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## Understanding the Appeal of the Taliban in Pakistan

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## **Understanding the Appeal of the Taliban in Pakistan**

### **Abstract**

This article briefly explores the economics of the "Talibanization" of Pakistan within descriptive and contextual paradigms, while attempting to find a best solution to counter rising militancy in the context of realities facing the population on the ground. One such solution is the National Pakistani Counter Terrorism and Extremism Strategy (NACTES), designed to curb Taliban financing in Pakistan. The strategy is being drafted by National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), the nascent homeland security coordination body set up by the state as the primary public organ entrusted with counterterrorism, counter-extremism, and de-radicalization efforts of the state.

# Understanding the Appeal of the Taliban in Pakistan

By Syed Manzar Abbas Zaidi

## Introduction

The past six years, since 2004, have witnessed a significant rise in incidents of terrorism in Pakistan. The writ of the state has been directly challenged by the rise of many extremist, militant groups, who have transmigrated from Pakistan's tribal areas. These groups have assumed control of large areas in Pakistan, like Swat in Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa, still popularly known as the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). The momentum of this extremism is marked by an unprecedented alacrity, organizational capability, and impunity to engage the state militarily. Scholarship has not kept pace with terrorism, and is in a nascent stage in Pakistan, with little understanding and research among researchers, analysts, and policymakers into the drivers of extremism. Among the possible factors giving rise to terrorism in Pakistan, poverty and poor social indicators figure prominently.

This article briefly explores the economics of the "Talibanization" of Pakistan within descriptive and contextual paradigms, while attempting to find a best solution to counter rising militancy in the context of realities facing the population on the ground. One such solution is the *National Pakistani Counter Terrorism and Extremism Strategy (NACTES)*, designed to curb Taliban financing in Pakistan. The strategy is being drafted by National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), the nascent homeland security coordination body set up by the state as the primary public organ entrusted with counterterrorism, counter-extremism, and de-radicalization efforts of the state.

There are several defining characteristics that need to be explored to put this extremist movement in perspective. First, the Taliban have attempted to win the sympathies of target populations by exploiting the lacunae in distributive social justice, thereby bypassing the framework of local governance. The result has been improvised local economic "pumps" catering to the masses, particularly the landless poor. Second, they have utilized an ingenious blend of natural resources that supplements or perhaps even equals outside donor funding; this implies that they have adroitly taken over whatever resources they could appropriate in areas under their control. Third, they have managed to augment their income

with funds generated from organized criminal activities. Last, but not least, the informal money exchange systems in Pakistan and the various Islamist trusts are quite active in Pakistan, notwithstanding state-enforced bans and crackdowns.

## Rural Poverty and Talibanization

Rural poverty is a major destabilizing factor in Pakistan, with approximately two-thirds of Pakistani people living in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> Authoritative studies have documented higher poverty levels in Pakistan with decreased capacity to acquire and hold land, which is the main source of subsistence in the agricultural areas of Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 67 percent of Pakistani households are landless,<sup>3</sup> though this is not the sole denominator of poverty in Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> The problem is thrown into sharp relief by comparison to the decline in India's rural poverty during 1987–2000.<sup>5</sup> The comparison is pertinent since both countries inherited a nearly identical system of land holdings and feudalism after independence, which India ostensibly seems to have tackled better than Pakistan; the latter seems to have alternated between monetary policies dictated by the IMF and World Bank, and its own experiments with land reforms, which proved deleterious.<sup>6</sup> The income disparity between the "haves" and "have-nots" in Pakistan has also increased significantly during the same period, while income disparity has largely become an urban phenomenon in the period under review.<sup>7, 8</sup>

Rural poverty declined in Pakistan through the 1970s and '80s, but increased steadily during the 1990s. Strikingly, poverty levels tend to decrease in inverse proportion to land holding, where poverty virtually disappears with holdings of fifty-five acres and above. The scope of the poverty is alarming; nearly 67 percent of households owned no land, according to an officially sanctioned study conducted in 2004.<sup>9</sup> For example, in 2004, 18.25 percent of households owned less than five acres of land, and 9.66 percent of households owned five to twelve and a half acres of land. This meant that very large extended families had to rely on meager incomes from this land as the sole source of income. The pattern is dismally skewed towards a few feudal families holding large land holdings; barely 1 percent (0.64 percent plus 0.37 percent) of households during this time frame owned more than thirty-five acres of land. This is reinforced by the Gini coefficient of land holding,<sup>10</sup> which was very high at 0.6151 (zero corresponds to perfect equality) in 2001–02. Thus, the problem is not just lower levels of land holding in Pakistan, but also highly unequal land distribution that has resulted in a wealthy minority

class that owns land and the vast majority that does not. This indicates that poverty and landlessness are directly related to each other in rural Pakistan.

As for spatial distribution of landlessness, 86 percent of households were landless in Sindh (landless plus non-agriculture), followed by 78 percent in Balochistan and 74 percent in Punjab. Evidence of income disparity in Pakistani society is bolstered by statistics, with the Lorenz curve of 2001–02 for Pakistan lying below the 1984–85 levels.<sup>11, 12</sup> This indicates that income distribution patterns gradually worsened, resulting in higher income inequality in 2001–02 relative to 1984–85.<sup>13</sup> Greater changes are visible in the higher part of the income distribution curves than in the middle and lower part of income brackets. This stipulates that in 2001–02, the upper income brackets registered a gain in income share to the richest 20 percent at the expense of the poorest 20 percent and middle 60 percent, which obviously increased the poverty levels in the lower and middle brackets. This projection also points out the dismal fact that the richest one percent who used to get 10 percent of total income in 1984–85, would be getting almost 20 percent of the total income in Pakistan in 2001–02. All of this has tended to create a class divide between have and have-nots in Pakistan, and has ushered in a feeling of lack of social justice in the society, which has facilitated the indoctrination for Talibanization.

## The Correlation between Social Justice and Extremism

As espoused by Maulana Maudoodi, a famous Islamic scholar from Pakistan, jihad is a binding duty of all Muslims. To perform this duty properly, Muslims must begin jihad first by correcting themselves (*Amar bil-ma`ruf*), and then move on to correcting others through instructions (*Nahi `an al-munkar*). One enters into a war only if the justification of jihad makes it necessary. For example, the Taliban presumably used jihad as an instrument of correction in Afghanistan to implement penal laws to exert control of unruly elements in the society. The modern Pakistani Taliban has done the same; even when Pakistani military operations were proceeding against them, they were engaged in organizing penal punishments against offenders. Certainly, Baitullah Mehsud, the now deceased Taliban leader in Pakistan, along with Fazlullah, his deputy in Swat, engaged in these tactics and transformed a once peaceful Pakistani area into a militant haven.

The unemployment rate for the age group fifteen to twenty-five years in Waziristan is above 80 percent, and could be a significant contributor of militancy in the tribal areas of Pakistan. With such abysmal statistics, it is not a stretch to imagine that unemployed youths may be attracted to militancy as a way of venting their grievances. The inherent structural imbalances in distributive social justice in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan have left gaping wounds, which the extremists are quick to exploit. The NWFP, and FATA in particular, have tended to feel left out of Pakistani development processes. A World Bank report on the NWFP clearly documented widespread poverty, a provincial GDP which was only 60 percent of the national GDP, and achievement in the education and health sectors well below the national average.<sup>14</sup> It had the highest infant mortality rate in Pakistan of fifty-six deaths per 1000 live births. Only 58 percent of total households received clean drinking water. The NWFP does not get its fair share even in the judicially determined shares of the governmental gross net profits.<sup>15</sup> The FATA areas fare even worse.

### *Examples of Exploitation by the Taliban from Everyday Life*

Several examples illustrate how the militants try to fill the socioeconomic vacuum. Hussein Khan, who owns a pharmacy in Wana, the capital of South Waziristan, praised Baitullah for some of his "good acts." Khan mused that Baitullah had "restored law and order in the area. Robbers and thieves have left the area fearing harsh punishments."<sup>16</sup> According to Khan, "Some people also believe that there are many bad people in his militia," citing the killing of thirteen family members of the federal government's political agent in Khyber Agency, an adjacent tribal area, in an armed attack by Baitullah's militia about four months earlier. "He (Baitullah) publicly apologized for the incident," Khan said. "The Taliban involved in the attack have been languishing in (his) jail for the last four months. They would have been punished if anti-security sentiments against military action had not been aroused and [the] military option had not been exercised."<sup>17</sup>

Aslam Awan, a journalist working with the jihadist publication *Weekly Takbeer*, mentions the establishment of a "special task force" in June 2007 to crack down on criminals in South Waziristan. "This force launched a number of crackdowns and made feared kidnapper Abdul Rashid Bakakhel free some of his hostages. Baitullah also collected donations from the local people to establish peace. It was a kind of protection money," Awan continues.<sup>18</sup> In the Taliban stronghold of Swat, Baitullah's equally radical deputy Fazlullah attempted to portray himself as a type of Robin Hood, establishing law and order through extreme and often brutal measures with the support of local populations.<sup>19</sup> Public

lashings in Mamdheray, Fazlullah's militant headquarters, resonate to the media images emanating from Afghanistan during the Taliban heyday.<sup>20</sup>

## The Appeal of the Taliban

Unfortunately, many of these acts are endorsed by the local populace, since these are seen as non-discriminatory acts by the Taliban aimed at punishing criminals masquerading as Taliban and committing acts of robbery. In areas where the locals have traditionally complained of ineffective governance by successive governments, which allegedly indulged in nepotism and inadequate resource allocation, a heightened sense of insecurity may be a driving factor swelling the ranks of Taliban followers. This suggests that in a closed society (like Waziristan), which is sequestered from the mainstream society at large, there is a complex interplay of different centrifugal forces which need to be researched in their context. The amount of aid and government resource allocation, for example, needs to be accounted for in these areas to appreciate the dynamics of the process. On the other hand, Marc Sagemen suggests that the commonplace stereotypical conception of penniless,<sup>21</sup> opportunity-denied Muslim youths turning to violence is not necessarily true. Instead, the desire to reconstruct, or put more suitably, deconstruct the existing society for a more egalitarian one drives some of the population to extreme acts such as suicide bombing.

Swat, which had a thriving hospitality industry, deteriorated into a militant haven within a few years. Swat was until very recently a prosperous area with a *laissez-faire* attitude toward religion. Perhaps the absence of distributive social justice and the remnants of feudalism in the form of the *Maliks* (local tribal leaders) in Swat had an effect on promoting militancy. Some analysts opine that the social vacuum generated by the apathy of the *Maliks* toward the conditions of the peasant class, and the dearth of provisions for obtaining speedy justice from courts, prompted the locals to pledge allegiance to *Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi* (TNSM), the radical movement in the area which spawned Talibanization. TNSM advocated for reforms in the shape of shar'ia.<sup>22</sup> TNSM gradually became unpopular as the movement lost steam, and the Taliban neatly stepped in as an effective substitute. This analysis is bolstered by the fact that the Taliban movement initially became popular in the rural areas of Khawazakhela, Matta, and Kabal; all three areas were characterized by a strong feudal system and what is widely considered to be downtrodden peasantry.<sup>23</sup> It is only after the Taliban had consolidated their hold in these relatively less affluent localities that they started speeding in strength to other more prosperous areas like Babozai and Barikot.

Thus, the Taliban seems to start as grassroots movements in feudal dominated areas, which is perhaps the main reason why they have not been able to gain a stronghold in the neighboring district of Buner. Buner is characterized by an absence of the feudal system of *Maliks*, and paradoxically, a poorly developed system of agriculture as opposed to Swat.<sup>24</sup> If poverty alone is considered as the main variable in generating militancy in these areas, then Buner should have been the district giving birth to the phenomenon of Talibanization since it is nearly identical topographically to Swat except for being poorer. However, the distinguishing feature of Buner—the absence of feudalism—has perhaps saved the area from Talibanization.

## Funding the Taliban

Even with popular support, without commensurate funding, militant organizations like the Taliban in Pakistan would not be able to survive. There are commonalities shared by the systems of money laundering and terrorist financing. Both criminals and terrorists try to exploit loopholes in legitimate financial systems to gain their ends, underlying which is the need to hide their activities. These activities are usually carried out in permissive environments with lax financial oversight from banking authorities, poor due diligence processes to "know the customers," and absent or poor comprehension of warning flags which should raise suspicion of illicit activity. Terrorist financing is also often referred to as reverse money laundering as it focuses on utilizing legal assets to carry out terrorist activities, which are often in the form of clean sources such as charitable organizations and legitimate business organizations. Since the terrorist organizations are now loosely decentralized, they are evolving in their ability to source, store, move, as well as use funds in innovative ways. Irrespective of the evolving means of sourcing and using funds, a substantial portion of terrorist funds still goes through the formal banking system.

Militant entities in Pakistan have turned aside from state sponsors to other alternative sources of funding, including wealthy Arab benefactors in the Middle East including the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. While the Taliban get most of their funding from a global network of informal funders and sympathizers, they likely continue to receive funding from sympathetic state players in the Muslim world. This has always tended to be a very shadowy affair, with very little information coming out into the open. However, such a picture is not at all complete without the



interpolation of Taliban funding generated by utilizing charities, covert "feeder" fronts, drug trade, taxation, crime, and natural resources like gemstones, timber, and marble.

### *Islamist Trusts*

In order to facilitate money transfers from donors, many businesses and banks are used as "fronts," enabling militant organizations to receive money in the name of income transfers. In the mid-1990s, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimated that fifty Islamic charities "support terrorist groups or employ individuals who are suspected of having terrorist connections."<sup>25</sup> The militant organizations are extremely careful about their financial matters; in its famous military manual, *Declaration of Jihad against the Country's Tyrants*, al-Qaida instructs its cadres about handling money; the same principles have ostensibly been used by militant organizations in Pakistan, including the Taliban.

"The group follows five financial security principles: funds should be divided between those invested for financial return and the balance—operational funds—that should be saved and spent only on operations; operational funds should not all be put in one place; only a few of the organization's members should know the location of its funds; while carrying large amounts of money precautions should be taken; and money should be left with non-members and spent only when needed."<sup>26</sup>

Militant organizations in Pakistan have tended to depend heavily on the *hawala* informal banking system, whereby funds are transferred on a personal guarantee of the sender, bypassing governmental scrutiny or accountability. Pakistani bankers have estimated that the *hawala* system accounted for \$2.5 to \$3 billion entering the country each year until 2002, compared to only \$1 billion via the formal banking system. For instance, in Pakistan alone there were over 1,000 *hawaladars* or informal money transferors in 2002, some dealing in amounts as large as \$10 million.<sup>27</sup> Even though the *hawala* system has decreased in importance in the wake of the Pakistani Government's crackdown, it continues as a viable source of income for the Taliban. This is particularly relevant in the context of charity money raised overseas by expatriate Pakistanis, and sent home on the personal guarantee of a *hawaladar*. Trust funds and charities are all important in this context.

Pakistan does not have laws in place which suffice as anti-terror financing legislation; the closest laws are the Anti-Money Laundering Ordinance 2007, promulgated by the former President of Pakistan, Pervez Mushar-

raf. This law is inadequate since it does not cover terrorism financing, though it does have provisions for a Financial Monitoring Unit (FMU) to be established within the State Bank. This is largely a placebo, since the FMU has not actively started functioning as of Spring 2010. Terrorist money laundering is recognized as a non-cognizable offence, which means that the police are not allowed to launch a case or carry out arrests of their own accord. All these legal lacunae have only added to the difficulties in tracing money flows generated and channeled by the militant organizations, including the Taliban.

### *The Link between Crime and Militancy in Pakistan*

Raising money from criminal activities has also been a forte of militant organizations in Pakistan; the Taliban are not loath to utilize this method either. Ostensibly, such activities in a *Dar-ul-Harb* (house of war) are perceived to be legal. This distorted ideology legitimizes many of the illegal activities carried out by the Taliban and allied jihadist organizations in Pakistan. Funds raised for their campaign have been projected to be in excess of one billion rupees (~\$12 million) over the past two years alone.<sup>28</sup> In the wake of the Pakistani Government's post-9/11 clampdown on jihadist organizations, jihadist assets were frozen, and a lot of fundraising infrastructure was demolished under American pressure. Ineffective fundraising meant that the militants had to invest in speculative agricultural and commercial real estate investments as alternatives, which produced huge profits.

Enforced bans meant that these properties could not be purchased in the names of the organizations, so they were registered to members deputed to be "trustees." Since this made the trustees the legal owners, many of them legally took possession of the property and sold it to bona fide purchasers and fled with large fortunes to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. A severe economic crunch and the bursting of the property bubble, however, meant that these sources of money eventually dried up as well. For want of an alternative, many of these groups turned to crime, since it did not carry any perceivable stigma, ostensibly being committed for "higher" causes. This is not just speculation—for example, Badshah Deen Mehsud, a close aide of Baitullah Mehsud, was arrested in Karachi in 2009 on charges of masterminding kidnappings for ransom, robberies, and hijackings.<sup>29</sup> All the money from these activities tended to end in the militants' kitty; Badshah ran a huge organization in Karachi which was organized more like a top-down mafia organization, with squads operating in specially targeted areas. Badshah's son Meharban Mehsud was also heading a large organization, which was allegedly involved in raising funds through criminal activities for the Taliban movement.

The story of Muhammad Farhan Qasim is also instructive; he was arrested in connection with several high profile kidnappings for ransom involving millions of rupees (hundreds of thousands of dollars).<sup>30</sup> Farhan confessed to Karachi police that he had carried out these crimes at the behest of Baitullah Mehsud, for the purpose of Taliban's "Jihad." And it is not simply money that is in demand; interestingly, several members of *Tehreek-e-Islami*, Sirajuddin Haqqani's organization, were arrested stealing walkie-talkies and laptops from electronics shops in Karachi in December 2006.<sup>31</sup> These were reportedly passed on to Mullah Dadullah, a top Taliban commander in Afghanistan, now deceased, through intermediaries. The Karachi-based Balochi group *Jundullah*, which allegedly has ties to al-Qaida and the Taliban in the FATA, and *Tehreek-e-Islami* maintain overlapping links with organized criminal mafias.

### *Jizya (Poll Tax)*

*Jizya* is an important source of Taliban revenue, which is a poll tax levied on non-Muslim minorities living under Islamic rule, and sanctioned by shar'ia law or, in this case, the Taliban's version of it. The Sikhs living in Orakzai Agency in FATA have faced the brunt of this ruthlessly collected tax; as a result, many have emigrated to other areas, in which case their property and houses have been appropriated by the Taliban. Sikhs have lived in Orakzai Agency for decades, and were well integrated into the tribal society. All this ended when the Taliban under Hakeemullah Mehsud descended on Orakzai; the Sikhs were subsequently forced to pay *jizya* at gunpoint, with forcible conversion as the only alternative. The *jizya* amounts demanded were exorbitant; initially a hundred million rupees were demanded, scaled down to half that amount after negotiations with Sikh elders. The Sikhs were warned that noncompliance with the terms of the "agreement" would result in the men being killed and the women and children being converted.<sup>32</sup>

### *Opium for Cash*

As during the Taliban heyday prior to 9/11, opium has become a major source of Taliban financing in Afghanistan. With improvements in the irrigation system, Afghanistan virtually has the monopoly on global production of opium.<sup>33</sup> The 2006 harvest alone was estimated at over \$3 billion dollars.<sup>34</sup> The revenues in succeeding years have been projected to exceed these figures. With Afghanistan currently producing 93 percent of the world's opium, it is estimated that almost half of Afghanistan's GDP is generated from the opium trade.<sup>35</sup> The Taliban in Pakistan differ from their Afghan counterparts insofar as opium growing does not figure prominently as a direct source of income, because Pakistan produces

much lower quantities of opium. On the other hand, opium transit is certainly big Pakistani Taliban business; some estimates claim that about 90 percent of Afghan opium passes through North and South Waziristan and Bajaur Agency.<sup>36</sup> A military officer posted in the counterinsurgency operation told me in an interview: "(It) seems that these areas have become the *charas* (a colloquial name for hashish, loosely applied to other narcotics) silk route...(probably) the Taliban are controlling this lucrative trade through the help of their counterparts across the border...(it is hard) to estimate the amount...(perhaps) millions of dollars worth (of produce)."

### *Natural Resources*

The Taliban had a lot of opportunity to boost their funds with the sale of marble, after taking over the Ziarat marble quarry in Mohmand Agency in FATA in April 2008; FATA is a major producer of marble, with around a million tons of marble being mined every year. A substantial amount of government input had been projected to increase marble and granite exports to \$500 million dollars by 2013; this lucrative mining business was taken over almost completely by the militants in Mohmand Agency.<sup>37</sup>

The Taliban next took control of the lucrative government-controlled emerald mines in Mingora, Swat. Reportedly, these mines had been occupied by the militants during the Sufi Muhammad brokered peace deal. The nearby Shamozaï and Gujjar Killi mines were also occupied, and a lucrative militant-controlled gem trade ensued, with reportedly a third of the profits being shared by the Taliban with the local populace. The lucrative timber trade in the Swat and Dir areas was also taken over by the Taliban. It is hard to calculate exactly how much the Taliban is gaining from the timber trade, but it is estimated that the Government of Pakistan is losing 65 billion rupees (nearly \$1 billion) annually from the illegal timber trade, and the Taliban seems to be the primary beneficiary.

### **Conclusion**

It is challenging and unnecessary to point to any one factor as causal in the allure of Talibanization in Pakistan; rather, the Taliban has shrewdly exploited the grievances of rural, impoverished populations suffering from social injustice and unequal land distribution. Furthermore, the Taliban has ingeniously generated income through organized crime, taxes, and classic money-laundering schemes, while simultaneously providing short-term "peace" and stability from local "criminal" entities.

As Marc Sagemen has suggested, poverty is not an exclusive driver of extremist violence. The greatest appeal of the Taliban is the desire of Muslim youths to create a more egalitarian society. The appeal of the Taliban to local populations is that they are able to "right the wrong"—even resorting to brutal tactics to achieve their objectives. There are no sanctioned institutions that offer due process as an alternative remedy to perceived problems in these rural communities. Thus, the corrupting influence of Taliban ideology in the absence of responsible governance has widespread appeal. Some benign grassroots movements have driven people to extreme acts such as suicide bombing as a means to alleviate the burden of social injustice on behalf of the greater society.

Financially, the Taliban has vehemently denied getting any help from outside the country, even though the Government of Pakistan has been quick to point fingers at foreign hands. The militants have tended to assert ownership of their movement as a home grown movement, rather than foreigner-directed unrest.

While foreign sources of funding contribute to the Taliban's treasuries, the Taliban has ingeniously improvised indigenous methods of raising money in their own environmental contexts. The Taliban has used coercive tactics to extort money in the name of *jizya*. Where natural resources were present in the form of emerald mines in Mingora or marble quarries in Mohmand Agency, these were taken over as lucrative sources of income. The doctrine of necessity has been invoked by the Taliban as a justification for generating funds by crime, particularly in the bustling commercial metropolis of Karachi.

All this income generation is supplemented by income sent from overseas in the form of donations sent by sympathizers and organizational operatives. This radical "remittance" is still largely invisible to financial oversight bodies in Pakistan because it is channeled through informal money laundering networks. Islamist trusts and charities also generate money for the Taliban. Even though many such trusts have been banned in Pakistan and around the world, they have re-branded themselves as secular entities. This trend has been overlooked by law enforcement authorities in Pakistan, which traditionally have given these trusts and charities considerable leeway.

Thus, the highly flexible money raising infrastructure of the Taliban in Pakistan has to be recognized in the context of being tailored to its own indigenous environment, and local stakeholders have to be involved in the

process of curbing terrorist financing. All these facets have to be recognized in the context of an overarching strategy, such as the NACTES currently under deliberation by the Government of Pakistan.

## About the Author

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- 10 The Gini Coefficient is a measure of statistical dispersion, commonly used as a measure of inequality of income distribution or inequality of wealth distribution. It is defined as a ratio with values between 0 and 1: A low Gini Coefficient indicates more equal income or wealth distribution, while a high Gini Coefficient indicates more unequal distribution; 0 corresponds to perfect equality (everyone having exactly the same income) and 1 corresponds to perfect inequality (where one person has all the income, while everyone else has zero income).

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