

Sectarian Divide: The Sunni-Shia Conflict in Pakistan

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Sectarian clashes are becoming increasingly volatile in Pakistan and remain a major destabilising factor in the country's political, social, religious and security order. The recent sectarian clashes during Muharram on Friday, November 15, 2013, between Sunni and Shia Muslims in and around Islamabad, symptomatise the extent of the divide between the two communities. Attacks on the minority Shia population of Pakistan by Sunni extremists have worsened in recent years with bombings and other attacks causing hundreds of deaths annually, including children gunned down on their way to school and doctors heading for work.¹ This perhaps represents one of the more serious fault lines amidst the many that plague Pakistan today.

Historical Perspective

Pakistan's Muslims are mainly Sunnis, accounting for 80 percent of the Muslim population. The Shias constitute 20 percent.² The first Shias in the Indian sub-continent were of Arab origin and settled in the Sindh region in the 9th century. They were to have a strong influence in many independent small states and regions within the larger Indian subcontinent, including Delhi, Malwa, Jaunpur, Kashmir, Bengal, Deccan (Bijapur and Golconda), Carnatic, and Gujarat. By the early 16th century, at the beginning of the era of Mughal rule in the Indian subcontinent, Muslim elites in the region were generally either Shia Persian nobles or Sunni Afghans, along with less influential Indian Muslim converts.³

Sectarian clashes remain a major destabilising factor in Pakistan.

Mughal rule did not see Shia persecution, but tensions became pronounced during Aurangzeb's reign. By the turn of the 19th century, these divisions developed into full-scale polemical warfare, each side accusing the other of being heretics and infidels.⁴ The puritanical Wahhabi movement in Arabia led by Abdul Wahhab (1703-92) also partly fuelled this rivalry. An influential Islamic scholar named Shah Waliullah led a branch of this movement in Mughal India and called for harsh measures against Hindus as well as Shias to break their power and influence.⁵ Earlier, another leading Sunni Muslim scholar, Shaykh Ahmed Sirhindi (1564-1624), advocated cutting off of all relations with the Shias, but received no support from the Mughal rulers.⁶ Today, conservative theologians associated with Sunni extremist groups in Pakistan often quote the writings of these two scholars.

During British rule, sectarian conflicts were largely contained. The state was secular and largely unrepresentative and, therefore, the use of the sectarian idiom was limited to the purpose of self-identification.⁷ In the 18th century, the Shia-ruled provinces of Bengal and Awadh emerged as centres of Shia learning and activism, and many of its practices became popular among Shia communities in different parts of the empire. Many acclaimed poets of the 18th and 19th centuries, including Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, Mir Anis, Meer Taqi Meer, Mirza Rafi Sauda, and Khwaja Mir Dard, were all Shias. The Urdu-speaking Shia immigrants who moved from the north of India to West Pakistan in 1947 brought their traditions with them, and even today, these religio-cultural practices distinguish immigrant Shias in urban areas of Sindh and parts of Punjab from those living in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. These immigrants mostly settled near Lahore and in Karachi and Hyderabad, leading to a significant increase in the Shia population in these areas. They brought with them the baggage of sectarian bias and hatred, but incidences of sectarian violence were rare.

Post-Independence Era

In 1949, Maulana Shabbir Ahmed Usmani, the founder of the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), demanded the inclusion of certain Islamic provisions in the Objectives Resolution of 1949—a document meant to provide a framework for Constitution-making in the country. The Ahmediyya community, accepted as a minority sect of Islam at the time of the country's independence, became the first minority group to be targeted for sectarian violence when anti-

Ahmediyya riots broke out in 1953 in Lahore, leading to the first imposition of Martial Law in the country's history, which was limited to Lahore. Three years later, in 1956, the first serious incident of Sunni-Shia violence erupted in the Punjab province, when a number of Sunni religious leaders demanded a ban on Muharram processions. The issue was amicably resolved, but created anxiety among the Shia community. With Shias facing resistance from increasingly vocal Sunni conservatives, two Shia organisations, a successor to the All Parties Shia Conference (APSC), established soon after 1947 and Idara-e-Tahafuz-e-Haqq-e-Shia⁸ (ITHS), established in 1953, became more relevant. Shia landlords in Sindh and Punjab, industrialists from Karachi, and wealthy trading families in Lahore financed both organisations. In 1957, *ulema* in the two organisations jointly adopted a resolution to demand reserved seats for Shias in national and provincial legislatures. The proposal did not receive much support and exposed the divide between the *ulema* and the landed Shia aristocracy.

The Ayub era witnessed a changing dynamic in Shia-Sunni relations. In 1963, Sunni extremists killed more than a hundred Shias in two attacks, one of which was on a Muharram procession. The government placed curbs on more processions and persuaded the Shias to restrict their Muharram procession routes. This had a major impact on Shia thinking and, consequently, on the community's organisational politics. To allay Shia fears, the Ayub government constituted a government board to consider Shia demands and submit recommendations. The formation of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto also received a lot of support from the Shia community, as Bhutto was a Shia. As the political identity of Pakistan's Shia community developed, it increasingly came into conflict with the Shia religious establishment. The emergence of the Imamia Students Organisation (ISO) in May 1972, marked a turning point for the mobilisation of the Shia youth of Pakistan and ultimately led, in some instances, to militancy.

Under Zia, sectarian conflict in Pakistan took a violent turn. Zia's policy to introduce Islamic *Sharia* (a radical brand of the Sunni Hanifi system of jurisprudence), shattered the bond of unity between the Shia and Sunni communities. Shia leaders vehemently resisted the imposition of *zakat* in 1980, an important Shia cleric, Mufti Jaafar Husain, arguing that if Pakistan was to have Islamic law, the Shias should be allowed to follow their own jurisprudence known as *Jaafariya fiqh* after the sixth Shia Imam Jafar al-Sadiq.⁹

Two external events at this time played a substantial role in shaping the dynamics of sectarian conflict in Pakistan. The first was the anti-Soviet *jihad* launched by a conglomeration of Afghan Mujahideen groups; the second was the Iranian revolution, which overthrew the monarchy but established a Shia ideological state. The Iranian government threatened the Saudis and their allies with its rhetoric of exporting the Iranian revolution and provided overt and covert assistance to Shia organisations and movements. The Gulf states retaliated by emphasising the heresy of Shiism in an effort to mobilise their Sunni and Wahhabi base. As Iran challenged Saudi Arabia's preeminent position and status in the Muslim world, the latter intensified its efforts at large-scale pan-Islamisation, to export Sunni-Wahhabi Islamism to other parts of the Muslim world. Pakistan, thus, became the main battleground in the Iran-Saudi battle. The *jihadis*, supported and trained in Pakistan to resist the Soviets, received Saudi financial backing and, thus, assumed anti-Shia undertones. On the other hand, the Iranian revolution had a strong emotional and psychological influence on Pakistan's Shias, as it gave them a new visibility and a renewed impetus for identity assertion. This further fuelled a cycle of sectarian violence in Pakistan, with Saudi Arabia spending millions of dollars to fund mainstream Sunni religious activities in Pakistan, and the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini galvanising the Pakistani Shias.¹⁰ A number of Sunni political parties, including the JUI, now began employing aggressive anti-Shia rhetoric, declaring many Shia practices to be in violation of the Islamic belief system.¹¹ The Shia community's increasing reliance on Tehran to organise and assert its demands created unease within the Pakistani military and led to demands by extremist Sunni groups to declare Pakistan as a Sunni state and the Shias as heretics.¹²

With the death in 1983 of the Shia community's most prominent and unifying leader, Mufti Jafar Hussain, the Shia ranks split between the traditional clergy and the reformists represented by the politically-ascendant ISO, along with a new band of Qom-educated clerics led by an Iran-educated, charismatic cleric named Allama Arif Hussain al-Hussaini. At a Tehrik Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafariya¹³ (TNFJ) convention in February 1984, Hussaini was elected the Quaid-e-Millat-e-Jafariya (leader of Shias). His ability to mobilise the Shia community transformed its political orientation. His defiance of the Zia regime, anti-imperialist rhetoric and opposition to elders in the tribal areas added to his popularity among ordinary Shias and won him the loyalty of the ISO cadres.

To curb Shia assertiveness, Zia and his intelligence agencies authorised and sponsored Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, Vice President of the JUI in Punjab, to establish a new anti-Shia outfit called Sipah-e-Sahaba¹⁴ (SSP). Jhangvi launched a virulent anti-Shia campaign in Jhang city, his hometown in Punjab, where Shia landlords were in a strong political position. The small traders and poor farmers of the area who were Sunnis, joined the campaign, largely motivated by economic concerns. This constituency was already ripe for an anti-feudal movement and Jhangvi took advantage of this opportunity by providing a sectarian dimension to the existing class conflict. Conservative Deobandi and Ahle-Hadith *madrassas* in the area provided many activists and leaders for this cause and created an environment conducive to violence.¹⁵ In the wake of these developments, Hussaini decided to convert the TNFJ into a religious political party in 1987. This alarmed Zia as well as the Saudis and led to Shia-Sunni clashes in Hussaini's hometown of Parachinar in 1987. Hussaini was assassinated on August 05, 1988, in Peshawar, allegedly at the behest of President Zia. Many in the Shia community also openly accused the Governor of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), Lt. Gen. Fazle Haq of being involved in the murder. Haq was killed by unknown gunmen in 1991. Twelve days after Hussaini's death, President Zia's plane crashed as a result of sabotage, killing him and many senior Army officers, along with the US Ambassador to Pakistan and the US Defence Attaché, who were also on board. While Zia's death is shrouded in mystery, many believe it to be the handiwork of Shia groups.

After Hussaini's assassination, Allama Sajid Naqvi took over the reins of the TNFJ and lowered the profile of the group. However, a number of Shia hardliners who believed in responding to Sunni militant groups in tit-for-tat actions, established a militant group called Sipah-e-Mohammad (SMP) in 1993.¹⁶ Many radical elements from within the ISO also joined the ranks of the SMP and Iranian financing was made available. The SMP justified its use of violence by arguing, in the words of its leadership, "*We are tired of picking up corpses. Now, God willing, we will clear all accounts. We will erase the name of Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP) from the annals of history*". The SMP soon launched a full-fledged retaliatory battle against the SSP and its militant faction, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LEJ), assassinating many top SSP leaders in the process.

An intensive security service crackdown on the SMP led to the destruction of the group's headquarters at Thokar Niaz Beg in the suburbs of the city of Lahore. The final blow to the organisation came when Punjab's Crime Investigation Department (CID) infiltrated or bought off the core circle of SMP leader Allama Ghulam Raza Naqvi, completely decimating the SMP. By the mid-1990s, the SMP

had also lost most of its Iranian support, partly due to Iranian fears of a backlash of Sunni militancy fuelled by Pakistani Sunni extremists in Iranian Balochistan.¹⁷

In the late 1990s, the SSP and LEJ gunned down around 100 Shia professionals in Karachi.¹⁸ The Shias retaliated but after the SMP's disintegration, their impact remained limited. In 2001, Gen Pervez Musharraf officially banned the SMP along with the LEJ, in a bid to stop sectarian violence. A year later, the Shia party TJP along with the Sunni party Sipah-e-Sahaba were also banned.¹⁹ Nevertheless, targeted killings on both sides continued. However, the SMP, though functional at some levels, had limited lethality as opposed to anti-Shia groups, which carried out lethal attacks on Shia religious places and leaders in Quetta, Rawalpindi, Karachi, Dera Ismail Khan, and Peshawar throughout the Musharraf years.²⁰

External events have played a substantial role in shaping the dynamics of sectarian conflict in Pakistan.

Present Scenario

There is little to indicate any lessening of the sectarian conflict within Pakistan. On the contrary, support and operational guidance provided by Al Qaeda and the Taliban to Pakistan's Sunni sectarian groups, especially the SSP and LEJ continues to fuel anti-Shia violence. Increased linkages between the so-called Punjabi Taliban (with significant SSP and LEJ participation) and the Pakistani Taliban based in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) area also encourage such discourse.²¹

The four important flashpoints of sectarian violence remain Karachi, Jhang, Quetta and Lahore. But it has further spread to Gilgit Baltistan and FATA. The Shias have been targeted in the Kurram Agency of the FATA, through targeted killings and economic blockade by the Taliban. The Shias of the Kurram Agency maintain that, because they are stopping the militants from entering Afghanistan, the Taliban are attacking them, whereas the Sunni groups allege that Iran has provided weapons to Shias in the area.²² With attacks also targeting the Shias in Orakzai Agency of FATA and in the NWFP districts of Dera Ismail Khan, Hangu, and Kohat, the nature of the Shia response is becoming more political, with the Shia community staging protests all across Pakistan, in major urban centres as well as small towns. There is an apparent shift away from the Shia clergy's earlier policy of restraint in the hope of persuading the sectarian extremists to exempt them. Nationwide protests signal a change and could lead to greater bloodshed.²³ Along with protests, targeted killing of

extremist Sunni leaders has been the Shia response to avenge their own. On December 03, 2013, a prominent Shia leader, the Deputy Secretary-General of the Majlis-e-Wahdat-e-Muslimeen (MWM) Allama Deedar Ali Jalbani was shot dead in a targeted attack in Karachi.²⁴ A few days later, on December 06, a prominent Sunni leader, Maulana Shamsur Rehman Muavia, the Punjab chief of the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat was killed in Lahore.²⁵ This was again followed by a retaliatory killing of another Shia leader, Allama Nasir Abbas, the leader of the Tehrik Nifaz Fiqah-e-Jafaria on December 14.²⁶ This cycle of violence and counter-violence continues to feed the sectarian conflict. Pakistan becoming the relocated battlefield 'for the Sunni-Shia violence of the Middle East' further fuels sectarianism within the country.

Conclusion

Pakistan's sectarian rifts are unlikely to heal in the near future despite the fact that a majority of Shias continue to be associated with the major political forces in the country and are well represented in Parliament and the government. The Shias perceive Sunni radicalism as a major threat, especially the prevalent anti-Shiism of the Deobandi groups and the Ahle-Hadith sub-sect. The failure of Shia leadership and the rise of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) whose leadership includes ardent anti-Shia militants increases the vulnerability of Shia communities across Pakistan and indicates further deterioration in the situation.

It has been argued that the Shias are unlikely to adopt a militant posture as a response to anti-Shia violence because they have learned the lesson that militancy is counter-productive and compromises their security interests in Pakistan. But the state would need to take effective steps to prevent violence against the Shia community else it could lead to Shia groups taking to arms in large numbers with disastrous consequences for Pakistan, especially if Iranian or other external support becomes available. It is important to understand that the phenomenon of sectarianism goes beyond the different 'armies' as the competing militant groups call themselves. Equally significant is the need to look at the regional stakeholders, especially when sectarianism has acquired a wider regional function in the area after the US intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At the macro level, sectarian terror groups like the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Sipah-e-Sahaba, which are now increasingly indistinguishable from terrorist organisations like the Tehrik-e-Taliban and even Al Qaeda would need to be curbed. This is easier said than done. In the social sector, the state has to promote

tolerance and pluralism through its educational curriculum. That too, as of now appears to be a tall order. In the short-term, sectarian violence is, therefore, likely to see a renewed impetus in Pakistan.

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Notes

1. Saud Mehsud , “Sectarian Violence Spreads in Pakistan After Days of Unrest”, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/18/us-pakistan-violence-idUSBRE9AH0FF20131118>.
2. The actual percentage of Shias in Pakistan is a contentious issue and there exists a broad range of estimates. According to Vali Nasr, the Shias constitute between 15 and 25 percent of the population. See S.V.R. Nasr, “The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan: The Changing Role of Islamism and the Ulama in Society and Politics,” *Modern Asian Studies* 34, No. 1, February 2000, 139. Shahid Javed Burki, a renowned Pakistani economist, contends that 25 percent of Pakistan’s population is Shia. See Shahid Javed Burki, *Pakistan: Fifty Years of Nationhood* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), p. 208. Many Wahhabi sources in Pakistan, however, insist that the figure is closer to 10 or 15 percent. The anti-Shia militant group Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan once declared that the Shias constitute only 2.5 percent of the population of Pakistan; see *Zindagi* Weekly Magazine, June 1991, p. 10.
3. John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire (The New Cambridge History of India)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 53.
4. Shah abd’l Aziz Rizvi, *Puritanism, Sectarian Polemics and Jihad* (Canberra: Marefat Publications, 1982), p. 3.
5. Ayesha Jalal, *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 52, 53.
6. Shah abd’l Aziz Rizvi, *A Socio-Intellectual History of the Isna ‘Ashari Shi’is in India*, Vol. 1, p. 399.
7. Mukhtar Ahmed , *Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan: A Case Study of Jhang* (Colombo: Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, 2001), p. 15.
8. The organisation for safeguarding the rights of Shias.
9. Moonis Ahmar, “Sectarian Conflicts in Pakistan”, <http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/studies/PDF-FILES/Moonis%20Ahmar-1.pdf>
10. Hassan Abbas, *Pakistan’s Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army and America’s War on Terror* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2005), pp. 89-132.
11. Mumtaz Ahmad, “Revivalism, Islamization, Sectarianism, and Violence in Pakistan” in Craig Baxter and Charles H. Kennedy, eds., *Pakistan, 1997* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 108-109.
12. Hussain Haqqani, “Weeding out the Heretics: Sectarianism in Pakistan”, *Current Trends in Islamic Ideology* 4, No. 1, 2006.
13. The Tehrik-e-Jafaria, Pakistan (TJP), also called Tehrik-e-Islami, is a Shia political party in Pakistan. It was formed in 1979 with the name Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafaria as a result

- of enforcement of controversial Islamic laws and politicisation and discrimination against Shias in the Pakistan Army and Civil Service
14. Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (the Army of the Friends of the Prophet), is a Pakistani Deobandi organisation, and a former political party, established in the early 1980s in Jhang by Haq Nawaz Jhangvi. Its stated goal is to primarily deter major Shiite influence in Pakistan in the wake of the Iranian Revolution.
 15. S.V.R. Nasr, *The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan: The Changing Role of Islamism and the Ulama in Society and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 142-143.
 16. Abou-Zahab, *The Politicisation of the Shia Community in Pakistan in the 1970s and 1980s*, p. 109.
 17. Mariam Abou-Zahab, *The Regional Dimension of Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan*, p. 117.
 18. "Pakistan: No Protection Against Targeted Killings", Amnesty International (2002), available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA33/030/2002/en/dom-ASA330302002en.html>
 19. Both parties quickly changed their names and continued to operate openly as the Tehrik-e-Islami Pakistan (TIP, the Movement of Islam) and Millat-e-Islamia Pakistan (MIP, the Nation of Islam), respectively.
 20. Details of such attacks are available in "South Asia Terrorism Portal", at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/SSP_tl.htm.
 21. Hassan Abbas, "Defining the Punjabi Taliban Network", *CTC Sentinel* 2, No. 4, April 2009, pp. 1-4.
 22. Jane Perlez and Zubair Shah, "Power Rising, Taliban Besiege Pakistani Shiites," *New York Times*, July 26, 2008.
 23. "Editorial: A Shia Backlash in the Offing?" *Daily Times*, February 22, 2009.
 24. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/640642/on-the-brink-mwms-prayer-leader-and-his-guard-shot-dead/>
 25. <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/12/06/338582/gunmen-kill-sunni-leader-in-lahore/>
 26. <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/12/16/340253/pakistanis-slam-killing-of-shia-cleric/>