

Sectarian Violence in Pakistan



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Two recent events in Quetta shattered the more than year long Shia-Sunni sectarian peace in Pakistan. The first incident took place in June this year, when twelve police recruits belonging to the Shia community were killed in Quetta. The second took place in early July, when forty five people belonging to the Shia community were killed in an *imambargah* while offering prayers.

This is the first time sectarian attacks took place in Baluchistan. However, relations between the two communities have been tense since 1989, as a result of a widening Shia-Sunni faultline. More than 1400 persons have been killed in the last fourteen years due to sectarian violence. Though sectarian divide has always existed in Pakistan, certain developments, within and outside the country in the 1980s, increased the number of violent clashes and casualties.

Causes for Sectarian Violence

Many factors contributed to the growth of sectarian violence in the 1980s and 90s. While some were direct causes, others indirectly deepened the sectarian faultlines. Before analyzing these causes, it is essential to focus on the facts related to sectarian violence in Pakistan and interpret them in the right perspective.

- **Sectarian Politics**

The following factors increased the sectarian divide, which was embedded in Pakistani society in the 1980s, especially in Punjab. First, the formation of Shia and Sunni militant organizations which were not representative of their respective communities although there was support from them. The formation of the militant Sunni *Sipah-i-Sahaba, Pakistan* (SSP) and the *Shia Sipah-i-*

Mohammad, Pakistan (SMP) was the main factor underlying the escalating conflict between the two communities. Apart from the *Sipah-i-Sahaba*, other Sunni organizations like Sunni Tehrik were formed in Sindh. Later some SSP activists led by Riaz Basra organized the *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi* (LJ), named after the founder of the SSP. The LJ was more militant and has been banned. These organizations widened the sectarian divide and both groups started using violence against each other. The strength of these militant sectarian organizations increased in the 1980s and 90s, and they were only banned by General Musharraf in January 2002.

Second, factionalism within the religious parties and militant organizations deepened the sectarian divide. The *Jamiat-ul-Islam* (JUI) got divided into two factions led by Fazlur Rahman and Sami-ul-Haq and both factions attempted to build their foundations on anti-Shia tenets with each trying to be more virulently anti-Shia. Even the militant organizations on both sides (the SSP and the SMP) faced divisions, and these factions, devoid of effective leadership, were involved in arbitrary killings of the other community.

Religious parties like the JUI provided indirect support to militant organizations. It is essential to understand that sectarian violence is largely limited to Punjab, especially in the district of Jhang, where the mainstream religious parties never enjoyed popular support. Baluchistan, had been free of sectarian violence and so was Sind, except for Karachi. The *Jamiat Ulama-i-Pakistan* (JUP), which enjoys support at the popular level in Punjab belongs to the Brehlvi faith and does not share the antagonism of the Deobandis and Wahabis towards the Shias. In fact, unlike the latter two, the JUP considers them to be Muslims and a part of the

Islamic world.

Third, sectarian violence in Punjab was primarily due to Shia-Sunni economic, social and political relations. For example in Jhang, where sectarian violence is high, the Shia community forms the upper class, being landlords and enjoying political power; the majority Sunni community forms the lower stratum in the social, economic and political hierarchy. When the Sunni middle class grew, especially in the 1970s as a result of better education and remittances from the Gulf, they demanded their share of social and political status, which was resisted by the Shias. Maulana Nawaz Jhangvi, assassinated in 1990 by Shia militants, formed the *Sipah-i-Sahaba* in Jhang in 1985, largely to fight the Shia landlords.

- **Islamization policies of Zia**

Islamic policies introduced by Zia-ul-Haq were also responsible for the growth of sectarian violence inside Pakistan. An in-depth analysis would reveal that these policies were cosmetic and peripheral, as they did not impinge on the bureaucratic-military oligarchy or the feudal structure of the society. In fact, these policies were aimed at gaining legitimacy within Pakistan and were not meant to challenge the existing social and economic institutions.

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This made the Shias defensive and they started supporting the PPP. Besides, the changes made by Zia led to intense competition amongst the various Sunni groups, especially the Wahabis, Deobandis and Brelvis, as they wanted the State to enforce their own version of Islam, especially

However, the Islamization policies exerted a negative influence on the two communities. The Sunni religious parties led by JUI and JUP became active vis-a-vis the Shias, as they wanted the State to introduce the Sunnization of Pakistan, which the Shias feared.

the Islamic laws, though they were united in their opposition to Shias.

However, the Islamic reforms introduced by Zia, especially relating to the legal field, alarmed the Shia community. The *Tehrik-i-Nifaz-i-Fiqh-i-Jafriya* (TNFJ) was formed in 1979 to enforce the Jafri *fiqh*; earlier in the same year Zia had declared that the Hanafi *fiqh* would be enforced. The formation of TNFJ was the political response of the Shia community. In its early years it fought to get concessions such as exempting the Shia community from paying *zakat* and *ushr*.

- **Jihad in Afghanistan**

Pakistan's Afghan policy in the 1980s and 90s aggravated sectarian violence inside the country. Afghan resistance against the Soviet Union in the 1980s resulted in the proliferation and easy availability of small arms in Pakistan. The emergence of and subsequent growth of the Taliban in the 1990s and their support to Sunni organizations such as the *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen* impinged directly on sectarian violence. The *Sipah-i-Sahaba* cadres were trained in Afghanistan and most of them fought the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Shias inside Pakistan.

- **Iran-Iraq War**

The impact of the emergence of the Khomeini regime in 1979 in Iran and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war in the early 1980s on sectarian violence in Pakistan has generally been underestimated. It is no coincidence that the TNFJ, the main Shite party in Pakistan, was formed in 1979. When the Iran-Iraq war started, the Muslim world got divided into two camps and started funding their faith. As a result, enormous funds flowed, especially from Saudi Arabia and Iran, into Pakistan to support the various Sunni and Shia organizations and the madrassas run by them respectively, which were directly responsible for the growth of organized opposition and violence.

- **Jihad in Kashmir**

Pakistan's support and involvement in Kashmir was also responsible for sectarian violence. While the *Lashkar-e-Toiba* and the *Hizbul Mujahideen* do not indulge in sectarian violence inside Pakistan, the same cannot be said about other jihadi groups, especially the *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen* and, its later incarnation, the *Jaish-e-Mohammad*. Both these

groups were trained in Afghanistan under the Taliban and were close to *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi*, the most violent Sunni organization. Before the Musharraf regime started its crackdown on sectarian organizations in 2001, these three were involved in collecting funds for *jihād* in Kashmir. The security agencies could not do much, as they could not differentiate which organization was involved.

- **The Madrassas**

Various madrassas, especially in Punjab and Karachi, accentuated existing sectarian cleavage. Each Sunni schism (Deobandi, Brehlvi, Wahabi) and Shias ran their own madrassas for providing basic education. The curriculum was decided by the *madaris*. As a result, when sectarian faultlines got pronounced, a hate campaign was introduced vis-a-vis the other sect. Besides, the madrassas also provided manpower for these sectarian organizations, leading to sectarian engagements on the streets and dividing them further. The communities started defending their faith by protecting and supporting the offenders instead of condemning their violence. This support took the form of political, personal and financial patronage, which only accentuated the cycle of violence.

Combating Sectarian Violence

Can this sectarian violence in Pakistan be stopped? Though it has reached alarming proportions, Pakistan can control this menace by initiating certain measures both internally and externally.

First and foremost, effective governance is required in Pakistan. Sectarian violence had declined in Punjab due to efforts made by its Chief Minister Shabaz Sharif; indeed, he broke the back of the sectarian militant organizations. Notwithstanding other criticism against deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, it was he who took measures at the national level; as result, sectarian killings in 1999 dropped to 53, compared to 200 in 1997. While support for jihadi organizations in Kashmir continued unabated, Nawaz Sharif did initiate actions against the *Sipah-i-Sahaba*, *Lashkar-i-Jhangvi* and *Sipah-i-Mohammad*. Angered by these steps, it is believed that the *Lashkar-i-Jhangvi* even attempted to assassinate Nawaz Sharif. The military regime later extended

the policies of the earlier government in targeting these sectarian groups.

Second, the state needs to increase its role in education. Official sources claim the literacy rate to be 50 percent, but independent sources place it at less than 40 percent, the lowest in South Asia. It is unfortunate that the state spends less than one percent of its GDP on education despite the educational system run by the state being in dismal conditions. Consequently, the madrassa system of education seems preferable to the middle and lower middleclass in Pakistan, as they provide boarding and lodging, as also a small stipend. Besides, there is an element of job security for the madrassa-educated with unemployment amongst them considerably less in comparison to the state educated. Unfortunately, these madrassas do not have a common syllabus and are the vehicles of sectarian hatred. Unless the state increases its role in education and reforms madrassa education, the systematic indoctrination of sectarian hatred would continue. Strengthening the state-run educational systems, introducing a uniform educational system, preventing misutilization of external funds by these madrassas and even state funding of madrassas, at least its teachers, would greatly reduce sectarian violence in the long run.

Military efforts may control sectarian violence, but would never lead to social amity.

Third, the state should encourage the religious parties to play a positive role in bringing down sectarian violence. While many credit the military regime with controlling sectarian violence after 1999, they have undermined the role played by various religious parties after the formation of the MMA. It is no coincidence that sectarian violence in Pakistan has reduced after the Sunni parties belonging to Wahabi, Deobandi and Brehlvi faiths

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alongwith the Shia political parties, came together under the MMA banner. Before its formation, religious parties came under the Pakistan-Afghanistan Defence Council banner, and it is no coincidence that sectarian violence declined thereafter. It should also be remembered that the religious parties did make efforts in the past, though unsuccessfully, to achieve sectarian amity within the country.

Fourth, the military should seriously reconsider its *jihad* policies. Not all *jihadi* groups in Kashmir are involved in sectarian violence inside Pakistan, but military support for these organizations in Afghanistan and Kashmir has encouraged the sectarian divide. Unless the military stops supporting *jihad*, these organizations would continue to mobilize funds inside Pakistan. The easy availability of small arms inside Pakistan is no doubt due to this *jihad* policy pursued by successive governments, democratic or military. Musharraf did initiate efforts to de-weaponize the society, but it has not been successful. As long as Pakistan is involved in Afghanistan and Kashmir, this effort would never succeed.



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