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# **Religious Nationalism and Sectarianism in Pakistan**

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## **Introduction**

Since the American occupation of Iraq, intra-Muslim violence has become daily news but prior to 2003, Pakistan not Iraq was the global centre for violent conflict between different Muslim sects. In 1947, British India was divided on religious lines and two nation-states India and Pakistan emerged. The British educated founding fathers of Pakistan perceived a united India as being detrimental to Muslims because as a minority Muslims would be not be recognized as equals by the Hindu majority state which would also suppress their rights so the concept of Pakistan was formulated as a nation-state where some aspects of liberal democracy would be implanted so that fairness and non-interference would be the norm. In the 1970s partly because of violent challenges to the state by ethno-nationalist movements partly inspired by uneven economic development and the upheavals in the international arena due to the Cold War, there was a major shift away from pluralistic politics and a move towards greater Islamisation beginning with the narrowing of the definition of a Muslim by the state in which the state gave up its neutrality. Additional government legislation imposing uniform religious taxes widen sectarian differences between the Sunni majority and Shia minority. By not initially accommodating Shia collective demands the state had alienated many of them. The subsequent and reluctant autonomy awarded to the Shias implied that the state recognized them which made Sunni militants fear that the Pakistani nation-state was not synonymous with Sunni Islam. Pakistan is probably the country which has the most diverse collection of Muslim sects, sub-sects and political parties in which sectarianism is implicitly or explicitly a part of the political discourse. Pakistan is also a country which has been under military rule for considerable periods of its troubled history. Pakistan has also as a result experienced violent regional and linguistic based separatist movements which have seriously challenged the military partly because the majority of the army, like most of the rest of the establishment is recruited from the dominant province of Pakistan, the Punjab. Islam is therefore been used by the state on society as a vital binding factor. However, as there are many interpretations of Islam in Pakistan, the state by imposing a particular one on society greatly undermines its own approach towards national unity.

In the seven year period from 1990 to 1997, official figures claimed some 600 lives were lost with 1997 the fifth anniversary of the birth of Pakistan being the most violent in her sectarian history. Independent organizations and scholars dismiss these figures as being greatly underestimated and some even claim that the real death could be actually up to tenfold of what the government acknowledges..

## **Theoretical Methodology**

Perhaps the most suitable method for exploring the politics of sectarian conflict is to see sectarian identity as a form of ethnic identity created by the instrumentalist manipulation of elites. The political scientist Vali Nasr (2000:172-173) argues that identity is a social and political construction as he says that elites manipulate the boundaries of identities so that what were once hazy identities become more demarcated and rival groups are formed for political mobilization. This becomes more evident when the few boundaries between Shia and Sunni Islam are emphasised rather than focusing on their shared core beliefs. In addition, the political anthropologist Thomas Eriksen (1993:11-12) asserts that the boundaries become the identity and if no boundary exists, there can be no identity'. The boundary becomes the identity.

## **The Saudi Connection and Wahhabism**

Wahhabism the state religion of Saudi Arabia is especially intolerant of Shi'ism. Wahhabis depict other schools or sects of Islam as being products of inter-religious syncretism or inheriting preIslamic traditions. All alternative versions of Islam are regarded as being dangerous to society by the Saudi Kingdom as they are deemed to be sources for discord (fitna) within the Muslim community, threatening its unity and diluting its belief. Some Wahhabis will go so far as even considering non-Wahhabi Muslims as being non-Muslims. Only 6% of Pakistanis are Wahhabis. The Saudi-American axis was greatly enhanced by the willingness of the military regime of Muhammad Zia ul Haq in Pakistan to join it by helping to train and equip the most fundamentalist fractions of the Afghan Sunni mujaheddin resistance in return for massive funding, which during its peak during the Reagan years ran into a package of more than a billion dollars per year.

## **The Military, Religion and Fundamentalists**

In 1979, the military regime imposed Islamic legislation regarding taxation and charity endowments uniformly on the entire Muslim population. This state legislation which was based on the Hanafi Sunni interpretation greatly enraged the Shia minority. Shias like other minorities in Pakistan also tended to be supporters of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) which has always been dominated by the Shia Bhutto clan. The Iranian Revolution helped to boost confidence in the Shia minority, as some of them successfully organized themselves into a political outfit called Tehrik Nifazi-Fiqhi Jafaria (the Front for the Defence of the Jafari Law, TNFJ) in order to confront the military government, which was eventually forced to grant Shias exemption from the Sunni laws. The military government's backing down before massive Shia demonstrations caused Sunni fundamentalists to notice and worry about the increasing strength of their Shia rivals, as the state's reluctant granting of religious autonomy to the Shias, implied that Shia law had a status that was equal or near to that of Hanafi law of the majority of Sunnis both the Deobandis and the Barelwis in Pakistan. For extremist Deobandis this U-turn by the military administration seemed to be damaging to their ultimate aim of having Shias declared non-Muslims.

## **The Muslim Sects in Pakistan**

The Shia Revolutionary Iran is the only country where the Shias are the dominant ruling majority. Neighbouring Pakistan has probably the world's second largest Shia population after Iran. The exact percentage of the Pakistani population in Muslim sectarian terms is difficult to establish as there are no official figures published. The government only acknowledges that there is a Shia minority and also that there are religious differences which are present among the Sunni majority. The only government statistics available regarding religious affiliation is based on the binary divide between Muslims and non-Muslims which shows the latter category includes as little as 3.5% of the entire population of Pakistan. Most scholars believe about 20% of Pakistanis are Shia which means that there are some 30 million Shias in Pakistan, so far exceeding Iraq. The late 1970s saw a massive upheaval in the geopolitics of the West Asian region, the ousting of the pro-West Muhammad Reza Shah's regime in Iran by the radical Shia cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and the ill-fated Soviet involvement in Afghanistan caused Saudi Arabian and American interests to quickly and sharply coincide as they hoped to create a Sunni fundamentalist wall that could impede the spread of radical politics both secular and religious in that region. One method used by the Saudis which continues even now is the funding of Sunni fundamentalist madrasas in Pakistan especially in the provinces bordering Afghanistan and Iran.

## **The Ahmedis**

The Ahmadis, also known as Qadianis, who believe that the Prophet Muhammad was not the last of the prophets, Some sectarian Sunnis had with the help of their Shia rivals successfully urged Bhutto Administration to change the status of the Ahmadi community from Muslim to Non-Muslim. Shias were reluctantly accommodated by Sunnis during the anti-Ahmadi campaign but their rivalries and differences remained submerged. Since 1974 when the Ahmadis had their status as Muslims revoked by the state, these Sunni fundamentalists have wanted to extend their success of excluding the tiny Ahmadi community from the Islamic fold to expelling the much larger Shia community.



## Internal Rivalry in Sunni Islam

### Sufism

Sunni fundamentalists are a minority within Sunni Islam. The great majority of Sunni Muslims in Pakistan belong to the Barelwi sub-sect which is especially strong in the countryside of where the bulk of the population resides. Inclined towards the mystical dimension in Islam or Sufism, Barelwis are or were usually more tolerant towards Shias as they relatively accommodating to others outside their fold. Hindus, Sikhs and Christians are sometimes welcomed at Sufi Shrines. The Islam of the Barelwis apart from the usual Islamic rituals such as praying and fasting is also based on pilgrimages to Sufi shrines, sometimes made in the hope of experiencing miracles. Some Barelwis become the disciples (murids) of holy men (murshids) and pay respect to saints both dead and living known locally as pir sahibs or Sufi sheikhs. Often Sufi pirs are candidates for the PPP or its rival the PML Peasants who are Sunnis sometimes will even take part in Shia festivals. Thus there is some convergence between Sunnis and Shias in rural areas. Sunni ulema fear that such a porous identity boundary will help to convert Sunnis to Shi'ism especially in areas where landlords are Shias. This fear of the Sunni ulema has helped sharpen sectarian identities.

### The Deobandis

The Deobandis are the second largest Sunni sub-sect in Pakistan and the one from which most of Pakistan's sectarian Sunnis and neighbouring Afghanistan's anti-Shia Taliban militia are affiliated with many of its leaders were educated at numerous Pakistani Deobandi madrasas. This particular Sunni sub-sect holds an intermediate position between polar extremes of Sufism and Wahhabism in the Sunni spectrum. The Deobandis discourage many of the popular festivals and rituals that the Barelwis associate with Sufi shrines but unlike the more extreme Wahhabis, Deobandis do not actively promote the whole scale destruction of shrines. This is probably why the Taliban itself an extremist Deobandi organization, especially regarding matters relating to gender and entertainment, was more welcomed by Afghan people than some of the muhajdeen parties which demand a Wahhabi influenced society. In a rare instance, the Taliban is at the middle of a religious spectrum or is even considered as a compromise movement which is a very strange and rare occurrence. Deobandi Islam is centred on Mosques and especially religious schools called madrasas. Deobandi madrasas greatly outnumber Barelwi madrasas in Pakistan. It comes as no surprise that Deobandis are the majority of the Sunni ulema in Pakistan. The Deobandis with their foreign funded madrasas produce far more ulema than the Barelwis despite their smaller share of the population. Some Deobandis had lacked political legitimacy as initially they had opposed the creation of Pakistan in the 1940s but by targeting minorities like Shias and Ahmadis as the ``threatening `other these Deobandis have recently gained a degree of political legitimacy. Regarding the dominance of such Deobandi organisations in anti-Shia sectarianism, Miriam Zahab (2002:77) considers that the Shia-Sunni conflict should be referred more precisely as the Shia-Deobandi conflict.

The Dynamics of Sectarian Conflict      The SSP (Army of the Companions of the Prophet-Pakistan) was formed during the Zia era in the district of Jhang in the Punjab, which is one of the regions of Pakistan, where Shia feudal landlords dominate a Sunni majority populace. The SSP draws much of its strength from the urban areas of Jhang where migrant families from the violent 1947 partition of British India settled, most of these families were from East Punjab which was relatively free from the domination of high status landowning castes or tribes and while Jhang's agrarian economy is still dominated by landlords. Despite the obvious vertical rivalry between the mostly lower middle class SSP and the Shia feudals, most of the SSP's violence is directed against the Shia militant organization Siphe Muhammad Pakistan (SMP or Army of the Prophet Muhammad-Pakistan), which recruits from the same socio-economic strata. Many SMP activists like their SSP rivals have seen action in Afghanistan, initially fighting the Soviet-backed communists but in different militias and later on opposing sides: the SSP on the side of fellow sectarian Deobandis, the Taliban and the SMP on the side of the various Iranian backed Shia Hazara militias that later allied themselves to their former rivals the Russian backed Sunni dominated Northern Alliance, which finally drove out the Taliban from Kabul with American help. Even more strange are the circumstances in which the SSP has experienced some success in the political arena. The SSP supported the PPP minority administration in the Punjab during the second and rather chaotic reign of Benazir Bhutto in 1993-1996 despite the Shia affiliation and Shia vote-bank of the Bhutto clan. Two SSP Local Assembly members even became ministers in Pakistan's most important province. In the adjoining NWFP (North West Frontier Province), the PPP political alliance with the Deobandis was used as a counterweight to Pathan nationalist parties. The PPP extended support to the Taliban movement with American approval to bring about much wanted stability in war torn Afghanistan which brought the SSP and other Deobandis organizations closer to the PPP. As a result, many in the Shia community shifted their political allegiance to the PML (Pakistan Muslim League) of Nawaz Sharif. This shift in voting on the part of the Shias, was one of the contributing factors that benefited the PML as Nawaz Sharif returned to office in 1997 ousting the PPP with a huge victory. Nawaz Sharif who was once the Deobandi General Zia ur Haques's protégé. However, he soon passed the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997 which was designed to curb sectarianism which had gained considerable ground during the Benazir Bhutto administration. Nawaz Sharif himself became a target of an unsuccessful assassination attempt by the Lasker Jhangvi (LeJ) a splinter group from the SSP which is even more violent and has alleged links with Al-Qaeda. This intra-Sunni violence represents a dilemma for the anti-Shia Deobandi extremists as they have to maintain their anti-Shia stance yet avoid alienating moderate Sunnis. Some Sunni Islamist organizations such as the Jammāt Islami who view sectarianism as damaging the Islamist antiseccular agenda have organized the Milli Yikjahati (National Unity) Council where sectarian differences can be discussed with the aim of reconciliation. The Jammāt Islami has also opposed sectarianism as much of

its Saudi funding has since been diverted to the SSP and the Taliban. The most extremist of the Sunni and Shia sectarian organizations such as the SSP, LeJ and SMP strongly oppose such meditating steps as threatening or compromising what they consider as the essentials of their faith.

The War on Terror in the aftermath of the events of 9/11 has, however, achieved some of the objectives of the Milli Yikjahati Council. The massive air bombing which helped to remove the Taliban in Afghanistan, created a powerful image of Islam being in danger from the West, which many Islamists of various sectarian affiliations used successfully to enhance their political standing. They joined in a political alliance the Muttahida Majlis Amal (MMA) based on antiAmericanism which included such diverse and opposing partners such as the Barelwi Jammāt Ulema Pakistan (JUP), Jammat Islami and the Taliban's parent Deobandi organization the Jammāt Ulema Islam (JUI). It even included Shias belonging to the TJP, which had its origins in the opposition to Zia's Islamization of the late 1970s. (Pinault2003:83). However, the SSP did not join the MMA which since the October 2002 elections has controlled the NWFP adjoining the sensitive Afghanistan border. The SSP not only opposed the MMA for it included the TJP the forerunner of its bitter rival the SMP among its ranks, instead the SSP supported General Musharraf despite him officially banning sectarian organizations, curbing extremist madrasas and his U-turn regarding support for the SSP's sectarian ally the Taliban, in the face of threats from the United States. Despite the MMA being a strong vocal critic of Musharraf's pro-American anti-Taliban stance, it is a junior partner of the Musharraf backed Muslim League administration in Baluchistan. Summary The above account shows that sectarian organizations have alliances and counter alliances with more mainstream religious and supposedly secular oriented political parties in Pakistan. As such alliances are more inclined to be situational than being based on an ideology such as nationalism it is hard to say if there will be any real reconciliation between the various sectarian groups in the near future. As Pakistan is still evolving from feudalism to capitalism, it is experiencing problems of an identity crisis as its traditional power structures are coming under considerable strain. The landlords are losing some of their political clout but the industrialists and bureaucrats have not entirely replaced them and these categories are being increasingly blurred. All these alliances and realignments leave the religious elites as brokers in a complicated patronclient set-up. Some of them have turned to and away from violent sectarianism in order to enhance their own power-bases depending on whether internal or external enemies can be portrayed as the greater threat to the national interest. (Haleem2003:474). Sectarianism violence threatens civil society yet it is only a symptom of the malfunctioning of the Pakistani nation-state which has used religion as a form of nationalism to counterweight other forms of identity but this approach has instead brought into existence a society now deeply fragmented on sectarian as well as regional, tribal and linguistic lines so undermining rather than enhancing Pakistani nationalism.

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