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RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN PAKISTAN: AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT

SUSHIL TANWAR

We force-fed beef to a differently abled Hindu student on Bakr Eid (and tried to convert him to Islam). We lynch non-Muslims in the name of blasphemy to settle personal disputes. We are Pakistan.

– Syed Faisal, Member of the Provincial Assembly

On June 21, 2024, the militancy-torn Swat district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan was rocked by violent protests after an individual allegedly committed an act of blasphemy. Even as the hysterical crowd was subjecting the alleged accused to physical torture, the local police intervened and took him into custody at the Madain police station. In a grotesque turn of events, the protesters set the police station on fire and brutally killed the alleged perpetrator in public.¹

This horrific incident of mob lynching in Swat was not the first instance of religion being weaponised. In May 2024, a poor old

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1. “Local Tourist Killed in Pakistan’s Swat Over Blasphemy Allegations”, Al Jazeera, June 21, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/21/local-tourist-killed-in-pakistans-swat-over-blasphemy-allegations>. Accessed on June 28, 2024.

Christian man was publicly lynched in Sargodha (in Punjab province) on a similiar accusation of blasphemy.² During the festive month of Eid this year, more than 35 persons of the Ahmadi sect (as per Section 298-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, persons of the Ahmadi sect calling themselves Muslim or preaching or propagating their faith, are to be penalised), were arrested by the police on charges of practising “Muslim rituals”.³ Earlier in 2021, in a widely reported incident that sparked global condemnation, a Sri Lankan working as a manager in a textile factory in Jarewala (Punjab) was brutally lynched to death.⁴

Persistent sectarian tension, a spate of ‘religion inspired’ public lynchings and an upsurge in violence against minorities reflect the impact of religious extremism that has spread its tentacles across Pakistan.

This is certainly not a sudden social development, as violent clashes, especially carried out by Sunni militant groups against the Shia community, and religiously motivated violence against the Ahmadis, Christians and Hindus has been the feature of Pakistan ever since its birth in 1947.

In effect, Pakistan continues to be the home of a myriad religiously inspired terror groups (such as the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Tehreek-e-Taliban, Islamic State, Jaish-e-Mohammad, etc) with interests not only in neighbouring India and Afghanistan but also across the globe. Recently, the Zainabyun Brigade, an Iran-backed Shia militia group active in the Middle East, published the obituaries of 10 of its fighters hailing from Pakistan who had died fighting, thus, confirming that Pakistan remains one of its key recruitment areas.

It is evident that most of the active trans-regional militant groups have, over a period, gained sizeable local support in Pakistan and comprise an influential factor in the national socio-political fabric. These groups also have an active presence on social media and the dark web which enables them to spread their extremist ideology.

2. “Christian Man Attacked by Sargodha Mob Scumbs to Injuries After 9 Days” *Dawn*, June 3, 2024 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1837480>. Accessed on June 8, 2024.

3. “36 Ahmadis Arrested Over Charges of Animal Sacrifice on Eid-ul-Adha”, *The Wire*, June 19, 2024, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/pakistan-36-ahmadis-arrested-over-charges-of-animal-sacrifice-on-eid-ul-adha>. Accessed on July 30, 2024.

4. “Sri Lankan Manager Killed by Mob of Workers at Pakistan Factory”, *Reuters*, December 4, 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/sri-lankan-manager-killed-by-mob-workers-pakistan-garment-factory-2021-12-03/>. Accessed on June 10, 2024.

These organisations also exploit incidents in other parts of the world such as the publication of cartoons on Prophet Mohammed by the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* or the desecration of the Holy Quran in several parts of Europe, to further fuel the religious sentiments of the gullible masses.

RELIGIOUS RADICALISATION: A STATE PROJECT

The *mullah-military* nexus in Pakistan was established soon after the creation of Pakistan, as the state began to use religion as a tool for forging a common national identity. This led to a gradual irreversible Islamisation of the state, as religious parties gained disproportionate political influence. The Justice Munir Report of 1953-54 which investigated the riots against the Ahmadi community in Punjab province brought out the nexus of political and religious parties in fomenting communal violence, and, warned again the future dangers of such religious nationalism.⁵

Despite the ominous dangers of the exaggerated influence of religion in state affairs, the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq aggravated the crisis by blatant promotion of its Islamist agenda, especially through sponsoring radical groups, which further confined the idea of Pakistan within a narrow religious prism. While the promulgation of “Hudood Ordinances” by Zia resulted in Islamisation of Pakistan’s legal system and aligned it firmly with the *Shariah* law, his brutal crackdown on political rivals too was accompanied by the promotion of hardline Islamic ideology. The state allowed the mushrooming of *madrassas* as part of Zia’s Islamisation agenda which was also aimed at creating a loyal political constituency through the use of socio-religious organisations like the Jamaat-e-Islami.

The corresponding geopolitical churn during that tumultuous period, including the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia over attempts to export their respective ideologies, also created ripe conditions for the growth of religious extremism in Pakistan.

This vile extremist ideology received a further boost after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, as the tribal areas in Pakistan became the operational and logistical bases for the Afghan

5. “Reporting on the Future”, *Dawn*, February 28, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1242056>. Accessed on July 26, 1975.

Mujahideen. The radical terror groups were cultivated as “strategic assets” and their ideology was nurtured in *madrassas* which, in turn, fostered “religious-sectarian terrorism” across Pakistan.

Post Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the Barelvi sect came into prominence as it was used by the Pakistani state as a tool to counter the Deobandi influence that had motivated a large number of youth for the Afghan *jihād*. Pakistan’s obsession with Kashmir and its sponsorship of terror groups for *jihād* also necessitated its military establishment’s close ties with religious extremist groups so that a steady supply of proxy fighters could be ensured.

The proliferation of religious seminaries during this period and the competing ideologies of the Barelvi and Deobandi sects amongst others, gave an uncontrollable impetus to socio-religious extremism across Pakistan. The politico-military establishment too turned a blind eye to this dangerous ideological wave and instead encouraged groups like the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) for political gains. These fundamentalist groups, thus, gained political legitimacy, legal immunity, operational space and street power which enabled them to weaponise religion with impunity and misuse concepts like *Ishq-e-Rasool*, *Khatm-e-Nabuwat*, etc. for public mobilisation.⁶ Such has been the increase in their public influence that these organisations do not hesitate to even challenge state institutions. On August 20, 2024, a large mob under the banner of “Aalmi Majlis Tahaffuz-i-Nabuwat” protested violently opposite the Supreme Court, and threatened to storm its premises, while demanding the resignation of Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa, who, while granting bail in an alleged blasphemy case to Mubarak Ahmad, an Ahmadi, had stated that “non-Muslims have the right to practise their religion”.⁷

This cancerous growth of religious extremism has, thus, not remained limited to the extremist organisations, but such radical tendencies have gradually become common at the personal, social and institutional levels across Pakistan.

6. Lieutenant General Syed Ata Hasnain, “The Pakistan TLP Phenomena”, Chanakya Forum, April 25, 2021, <https://chanakyaforum.com/the-pakistan-tlp-phenomena/>. Accessed on July 27, 2024.

7. “Protesters Reach SC Despite Police Cordon”, *Dawn*, August 20, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1853392>. Accessed on August 22, 2024.

Even the armed forces have exploited religious indoctrination as a tool of combat motivation, resulting in the growth of extremist elements in their rank and file. As a result, there have been numerous cases of religious fanaticism within the armed forces, as was witnessed in the 2014 Karachi Naval Dockyard attack case for which the Navy Tribunal sentenced its five officers to death on charges of links with the Islamic State (IS) group and attempts of armed mutiny. This was not the only instance of religious indoctrination in the Pakistan military as over the last few years, many serving and retired personnel of the Pakistan military have reportedly joined the ranks of militant organisations across the region in various capacities.⁸

Blasphemy, punishable by death, as per the existing law, has emerged as another extremely sensitive issue in the country where mere accusations, often made to settle personal scores, have led to mob violence and street lynchings. Under Pakistan's dubious blasphemy laws, anyone found guilty of insulting Islam or Islamic figures can be sentenced to death. While no one has yet been executed on such charges, mere accusation has been exploited by vested interests in the past to incite mobs, cause riots and perpetrate killings.

Such has been the appeal of religious indoctrination that in 2011, Salman Tasir, the then governor of Punjab, who publicly advocated the amendment of the blasphemy laws, was shot dead by his bodyguard Mumtaj Qadri, a staunch follower of the Bareilvi sect. Though the unapologetic bodyguard was subsequently hanged as per the court verdict, a shrine came up near his grave to honour his martyrdom where hordes of people pay their obeisance in reverence every day.

In June 2024, Syed Ali Raza, a nineteen-year-old *madrassa* student, driven by a similar sense of fanatical religious duty, shot dead two Ahmadis in Mandi Bahauddin for being "non-believers".⁹

8. Colonel Sushil Tanwar, "A Coup That Wasn't A Threat That Remains", *Resonant News*, September 8, 2021, <https://resonantnews.com/2021/09/08/a-coup-that-wasnt-a-threat-that-remains/>. Accessed on March 20, 2024.

9. Bhagyasree Sengupta, "2 Ahmadis Killed by 19 y/o in Pakistan: How Plight of the Minority Community Remains Unheard", *First Post*, June 9, 2024, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/2-ahmadis-killed-by-19-y-o-in-pakistan-how-plight-of-the-minority-community-remain-unheard-13780389.html>. Accessed on July 26, 2024.

It was due to such frightening frequency of minority killings and rampant use of dubious blasphemy laws for perpetrating mob violence against religious minorities that the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has repeatedly designated Pakistan as a nation of “very high concern”.¹⁰

A STATE OF DENIAL

The rapid growth of religious extremism in Pakistan is directly related to the worsening internal security situation across the country as various militant groups have exploited religious indoctrination for recruitment of new cadres and their organisational growth.

Socio-religious outfits too continue to exploit a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam and use religion to spread hate and incitement amongst the masses. The demographic profile of Pakistan where over 65 percent of the population is under 35 years (with many of them uneducated and largely unemployed) makes the society highly volatile and vulnerable to violent religious rhetoric. The continuous attacks on polio eradication teams as they are deemed unIslamic are a reflection of how Islamic hardliners are able to propagate a self-serving narrative in the gullible public.¹¹

Many security analysts believe that a new generation of religious fanatics has already established itself in Pakistan. This generation of zealots is ideologically more aligned to hardline *Salafi-Takfiri* leanings and are certainly global in their religious ambitions and outlook.

Despite this obvious correlation between extremism and militancy or terrorism, successive regimes in Pakistan have constantly attempted to downplay the growing religious extremism by refusing to break its umbilical cord, rejecting the growing civil society concerns and discouraging or even censoring media coverage of incidents of religious bigotry.

The government has, instead, tried to project an inclusive image of the country and attempted to give an impression of religious

10. Annual Reports on Pakistan, <https://www.uscirf.gov/countries/pakistan>. Accessed on July 30, 2024.

11. Braira Wahid, “The History and Current Killings of Polio Vaccinators in Pakistan: A Need for Targeted Surveillance Strategy”, *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health*, vol. 35(2-3), 2023, pp. 183–188, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/10105395231158866>. Accessed on August 12, 2024

tolerance to the international audience. The much quoted speech that was delivered by Muhammad Ali Jinnah in 1947, wherein he famously said “You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan.” and pledged to protect the rights and religious freedom of minorities, is often projected by the official machinery as a testament to the “Idea of Pakistan”.

However, the ground realities today are completely the opposite and the minorities are not safe even in death. In the month of June 2024, the Punjab police, ostensibly under the pressure of the hardline Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), desecrated at least 17 graves in a graveyard of the Ahmadi community in Bahawalpur district.¹²

It would, therefore, not be an exaggeration to say that an environment of fear prevails in the society due to religious vigilantism being practised with impunity by extremist groups.

According to the latest census conducted last year, over 96 percent of Pakistan’s population is Muslim, with a severe decline noticed in the population of minorities who are now a mere 4 percent comprising 5.2 million Hindus, 3.3 million Christians, 15,992 Sikhs and others.

Almost all of Pakistan’s minorities currently feel that they have been victims of religious discrimination, and the state authorities have failed to protect them. For instance, a Christian in Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK) (only a handful of whom are left now) had to be buried in a cemetery in mainland Pakistan because as per the local law, Christian cemeteries are not allowed in PoJK. Many such existential challenges for religious minorities are embedded in Pakistan’s legal, constitutional and administrative machinery.

Hindus, in particular, have frequently been subjected to abductions and forced conversions, particularly young girls of the community, along with attacks on their places of worship. Some of those responsible for these forced marriages and religious conversions also have political patronage. One such notorious personality, Abdul

12. “Pakistan Police Destroy Tombstones of 17 Graves Belonging to Persecuted Ahmadi Community in Punjab,” *Deccan Herald*, June 15, 2024, <https://www.deccanherald.com/world/pakistan-police-destroy-tombstones-of-17-graves-belonging-to-persecuted-ahmadi-community-in-punjab-3068308>. Accessed on July 10, 2024.

Haq@ Mian Mithu, a revered cleric of the Bharchundi Sharif shrine in Ghotki district of Sindh province, who is infamous for large scale forcible conversions, enjoys a very good rapport with most of the political parties and continues to conduct his nefarious activities with impunity.¹³

Religious minorities in Pakistan, thus, are victims of social, institutional and legal discrimination, though the government claims otherwise and cites its non-discriminatory policies as proof of its benevolent approach towards minorities.

In recent years, the authorities have made a few feeble attempts to counter religious extremism such as the formulation of the National Action Plan (NAP) in 2014. The NAP, subsequently revised with a 20-point agenda in 2021, advocates the regulation of religious seminaries to ensure that they do not promote extremist ideologies. This includes registration and monitoring of religious seminaries and promoting a curriculum that preaches respect for diversity and religious tolerance.¹⁴

However, these belated efforts by the government have so far proved to be cosmetic in nature and have been hampered by a lack of political will, serious capability deficit of the law enforcement agencies and a fear of reprisals from ultra-religious groups. As a result of this inefficient governmental approach, there has been no let-up in the activities of extremist groups, and their cadres continue to operate with impunity. The rapid growth of social media and a global drift towards extremism have further added to the complexity of controlling the radical narratives.

In August 2023, riots broke out over blasphemy charges in Punjab where more than 21 churches and temples were set on fire and over 100 homes of Christian and Hindu inhabitants were destroyed by a raging mob, while the police, as in most of the earlier incidents, remained a helpless bystander.¹⁵

13. Gul Bukhari, "Mian Mithu, the Extremist Cleric Whom Hindu Families Dread in Pakistan's Sindh", *The Print*, September 17, 2019, <https://theprint.in/opinion/mian-mithu-the-extremist-cleric-whom-hindu-families-dread-in-pakistans-sindh/292617/>. Accessed on June 22, 2024.

14. Malik Asad, "Military, Political Leaders Agree to Revisit Anti-Terror Policy", *Dawn*, April 15, 2023 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1747735>. Accessed on June 11, 2024.

15. HRCF Fact-Finding Report "Allegations of Blasphemy and Mob Violence in Mujahid Colony, Sargodha", June 2024.

The government, as usual, was quick to announce a thorough investigation and even made a couple of arrests but state responses in such cases have often been belated, and usually biased against religious minorities.¹⁶

In order to deflect international attention, the government often relies on optics to demonstrate religious unity and availability of equal opportunity to minorities. The recent promotion of Major General Jullion James, the first Christian officer in such a high rank or Major Hercharn Singh, the first commissioned Sikh officer, are minor aberrations in the otherwise miserable condition of the minorities. As per a report of the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) in 2022, nearly half of the posts reserved for religious minorities in government jobs remained vacant, while 80 percent of low paying jobs were filled by non-Muslims. Advertisements for jobs of sanitation workers only for non-Muslims are routinely placed in Pakistani newspapers.¹⁷

PROGNOSIS

Due to the decades of ideological indoctrination of the masses which was actively facilitated by the state, religious extremism has now become Pakistan's biggest challenge wherein the nation has become a hostage to extremist organisations. The TLP, in particular, with its growing ideological influence and incendiary rhetoric, is turning out to be a major street mobiliser. Its Barelvi followers, especially in the populous Punjab province and the middle- and lower-middle class groups in Sindh have steadily increased, despite the vicissitudes of its relationship with the political and military establishments. The TLP has, however, not yet been able to translate its street presence into sizeable electoral gains, but it may not be too long before it emerges as a major player on Pakistan's political landscape.

The radical influence of the clergy has also resulted in weakening the writ of the state and, religious endorsements are often sought

16. "Most Suspects in 2023 Anti-Christian Rampage in Pakistan at Large – Amnesty International", *Arab News*, August 16, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2567674/pakistan>. Accessed on August 17, 2024.

17. NCHR Report, "Unequal Citizens: Ending Systemic Discrimination Against Minorities", May 2022, <https://www.nchr.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Minority-Report.pdf>. Accessed on June 22, 2024.

by various government functionaries before implementing official policies. Such was the case in June 2024 when the Sindh Institute of Child Health and Neonatology (SICHN) announced the establishment of Pakistan's first human milk bank facility, in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), describing it as a "significant milestone in maternal health." However, just a day later, a *fatwa* issued by Darul Uloom, Karachi, against this "unIslamic concept", and threats by religious clerics forced the government to announce the discontinuation of the project.¹⁸ Similar pressures are also evident even in pursuance of foreign policy objectives by the government where the "Islamic Factor" has become one of the key considerations. This was evident in the removal of Atif Mian, the renowned economist, who was appointed as the economic advisor by the Imran Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government but had to be removed due to public opposition on account of him being an Ahmadi.

While a "de-Islamisation drive" may be a far-fetched and unviable idea, Pakistan certainly needs to amend its constitutional and legal framework if it wants to check the growth of religious extremism. The challenges faced by religious minorities include various forms of embedded discrimination which can only be addressed by implementing inclusive policy reforms. Repealing the outdated blasphemy laws and ensuring prosecution in cases of communal violence against the minorities will be key to ending the climate of impunity that currently prevails for religious extremists.

The education sector in Pakistan, which is constitutionally the responsibility of provincial governments, also requires urgent reforms as "hate speech and misinformation against other religions" feature prominently in the curriculum. Religious fanaticism is being spread through more than 43,000 *madrassas* located across Pakistan. A number of these *madrassas* such as the Deobandi Dar Al Ulum Haqqania and Jamia Manzoor-ul-Islamia have long been considered as fertile recruitment grounds for terrorist organisations. Abject poverty is also one of the reasons that many of the lower

18. "Pakistan's Sindh Province Suspends Human Milk Bank: Refers Initiative to Islamic Ideology Council", *Arab News*, June 22, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2535231/pakistan>. Accessed on August 1, 2024.

income class people who cannot afford basic education, send their children to these *madrassas*. The government spending on education has remained stagnant over the last few years and it was a mere 1.5 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2023-24.¹⁹ Its feeble efforts to regulate *madrassas* have also been stalled by stiff opposition from the religious clerics.

In fact, the political class and, more importantly, the military establishment of Pakistan, have failed to rise above their narrow interests and have not yet demonstrated the required intent to tackle religious extremism. Instead, they continue to use these extremist groups to build their support constituencies. As a result of this narrow approach, a large section of the population believes that its religious and sectarian identity is more important than the national identity.

The resultant societal attitudes towards religion, rampant sectarian violence and persecution of minorities are, thus, mere symptoms of an ideological malaise plaguing Pakistan. This could ultimately prove to be an existential threat and sound the nation's death-knell.

19. Ahmad Ahmadani, "Education Sector Receives Marginal Budget Boost for 2023-24", *Pakistan Today*, June 19, 2023, <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2023/06/09/education-sector-receives-marginal-budget-boost-for-2023-24/>. Accessed on March 17, 2024.

