

## Sectarianism in Pakistan: Lived Experiences, Sour History & Potential Remedies

Afsheen Fatima Pakistan



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I remember my younger days when there were frequent bomb blasts in Pakistan in different cities targeting the Shia minority. It was seemingly a typical day. On 31st May 2005, I was watching TV with my brother when suddenly we heard a loud boom, with our window shaking behind us. Moments later, we regained our senses, and my brother went out to check. Upon investigation, we found out that a suicide attack took place in a nearby Shia mosque known as Madinat ul Ilm. After the attack, my older brother went to the mosque and saw the attacker's head and foot. This macabre sight still haunts him, and this story stays with us as a reminder that our family members could have been there in the mosque, lying in a pool of blood. It was just our luck that none of my brothers were there for prayers that day.

In this particular incident, one worshipper was killed, and twenty were wounded when the bomber blew himself up during Monday evening prayers after sneaking inside the mosque amid a gunfight with police that claimed the lives of two officers and another attacker.<sup>[1]</sup>

As per the <u>Minority Rights Group</u>, Pakistan houses around 10% -15% of the Shia population spread across the territory. Almost all provinces and major ethnic groups in Pakistan have a Shia minority, with the most prominent one being the Hazaras of Balochistan, who have been the prime target



As per the Minority Rights Group, Pakistan houses around 10% -15% of the Shia population spread across the territory. Almost all provinces and major ethnic groups in Pakistan have a Shia minority, with the most prominent one being the Hazaras of Balochistan, who have been the prime target due to their easily identifiable facial features. To know how this all started, we need to delve deep into the sociopolitical history of Pakistan. The Human Rights Watch traces sectarianism history back to 1979 with the start of the Afghan jihad and the Islamization policies of General Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan. As per Mr. Peerzada's feature report for the Friday Times, since 1963, more than 23,000 Shias have been killed.

In 1985, Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, from Jhang in central Punjab, led the formation of the Sipah Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). A sectarian organization, the SSP sought to lessen Shi'ism's power in Pakistan. High-profile killings of Iranian diplomats, such as the 1990 murder of Iranian Consul-General Agha <u>Sadiq Ganji</u>, were carried out by the SSP.

In 2011, a splinter group of SSP, <u>Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ)</u>, issued a threat letter in Urdu and circulated in Pakistan, which stated:



"All Shi'ites are worthy of killing. We will rid Pakistan of unclean people. Pakistan means the land of the pure, and the Shi'ites have no right to live in this country. We have the edict and signatures of revered scholars, declaring Shi'ites infidels. Just as our fighters have waged a successful jihad against the Shi'ite Hazaras in Afghanistan, our mission in Pakistan is the abolition of this impure sect and its followers from every city, every village, and every nook and corner of Pakistan. As in the past, our successful jihad against the Hazaras in Pakistan and, in particular, in Quetta, is ongoing and will continue in the future. We will make Pakistan the graveyard of the Shi'ite Hazaras, and their houses will be destroyed by bombs and suicide bombers. We will only rest when we can fly the flag of true Islam on this land of the pure. Jihad against the Shi'ite Hazaras has now become our duty."

Both groups have carried out several violent attacks on Shi'as in Pakistan and openly called for their murder since their founding. After being outlawed by the Musharraf administration in 2002, the SSP was then re-founded as Ahl-e Sunnat Wal Jama'at (ASWJ) before being outlawed once more in 2012. The Pakistani Taliban, also known as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has more recently been linked to targeted murders of Shi'a. They promised to carry out further strikes and took credit for two explosions that occurred in Karachi at the end of 2013.



Open threats and statements like these caused thousands of Shia citizens to be killed by armed Sunni militants in many killings and bombings around Pakistan. Shia judges, doctors, bureaucrats, and police officials have all been targeted by militants. This kind of propaganda literature spreads far and wide in this digital age, causing more rifts than ever. Such letters and social media posts call for open genocide, which is alarming for the whole world.

Last year alone, a Shia convoy was attacked in the restive region of Kurram, which claimed 42 lives, including 6 women, and injured 20 others. This sectarian conflict escalated to the point that more than 100 villages in Upper and Lower Kurram, including Parachinar's district headquarters, were besieged since November for more than three and a half months, entering the new year 2015 with the same unabated crisis. The long and porous border with Afghanistan, which has turned into a hotbed for instability, is blamed by local elders for the continuous unrest.

It is pertinent to note that Pakistan was a signatory to the <u>Universal Declaration of Human Rights</u> in 1948. Pakistan has signed and ratified seven core treaties and two additional protocols. Despite all these treaties and protocols, the Pakistani state has regularly failed to protect its minorities.



To combat this ever-increasing menace of extremism, the Pakistani government has to come to terms with the fact that this has been going on for years with the authorities turning a blind eye and send a strong message both to the terrorists and their victims. This tells the world that the government is complicit, the number of victims will continue to rise, and the culprits can roam free.

In my view, below mentioned are some policies for the Pakistani government and the international community can design and implement to reap long-term benefits:

- **1. Increment of acquittals:** There's ample evidence of terrorists being given a clean chit by the <u>anti-terrorism courts</u> due to a lack of evidence. Eyewitnesses hesitate to testify against these militant groups due to the fear of reprisals. It's high time to use advanced probing techniques and evidence collection so we don't have many repeat offenders.
- 2. Educational reforms: To stamp out this eternal threat, Pakistani authorities need to overhaul the current curricula. Since Islamic Studies is a compulsory course from childhood to university level education, certain Quranic scriptures and the Prophet's sayings concerning humanity, brotherhood, and societal harmony should be added to the curricula. Secondly, a course on Global Citizenship Education (GCED) should be included at the primary and secondary levels of education to influence the young minds before they start their higher education. GCED's core tenets are based on emotional intelligence and positive development. Once introduced to these ideas at a young age, it will be far easier for those students to understand the concepts of acceptance, tolerance, and harmony.



## 3. Pressure from international donors/agencies & governments:

Foreign agencies should take stringent action and prevent their financial assistance from getting into the hands of extremist outfits. Moreover, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and the Special Rapporteur on minority issues should visit Pakistan for a neutral investigation of Shia killings and hate speeches. This will help the Pakistani government in receiving technical expertise and also give a clear picture to the UN Human Rights Council about this pressing issue as well.