



POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND ITS IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH: WHERE DO WE STAND?

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Political and social polarization is the division of people in to distinct groups with contrasting viewpoints and minimum likelihood to converge on a uniform agenda. It has varied connotations in the field of social science. However, the given political climate of polarization and its impact on mental health, it is imperative to focus the issue in a scientific way. Furthermore, in recent years the situation has been made more volatile and complicated by social media amplifications with greater effects on psychosocial well-being of people. There is plenty of literature, suggesting that polarization is widely perceived as a loss or gain of social status, which has a direct link with psychological disorders.¹

There is scarcity of research in developing world about the psychosocial effects of polarization. Most of the research looking at the psychological adverse implications of this phenomenon has been carried out in the west. For example, a study conducted by Smith KB, reported that adverse effects of recent American polarization in politics and contrasting political views on psychosocial well-being were not less than a public health concern, leading to damaged friendships, persistent fatigue and even suicidal behavior in significant number of population.²

Similarly, the stress associated with political disagreements has the add-on effect on psychosocial well-being of people holding diverse political views leading to deleterious effect on mental and physical health. The harming effects of political polarization is a known perpetuating stressor, cluttering society and traversing daily life through media, various internet platforms and persisting news feed.³ Additionally, the American Psychological Association

identified politics as a major source of stress for American adults.⁴

The findings of a recently conducted survey showed that nearly 40% Americans reported that they were stressed out because of politics and nearly 20% had lost sleep due to the effects of social upheaval and almost same number were tired of political news.⁵ In addition to psychological consequences political stress, French JA et al, reported increased blood cortisol, increased skin conductance and decreased testosterone levels in people engaging in emotionally draining political debates.⁶

It's equally important to understand the mechanism through which the polarized politics harm the psychological health, and how it should be managed in order to ward off its deleterious consequences? The mechanism is well understood that people cannot isolate themselves from politics bearing in mind the vast array of information feed on daily basis. Secondly, as part of human society one cannot get away with social network and individual identity. As far the negative effects are concerned, they permeate through various means, irrespective of people being either actively involved in politics or passive only observer. For, instance, the harassment, bullying, grandstanding attitude on social media is not uncommon while personal political debates, demeaning comments and its association with psychosocial sickness is well documented.⁷

The cult indoctrination is another distressing phenomenon, where the leaders coerce the followers through persuasions, thoughts reformation and brainwashing leading to immense suffering of exposed population to such condition, at times along with their

family, friends and community at large.⁸ There is large body of research pointing towards the abusive effects of cultic politics and its adverse emotional consequences. The psychological damages perpetrated by cultic indoctrination, fake and occult information have been extensively reported in scientific publications over the last many years.⁹

Pakistan is a South Asian Muslim country of more than 220 million population with relatively unstable political history and abysmal socio-economic and health indicators. Mental health statistics are staggering with a wide treatment gap and no dedicated budgetary allocation of annual gross domestic product (GDP).¹⁰

In addition to the existing heavy burden of mental health issues and traditional entrenched religious intolerance in Pakistan, the recent wave of political intolerance has polarized the society to an unprecedented level. This wave of political polarization has permeated into all strata of society, with sporadic reports of violence, which is likely to deteriorate further in the presence of unregulated and excessive use of social media. The widespread consumption of social media reports without verification of its authenticity could be one of the sources of social and political polarization which may cause further deterioration in near future.¹¹

Regrettably, the young population constitute about 60% of the Pakistani population has been found to be affected more easily by the polarized environment in the country, which otherwise should be the most productive segment of society. As a matter of fact, depriving them of critical thinking and ability to formulate and ask appropriate questions tantamount to a huge social capital loss. Scientific literature shows that younger

population is more impressionable and highly vulnerable to become radicalized easily in a polarized society, unfortunately, Pakistan is not an exception, currently a fertile ground to support the growth of such tendencies.¹² The recent published reports in lay press pointing to a shocking situation of violence in various part of the country due to political rivalry and contrasting posts on social media.

The vulnerability of people being affected psychologically by political polarization has been reported extensively by previously published research. Various reports indicate that perpetuating exposure to political stress is associated with increased rates of psychiatric disorders like anxiety, depression and even suicidal behavior.¹

Similarly, mental health professionals are also facing the dilemma of unfriendly environment generated around politics, which highlights the need for further training to deal with such issues without being judgmental or biased in clinical setting.¹³

There is high time that scientific community, social scientists, political and religious opinion makers open a dialogue to raise awareness about the possible causes and devastating effects of polarization on the society. Country like ours with entrenched religious intolerance, economical inequalities, social disparity and alarming mental health statistics cannot afford to get plunged into yet another social and psychological chaos in the background heated polarized political discourse. We need to encourage our younger generation to be more tolerant and equipped with critical thinking to meet the social challenges with grace and

scientific reasoning in order to ward off the impending onslaught of polarization, radicalization and psychosocial sickness. There is dire need to bring back the lost political sanity and put a full stop to the rising psychosocial turmoil in Pakistan.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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