

Sectarian Calculus in Pakistan: The Changing Dynamics

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The resolve of the Musharraf government to remove the sectarian cancer from the body politic of Pakistan has come face to face with even a stronger resolve of the sectarian elements within the Pakistani society to keep the violence going. The suicide attack on Shias in Quetta on March 2, 2004, which claimed 47 lives, on the occasion of Ashura in spite of widespread security measures by the government to let this Muharram go trouble free, proves this point. Most media reports in the wake of this tragedy, focussing mostly on the Quetta incident, looked at such attack as a typical Sunni attack on Shia religious procession even if it was perhaps the first suicide attack in the history of sectarian killings. They even reported that the anti-terrorist police employed by the administration teamed up with the Sunni sectarian killers in attacking the Shias. Some of the representatives of Balochistan legislative assembly as well as the National legislature who participated in the Ashura procession even offered eye-witness accounts of such tragedy.

However, some discerning analysts suggested that the sectarian calculus might have undergone some qualitative transformation this time round, in the sense that it is no longer Sunnis versus Shias en bloc. The entrepreneurs of Sunni sectarian militancy may have isolated a relatively smaller section among the Shias, who have managed to provoke the jealousy of Sunnis as well as some other sections of Shias, by their superior material status.

The attacks on schools for girls, managed by Aga Khan Foundation(AKF), in the Northern Areas and funded by the World Bank(WB) and European Commission(EC) in February 2004, proves such a point. The attacks on the WB-funded schools have come in the Sunni majority pockets in the Northern areas even though the efforts are also supported by the government of Pakistan and by continuing its focus on increasing educational opportunities, particularly for girls, in a region that has amongst the lowest literacy rates in South Asia, the AKF has been reducing the pressure on the central government, which had started building up over demands for representation. The Aga Khan Education Service, with its emphasis on English language activities, community-owned, locally managed schools has provoked the wrath of the sectarian elements who have now come out with allegations that Prince Karim Aga Khan, the head of the Ismaili sect within the Shias, along with his followers "are engaged upon to carve out their own pro-Zionist, Ghali Shia Ismaili State in the North of Pakistan". This would include Northern Areas of North West Frontier Province, Jammu and Kashmir. In the North of Pakistan this would include Pul-i Khumri, Darr-i Kiyan, Badakshan, Pamirs, Certain areas of Tajikistan and other central Asian Muslim States. They have also called the blind belief of the Ismailis in the Aga Khan, as an incarnation of Hazrat Ali, is "blasphemous", an allegation which if proved in Pakistan may lead to death sentence.

The Northern Areas, home to 1.2 million people spread across 1,123 villages and with a population density of merely 12 per sq km stayed unrepresented till Supreme Court guidelines issued on May 28, 1999 compelled the Pakistani government to establish a toothless 28-member Northern Areas Legislative Council. There have been allegations of the Pakistani state adopting a step-motherly attitude towards the Shia majority in the area and has even of encouraging Sunni militants to launch attacks on the Shia from time to time.

The recent decision by the Privatisation Commission of Pakistan to hand over the management control of the second largest bank in Pakistan, Habib Bank Ltd (HBL), to Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED) which gave the highest bidding for Rs. Rs22.409 billions for 51 per cent strategic stake for acquiring the management control of the HBL. While Dr Hafeez Shaikh, Federal Minister for Privatisation and Investment called it “an important day in the history of privatization process of the country”, the sectarian elements had started interpreting it as a conclusive proof of the conspiracy the Ismaili sect and its leaders were hatching to control the economy of Pakistan. And they would allege that the Musharraf government was encouraging such heretical elements who would rather like to see Pakistan ruined.

In a post-Taliban context, the sectarian animus has in fact kept these elements active. These elements- nurtured for years on the highly sectarian and intolerant version of wahabite Sunni tonic and trained to resist through force and force alone- have evolved a highly coercive philosophy which refuses to tolerate anything that disagrees with its constipated worldview. Thus, anything that does not conform to the Deobandi-Wahabite puritanical view of Islam has to be dismissed and people advocating a view which runs counter to it have to be eliminated. Such puritanical zeal combined with a combative drive deems it ordained by faith to preserve the core of the faith from all kinds of contamination to which the faith has been subjected through years. This regressive mindset characterized the jihad against Communism and after the fall of Soviet Union, it crystallized into the shape of Taliban with devoted recruits primarily from the Pushtun dominated areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Taliban wind swept the poverty stricken Pakistani hinterland and the need for sustained recruitment for the Taliban fight against other forces in Afghanistan gave the Pakistani youth an opportunity to enlist themselves for the Taliban army, for a just cause, which offered them material and spiritual assurance.

But once Taliban was wiped out after the 9/11, one saw a vast army of highly motivated young populace suddenly out of job turning back across the border into Pakistan. When the American put pressures on Musharraf to nab these elements, they dispersed themselves and during the last three years one has seen these elements spreading out into small cities, where they have left their mark through initiating violent sectarianism. The law enforcement agencies, especially at the lower levels have often ignored their presence and their wide dispersal along with the highly incendiary propaganda they often have unleashed have taken the rather localized sectarian virus to remote corners of Pakistan.

The most perplexing of all, for Musharraf administration, has been the role of the “jihadi” constituency, which Pakistan had fervently nurtured as a tactical weapon against India on Kashmir, in such sectarian incidents. The authorities in Pakistan have suddenly realised that

these very elements have all along been responsible for the flare up in sectarian violence since the Taliban retreat. The strategy of launching an Islamic jihad in Kashmir has backfired.

These sectarian elements have now swooped down on Ismailis and the age-old strategy of targeting an affluent minority within a minority and attributing motive to their efforts has now begun. The poor, non-Ismailis may soon be victims of puerile hypotheses that they owe their poverty to the crafty and unscrupulous pursuit of the mammon by the Ismailis. It remains to be seen whether such diversionary issues would bridge the Deobandi-Barelvi divide in Pakistan on the one hand and divide the Shias on Ismaili and non-Ismaili lines. The sectarian situation in Pakistan is a highly mutating phenomenon and much will depend on how the Musharraf administration handles the pressing socio-economic issues in Pakistan and the seriousness with which it deals with the increasing dent of the MMA religious combine.