

Sectarianism: A Severe Setback to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan

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Abstract

The research has elaborated the severity and aftermaths of sectarianism in Pakistan. It has provided a historical background of the research that reflects the history of ups and downs of the sectarian issues in Pakistan. It explained how various governments in Pakistan had been playing their critical role in infuriating the different groups of people against each other, particularly the *Sunnis* and *Shias* that earned the tarnished image for Pakistan in the comity of nations. Various dynamics of sectarianism have been discussed in the paper to know about the facts that there were and are political motives behind the division of public instead of religious or theological ones. The research has enunciated the aftermaths of the sectarianism that has provided a large increase in the number of casualties after the bombing on the shrines of *Sufi* saints and *Imam Barghas*. In addition to that, the weaponization of the public, as well as the religious organizations, is the result of these sectarian differences. It has also discussed the recent prevailing trends of sectarianism in Pakistan with some remedies to get rid of all these grievances. The research is supportive for the readers who want to know about the implications of the sectarian violence in Pakistan. It is a guide for the students who have a desire to explore the dimensions of

the interpretation of the Islamic teachings from the platforms of the particular sects.

Keywords: Pakistan, Sectarian Violence, Shias, Sunnis and Dynamics.

A Brief History of Sectarianism in Pakistan

History witnesses that Pakistan's political, religious and military elite have been using religion as an impressive card to grab more and more powers. For that purpose, they used the public to attain their ulterior motives even after dividing them into various groups based on their different religious approaches. Therefore, sectarianism is not a new phenomenon for Pakistan as several sectarian clashes can also be seen even during the days of British Raj. As Tariq Rahman points out, "there was much more acrimonious theological debate among the Shi'as and Sunnis and the Sunnis themselves during British rule than is common nowadays. The followers of the main debaters sometimes exchanged invectives and even came to blows', he writes, 'but [they] never turned to terrorism as witnessed in Pakistan's recent history".¹

Today it seems that discussion and debate are actively discouraged, leading to 'politics by other means' Shi'as and Sunnis, the same: one faith; one Prophet; one text and one way. Soon after the inception of Pakistan, it is observed that there was a harmony between the Shia community and the Sunnis to some extent. Both Ayub and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto formulated the policies to avoid the national disintegration just because of sectarian hatred. But General Ziaul Haq could not capitalize it. Zia-ul-Haq's 'divide and rule' policy, Saur Revolution (1978) in Afghanistan, Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979), the appearance of Jihadis and formation of the number of terrorist organisations, Iranian Revolution (1979) and Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) are considered as significant developments behind the promotion of sectarianism in Pakistan.² Most of the writers are of the view that sectarianism began strengthening its roots in Pakistan during the regime of President Zia-ul-Haq when attempts were made to 'Sunnify' the state. At the same time, the episode of the Iranian Revolution had inspired its Shia

following in Pakistan that stoked a Shia-Sunni conflict. Religious scholars from both the sects felt their identity in crisis and tried their best to prove themselves right through interpreting the Islamic teachings. Under these circumstances, Mufti Jafar Husain, founded a Shia organization *Tehreek-i-Nifaz-i-Fiqh Jafariya* (TNFJ) in 1979 to resist the process of 'Sunnification'. Six years later, Molana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, inspired by the traditional activism and radical oratory of *Ahrar*, created *Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan* (SSP).³

Safdar Mahmood informs that SSP was an extremely orthodox and developed form of one of the factions of Jama'at-i-Islami JUI(S) a group headed by Molana Saami-ul-Haq. SSP broke apart from the party and interpreted Islamic teachings based on orthodox views that affected the inter-sectarian relations in Pakistan. Killings, murders and assassinations of the leaders and the public became the order of the day.⁴ Zia furthered fuel to the fire when he diverted all of his attentions to promoting the Sunnis and ignored Shias without considering the repercussions for the Pakistani generations to come. The purpose of Zia behind the initiation of religious involvement in state affairs was to legitimize the power. The policy proved productive for him as he got successful in influencing small bourgeoisie, feudal elite and middle class, who belonged to the Sunni faction. Marco Corsi States that:

“With the support of the US, Zia exploited religion to acquire domestic legitimacy and countered Shia dissent that implied economic and political patronage to Sunni extremists”.⁵

Not only at the national level but also at regional level Zia supported the Sunni communities. During the process of the formulation of foreign policy, Pakistan's establishment assured its support not for ethnic Pashtuns of Afghanistan but for the Sunni Muslims of that country. The political elite in Pakistan did not want to see Shia dominated government in Kabul that was under the predominantly Shia Mujahedeen group before the Taliban, more friendly towards Shia Iranian Government. In addition to that, US supported Pakistan for installing the

Taliban against Shia Mujahedeen, an ally of its arch-enemy, Iran.⁶

Prominent works of Vali Raza Nasr, Qasim Zaman and Muhammad Waseem reflect the same views that Zia's Islmaization and proliferation of *Deobandi Madrassas* paved the way for soaring sectarianism in Pakistan. S. Akbar Zaidi adds that:

“Islamisation resulted in the worst kind of sectarianism in Pakistan and is the precursor to much of the militancy and fundamentalism in the name of religion in Pakistan today”.⁷

Later on, the assassination of Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, the leader of SSP, on February 23, 1990, furthered fuel to the fire. The incident witnessed historical protests in district Jhang after the heinous murder of Jhangvi. Sunni Deobandis showed hatred towards Shia community to such an extent that they accused Shias of murder and raised a cry, Kafir Kafir, Shia Kafir (Infidel, Infidel Shi'a Infidel).⁸ This ghastly act, from the side of Deobandis, forced Pakistan to face the menace of extremism that caused colossal damage to the national integration. A few years later, Pakistan was trapped by a ray of violence that increased the number of heinous acts of target-killing, attacks on Imam Barghas, mosques and Sufi shrines. In December 1994, Pakistan in general and Karachi in particular witnessed the highest ratio of deaths under the banner of ethnicity and Shia-Sunni conflicts. Iftekhar H. Malik states that:

“The violence is the result of four separate conflicts involving rival criminal gangs, Sunni and Shia Muslims, native Sindhis and Urdu speaking Mohajirs, and rival factions of Mohajir community”.⁹

Malik also reports that between 1 December 1994 and 15 March 1995, 542 people were killed only in Karachi in ethnic and sectarian clashes. During the month of Ramzan, two Shia mosques were attacked leaving 26 worshippers dead and an equal number of seriously injured. In May 1995, the acts of

sectarian violence were manipulated to a greater extent while ethnic turmoil took a new turn. These conflicts created a blend of problems for the governors and administrators in Pakistan. There was a civil-war like situation in Karachi as the security forces were confronted with face to face clashes with the supporters of MQM.¹⁰ From January 1997 to October 1999, 123 cases of sectarian violence were reported in which 345 people lost their lives. The year 2002 experienced the reactivation of sectarian groups in Karachi. In March and April, these groups targeted the public, particularly, doctors (who belonged to both Shia and Sunni communities).¹¹

Soon after the episode of 9/11, General Pervez Musharraf demonstrated a new image of Pakistan in the world community through maintaining a clear distinction between terrorism and Jihad. He earned more reliability from United States (US) as a sincere ally to curb militancy in Pakistan particularly and in the region generally. Musharraf identified three types of violence which included “violence originating from sectarian militant organisations like SSP and SMP, authors of the Shia and Sunni's fresh outbreak”.¹² There is a difference in the opinions of the writers about the strategies and policies of General Musharraf he adapted to avoid the disgusting results of sectarian clashes in Pakistan. Some view that he was supporting the Shias and others consider him as a staunch supporter of the Sunnis.

Dynamics of Sectarianism

There are multiple internal and external factors behind the promotion of sectarian violence in Pakistan. Internal ones may include power politics, religious disparities, mal-governance, failure of the government writ, lack of check on religious *Madrasahs*, least observation of minority rights, problem in the temperament of the Pakistani society and waywardness from the Islamic teachings. Additionally, the foreign factors may be referred to as the *Afghanistan Jihad*, Iran-Saudi Proxy wars, Indian conspiracies and the role of US for ulterior gains.¹³ Politics of power among the Sunni and Shia leadership and Iran-Saudi proxy wars are severer in this respect. Sunni

community observes that Shias are influencing from the upper level of the hierarchy of power to attain their particular goals. On the contrary, same grievances can be seen from the *Shia* community who argues that *Sunni* leaders are silent but approach the higher authorities to inflict aggression against them. The Iran-Saudi tussle has also polarised the Pakistani society into two classes; *Shias*, the supporters of Iran and *Sunnis*, the supporters of Saudi Arab.¹⁴

Now, it is important to mention the major actors or organizations which are changing the situation in Pakistan from bad to worse. They are listed as *Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ)*, *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ)*, *Tehrek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)*, *Sipa-e-Muhammadi (SeM)*, *Tehrek-e-Jafria Pakistan (TeJP)*, *Sunni Tehrek* and *Jundullah*.¹⁵ Most of them are influencing the Pakistanis in different areas of Pakistan. In Punjab, particularly, sectarianism is used as a tool to approach political goals rather fulfilling the religious and theological ones. Punjab is the centre for violent and brutal enmity between Shias and Sunnis that has brought them in a state of a gun battle and they have formed “militant” Sunni and Shia armed squads. There is no doubt that there are huge religious differences between these two factions in modern Pakistan but the noticeable thing is that:

“The manifestation and form of sectarianism is based less on theological disputation and far more on modern politics, often vary petty and localized”¹⁶.

In addition to that, Qasim Zaman believes that a rapid increase in the number of Madrassas in Punjab has played a critical role in the rise of sectarianism in Pakistan. His collected statistical data reveals that between 1975 and 2001 only Bhawalpur and Dera Ghazi Khan, the smallest two administrative divisions in Punjab and contain less than 10 per cent urban population of the province, experienced 50 per cent of Madrassas of the total number (1368 out of 2715).¹⁷

Syed Vali Raza Nasr informs that there were only 137 madrassas in Pakistan at the time inception. The proliferation of

Deobandi, Bralvi and Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas began in the mid-1970s and was supported by the Gulf monarchies especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The flow of funds by these governments helped Punjab, noticeably, to maintaining the phenomenal pace of the increasing number of madrassas since. Punjab observed three and a half time rise between 1975 and 1996. During these years the number of madrassas in Punjab increased from 700 to 2463 and “of 2463, 750 were called as aggressively sectarian”.¹⁸ Furthermore, Nasr argued that all the peoples, associated with sectarian groups in these madrassas, enjoy the support of mainstream religious political parties like Jama’at-i-Islami and fall victim of ulterior motives of Islamist politicians. He describes that:

“This process also transformed madrasahs from intellectual institutions into political ones. Madrasahs became the recruiting and training grounds for religio-political activist organizations. In some instances, they also become lucrative financial concerns. This has given a whole new dimension to sectarian posturing. It has made sectarianism a means to a financial end, and militancy a form of 'rent-seeking.' For instance, Saudi and Iraqi sponsorship of sectarianism has led sectarian groups to try to out-do each other in rhetoric and violence in the hope of receiving increasing shares of the flow of funds from the Persian Gulf”.¹⁹

Mtthew J. Nelson concludes his field research about the nature of the curriculum of Islamic Studies in a lucidly. Respondents from Baluchistan and Azad Kashmir are the population of his research. He raised the question whether the curriculum of Islamic Studies should reflect the ideology of different religious groups in Pakistan, for example Sunnis, Shias, Deobandi Sunnis and Bralvi Sunnis and so on. 52 per cent respondents from Baluchistan and 89 per cent from Azad Kashmir argued that 'it's not necessary to mention these things,' because 'there is only one Islam'.²⁰

Impact of Sectarianism in the Islamic Republic

It is a common view that sectarianism involves the conflicts between Shias and Sunnis. Intra-sect clashes can also be witnessed particularly in case of Sunnis. It also involves the clashes between Deobandis and Bralvis who are popularly known as the followers of institutionalized Islam in Pakistan. They oppose the religious interpretations and show aggression against each other to worsen the situation of Pakistan. The examples of aggression can be seen from the year 2005 when violent attacks on Sufi shrines and *Pirs* were planned. Pir Samiullah became the victim of this violence in 2008 when Swat Taliban claimed the heinous act. Shrine of Data Ganj Bakhsh was attacked in 2010 that claimed 45 lives. Later on the shrines of Baba Farid in Pakpattan and Abdullah Shah Gazi were also targeted.²¹ The shrine of Pir Rakhel was attacked by a suicide bomber on March 19, 2005, in which 35 people lost their lives. Later on, shrines of Sufi poet Rehman Baba in Peshawar and Golra Sharif in Islamabad were attacked in 2009 and 2010 respectively. There was a minor loss of lives in these attacks. But, the bombers caused a heavy loss when they attacked the shrines of Ali Bin Usman (Data Hajveri) at Lahore, Abdullah Shah Ghazi at Karachi and Baba Farid in Pakpattan in 2010. Almost 51 pilgrimages lost their lives in these attacks.²²

Accordingly, 11 people were killed as a result of the bombing at the shrine of Akhund Panju Baba at Akbarpur Taro Jaba in 2011. During the same year, 50 people died when the bombers attacked the Sakhi Sarwar shrine in Dera Ghazi Khan. 2012 experienced the attacks on the shrines of Sufi saints Shaikh Nisa Baba and Sheikh Bahadur Baba. Shrines of Baba Nangay Shah in Islamabad and Abdul Qadus Shah in Peshawar were attacked in 2014. Additionally, 50 more lives fell prey to the bombing at the shrine of Shah Noorani in Khuzdar in November 2016.²³ According to the report of the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) 101 people fell victims to the sectarian violence in Pakistan from January to March 2017. Among these 93 were from Sind only. Further, from these 91 casualties was the result of the suicide attack on the

shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalander. Only this fatal attack increased the death rate up to 25 per cent in the whole country.²⁴

If one observes the current state of sectarian clashes in Pakistan, he will find that Shia Muslims are paying the heavy cost in shape of attacks on their Imam Barghas. Many lives have become the victim to the grudges of the opposite sect. Religious elite is dormant and shows reluctance in peacefully resolving the mutual issues. Resultantly, the public is suffering a lot and living life under pessimism. There were a rare number of attacks on Imam Barghas since the death of Haq Nawaz Jhangvi (d. 1990) the founder of a religious organization SSP. But the severity can be seen at the beginning of the 21st century. The year 2015 is mentionable here when almost in every province the suicide bombers attacked Imam Barghas at various places. Banned Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan has been on the front line to cause an irreversible loss to the nation. On 9 January 2015 TTP claimed an attack on Rawalpindi Imambargh that left people died. It further threatened the Pakistani leadership. TTP leader Ehsan Ullah Ehsan clearly said in an email “We claim responsibility of the attack on the *Imambargah* and vow to continue such attacks”.²⁵

Jundullah, a splinter faction of TTP, which pledged the support of Islamic State (IS) group based in Syria, claimed the responsibility of attacking the central Imam Bargha of Shikarpur (a district in Sindh province). 60 people were killed and the same number got injured in that explosion. It terrified the Shia Muslims in the province to a greater extent.²⁶ Two weeks later, Jundullah planned a gun and bomb attack at an Imambargha in Peshawar in which 21 were killed. The leadership of Jundullah said that it was the revenge for a militant known as Doctor Usman, who was hanged in December 2014. All these attacks tarnished the image of Pakistan at international level and sectarianism, as a defining feature of Islam in contemporary Pakistan, has enabled the Western thinkers to circulate the opinion among their public that an Islamic revolution cannot be expected in Pakistan. Politicization and weaponization of the sectarian groups have earned the menace of terrorism for Pakistan as “sectarianism

provides fertile soil for recruitment to radical Jihadist movements”.²⁷ In short, Pakistan has been trapped by a blend of issues which are the offspring of the sectarian clashes between and among the people of the same religion i. e. Islam.

The intensifying sectarian violence has exposed the institutional failure and futile statehood in Pakistan. Most of the sectarian organizations have developed their infrastructure which includes the trained and armed militant youth especially. They are well-equipped with the sophisticated weapons that are a clear signal towards the foreign backing to these assassins and rebels. Weak writ of the state allows these killers and create the circumstances for the drug mafia and other criminal groups to affect the socio-economic and religious spheres badly. Resultantly, the promoters of sectarianism get a chance to shelter for their illegal cover.²⁸

Recent Trends

In recent years, Pakistani security forces have launched many operations in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to curb Taliban led militancy. They have got quite successful in this connection. At the same time, sectarian terrorism is expanding not just in terms of its spread but its lethality. Rivalry and violence is increasing day by day on intra-sect basis rather inter-sect ones. The conflicts between Shias and Sunnis have been minimised to a greater extent. But, various factions of the Sunnis like Deobandi-Bralvi and Deobandi-Salafi are in a war-like situation now.²⁹ Additionally, the security forces have been successful in manipulating the frequency of suicide attacks and heinous acts of terrorism, but still, they are unable to counter the menace of sectarian violence. In 2010 and 2011, 57 and 30 cases of sectarian killings were recorded respectively. The year 2012 witnessed 41 cases of the same nature. Broadly speaking, “this recent wave of sectarian violence in Pakistan is qualitatively different from the traditional sectarian discourse in terms of broader ideology, trends and theatres. This indicates the transforming trends of sectarianism in Pakistani society”.³⁰

In a 2013 study by the Pew Research Centre, Pakistan had the highest possible score on the social hostilities involving religions index which gives the detail that:

“The measure acts of religious hostility by private individuals, organizations, and social groups. This includes religion-related armed conflict or terrorism, mob or sectarian violence, harassment over attire for religious reasons, and other religion-related intimidation or abuse”.³¹

Measures Taken by the Recent Governments

In recent years, it has been attempted twice that the madrassas in Pakistan should be reformed to minimize the heinous acts of sectarian violence. The first attempt was made by General Pervez Musharraf in 2008 when he issued the Madrassa Regulation Ordinance. He built the ordinance according to the act of 2002 for bringing the madrassas under regulation and state oversight. The purpose behind the introduction of the particular ordinance was to register the madrassas with the government and to teach the curriculum that could discourage militancy, hate speech and sectarianism.³² Similarly, in 2010, Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) signed an agreement with *Ittehad-e-Tanzeem-ul-Madaras Pakistan (ITMP)* to recognize its five madrassa boards and to link them with the ministry of education through an act of parliament. The agreement was based on the condition that madrassas would not publish the literature that promotes militancy and sectarianism and would teach an inclusive curriculum. But, unfortunately, bureaucratic bottlenecks did not allow the agreement to be presented in the parliament for legislation.³³

Most probably, Pakistan is a state where there is no concept of observing the state laws that have given birth to several socio-economic and politico-religious problems. In the case of sectarian violence, the law enforcing agencies have been facing failure and reluctance in ensuring their writ. They have not been able to arrest the culprits and initiate their trial in time that caused a delay in providing the victims with justice. For example, Malik Ishaq, a prominent figure of SSP and was

encountered in 2015, have killed many Shiites and have been speaking against them in different meetings within Pakistan but no strict action was taken against him till 2015. In 1997, Ishaq was arrested for killing 44 people and was released in 2011 (after 14 years of imprisonment) due to the lack of evidence. Further, Malik masterminded a large scale targeting attacks against the civilians, diplomats and religious monuments. Surprising thing is that he has been planning all these attacks in the custody of the police.³⁴ Same is the case with new leadership that has not assured the promulgation of rules and regulations through which it can initiate the trial of the culprits in this regard.

Remedial Measures

A co-operation from the side of the public, the government and the religious elite is required to manipulate the peril of sectarianism in Pakistan. The public should possess the nature to tolerate the things; the government should have a check on the activities of all the sects which can cause an increase in the number of violent acts. Most importantly, the religious strata should not exaggerate the religious teachings. While living in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan the menace of sectarianism can be avoided through adopting the following measures:

- 1- The government should try to pursue a policy of 'pragmatic realism' to improve the standards of education that can be supportive for the public to interpret the things logically. Education makes the masses able to bear the things and guarantees the deep observation of peace among the people of different sects. The curriculum of religious as well as public institutions should be based on the promotion of intra-sect and inter-sect harmony.
- 2- The religious elite should come forward to remove the misconceptions among the people about the teachings of various sects. The role of *Mullahs* of grass-root level cannot be denied in this connection. They should present the true definition of the Muslim and restrain

- the conspiracies of declaring each other as non-Muslim or 'Kafir'.
- 3- Local media should play a positive role in resolving the issues if found anyhow to avoid the irreversible loss of property and lives. Different media channels should organize the programmes in which scholars of different *Fiqah* should be invited to interpret the teachings of Islam. It will pave the way for the promotion of harmony among the peoples of concerned sects.
 - 4- There should be a proper system of check and balance to assess the impact of the educational institutions, particularly, the *Madrassas*. The government should form a board that should be composed of learned religious scholars. The board should be able to examine the influence of these institutions on the whole society.
 - 5- Some constitutional measures should be taken to declare the promotion of sectarian hatred as a crime. The culprits should be facing the trials and punishments. Deep and practical observation of article 256 can be fruitful in this connection.
 - 6- The state should observe neutrality while dealing with either of the sects particularly during the circumstances of conflict. Biases for any sect can irritate the other one to be infuriated even against the state.
 - 7- The sectarian organizations, which are reappearing with different names, should be banned permanently.
 - 8- Like other spheres, religious one is also being intervened by the external factors. Muslim countries with Shia majority send a lot of money to particular organizations with a purpose to counter the Sunnis and vice versa. So, this interference should have an end to secure national peace.
 - 9- *Haddood* laws and blasphemy laws should be practised properly to avoid sectarian issues.
 - 10- *Auqaf* department should appoint the prayer leaders and orators at mosques and religious institutions after a full-fledge verification of their religious background and the required qualification. The department should be judging them on the basis either they are sectarian extremists or promoters of inter-sect harmony.

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