

UNRAVELING THE NEXUS: RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND SECTARIAN DIVIDE IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Religious extremism is the most lethal threat to the world and it has jeopardized the security, rights, peace and sustainability of states. Deeply ingrained religious extremism in Pakistan is a result of the intricate interaction of historical, socioeconomic, and geopolitical elements. The extremist elements usually target the religious minorities and lead to sectarian violence, which causes a divide in the Pakistani society. This sectarian divide is primarily between Sunni and Shia segments of the society. The main argument of this study is to analyze how religious extremism has been deeply enrooted in Pakistani society since independence and how this religious extremism has led to a greater sectarian divide in the Pakistani society. The study highlights the socio-political factors, which aggravate religious extremism and their impact on society. The study has been conducted using qualitative methods of research. In dissecting the root causes, this article seeks to offer insights into the strategies for fostering religious intolerance and social cohesion within the society.

Introduction

Pakistan, situated at the heart of South Asia, grapples with the intricate interplay between religious extremism and subsequent sectarian divisions. The nation's historical and contemporary narrative intricately intertwines with the complexities of religious ideologies, significantly impacting communal cohesion, all within a diverse cultural tapestry. This intricate connection exerts a profound influence on societal structures, shaping interpersonal bonds, political discourse, and the foundational essence of communal life. This study navigates through Pakistan's intricate socio-political landscape, analyzing the nuances of religious fervor and resulting sectarian discord that has marked the nation's history. Our objective is to comprehend the historical context, ideological underpinnings, and contemporary manifestations of this phenomenon, aiming to discern the foundational ideologies, historical contexts, and present-day articulations of this relationship, along with the potential implications and avenues for a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Religious extremism

A movement, group, or individual within a religious organization that adheres to extreme interpretations of orthodoxy is known as religious extremism. It also includes the parties' strategies to accomplish their objectives and disseminate their opinions and influence. Extremism in religion seeks to fundamentally alter the current religious system as a whole or any meaningful part of it. Profound changes to the social, legal, political, moral, and other pillars of the society connected to the religious system are necessary to achieve this aim. While religious extremism goes further by involving violent action to achieve this adherence,

religious fundamentalism is the precise observance of the strict interpretation of religion (Eraliev, 2022).

Sectarianism

In an attempt to define sectarianism, The Religious and Development Research Programme (2005) sectarianism says, "It refers to a rigid devotion, unnecessary attachment or excessive favoring of a specific sect, group or dominion. It usually constrains reprimand of and even violent prejudice against the other sect. The term is most widely employed for understanding religious sectarianism - the conflict between groups and denominations of one religion having varying interpretations of it." On the other hand, it is also asserted that sectarianism is a system of 'attitude,' 'belief,' and 'structure,' which is expressed as a basic human need for identity, association, and freedom of expressing difference, in destructive patterns (Liechty and Clegg, 2001). The intra-sect sectarianism implies the divisions within major groups; in the Islamic tradition, Shia and Sunni are two primary thematic schools of thought.

Further groups are within the Shia tradition (Twelvers et al.) and Sunni tradition (Hanfi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali, Bareli and Deobandi). Behind any sectarian action or religiously motivated violence, there is an underlying economic, social, or political reason behind it. In other words, when transformed into violent currency, ideological differences are primarily influenced by individuals' vested personal or political interests. When the dominant group deprives the weaker or marginalized one of their 'desired political benefits' within the same sect, the deprived one generally opts for violent means of communication to let its voice be heard. From this standpoint, this research will focus on how the division within major sects causes violence and leads to a constant state of conflict and unrest.

Historical roots of religious extremism and sectarianism in Pakistan

Pakistan's genesis is deeply rooted in religion, and the principal aim behind its creation was to establish a state for Muslims where they would be able to live their lives per Islamic principles with complete freedom. The issue of extremism and sectarianism was not only present in the society but also in politics. The major contenders of this sectarian fierceness are Sunnis and Shias. The nature of this hostility is both inter-sect and intra-sect. The most regrettable aspect of this interaction is that all violently involved factions claim to be followers of the same religion. A religion of radicalism and extremism has replaced a religion of peace and tolerance. These extremists are convinced that their opponents have no right to exist and regard them as unbelievers. The issue has gotten worse due to foreign help and the vested interests of political elites.

Various events and incidents after Pakistan gained independence have laid the foundations of a segregated society. The political elements, such as the introduction of the Objectives Resolution in 1949, included specific provisions for the inclusion and domination of Muslims in political affairs and marginalized religious minorities. Post-partition, the religious minorities faced grave violent incidents, and it is estimated that over 2 million Hindus and Sikhs were killed, villages were destroyed, and till today, they are living a life of extreme poverty. Another prominent event was the anti-Ahmadiyya movement in 1953, which led to the first martial law in Pakistan. In the 1950s, a religious organization named Tanzim-e-Ahle-Sunnat declared a countrywide war against the Shias and attacked Shias at any place.

After Ayub Khan imposed martial law in 1958, religious and political parties and religion's role in politics were marginalized; however, during his rule, the most violent sectarian conflicts emerged from the attack on a Muharram procession in Khairpur Sindh. On June 6, 1963, near Thehri, Sindh, a mob of Deobandi Muslims was said to have massacred 118 Shias. In this incident, the Imambargah and the Taziya were set on fire, and several of them were killed. Anti-Shia propaganda was published in books and journals, and the TAS insisted that Azadari be restricted to places where Shia communities are found. As a result, the Shia community was pressured to reduce the number of Muharram processions (Abbas, 2010).

The Islamization period from 1979 fueled some major sectarian conflicts, which have impacted the country in a way that it has not been able to recover until now. During this

period, several violent and extremist sectarian groups emerged, such as Tehrek-e-Nifaz-Fiqah-e-Jafria (1979), Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (1985), Popular Islamic Army (1987), Sunni Tehreek (1992) and Sipah-e-Muhammad (1994). In addition to this, the 1973 constitution also declared that the Prime Minister and President of the country would be Muslims, thus marginalizing the other religious minorities. General Zia-ul-Haq, the head of state at that time, was a Sunni, and he introduced Islamization policies, which not only created rifts between the sects of Sunni and Shia but also led to clashes between various sects of Sunnis. This situation led to a popular Shia organization i.e., Therek-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqah-Jafria (Zaman, 1998). The Sunnis felt threatened and started their movement known as Sipah-e-Sahaba. According to the South Asian Terrorism Portal, from 1989 to 1990, about 1,470 sectarian-based incidents occurred, and 859 people were killed. Thus, it can be asserted that Islamization was an impetus to increased sectarian divides, leading to religious intolerance and violent incidents. As far as minorities were concerned, they were given the right to vote and representation, but it was limited to their community, and they were not allowed to vote for a Muslim candidate (Aqeel, 2017).

The post-9/11 situation was completely different. During this period, sectarian-based violence declined as General Pervaiz Musharraf started a crackdown against all the fundamentalist and sectarian groups. He also ended the sectarian parties such as SMP and LEJ in 2001 and the Sipah e Sahaba and TJP in 2002. Moreover, the focus from sectarianism shifted towards the war on terror started by the US. In addition, the non-Muslim minorities' compulsion to vote only for their communities was revoked by Musharraf.

Furthermore, religious means have always been utilized in order to gain certain political and economic gains as sectarian groups are mobilized against one another. Since 2007, there has been a great resurgence of sectarian violence, and according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, there have been 631 sectarian incidents between 2007 and 2011, in which about 1,649 people died (Yusuf, 2012). Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan has been conducting suicide attacks against the armed forces and civilians in order to impose Islamic laws.

In order to prevent the influence of TTP, the army signed an agreement with TTP and took control over the Swat district of KPK. In addition to this, the National Counter Terrorism Authority was also established to put an end to terrorism, but it failed to do so. In 2011, the Mastung bus shooting incident took place against the Shia pilgrims on their way to Iran, and 26 Shia people were killed in this shooting. Another major incident of religious intolerance took place on January 4, 2011, in which Salman Taseer was killed by his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri because Salman supported the amendments suggested in blasphemy laws after the case of Asia Bibi. The Kohistan Shia massacre on Babusar Top occurred in 2012, in which two Shia were killed after being identified from four buses on the way to Gilgit. TTP accepted this killing as their doing. Later on, in 2013, gunmen killing eight and injuring 30 Shia people targeted an Ashura procession in Rawalpindi. Furthermore, in 2014, the Pak-Iran border was attacked, and the pilgrims visiting the holy places in Pakistan were killed. Jaeshul Islam, a Sunni militant group, took responsibility for this attack and accepted that they had been indulging in attacking the Shia pilgrims for the past eight years (Yasmeen & Umar, 2021).

Furthermore, in DI Khan, militants killed two Shia teachers and lawyers along with a Shia religious scholar named Syed Khurram Zaki and a journalist named Rao Khalid. All these killings were done because of increased sectarianism in the society. The worst sectarian genocide during the last decade included the killing of central Sunni Tehrik leadership in 2003 through a bomb blast, the killing of the Hazara community in 2013, the killing of innocent people in Youm-e-Ashour in Rawalpindi in 2013, and the Abbas Town explosion in 2013 in Karachi (Shah, 2014).

Contemporary dispute

The true essence of Pakistan's creation has eroded because of the evils of 'sectarianism' and 'religious extremism.' In recent years, these evils have strengthened in society, and people have become intolerant of religious thoughts other than their own. People declare each other kaafir and target each other due to religious differences, which has become a grave issue for Pakistan. In 2020, Pakistan saw a significant rise in attacks and arrested most of the Shia population, which forms 15% to 20% of the Sunni-majority society. This increase in Shia massacres is alarming. In Pakistan, blasphemy is considered a capital offense and often leads to mob lynching and violence against the one who did blasphemy. Thus, the killing of Shias and calling them heretics is done under the shadow of blasphemy, which allows these killings, which, however, is not what the actual blasphemy law states. This targeted killing of Shia can be interpreted as genocide, and the irony is that Pakistan condemns the human rights violations in other states, such as in Kashmir, but seems to be unaware of the conflicts going on inside the country.

In previous decades, the Deobandi Sunni groups such as Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi have been instigating most of the violence. However, new forces such as Salafi Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan have become hardline political parties and brutal protest movements. ISKP has been responsible for many sectarian attacks such as the 2022 bombing of Shia mosque in Peshawar, which caused 60 people their lives. The worrisome aspect is that the sectarian militancy is now running across a range of various Sunni Islamist groups. For instance, Labaik has risen since 2017 to a prominent position, and it has been responsible for inciting great sectarian violence. Labaik has been actively promoting an anti-Shia agenda due to which the Shia community of Pakistan has been facing a continuous life threat. The state has used some force against these organizations, such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, by decimating its leadership; however, these actions had short-term success. With this decimation, most of the members joined a like-minded Deobandi group i.e. TTP and some joined ISKP (2022). The counterterrorism officials have asserted that the ISKP threat has been increasing in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa within the Shia populations of Peshawar, Dera Ismail Khan, Kohat, Kurram, and Orakzai.

Sectarianism has become a common notion in the spectrum of the Sunni Islamist groups of Pakistan. Some of the most heinous acts of sectarian violence have been incited by a Barelvi group called Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan, a hardline political party and violent protest movement that mobilizes supporters by alleging blasphemy and other infringements upon religious sensitivities, since 2017 (2005). Labaik incited the crowd responsible for the Sialkot murder. In the meantime, the Salafi Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Islamic State's local affiliate, is becoming more powerful. It claimed the Peshawar bombing, one of the worst in the history of the nation and the first significant anti-Shia strike in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in recent years.

The rise of Barelvi political groups, most significantly Labaik, who has been exploiting the issue of blasphemy and indulging in rigorous acts of sectarian violence, is a significant contemporary development. Pakistan's sectarian terrain has also prominently highlighted intra-Sunni conflict. In particular, Orthodox Deobandis consider the Barelvi shrine culture idolatrous. This struggle became more intense in the 1990s when Sunni Tehreek, a Barelvi organization based in Karachi, was established to oppose Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a rival Deobandi organization. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi slew top Sunni Tehreek officials in a suicide bombing that took place in 2006 and was directed towards a religious gathering in Nishtar Park, Karachi. Major Barelvi shrines were also targeted by Deobandi militants (2009). These attacks included the suicide bombing of Islamabad's Bari Imam in May 2005, which claimed twenty lives; the bombing of Lahore's Data Darbar in October 2010, which claimed 37 lives; and the November 2017 suicide attack at Sehwan's Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, which claimed over eighty lives (Dawn, 2019).

It can be claimed that if it were possible, the Ultra-orthodox Sunni factions in Pakistan would amend the blasphemy laws to include Shia religious expression and historical interpretations of Islam. The country's sectarian conflict, until recently, primarily pitted Shias against some Deobandis, with the former's hardliners calling the latter "Shia kafir". Fundamental demands made by the Sipah-e-Sahaba included barring Shias from government employment, outlawing religious ceremonies, processions, and programs, intimidating well-known Shias into leaving the nation, and instilling dread across the Shia community (2009). Labaik has now adopted the anti-Shia sentiment expressed by Deobandi as its own.

Even though Shias and Barelvis share many observances, including rites at shrines, rights activists and researchers who regularly monitor such changes claim that divides have been increasingly prominent. An activist stated, "Barelvis used to be the buffer between Shias and Deobandis." Now, he said, "that buffer has been dismantled thanks to the state's interference," by which he meant its backing of Labaik (A new era of sectarian violence in Pakistan, 2022). Many Labaik adherents and sympathizers mistreat Shias by applying the Sunni doctrine of takfir, which is essentially the excommunication of Muslims for actions they deem immoral. Supporters of Labaik and other Barelvis yell anti-Shia chants outside of Majalis during Muharram in cities like Karachi and Islamabad. In 2020, Muharram, anti-Shia sentiment among Sunni extremists peaked, especially in Karachi, home to a sizable Shia minority. ASWJ supporters allegedly put pressure on police in late August of that year to submit a first information report for blasphemy against a Shia orator in Islamabad who had attacked Abu Bakr, the first caliph, at a private majlis. According to reports, on August 30, Deobandis put pressure on Karachi police to detain an elderly Shia man for saying a prayer that is considered blasphemous by Sunni extremists. The following month, Sunni militants demanded that the state proclaim Shias heretics during large-scale anti-Shia demonstrations in the city. According to reports, the leader of Labaik in Karachi encouraged his supporters to decapitate those who "blasphemed" against Sunni historical figures.

Based on anecdotal evidence, the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said that approximately 40 blasphemy complaints, primarily against Shias, were registered in September 2020 and issued a warning about the possibility of inter-communal violence (HRCP, 2020).

Socio-Political Factors Fueling Extremism and Sectarianism

Social, economic, and political factors influence every societal event or movement. The same is the case with religious extremism and increased sectarian tendencies in society. Some of the socio-political factors fueling these events are discussed below:

- **Power politics**

Power politics is the primary factor that contributes to sectarian violence in Pakistan. At the local level, there is an accusation that power struggles between various organizations and institutions are involved. The Sunni groups have been blaming the Shia politicians and vice versa. The Sunnis claim that the Shias are involved in power politics because they usually have the upper hand in the power hierarchy through which they quickly attain their interests. In reaction to social and political issues, Shia groups have primarily kept quiet in public in order to gain direct access to the corridors of power. Their religious establishments covertly receive funding from Iran (Khan Z., 2016).

On the other hand, the power struggle is usually between the political parties at the national level. There are numerous examples of national political parties forming alliances with various sectarian organizations to gain electoral support. The most significant include the Peoples Party's electoral alliance with the Sipa e Sahaba group in 1989 and the PML (N) electoral alliance with the same group in the Jhang district. A recent example is the election rally in which Malik Ishaq, the leader of the Jangvi group, participated with Rana Sanaullah in 2013. In retribution, the PML (N) issued election tickets to Shia leaders when Sipa e Shaba leader Azam Tariq ran against the Muslim League (N) candidate. As a result, the two communities' sectarian divide was healed. In addition to this election, the ruling PML (N)

consistently strikes electoral agreements with Sunni sectarian groups. This was demonstrated in 2010 when Rana Sanaullah, a well-known PML (N) politician, campaigns alongside Malik Ishaq of Ahl e Sunnat Wal Jamat. The main political parties in Pakistan, particularly the Pakistan Muslim League, are accountable for their electoral agreements with Ahl e Sunnat Wal Jamat, even though they have openly labeled Shia as heretics. In addition to this, political incompetency can be held responsible for the sectarian divide in Pakistan (Abbas, 2010). Differences in religion can only help us to comprehend the underlying causes of sectarian differences. It is necessary to concentrate on the institutional component and the elites' role in fostering the Shia-Sunni conflict to comprehend the proper security and threat (Kalin & Siddiqui, 2014). In a weaker state, power struggles take place around the survival policies. Political and social differences are frequently utilized as a tool for divide-and-conquer tactics.

- Religious disparity

Pakistan is a plural country and consists of various religious, sectarian, and ethnolinguistic groups. It is composed mainly of Muslims, among which the Sunnis are the majority, and about 12 percent are Shia's. Apart from them, Ahmadis are also present, which were declared non-Muslims in 1974. Several other non-Muslim minorities, such as Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis, and Buddhists are also present. Religious segregation is considered a significant cause of increased sectarianism in Pakistan. These religious factions often offend each other and consider their religion as absolute. They cannot harmonize and unite with the opposite sect, and this intolerant behavior leads to sectarian divides. A significant role played in fueling this intolerant behavior is by the educational institutions and mosques, which circulate a biased view of their religion against other religions and sects. This intolerant behavior has been growing in Pakistan over the last few decades.

- Failures of government

Zia-ul-haq legitimized his military rule by exploiting the ideology of Islamization (Hussain, 2008). His regime is regarded as the beginning of the sectarian violence. For the first time in Pakistani history, the Shia population was mobilized by the Islamization policy started by the Zia government, and they demonstrated in Islamabad for three days (Zaman, 1998). After the protest, the government promised them their demands would be completed (PIPS, 2013). For instance, primary evidence demonstrates that the religious intolerance graph was continuously trending upward. Deobandi were the primary beneficiaries of Zia ul Haq's policies, even though they supported all religious movements. After the 1979 revolution, there was a push for Shia mobilization; Saudi Arabia began providing financial support to quell this movement. This money was provided for two reasons: to combat Shia mobilization and to fight the anti-Soviet Jihad (Majeed & Saaed, 2014). During the Zia regime, specific patronage was given to such Islamic organizations. He was successful in creating hatred between both sects in order to achieve his political interests. This hatred has continued till today, and despite the attempts by the government to stop this violence, the issue has not been resolved (Butt, 2012). The repeated bans over the organizations by the government have failed to stop their violent actions because they have started operating under new organizations and instead have become more violent and active at this moment. While it would be incorrect to claim that the Pakistani government did nothing to stop the murder of the Shia population, they have generally been unsuccessful in identifying the trustworthy source of sectarian conflict and finding solutions to bring about enduring peace. Despite the Federal and Provincial governments' efforts to safeguard the Shia community's unique occasions and rites, historical records reveal a significant security breach. For instance, Pervaiz Musharraf temporarily outlawed the sectarian groups, but they continued to function under different identities under his rule, and incidents regarding sectarian violence occurred during his regime (Arif, 2014).

- **Institutional failure**

The failure of state institutions is another significant cause of increased sectarian violence. Most often, the employees working in a particular institution, such as an intelligence agency or any other security agency, work for their sect rather than the institution. In prisons, these workers facilitate their group members with weapons and maneuver their investigations. The ongoing inability to capture and bring charges against terrorists engaged in sectarian violence is the reason why sectarianism thrives (Yusuf, 2012). In this sense, Pakistan's situation is clear. Extremists propagate violence because they do not care about consequences (Fazal, 2012). The criminal justice system in Pakistan is incredibly flawed, incompetent, unskilled, and corrupt. It is not self-sufficient, and the tools, guidance, security, and training needed for successful prosecutions are unavailable to investigators and prosecutors. The culture of exemption and indemnification that flourishes in the absence of a strong criminal justice system feeds more cycles of cruelty and violence with no repercussions. The criminal justice system itself is generally weak and irrelevant. Thus, it can be asserted that the institutional failure has heightened the issue of sectarian violence in society.

- **Societal temperament**

Society has an inherent issue in its temperament towards acceptance. The extremists consider individuals from any other sect as infidels and justify their killing. Such extremists have deviated from the fundamentals of Islam (Amir, 2011), and ironically, they think that they are serving Islam (Waseem, 2010). This religious intolerance has been growing in society since the Zia regime among which the Sunni-Shia violence is worst as both sides are Muslims. Moreover, Pakistan has been declared as a nation of intolerant people (Naeem, 2020). The significant degree of religious intolerance in our culture makes it challenging to foster harmony and tolerance amongst divergent viewpoints. In addition, the decline in the Islamic value system in society has also made people intolerant and society violent.

Governmental response

Religious extremism is becoming a major issue in Pakistan. The extremist groups have created a wave of intolerance in Pakistan, which has adverse effects on the society and politics of the state. In order to counter religious extremism in Pakistan, the government took various steps, including the formation of a National Action Plan and counterterrorism force. The NAP demands an all-out assault on extremist organizations, demanding the seizure of their property, the detention of its members, and the suspension of all of their operations. It also asks for bolstering law enforcement organizations to ensure they have the tools and expertise to fight terrorism and extremism. This entails enhancing intelligence collection and giving law enforcement officers better tools and training. Unfortunately, a lack of political will and a fear of retaliation from radical organizations have hindered these efforts. The absence of political will to fully execute the NAP was one of the key causes of its failure. Although the plan was excitingly introduced, the political establishment did not live up to its promises. Numerous parties were involved, including provincial governments, law enforcement agencies, and intelligence services. Nevertheless, these parties did not work together or coordinate well, which reduced the plan's efficacy.

Moreover, the political leaders have yet to formulate a framework for antiterrorism. Thus, the civil society and military started a chain of countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives, and the mechanism for implementing this CVE structure was based on the local dynamics of Pakistan (Iqbal, 2014). The key characteristics of these CVE initiatives include religious education, sending messages through social and print media, revision of the madrasa syllabus, monitoring extremist messages on websites, and community initiatives. The government introduced numerous CVE initiatives, but the benefits must be maintained, and the implementation process needs to be enhanced through ongoing assessment. Naturally, combating terrorism is expensive, and CVE is critical to any nation's total counterterrorism plan. Pakistani policy leaders must analyze obstacles before deploying CVE measures. Above

all, NACTA needs to be strengthened as soon as possible because it is the principal organization in charge of carrying out CVE programs (Khan, 2020).

Impact on society

In Pakistan, sectarian terrorism and the official hesitancy to tackle it are arguably the most apparent manifestations of state fragility. Attacks against Shias have grown more heinous and targeted since the 2000s. For fear of deadly retaliation, the nation's primary information source—the local, non-English broadcast media—has refrained from condemning Sunni terrorists.

As a result, most Pakistani journalists do not oppose government attempts to minimize the severity of the sectarian conflict, with a small few speaking out against it frequently at personal peril. The most dangerous effect of sectarianism has been the opportunistic self-radicalization of organized criminal syndicates, who have taken on a sectarian appearance in an attempt to get official support for their lucrative operations. The relationship between criminal gangs and extremist mullahs has lessened the control that Pakistani intelligence services had over sectarian groups. These groups now have a source of funding and personnel on their own if the government attempts to shut down their above-ground infrastructure. Political parties that advocate terrorist acts rhetorically but do not really carry them out are part of this above-ground support network. Through the use of a nationalistic narrative centered on the idea of a Sunni-majority country, they have framed such attacks and given other political parties a means of negotiating strategically with sectarian terrorists. Using mosques, charitable organizations, and privately published books, mainstream politicians permit sectarian groups to disseminate extremist beliefs to groups of people in exchange for votes solicited from the militants' supporters or sometimes just as self-insurance.

The violence that was hitherto restricted to Shias is now, concerningly, also directed towards moderate Sunnis if they are deemed to be insufficiently orthodox. Twenty-five religious sites in Pakistan have been assaulted in the past ten years, many of them Sunni. These shrines honoring the memory of regional saints are hated by militant sectarians because they are perceived as an "innovation" that compromises the "purity" of their Islam, which is centered on the Arab world.

Younger militants now use attacks on these locations as a way to surpass their older counterparts. Some bombs since 2015 have been attributed to IS, or more appropriately, to terrorists from Pakistan who have sworn allegiance to the group. These new attacks seek to subvert Pakistani society's established values and divide the nation along sectarian and subsectarian lines. Nearly ninety persons were killed when a Sufi shrine was bombed in February 2017. In Pakistan, Sufis and Barelvis are frequently seen as more moderate than Wahhabis or Deobandis, two of the more traditional Sunni Muslim groups. However, it seems that even moderates now feel forced to show off their dogmatic rigidity in order to avoid inciting militant attacks. Thus, in a shocking development for the world community, hundreds of Barelvi clerics celebrated the gunman and approved of the death of the Punjab province governor, whom a Barelvi had shot. In 2016, the authorities executed the assailant (Mahadevan, 2017).

Recommendations

Proposed Peace-building model

Peace is the primary prerequisite for any society to prosper. This section outlines a framework that may be taken into consideration by the state of Pakistan to counter hatred and violence in the name of faith and establish a peaceful social setting for the development of cultural capital and political stability.

Our framework of peace building is based upon the Comprehensive Peace-building Framework Approach. This theory, proposed by Jean Paul Lederach, argues that peace can be restored if a patterned method of political intervention is followed carefully. Since this peace-building model was developed in a non-Pakistani socio-political setting, it needs points that are more specific. For example, considerable attention is paid to political will, which is required to counter violence in the name of religion. Similarly, the state in Pakistan needs to make some more laws clarifying that no political party may use any channel to seek help from extremist religious groups during the elections. For that matter, some structural and procedural measures have been outlined below:

a) Strong politico-legal will: The state has been soft in dealing with one group or another. It has created space for religiously motivated individuals to draw selective interpretations of religion and seek political support from the same. The state, through its institutional setup and legal provisions, must ensure that it has a severe, clear, and strong agenda to end violence in the name of religion. This is the fundamental structural change that needs to be incorporated into Pakistani socio-political discourse.

b) Reforming curriculum of religious seminaries: The role of religious seminaries in disrupting social order is predominant. Hence, there is an urgent need to completely revise and reform the curriculum taught in religious institutions of any sect. This shall be a structural change since it may involve direct control of the state over these seminaries. Without establishing the expression of the writ of the state, these institutions shall continue to exhibit religiously exclusivist tendencies.

c) Regulate Mosques through district government: Prayer leaders generally and on Friday prayers particularly get ample opportunity to interact with masses. In a cultural setting where education is not readily available and economic opportunities are limited, the people are generally submissive and offer unconditional submission to the Imam. For that matter, the state needs to show seriousness and draft a law that all mosques shall be regulated by the respective Deputy Commissioners (DCs) so that no discriminatory or insulting remarks against any sect or individual belonging to any particular faith system shall be passed. This may be a direct system of checks and balances. At the operational level, the concerned may form a committee at the local level to report to him directly, and the committee may have members from all the sects in a particular community.

d) Training courses for local religious leaders/Imams: While considering the abovementioned point, it is pivotal to introduce a training system for every Imam leading a mosque in a village or town. Gathering religious leaders in one hall with diverse backgrounds will help them listen to one another and debate on the points they generally do not agree. This will help them to understand each other's point of view in a controlled environment. There must be a team of trainers, certified by the government, to familiarize these Imams with a basis of peace and harmony in complex social settings.

e) Inter and intra-sect dialogue: In Pakistan, the dialogue between and among the representatives of competing ideologies does not exist anymore. The absence of such platforms where scholars could have debated issues and puzzles in an open environment led to violent means of collective interaction. Once the violence starts, mob justice becomes the only available option to pacify the larger communities. The state must ensure that at the district and Tehsil level, there are some platforms where scholars from different sects are invited and encouraged to share their views on matters of mutual interest. Seminars and public campaigns are also available to shape a discourse based on tolerance, peace, and harmony.

Conclusion

To conclude, the intricate tapestry of religious extremism and the sectarian divide caused by it exists as a daunting challenge and is deeply ingrained within the socio-political fabric of Pakistan. The fracture and strife within Pakistani society can be attributed in large part to the country's historical background, intricate ideological foundations, and modern extremist expressions. There have been terrible repercussions from this relationship, including targeted attacks, horrific acts of violence, and widespread mistrust and terror among various religious communities. These conflicts nevertheless put pressure on society's fabric, obstruct advancement, and prevent a peaceful, inclusive society from happening. Amid these difficulties, there are chances for improvement. In order to effectively combat religious extremism and sectarian divisions, a comprehensive strategy involving extensive reforms in the domains of education, society, and governance is required. In order to create an inclusive society and harmonious cohabitation, it is essential to support initiatives that advance tolerance, understanding, and respect for other religious beliefs. Positive change can be sparked by strengthening interfaith understanding, empowering communities, and reworking school curricula to emphasize pluralism and critical thinking. In addition, addressing the fundamental causes of extremism and sectarianism requires putting in place efficient governing structures and guaranteeing fair socioeconomic growth.

In order to move Pakistan in the direction of harmony, tolerance, and cohabitation, the state, civil society, religious authorities, and the international community all play critical roles. Building a society where diversity is valued and peaceful coexistence is upheld, as a fundamental tenet will require cooperative efforts to demolish the ideological foundations of extremism, inclusive policies, and a sincere commitment to protecting religious freedoms. Pakistan is at a turning point in its efforts to understand the complex relationship between religious extremism and sectarian tensions. This is a chance to welcome diversity, promote societal harmony, and create a future in which peace and unity triumph over divisions.

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