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# OPINION

## Politics of 'Sacred' in Barelvism: The Case of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP)

Mohammed Shoaib Raza\*

### Abstract

*The Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), by highlighting the convergence of politics and religion within the Barelvi school, has successfully used religious populism. Due to this, the TLP has emerged in Pakistani politics, signalling a change from the pacifist and less politically engaged position first identified with Barelvism. TLP has not only revitalised Barelvi politics in Pakistan but also channelled elements of extremism. This article aims to explore the various aspects of religious populism demonstrated by the TLP in relation to Barelvism. Consequently, the Barelvi School has become a victim of sacralized politics and, subsequently, religious populism. Additionally, the article suggests that religious populism within the Barelvi school is likely to escalate further, considering the unfolding events.*

### Introduction



Saad Rizvi, the current leader of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and son of the late Barelvi hardliner Khadim Rizvi, advised the Pakistani government to

refrain from 'begging' in front of other nations and instead threaten them with nuclear bombs and demand money. This is just one of many infamous instances involving the TLP, which mobilizes the masses to meet its political objectives in the name of the Islam and the Prophet.

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Similar instances can be observed in the rise of groups such as Dawat-e-Islami, Sunni Tehreek, and Tahaffuz Khatm-e-Nubuwwat, which have gained prominence in Pakistani politics in various ways. These groups are all associated with the Barelvi school of thought, which initially appeared pacifist and less political after the inception of the Barelvi reform movement. However, contemporary events indicate that the Barelvi school has not only succumbed to religious populism but has also developed extremist tendencies.

### **Emergence of the Barelvi School**

The Barelvi School, which first appeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, is one of the most prominent schools of thought within Islam in the Indian subcontinent. It emerged as a result of the unique doctrinal and theological interpretations of Sunni Islam by the *Sanaf* scholar Ahmad Raza Khan based in Bareilly, a city in Northern India. Ahmad Raza's interpretation served as a refutation of Wahhabism, an extreme brand of Islam that places a premium on a literal reading of the Quran. Due to its adherence to the unreformed Sufi tradition of tomb worship and other rites, which extreme Deobandis or Ahle-Hadith

violently detest, the Barelvi school is tolerant and mild in comparison. Barelvi School's principles are criticized on the Islamic da'wah website, Islam Q&A, which is managed by a Salafist scholar who believes that they divert people from "jihad for the sake of Allah".<sup>1</sup>

The Barelvis, with the support of their pirs, clerics, and heads, were crucial to the All-India Muslim League's effort to support Pakistan in the run-up to the general elections of 1945–1946.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the Deobandis, the Barelvis were more supportive of the idea of Pakistan's creation. Post the 9/11 attacks, Barelvis were promoted as a counter-narrative to extremist ideologies such as that of al-Qaida, Taliban, Sipah Sahaba, or Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.

### **Emergence of Populism in Barelvis**

Religious populism vis-à-vis the Barelvi school in Pakistan exhibits two general dimensions, one of which is the politicisation of religion (PoR). PoR refers to the ways in which traditional religion defends a political group, a particular institution, or a social order against divisive forces.<sup>3</sup> In colonial India, the ulemas (Islamic scholars) of the Barelvi school politicised Islam during the movement for Pakistan, which had a

significant impact on the formation of Pakistan. In this context, Jinnah granted a considerable degree of autonomy to the *mashaikh* (leaders of Sufi shrines) and Barelvi clerics promised to construct an ideal Islamic kingdom after the one established in the seventh century in an effort to rally Muslim support behind the demand for Pakistan.<sup>4</sup>

Through the efforts of the TLP, a Barelvi political organisation created by Khadim Hussain Rizvi, the politicisation of religion (PoR) has become more evident in modern Pakistan. The preservation of the Prophet's holiness and sanctity of Prophethood is the main goal of TLP. The assassination of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer by his security guard Mumtaz Qadri, who gave the former's interpretation of blasphemy laws as justification for this act, was the most critical factor that led to the emergence of TLP. It is a significant religious-political organisation because Khadim's brand of politics emphasises on the Barelvi vision of Islam, which should guide the conduct of the state in both temporal and spiritual domains.

### **Sacralisation of Politics by TLP**

Religious populism vis-a-vis the Barelvi School in Pakistan is mainly

exhibited by the sacralisation of politics (SoP) which is another important dimension of religious populism. The SoP often takes off from politicisation of religion. The SoP not only seeks to reinforce the very change brought about by the PoR but also complements and overlaps with the latter in various instances. It is frequently rooted in myths, ceremonies, and representations and is considered a vehicle for radical change to inspire communal togetherness and give meaning to the lives of individual and their futures.<sup>5</sup> In Pakistan, most Barelvi organisations had earlier failed to capture the political imagination of the community of Muslims as a whole, before the advent of TLP. The SoP by the Barelvis had never been substantial. In the changed context today, the SoP's key components—the employment of “quasi-religious imagery”, “semi-religious overtones”, and “political journey of redemption” or “redemptive crusade”—have all been articulated effectively by the TLP. It focuses primarily on *Tauheen-e-Risalat* (blaspheming the Prophet) and *Khatm-e-Nabuwwat* (the finality of the prophethood), which has made it an influential religious-political group today. Although these issues have been invoked earlier, the TLP has done it in a much more programmatic manner than ever before. Sensing the popular approval

behind Mumtaz Qadri, the TLP came forth announcing high-end honorary titles even before he was hanged. The idea of *Ishq-e-Rasool* (love of the Prophet) was monopolised and preserved under the pretext of *Namoos-e-Risalat* (honour of Holy Prophet), and it has become the primary driver of the TLP's mobilization strategy and politics over time.

If the "mission of salvation" and creation of "a moral community" are twin pillars of all major 'political' religions<sup>6</sup>, the notion of *ishq-e-Rasool* before anything, deeply integral to Barelvi school is being held as a means of salvation by TLP, based on which, it seeks to create a new moral community in Pakistan. The TLP forges all this into its strategy to transit from its street-politics of dissent to mainstream electoral politics. Thus, it exhorts people to vote in the name of the Prophet and Allah to be eligible for both earthly and heavenly salvation. Invoking these two pillars in the 2018 Pakistani general election, the TLP reaped a decent electoral harvest and emerged as the fifth-largest party overall and the third-largest political party in Punjab. The main campaign slogans employed by the TLP were: "*Vote ki izzat nizam-e-Mustafa mein hai*" (the system of the Prophet Muhammad rewards voting) and "*deen ko takht par laana*

*hai*" (religion will be in command).<sup>7</sup> These were just a few of the many slogans with "semi-religious overtones", which were used to incite large crowds to join protests, blockades and demonstrations.

### **TLP: The Current Boat of Barelvism in Political waters of Pakistan**

Contrary to its historically limited importance, the Barelvi sect has significantly increased its influence on Pakistani politics in recent years. This alteration can be linked to the TLP's swift ascent, but it's crucial to remember that this transformation did not take place on vacuum. It is the outcome of conscious efforts made by important Barelvi organisations to bring the formerly divided Barelvi community together.<sup>8</sup> During a period dominated by the Deobandi and Wahhabi ideologies in Pakistan's socio-political landscape, the primary focus of the Barelvis was to protect their interests and shield themselves from what they perceived as a government-supported campaign aimed at marginalizing their followers and reducing their influence.<sup>9</sup> To counter these challenges, Barelvi organizations took proactive measures to unite various factions within the Barelvi groups and foster

collaboration among them.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, several Barelvi groups such as the Pakistani Awami Tehrik (PAT) led by Allama Tahirul Qadri, Dawat-e-Islami led by Ilyas Qadri, and Allami Tanzim Ahl-e-Sunnat led by Maulana Afzal Qadri emerged to champion the interests of the Barelvis.<sup>11</sup> However, apart from a few notable exceptions, these groups struggled to gain significant political leverage. They appeared largely disinterested in mainstream politics, focusing primarily on engaging in polemical debates within the Barelvi versus Wahabi/Deobandi/*Ahl-e-Hadith* discursive tradition.

Nonetheless, with the meteoric rise of the TLP in Pakistan's socio-political arena, the Barelvi sect's position as a religious populist group has materialized. Despite being a relatively young party, the TLP achieved unprecedented success in the 2018 elections, receiving an exceptional number of votes.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it secured two seats in the Sindh Assembly, signifying its emergence as a potent political force within the country.

Furthermore, the issue of administrative and political favoritism in Pakistan extends beyond its manifestation among influential intra-Sunni Deobandi/Wahhabi groups such as *Sipah-e-*

*Sahaba*, *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi*, and *Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam* Pakistan. It has also become increasingly evident within the TLP, highlighting a concerning trend. Numerous instances have come to the fore where authorities have been observed appeasing TLP members during their protests or other disruptive activities, further exacerbating the issue. One notable incident occurred in November 2017, capturing the Director-General of the Punjab Rangers on camera distributing envelopes containing 1,000-rupee notes to TLP protesters. This incident served as a clear example of the preferential treatment bestowed upon TLP members by the authorities. In yet another distressing event, Pakistan's government succumbed to the demands of the TLP in 2021 after a protracted two-week-long protest, tragically resulting in the loss of lives of several policemen and inflicting substantial economic damage.

These occurrences demonstrate both the government's acquiescence with TLP demands and the tremendous power that this Sunni-Barelvi group has. It is obvious that favouritism and appeasement have spread across the political environment, cutting over sectarian boundaries and influencing the actions and judgements of the authorities in regard to the TLP.



## Conclusion

The TLP has made Barelvi school a subject of religious populism by successfully emphasising both sacralisation of politics and the politicisation of religion. Also, it has not only revived Barelvi politics in Pakistan but also channelised elements of extremism which were earlier limited to Salafist and Deobandi or Wahabi militant

groups. Taking the cue, large-scale protests and social media are being actively used by a new generation of Barelvi Ulemas and organisations to organise the community as force majeure. With the deteriorating condition of Pakistan both in the political and economic context, it can be expected that the religious populism vis-a-vis the Barelvi school would intensify along with manifesting itself more conspicuously. ■

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