



RELIGIOUS ACTIVISM IN PAKISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MINORITIES: 2007 TO 2014

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Abstract

Religious activism is defined as “mobilization of contention to support religious causes”. It is an inclusive terminology which accommodates multiple contentions, mostly emerging under the banner of religious legislation, preaching movements, terrorist groups and religio-political movements seeking to establish a theocratic state and groups who promote religious spirituality through combined struggle. The religious nationalism or religious activism has assumed a new surge despite modernization and secularism thesis. Religious activism has implications for ‘religious minorities’ all over the world including Pakistan. Religious activism intensified after the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) operation in July 2007. The aim of this research is to investigate the phenomena of religious activism in the context of Lal Masjid and its implications for religious minorities in Pakistan. Minorities here refer to non-Muslim religious groups living in Pakistan. This research is analyzed in the light of radicalization leading to violence theory a test of 3-N model. Primary and secondary data have been consulted to achieve the objectives of the research.

Key Words: Religious activism, radicalization, minorities, fundamentalism, Islamization

Introduction

The nature of religious activism in Pakistan is based on two variables ‘religious fundamentalism’ that means a specific interpretation and practices of religion is a root cause of religious activism in Pakistan’s state and society. Another variable is linked to theory of ‘political theology’ that explains the ‘relationship of government with religious group’ is the cause of contemporary religious activism in Pakistan (Monica Duffy Toft, 2010). Religious activism in Pakistan and its implications for minorities is traced back to post-independence era when the country was wedded to ‘religion’ and ‘Muslim-state’ rather than a ‘pluralist nation state’. The country was perceived as a ‘state surrounded by mixture of real and hypothetical Indian hegemony’ and the ‘fortress of Islam’ (Ahmad, 2013). Since Pakistan’s inception the religious sentiments have been utilized both by politicians and state as a tool to strengthen the bond of unity and identity (Haqqani, 2005).

Religious activism in Pakistan means all those state measures like religious legislation, instrumentalization of religion in national and international politics by the state, society religious behavior based on preaching fundamentalist version of religion by all religious movements, proxy holy wars and religio-political forces who have been struggling for transforming Pakistan into an ‘Islamic State’. Religious activism affected minorities by one way or the other after independence of the country. Objectives Resolution was the first legal step which created unrest amongst the minorities in the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan (Munir, 1980).

Lal Masjid or Red Mosque and its madrassas wings *Jamia Hafsa* and *Jamia Farida* in Islamabad started unconstitutional activities in the summer of 2007. In July 2007, Pakistan government installed security forces to restore law & order which culminated into an ‘operation silence’ against the Red Mosque and death toll reached 106— the number is disputed and claimed to be higher than it. The same day, *Al-Qaeda* announced revenge against the Pakistani forces’ assault on Red Mosque. The insurgents sought vengeance against the security forces and minorities across the country (Siddique, 2008).

The literature review elucidates that a bulk of research is related to religious activism but there is dearth of research about religious activism in Pakistan and its implications for minorities. Hence, a critical and comprehensive study was needed to conduct analytical research on the area.



Religious Activism after 2007

Religious activism got upsurge after the post-Lal Masjid operation. Pakistan faced radicalization and terrorism which affected the religious minorities such as Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Ahmadis, Baha'is, Kalash and Zoroastrians. The repercussions of blasphemy laws continued, and religious minorities were persecuted even during Musharraf's 'enlightened moderation' era. The liberalization of media did not improve the plight of minorities. On September 7, 2008, during a Geo TV show, the late Dr. Amir Liaquat Hussain openly advocated for the murder of Ahmadis, with two other religious ulema supported his stance. Just twenty hours later, Dr. Abdul Manan Siddiqui, the head of the Ahmadi Community in Mirpur Khas district, was killed by evangelists (Shea, 2011).

Sectarian Violence against the Shia Community

The Shia community, which is a sect within Islam, is considered non-Muslim by religious orthodox organizations like the SSP and other fundamentalist groups in the country. Anti-Shia violence escalated with greater brutality during civilian government rule from 2008 onwards.

In December 2008, a car bomb blast targeted a Shia mosque, resulting in the death of twenty-nine people. Another heinous suicide blast struck a Shia mosque in Multan on February 5, 2009, killing twenty-four worshippers. Then, on February 20, a suicide bomber detonated himself during a Shia funeral procession, resulting in the deaths of twenty-eight people and the injury of more than sixty in Dera Ismail Khan. This was a horrific and deadly incident, with some of the injured people being transported to the hospital by handcarts. After the blast, gunfire erupted, and enraged Shias began firing back at the police present during the procession. Subsequently, two Sunnis were killed in the ensuing sectarian riots (Qadoos, 2009).

On December 26, 2009, a Muharram procession was attacked, and more than 30 Shias were wounded ("26 Wounded in Karachi Blast near Muharram Procession," 2009). Religious activism continued to exacerbate, with Islamic insurgents targeting their ideological opponents in broad daylight. Terrorism carried out in the name of religion represents the most extreme and harsh aspect of religious activism. In 2010, religious insurgents extended their attacks to Sufi shrines. Sufism is often considered the more moderate and peaceful aspects of Islam and Sunni Sufis typically have more tolerant views towards Shias, not considering them as heretics.

Radicalization leading to violence


Ideological radicalization is the tool of violence with extremist elements in Pakistan. Violence is encapsulated in religious narrative through combined network of

On July 1, 2010, a nearly thousand-year-old shrine, Data Gunj Bakhsh Ali Hajveri, was targeted by two suicide attackers, resulting in the deaths of more than forty people. Usually, people gathered at Data Darbar every Friday night. The explosions shattered the concrete walls of the shrine, and the white marble floor was soaked in blood. Surprisingly, the media in Pakistan diverted attention from the extremist groups responsible for these attacks. Sadly, the media falsely accused the Ahmadis of the attack and argued that Pakistan's alliance with America was the cause of such brutal events (Khan, 2010).

During the month of Ramadan in 2010, a Shia procession in Quetta was targeted, resulting in the deaths of fifty-five people and over one hundred wounded (Syed, 2010). The SSP, which is the militant wing of the Deobandi ideology, considers Shias as infidels. Deobandi Mullahs preach from the pulpit that Shias are non-Muslim, and a significant portion of Pakistani society holds similar religious beliefs (Ali, 2023).

On September 1, 2010, a Shia religious procession was attacked in Lahore, resulting in the deaths of twenty-eight people and more than 150 injuries. The extremist and militant organization Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, an offshoot of the SSP, claimed responsibility for this heinous blast (Tasleem, 2010).

The atrocities against the Shia community did not cease. On September 20, 2011, 26 Shia pilgrims en route to Iran were lined up and killed in Mastung, Balochistan. Three individuals who were helping transport the injured to the hospital were also shot dead in Quetta. A similar attack occurred at the same location on a bus carrying Shia pilgrims in 2011. International organizations and media questioned why the government had not tightened security at the site after the initial Mastung incident (Amnesty International Organization, 2011).



The targeted killings of the Shia community escalated to such an extent that from 2009 to 2015, 1,659 Shias were murdered, and 2,950 were injured. The Shias of Quetta, primarily belonging to the Hazara ethnic community, viewed this campaign of targeted killings as organized genocide. Human rights organizations had differing opinions on whether the death ratio constituted 'genocide' or not. Some experts argued that the deliberate targeting of Shias by religiously motivated groups could indeed be described as genocide (Amnesty International Organization, 2011).

Hazara people, like other minorities, were leaving Pakistan to seek asylum in Western countries, including the United States, in order to protect themselves from persecution in their own homeland. Many of them embarked on risky journeys, including illegal boat trips to Australia, where they sought refuge and the company of their long-established community members. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), Hazara Shias were willing to seize any opportunity to leave the country in search of protection, and approximately seventy people tragically drowned off the Indonesian coast in 2011-12 (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2012).

In addition to the persecution of Shias, attacks on Ahmadis and Christians began from 2008 to 2014. According to HRCP reports, Hindus from Balochistan and Sindh were attempting to migrate to India. Representatives of minority communities expressed that the vested interests of extremists were forcing minorities to leave the country. Land grabbers and religious insurgents were also threatening minorities to seize their properties and plots ("HRCP Outrage at Minorities Flight," 2012).

The Ahmadis' Persecution

The Ahmadis were the most persecuted minority during the democratic government's rule from 2007 to 2014. Their mosques, known as "*baituz-zikar*," were invaded during Friday prayers on May 28, 2010. An Ahmadi recounted that they had started carrying licensed pistols to the mosques for their safety. A few days before the attack, the police had visited the mosque and advised them not to bring pistols, assuring them that the government would provide security. However, when the mosque was attacked, the terrorists mercilessly killed the worshipers without any resistance. This tragic event resulted in the horrifying death of ninety-eight people and severe injuries to more than a hundred. Both mosques were attacked within a short time frame and were only a few kilometers apart. The terrorists initially shot the worshipers with guns and grenades and, when security forces arrived, they detonated themselves with suicide bombs. In May 2014, an Ahmadi doctor was seemingly killed due to his religious beliefs in Peshawar. One terrorist was captured by the worshipers; his suicide jacket had failed to detonate (Anonymous, 2023). An Ahmadi family faced a brutal assault in Kasur when they refused to convert to Sunni Islam, and local clerics beat them severely. The social hatred against the Ahmadi community continues to persist across the country. In another incident, an Ahmadi family was forcibly evicted in 2013 by a group of evangelists who aimed to disrupt the financial benefits of a magazine run by Ahmadis (Tanveer, 2013). In July 2013, at the beginning of Ramadan, a sect of Sunni radicals attacked the worship place (Baituz-Zikar) of the Ahmadi community in Fatehpur, Gujrat. They attempted to seize ownership rights of their place of worship. In Pakistan, the worship places of most minority groups have been occupied by property dealers or land grabbers in cities. Unfortunately, the police did not even register an FIR against the evangelists (Tanveer, Express Tribune, 2013).

The persecution and marginalization of the Ahmadi community have escalated significantly in recent years, and they are now subjected to organized campaigns of hatred (HRCP: State of Human Rights, 2013). Ahmadis live in constant fear of attacks on their homes, workplaces, places of worship, and even their personal safety. Everything related to their religious beliefs is ridiculed and disrespected. In a particularly disturbing incident, the gravestones of 120 Ahmadis in Lahore were demolished and desecrated by religious militants.

The injustices against Ahmadis remain unaddressed, and successive governments have failed to provide them with meaningful protection. Ahmadis are often charged under false blasphemy cases, while the government has been ineffective in prosecuting the radicals and extremists involved in



anti-Ahmadi activities. In a tragic incident on July 27, 2014, a mob of fanatics attacked an Ahmadi family, resulting in the merciless killing of two Ahmadi children and their grandmother (Pakistan: Ahmadiyya Community Attacked, Three Killed, 2014).

Attacks over Christian Community

Following the persecution of Ahmadis, the Christian community also faced ferocious targeting during that period. One of the most ruthless attacks against Christians occurred on July 30, 2009, in Korian, Punjab province. Nearly one hundred Christian families were residing in that area. This tragic event was triggered by an allegation of blasphemy. A Christian family was accused of throwing pieces of the Holy Quran in the air during a marriage ceremony, a cultural practice that usually involves tossing paper money into the air.

Extremist Mullahs incited a mob through loudspeakers, and this enraged mob, along with religious fanatics, launched an attack on the Christian colony using guns and explosive materials. It was reported that almost two churches and sixty houses were mercilessly demolished. The mob also stole livestock, and Christian families fled to the fields to hide from the violence while witnessing their homes burn (Shea, 2011).

The theory of radicalization leading to violence is evident in the religiously motivated violence within Pakistani society. Fanatic Mullahs, whether directly or indirectly sponsored by the state, have poisoned Pakistani society. These extremist Mullahs have essentially provided a weapon of blasphemy, which can be used by common people against anyone without proper investigation. The entire Christian community center was ruthlessly destroyed, and churches were violently ransacked.

The enraged mob desecrated Bibles and all the sacred symbols of Christianity. Often, law enforcement forces arrived at these scenes late, and sometimes they appeared to be mere spectators. Extremist Mullahs have driven Pakistani society into the depths of religious activism, and common Muslims have been indoctrinated from the pulpits of mosques. As a result, people have come to view violence carried out under the pretext of blasphemy laws as a virtuous duty.


One of the deadliest incidents in the history of Pakistan's minorities occurred in Peshawar on September 22, 2013. Two suicide attackers detonated explosives outside the premises of the Peshawar Diocese, where a 130-year-old Anglican Church is located in Sadar Bazar. This horrific blast claimed the lives of at least 78 innocent Christians and over 250 people were wounded (Aziz, 2013).

The Islamist militant organizations associated with the TTP (*Tehrik-i-Taliban* Pakistan) claimed responsibility for the attack, stating that it was a vengeful response to American drone strikes. In the aftermath of the attack, the Christian community expressed its anger and frustration, denouncing the government's failure to provide security for minorities in Pakistan. Inside the building, women and children were left screaming and crying (Pakistan blasts: Burials Amid Anger after Peshawar Church Attack, 2013).

Many of the common, often illiterate people and religious sections proudly refer to themselves as "Ghazi" or "*Aashiq-i-Rasool*" (holy warrior and lover of the Prophet) without fully understanding the implications of these terms. People have been inundated with the slogan "*Gustakh-i-Rasool ke aik Saza, Sar Tan Sa Juda*" (the punishment for blasphemy against the Prophet is to sever the head from the body). This maxim has been posted on social media walls, including by university students, and displayed on banners in the streets and markets.

The tragic incident that occurred in Korian was repeated in Gojra, where the Christian community was targeted by the SSP (*Sipah-e-Sahaba*) on August 1, 2009. Radical Islamists incited the masses, and approximately one thousand people attacked the local Christian population under allegations of blasphemy. The barbaric mob set fire to more than forty homes, resulting in the merciless killing of seven Christians. Despite the desperate pleas and cries of the people, six individuals, including two children, were burned alive.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reported that the police had been informed about the impending tragedy but failed to take preventive action. The law enforcement personnel are often drawn from a society that has been religiously influenced by fanatic Mullahs. They tend to



side with the attackers of alleged blasphemers and often arrive late or become passive bystanders during such incidents. According to the HRCR, the fanatic SSP incited the mob through mosque loudspeakers to "annihilate the Christians" over the alleged blasphemy (Shea, 2011).

In an attempt to empower minorities across the country, Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian, was appointed as the Minister of Minority Affairs by the federal government of the PPP. He highlighted the fact that blasphemy laws were being misused to persecute the country's minorities. He had the support of the liberal faction within the PPP and advocated for a review of the blasphemy laws.

In the beginning of 2010, the federal government of the PPP initiated discussions regarding the persecution of religious minorities by extremists using a fundamentalist interpretation of blasphemy laws. However, this initiative did not prevent further persecution of minorities due to the support for blasphemy laws from the Punjab provincial government.

In February 2010, a Christian named Qamar David was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for allegedly inciting the emotions of Muslims by sending blasphemous messages via mobile about the Holy Quran and the Prophet Muhammad. The persecution of the Christian community continued to escalate under these blasphemy laws.

Another incident related to blasphemy occurred in March 2010 when a Christian husband and wife were accused of touching the Holy Quran without washing their hands and disrespecting the holy book. The couple was sentenced to 25 years in jail for blasphemy. An eighty-five-year-old Christian, Rehmat Masih, became embroiled in a land dispute with his Muslim neighbor, which led to him being accused of blasphemy and subsequently imprisoned in Faisalabad Jail on June 19, 2010 (Shea, 2011).

Misuse of Blasphemy Laws

The famous Asia Bibi case in November 2010 stirred strong sentiments among people in favor of altering the blasphemy laws. Asia Bibi, a destitute woman with five children from Nankana in Sheikhpura, was sentenced to death for alleged blasphemy. According to various sources, the incident occurred in June 2009 while Asia was working with Muslim women on a farm. The women wanted to drink water from a well, and when Asia offered them water, some women refused to drink from the hands of an "unclean Christian," claiming that non-Muslims were impure. The concept of non-Muslims being considered "impure" or "unclean" is widespread in Pakistani society.

Reportedly, Asia Bibi responded offensively, asking if they were not human beings, which led to a heated exchange of arguments. The women of the village then reported the incident to a local cleric who, without being an eyewitness, filed a First Information Report (FIR) against Asia Bibi. Despite denying the allegations, she was convicted of blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad by a local magistrate in 2010, and the sentence was upheld by the Lahore High Court. She spent several years in solitary confinement based on this ambiguous blasphemy accusation.

Asia Bibi was eventually acquitted by the Supreme Court of Pakistan due to unsatisfactory evidence against her. The court noted that she had been forced to confess her "crime" under the threat of being killed by a mob. Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab, openly criticized the blasphemy laws and expressed his support for Asia Bibi. The prominent politician from the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) referred to the blasphemy law as "*Kala Qanon*" (Black Law) and stated that it had ruined the lives of innocent people. He publicly criticized the law, showed sympathy for Asia Bibi, and vowed to amend the blasphemy laws.

Governor Punjab Salman Taseer visited Asia Bibi in jail to show his support and urged President Zardari to use his constitutional authority to pardon her and secure her release. As a result of his stance on the blasphemy laws, Salman Taseer was targeted by religious extremists who issued fatwas (religious decrees) and declared him an infidel for suggesting changes to the blasphemy laws.

He was assassinated by his official security guard named Mumtaz Qadri (Asia Bibi: Christian leaves Pakistan after blasphemy acquittal, 2019). Mumtaz Qadri was sentenced to capital punishment for killing Salman Taseer in broad daylight. Pakistani society regarded Mumtaz Qadri as their hero and *Aashiq-i-Rasool* (Lover of the Prophet), while they labeled Salman Taseer as *Gustakh-i-Rasool* (Blasphemer of the Prophet).



The Pakistani Ulama (religious scholars) did not condemn the murder of Salman Taseer and, in many cases, openly praised Mumtaz Qadri's actions. With the exception of a few voices in religious circles, most religio-political parties and common people praised the killing of Governor Salman Taseer and the actions of Mumtaz Qadri.

The assassination of a prominent figure who spoke about amending the blasphemy laws created an atmosphere where few dared to question the laws or propose changes to the legal process in Pakistan. Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian minister of religious affairs and a critic of the blasphemy laws, was shot dead on March 2, 2011. Prior to his killing, pamphlets were distributed in the area describing him as "a Christian infidel," and these pamphlets were signed by radicals affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban based in Punjab (Pakistan minister Shahbaz Bhatti shot dead in Islamabad, 2011).

Minorities in Pakistan have consistently faced violence and discrimination at the hands of religious extremists and fundamentalists in the name of religion. The persecution and wave of extremism in the country intensified after the Lal Masjid operation in 2007. All minority groups, including Sikhs, Christians, Ahmadis, Hindus, Parsis, Jains, and Muslim Shias, have experienced harassment, violence, discrimination, and social hatred in the country. According to a report from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom in 2013, Pakistan had failed to protect its religious minorities, and the flight of minorities was described as reaching a "crisis level." The report highlighted that the Pakistani government could not prevent gross violations of freedom of faith or religion, and these violations had disrupted the peaceful harmony, tolerance, and coexistence in the country. Furthermore, the report emphasized that the state had failed to protect Hindus, Christians, and Ahmadis in Pakistan ("US Report Warns of Crisis for Pakistan's Minorities," 2013).

The Minority Rights Group International (MRGI) report from 2014 comprehensively assessed the conditions of minorities in Pakistan. The report expressed deep concerns about the flight of minorities from 2007 to the recent past. It highlighted that religious minorities in Pakistan had endured persecution, with Hindus, Ahmadis, and Christians facing socio-political and religious discrimination for a significant period. The persecution of these religious communities, especially Christians, Hindus, and Ahmadis, had escalated to a critical level.

Notably, the report pointed out the instrumentalization of blasphemy laws against religious minorities, leading Pakistan to violate its international legal commitments. Discrimination against minorities was also observed in schools, workplaces, the media, and at burial sites, where some local extremists prevented the observance of minority religious customs. Furthermore, the negative image and pessimistic portrayal of minorities persisted in the national curriculum. Despite quotas, religious minorities encountered obstacles in securing government jobs, particularly in federal agencies, often relegated to low-ranking positions such as sweepers or stigmatized roles within society (Searching for Security: The Rising Marginalization of Religious Communities in Pakistan, 2014).

The blasphemy law continues to be applied to both Muslims and non-Muslims. In 2014, blasphemy accusations were filed against 68 lawyers who had protested the arrest of their colleague by the police. The lawyers were accused of derogatory remarks against a companion of the Prophet Muhammad. The police explained that a local resident had filed a complaint against the lawyers. Human rights activists have noted that blasphemy laws are often invoked for personal vendettas and disputes (BBC, 2014).

However, Christians in Pakistan continue to face victimization and social discrimination across the country. This discrimination is evident in the historical nationalization of health and educational institutions during the era of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, which affected Christian-run institutions. Their longstanding concerns and grievances have not been adequately addressed. Christians have been specifically targeted and victimized since the events of 9/11, with some associating them with Christianity and the United States, linking them to the U.S. war on terror in Afghanistan. A significant proportion of Christians in Pakistan have suffered due to these perceptions. This victimization includes violent attacks on churches, land grabbing issues, forced marriages, and

conversions, particularly in rural areas of the country (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom: Annual Report, 2014).

Hindus constitute the largest minority community in Pakistan and are primarily concentrated in the Sindh and Tharparkar regions, which are adjacent to India. Smaller Hindu populations also reside in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Punjab. However, the Hindu community in Pakistan has faced victimization and discrimination throughout its history, often stemming from the tumultuous relations between Pakistan and India. Incidents between the two countries or anti-Muslim acts in India have sometimes resulted in violence against Pakistan's Hindu community. Such violence has included desecration of temples and cases of kidnapping and rape of Hindu women.

In recent times, Hindus in Pakistan have continued to be targeted, facing suspicion, persecution, and various forms of discrimination. For example, Hindu marriages are not registered or recognized under Pakistani civil laws, enabling the police to level charges of adultery against them and demand bribes and extortion money (The News International, 2013). There have been numerous cases of Hindu girls being kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam, and compelled to marry Muslim boys (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom: Annual Report, 2014). Additionally, religious fanatics have vandalized temples and burial places. Due to the lack of crematoriums or grounds for cremation, Hindus in Pakistan often bury their dead instead of conducting cremations in line with their religious rites. In some instances, evangelists exhumed Hindu's graves and desecrated the bodies, as reported in the Badin district in 2013 (State of Human Rights in 2013, 2014).

The challenging situation has prompted many Hindus to leave Pakistan for India in search of better lives and security. Numerous temples were demolished in 2014 throughout the country due to religious activism (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom: Annual Report, 2014).


Conclusion

Religious extremism and radicalism in Pakistan intensified after the Lal Masjid operation in 2007. Pakistan has become a breeding ground for numerous extremist and radical groups, each with its own ideological stance towards religious minorities. The situation for minorities in Pakistan has been widely condemned by international agencies and organizations. Ahmadis, Christians, and Hindus have borne the brunt of religious intolerance and persecution by extremist elements. Ahmadis have been consistently targeted due to their distinct religious beliefs, and society has been indoctrinated against them. Christians have faced oppression due to their perceived association with America, making them targets for retaliatory violence. Hindus have been labeled as enemies of Pakistan and Islam, facing persecution fueled by negative propaganda propagated by both the state and Islamist insurgents.

During the period from 2007 to 2014, the fundamental rights of religious minorities in Pakistan, including their social, political, and religious rights, were grossly violated. The situation has been a cause for concern and has garnered widespread international attention and condemnation.

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