local communities. Specifically, Gallup Pakistan asked a representative sample of Pakistanis the following question: Do people in your locality listen to the Imam-e-Masjid expressing his opinion pertaining to a religious matter? This question was first asked in 1980, and then repeated in 2014. The result on the influence of local clerics on Pakistanis' religious knowledge and attitudes is shown in the figure below:

Influence of Local Clerics



The result shown here indicates an intriguing change in Pakistani society in the last thirty-four years, and simultaneously reveals/reaffirms the theory that religious clerics exercise power and influence over Pakistanis' religious opinions. In 1980, at the height of General Zia's Islamic-centered dictatorship and at the onset of Afghan Jihad against the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, more the three-fourths of all Pakistanis (79%) reported that their communities listen to and draw knowledge on religious issues from their local Imam-e-Masjid. This implies a tremendous level of significance attributed to religious clergy in Pakistan; especially, opinion-building and moulding power available to clerics at the grassroots level across Pakistan. Only 10% Pakistanis reported in that year that members of their local communities/localities did not listen to the religious opinion of the local Imam-e-Masjid. 11% Pakistanis in 1980 did not know if their neighbors and community members drew religious guidance from the local Imam. In 2014, things have changed, albeit only slightly. More than two-thirds of all Pakistanis (71%) reported in 2014 that their local community members listened to the local Imam when he expresses and provides his opinion on a religious issue. This shows a slight decline since 1980;

although this still implies that a substantial majority of Pakistanis draw their religious guidance and knowledge from local clerics. Crucially, in 2014, a significant 21% Pakistanis reported that their neighbors and community members did not listen to or adhere to the local Imam-e-Masjid's religious opinions, while 8% did not report an answer to this query. These results provide for interesting observations and interpretations to be made about religious opinions and knowledge in Pakistan specifically, and larger public opinion and perceptions generally.

Results recorded thirty-four years apart indicate that religion in Pakistan is primarily operationalized through the grassroots human capital of local clerics. Bound in various schools of thought (intra and inter-sectarian), these clerics provide the essential human infrastructure and knowledge that affects Pakistanis' religious perceptions and knowledge. Over the last three decades, the majority of Pakistani citizens have remained deferential to the opinions of local Imam-e-Masjid. They seek guidance from and listen to the local cleric when it comes to religious issues. This evidence supports the assertion that religious clerics and religion are powerful formative forces in Pakistani society. In this sense, these results provide a reaffirmation of the power of religious teachers, leaders, and scholars in Pakistan.

Religion is inextricably linked to Pakistan's socio-cultural and political identities – and has been responsible for much of the state's identity-crisis. Pakistanis are well-aware of and acquainted with religious slogans and narratives that position and locate Islam as the core feature of Pakistan's state and social identities. Islamic practices in Pakistan are widely prevalent in the official and unofficial life of the state and its citizenry. For most Pakistanis, local Imam-e-Masjis is intricately linked with and involved in the rhythms of life and death, and the vicissitudes of happiness and tragedy in a Pakistani household. The rituals of birth and death, matrimony and conflicts are all influenced by religious precepts and injunctions. Most Pakistani households operationalize these beliefs, and more crucially religious practice, with the help and involvement of the local Imam-e-Masjid. The local cleric gets a say in providing religious guidance on issues confronted by Pakistani households. In this sense, the results shown and discussed here provide empirical attestation to what is known anecdotally.

But why is this finding important? And what implications does it have for Pakistanis' perceptions? As stated above, religion is a critical and core feature of Pakistani society and its citizens' identity. So much so, that religion has been inserted deeply as the only anchoring identity for the state and its inhabitants. More interestingly, the religious clergy (despite its own diversity and range of schools of thought) has always emphasized the function and nature of Islam in the following slogan, well-known to most Pakistanis: *Islam is a complete code of life*. This is a powerful and consequential slogan. If Islam is a complete code of life, it must provide guidance and answers to every facet of individual and collective existence experienced by an individual. In other words, Islam is ubiquitous in Pakistan. Linking this to the preceding discussion on local Imam-e-Masjid being the human face of religious knowledge, or the source of guidance, we can see easily how and why these clerics would have considerable influence over public perceptions in general. If all things in life are to be religiously determined and understood, then the local cleric – being the repository of religious knowledge – would have considerable and critical formative contributions to make in his local community and sphere of influence. In other words, the practitioner of a ubiquitous religion (relevant to all matters of life

and death) must also have ubiquitous presence in the life of a society. And this is where the implications of these results become even more significant. Individuals who are critical opinion-builders at the grassroots levels are mostly limited by the bounds of their specialist positions and knowledge. But for an individual whose vocation applies to all issues and subject matter, should have influence over formulating public opinions, attitudes, and perceptions. Religion infuses all social issues in Pakistan. By association, the local Imam-e-Masjid is the most readily available repository of knowledge on religious matters. This then implies that most public opinion in Pakistan must be shaped by the work and influence of local clerics. For example, politics and political issues in Pakistan are colored by religious beliefs. Depending on the depth and strength of this influence, and a community's receptivity towards religion-infused political participation, local clerics could be influencing Pakistanis' political choices and opinions.

Notwithstanding this core line of interpretation, the results also show that an increasing number of Pakistanis in 2014 also indicated that members of their community do not listen and adhere to the opinions of local clerics. Three important conclusions can be drawn from this finding. First, it could be likely that grassroots communities in Pakistani are increasingly experiencing religiously centrifugal forces i.e. Pakistanis living together in the same neighborhoods are increasingly unaware of their neighbors' religious preferences and source of knowledge/guidance. Second and related is the evidence (discussed extensively elsewhere) that Pakistan has increasingly become more sectarian over the last three decades or so. This finding might imply that Pakistanis increasingly find their own sectarian-aligned mosques and religious clerics to seek guidance and knowledge on religious, as well as social and cultural issues. This simultaneously also emphasize the increasingly religious fractured structure of Pakistani society. Third, modern technologies have made informational/knowledge access and dissemination immensely devolved at the individual level. Religious scholars and clerics can command influence and authority over followers through these technologies, and without physical presence in a community. This feature of modern communication and engagement implies that while the influence of local clerics might be waning, the influence of religious leaders and prominent scholars might be on the rise in Pakistan.

For any interested stakeholder in Pakistan, looking to influence social behaviors and public opinions, it is important to understand the geography and power dynamics of the social structures prevalent in society. Religion is a critical component of Pakistan and its citizens. Public opinions, knowledge transfusion, attitude formation, and action orientation are all still influenced by the actions, knowledge, beliefs, and approaches taken by local clerics i.e. Imam-e-Masjid. For those looking to seek social and behavioral change at the community-level, perhaps closer engagement with and inclusion of local clerics could be an important game-changer.