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The Threat of Post 9/11 Sectarian Violence to the National Integration of Pakistan: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

This study aims to explain and analyse the post 9/11 sectarian violence in Pakistan and the way it is flourishing. The study also critically analyses the role played by foreign agencies in fuelling sectarian violence, inability of our Government to take concrete actions against perpetrators of sectarian violence and the threat posed to national integration of Pakistan. The Government and institutions have failed to protect the valuable lives and property of its citizens whether they belong to whichever sect. At the same time the foreign agencies are playing a murky role to destabilize our country internally. This study would provide insight that how war on terrorism has affected sectarianism in Pakistan and the role of foreign agencies in strengthening the perpetrators of sectarianism. Furthermore, it provides a linkage to how the sectarianism is threatening the national integration of Pakistan. This study would help out our policy makers to formulate policy for eradicating religious violence and countering the threats to national integration. This research would contribute to the larger body of literature on sectarian violence in Pakistan.

Keywords:

Sectarian, Violence, Foreign, Agencies, Destabilisation, Pakistan.

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Introduction:

Pakistan has pluralistic society where Muslims constitute 95-97% population along with other religious minorities – Hindus, Christians, and other faiths. The Muslims are further divided into Sunni and Shia on sectarian basis. Sunnis are 80-85% and Shias are 15-20% of the Pakistani Muslim population.¹ Both the factions breathed serenely for epochs. Both the factions had mutual belief on the idea of monotheism and the conclusiveness of last prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). Both sects interpreted the Islamic laws in different ways.² Though dissimilarities existed among the different sects of Islam particularly between two major factions of Sunni and Shia Islam; yet the sectarian milieu in Pakistan and other parts of the world was not much aggravated as it is in contemporary times. The Iranian Revolution, Afghan Jihad and Zia's Islamization process have fomented violent sectarianism in Pakistan which posed a real threat to the security of Pakistan and has created disturbance, violence, hatred and disorder in society.³

The sectarianism has largely been politicized all over the world including in South Asia wherein sectarianism has taken a peculiarly fierce turn and deteriorated gradually the social fabrics in the last seventeen years. The sectarian violence from Pakistan's perspective is often referred to the clashes between the Sunni majority and Shia minority population; but in reality that is not the only case because such incidents of sectarian violence between *Deobandi* and *Barelvi* – sub-sects of Sunni Islam – have also been happened in Pakistan. Intolerance among different sects in Pakistan is driven by hatred and utter misinterpretation of their opponent's beliefs in comparison to their own beliefs.⁴ This misinterpretation of beliefs was widened over the Zia regime⁵ and Afghan Jihad but it was largely unknown to masses because of state controlled media. The 9/11 attacks on World Trade Centre, the advent of western intelligence agencies and press and their cooperation with the Arab intelligence agencies augmented by social media worsened the sectarian violence in Pakistan. The dynamics of Sectarian Conflict changed abruptly and its links began to be

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identified with foreign agencies and organizations more clearly.⁶ Both internal and external elements are liable for instigating and supporting sectarian violent acts. Sectarian violence has plagued our society over the last two decades to such an extent where it threatens the national integration of our country. Our self-esteem as a nation is at the lowest point since inception of Pakistan wherein the agents of sectarian violence have created havoc in the country by ruthless terrorist attacks on Mosques, *Imam Bargahs* (Shia religious places) and target killings of innocent citizens of the country. Despite claims and promises by the political leadership and state institutions for controlling the menace of sectarianism, the violence still exists as it was.

Post 9/11 Sectarian Violence in Pakistan

The Global War on Terror and Pakistan's participation⁷ in it has caused severe damages to the country and its people in terms of human lives, economy, social fabrics, moral and religious; and the loss of around 80,000 precious human lives has been reported.⁸ In Pakistan, the political content of the sects and the religious content of politics are blurred realities.⁹ The 9/11 incident has changed the dynamics of the global politics; and non-state actors became active and Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaida were made responsible for 9/11 incidents.¹⁰ Pakistan under the leadership of General Musharraf joined the US-led coalition under pressure of the United States and international community. Pakistan provided air and naval bases, logistics support to the Americans for launching attacks against Afghanistan. Pervez Musharraf later narrated that if Pakistan declined to collaborate, the United States would look to India for the same thus posing great danger to stability and the nuclear arsenal of Pakistan. In return for Pakistan's support, the United States lifted numerous sanctions and provided security and economic assistance to Islamabad although Pakistan is unable to accrue any substantial benefits. In October 2001 the aerial bombardment on Afghanistan was started. Al-Sidique, Al-Umer, Al Mouwiyah and Khalid Bin Walid camps – where sectarian and Kashmiri militants were based – were destroyed

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in addition to other military training camps. In November 2001 the Taliban regime was ousted from Afghanistan;¹¹ and consequently a large number of Taliban and Al Qaeda Arabs escaped to Pakistan and welcomed by the Saudi Arabian funded religious seminaries and religious parties.¹² This huge influx of militants worsened the sectarian situation in Pakistan and sectarian killings became routine matters where Shias, being minority, were the victims most of time. But at the same time, the Shia militants also conducted violent attacks against opponents. Sectarian character in Pakistan has been politicized as a direct outcome of national and international dynamics. It is evident from many historical case studies and interviews that sectarian networks are usually local but are often bolstered by transnational religious communities and can be highly responsive to international events.¹³

Causes of Growing Sectarian Violence:

The phenomenon of sectarian violence is not mono-causal as it is hosted by many domestic as well as external factors that are playing a significant role in the growing sectarian violence in Pakistan in the post 9/11 era. Sectarian violence seems pervasive in Pakistan and it has deep social, political and geopolitical origins. The domestic factors include lack of religious education, illiterate religious clerics, political and economic volatility, lack of political will to deal with the problem, discrimination, injustice and lack of coordination among the government institutions. The external causes and factors are associated to dissimilar aspects such as Pakistan's involvement in War on Terror and Drone attacks, Strategic location of Pakistan in the region, Pakistan nuclear program, role played by Research and analysis Wing (RAW) to destabilise Pakistan, funding by Saudi Arabia and Iran.¹⁴ The contacts between jihadi groups and sectarian agents, as well as between local and international groups were also developed in the last few years.¹⁵

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A. Domestic Factors

The socio-cultural and political dynamics in the country could not help to manage the looming threats of the sectarian violence. Several domestic factors exacerbated sectarian violence in Pakistan. Amir, Zafar and Samina have pointed out that “the various secular and religious political parties have militant wings are the great national security threats”.¹⁶ Such sectarian oriented organisations are *Jamaat-ul-Ahrar*, *Jundullah*, *Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan*, *Sunni Tehrik*, *Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat* (ASWJ) and *Lashkar-e-Janghvi* (LeJ) that openly advocated sectarianism and have close ties with militant groups in Afghanistan. These political parties provide funds and other support these militant wings. These parties also took part in national electoral process. Some known people like Maulana Ahmed Ludhianvi (the leader of the banned ASWJ) who has purportedly been guilty of the slaying of a large number of Shias, has remained a Member of Parliament.¹⁷ These combative sectarian organizations carry out attacks in numerous forms such as suicide bombing, gun attacks on contending sect’s funerals, religious procession and mosques; and create serious threats to Pakistan's internal security and national integration. The inability of the Government to formulate a comprehensive policy to stop these acts of sectarian violence is a major factor due to which security agencies are unable to dismantle militant sectarian groups. Most of the militant sectarian organizations are Deobandi and this sect has potential to influence the security situation of Pakistan.¹⁸ This shows lack of political will on part of Government to curtail the sectarian elements from gaining power and spreading violence. Recently the United States backed motion was successful to put Pakistan in grey list by Financial Action Task Force due to government’s failure to cope with sectarian and religious terrorist organizations. In addition, economic uncertainty in the country is also fostering sectarian violence in the country especially in the backward areas to meet expenses of daily life.¹⁹ Moreover, the lack of adequate coordination among government institutions and departments is also a cause of growing sectarian

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violence as these departments are not geared up to handle the situations being faced by Pakistan in the post 9/11. Besides this, the clash among governmental institutions also exists in the political system of the country. The horrible attack on Army Public School in December 2014 forced the civil and military institutions to coordinate and design a comprehensive security plan in the shape of National Action Plan (NAP) to counter sectarianism. In addition, hate speech also causes sectarian violence in Pakistan. Sunni as well as Shia radical scholars deliver hate speeches to their respective audience which result in the construction of malicious images in the minds of people. The perpetrators of sectarian violence also utilise provocative literature, incendiary graffiti and mosque's loudspeakers for achieving their evil designs. Few highly qualified and credible Ulema of both sects say that large number of people do not have adequate knowledge about the religion so they adopt a policy of cheap popularity by defaming the teachings and people of other sects.²⁰ In this era of information technology, electronic media and social media both play a very sensitive role in perception building which is the fundamental tool in 5th generation warfare. So many media houses in Pakistan work on their own agendas by forgetting basic values and create further polarization among different sects. Beyond certain limits, illiteracy, unemployment and poverty itself become a crime. Loyalty of an uneducated, jobless or poverty afflicted person can be altered or procured by utilising black money. Mostly sectarian extremist groups in Pakistan have adequate black money to finance malicious projects to defend their vested interests.²¹ All these factors along with many more are domestically responsible for growth of sectarian violence in Pakistan over the past two decades.

B. External Factors

It is also pertinent to highlight some external factors through which the sectarian outfits gained so much prominence to implement their vicious designs in Pakistan post 9/11. The evidence of participation of foreign states in perpetrating

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sectarian violence in Pakistan is well established and evident. Many interior ministers, army chiefs, heads of intelligence agencies and political leaders have acknowledged foreign involvement on numerous junctures. Sectarian divide in Pakistan has been hosted by prominent factors of foreign influence. The sectarian landscape of Pakistan is largely affected by the developments and events happening in the Middle East and the Arab world. Many religious scholars and seminaries have their loyalty with some of Arab and Middle Eastern countries from where they are getting funding so they protect the interests of those countries in Pakistan by all means.²² The identity mobilization has its beginnings in the political power struggle in a fragile state. This political power struggle between different segments of fragile state invites external actors to reshape the power struggle in the country by supporting different factions to achieve their own interests. Pakistan has fallen prey to the similar situation where unfriendly countries like India, United States and Israel and friendly Islamic countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia are equally involved in funding different sectarian organizations to achieve their own hidden agendas. A well-known French researcher Oliver Roy regarded the revolution in Iran and United States invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq as the two major events which reshaped the dynamics of Shia-Sunni conflicting relations. India and Pakistan have had unpleasant relations since inception owing to multiple fault lines between both countries. These fault lines result in covert efforts by both countries to destabilise each other to safeguard their own national interests. India has moved a step further by making collaborations with many agents of sectarian violence in Pakistan, who leave no stone unturned to implement nefarious designs of disintegrating Pakistanis on sectarian grounds. There are credible reports and proofs which clearly indicate involvement of RAW in supporting and funding sectarianism and instability in Pakistan. Pakistan has also attained proofs against India for aiding sectarian organizations in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Pakistan has also raised this issue at global level. Both Shia and Sunni sectarian organizations receive large

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amounts of money from states like, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia. Iran supports Shias in Pakistan whereas the Wahhabis are being funded and supported by Saudi Arabia. So Pakistan is also a sectarian battle ground owing to conflicting interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia who fight their proxies in Pakistan by promoting sectarianism and violence. They have further increased their interaction with Taliban and other groups in post 9/11 era which further fomented sectarian violence in Pakistan.

Government and State Institutions Failure

Regardless of all the strategies being adopted by different governmental regimes since 2001, the menace of sectarianism is still plaguing our society and sectarian organizations are operating under patronage of either political parties, establishment or under new banners. The successive governments just focus on completing their own tenure and do nothing about the threats posed by issues like sectarianism and terrorism. The steps taken in this direction are either not sincere or if sincere then not being implemented in letter and spirit. It will be not true to say that Pakistani government has done nothing to stop the sectarian killings rather it would be appropriate to say that it has failed to identify the genuine causes of sectarian violence and also failed to formulate effective policies and then to implement those policies. The Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) like police and other civil security agencies are neither well equipped nor have the capacity and training to quickly respond to the formidable challenges posed by the internal security situation of the country. Establishment of National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) and announcement of the National Internal Security Policy (NISP) are positive steps taken by government to counter terrorism and extremism in the country but the results are still far from being optimal. Issues of Sectarian Violence, madrassa reforms and stopping funding to proscribed organizations were included in the National Action Plan, but its implementation is not encouraging. In NISP 2014-18, sectarianism was identified as one of the serious threats to

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national harmony and economic stability of the country which was proved by subversive activities and terrorist attacks on key installations and security apparatus;²³ and killing of innocent citizens of Pakistan, genocides, suicide attacks on mosques and shrines. The failure on the part of state Institutions also became a key cause for the promotion of irrepressible sectarian violence. Many individuals working in different departments actually have their loyalty with their sectarian masters instead of their departments so they help out the unchecked flow of information and equipment to respective group members. It is also established fact that sectarian militants also got support from officers and soldiers from the Police department of their affiliated sects who used to provide guns, lodgings, pick and drop facilities and safe hideouts to sectarian militants.²⁴

Threat to National Integration of Pakistan

The great Islamic scholar Ibn-e-Khaldun defines three basic concepts on which the foundation of an Islamic state are based: group feeling (*Asabiyah*), a ruling structure with leaders and a large community that is based on religion.²⁵ In an ideological state like Pakistan, religion plays a very important role and is an essential element of National Integration. But unfortunately our society is critically divided on religious basis which is a major threat to our national integration. In the Post 9/11 scenario, sectarian strains in Pakistan have emerged in a national context where the writ of the state is facing a broader and more concerted challenge from sectarian militants who rationalise their engagements on the basis of a claim to Islamic legitimacy. Sectarian conflict, hatred and violence are solidifying the polarization of our society on sectarian grounds thus causing threat to national integration of Pakistan like never before.

National integration is the process of achieving national cohesion, stability, prosperity, strength and feelings of being united as a nation.²⁶ Whereas if we look at Pakistan in the post 9/11 era, we can see that all the basic ingredients of National integration are missing in our society owing to the Sectarian violence that is causing disintegration in our society on religious, social, economic and cultural dimensions. The

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sectarian violence has enormously affected the political, religious, commercial, societal, and diplomatic dealings of Pakistan to an alarming extent at international level. A huge number of intellectuals, doctors, scientists and other important figures from all sects are murdered on sectarian grounds. Such brutal mass assassinations lead to brain drain in the society. It is evident that Social order of the country is highly polarized owing to the franchises of sectarian violence and masses have entirely lost confidence in the state's capacity to safeguard their lives, dignity and assets from perpetrators of sectarian violence. Although during the regime of General Pervez Musharraf Pakistan's then-President, few concrete steps were taken to eradicate sectarian violence by proscription of sectarian combative groups and of both Shia and Sunni orientation but the results achieved were not long lasting. It was the first time the government effectively targeted local sectarian groups across the board, and Musharraf's policy increased his popularity among the Shias of Pakistan. But as it was not a durable strategy so, sectarian violence kept on growing in ensuing years.

Sectarianism is a menace that is eroding our national unity by each passing day with the regular stimulus from both internal and external factors. The widening gulf between different contending sects in a multi-ethnic, multi lingual, multi religious country like Pakistan have the power to create havoc in the country on trivial issues. Target killings and suicide attacks on mosques and Imam Bargahs, undoubtedly tarnish the image of unity and cohesion. The differences between the two sects were historical but the state of hatred and violence towards each other was not the law of the land of Pakistan. The sectarian conflict has resulted in the breakdown of rule of law to a greater extent where the state seems a silent spectator. The state structures and institutions have weakened with passage of time as no comprehensive strategies have been formulated to deal with sectarian violence. In addition to this, the western countries provide funding to the so called moderate religious organizations as a policy strategy since 9/11 to counter the radicalization in Pakistan but foreign funding is a major cause

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of sectarian conflict in Pakistan. This intervention is actually harming the national integration in Pakistan.²⁷ These funds are utilized by sectarian militants for promoting sectarian violence instead of countering it. The recent move by financial watchdog Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to put Pakistan on the grey list may be linked as a close manifestation of this as well.

After 9 September 2001, the Muslim society in general and Pakistani society in particular, has been divided between Conservative and Enlightened Muslims. This tendency further generated a division but with a fresh approach to the previously polarized society on sectarian lines. The situation although apparently shadowed the later nature of division by the former one, yet the ground realities expose that both these dispositions exist in parallel. The state of war has however prevailed in the country against the extremist elements, which support the terrorists, and on this basis the society has further fragmented. This trend would, no doubt, negatively affect the national integrity of Pakistan.

Furthermore, due to extending and intensifying sectarianism in Pakistan, certain clans, sectarian groups and some political rings are becoming more influential as compared to central government and they are also destabilising and portraying a negative image of Pakistan. Sectarianism had never struck Pakistan with such severity since its inception as it has been for the last eighteen years. Sectarianism has intense impacts and also has serious implications on the free movement, religious obligations and social life of alienating sects. The Sit-in culture by religious groups, like one held in Islamabad in 2017, is a clear manifestation of religious polarization of our society where the incompetence of the state and its institutions brought the life to stand still in the capital of Pakistan. This incident can be termed as a failure of the state to deal with religious extremists effectively. No comprehensive effort has been put in at the government level to define a road map as to how we, as a nation, will achieve national cohesion and unity in the face of all the challenges faced by our nation. Geo-political environment for Pakistan has not been more challenging with war in Afghanistan about to culminate, China

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Pakistan Economic Corridor starting and war in Syria of global players turning it into a sectarian battle ground. Pakistan, by its very location and sectarian diversity is in the middle of it all.

At present, Pakistan is confronting formidable challenges of sectarian violence. Pakistan is becoming fragile both on internal and external facades with every passing day. On the internal front, political parties are pressing the government to stand down due to enduring catastrophic circumstances within the country. Radical groups, hate speech, sectarian literature, unrealistic criminal justice system, and unreformed religious seminaries have permitted sectarianism to flourish. Sectarian violence is omnipresent across the state and is largely concentrated at marginalized subjects such as Balochistan's Hazaras (an ethnic minority), mosques, Imam Bargahs and worshippers at Sufi shrines. These malpractices nurture an atmosphere of prejudice which drives sectarian violence which in turn exacerbates Pakistan's fragile security situation and thus have negative impacts on national integration of the state. It is significant that we as a nation must have a clear understanding of the impacts of sectarian violence on our national integrity so that a comprehensive strategy may be evolved to counter them.

Way Forward:

One nation cannot be created if we fail to create one Pakistan which is based on the principles defined by the founders of Pakistan. The father of the Nation Muhammad Ali Jinnah gave the perfect solution for the national integration in three words that is Faith (Iman), Unity (Wahdat) and Discipline (Tanzim). These three principles can solve most of our problems if followed in letter and spirit. Here unity implies that we need to stand together as Pakistanis and not as Shia/Sunni, Punjabi/Pathans or Muslims/non-muslims. The ground realities of religious differences must be understood and utilized as unity in diversity instead of forming the basis of polarization. Religious scholars and clerics may be engaged to present the true image of Islam and those who propagate negative images must be

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taken to task. The well-educated and moderate religious scholars can play a significant role in national integration as they can mitigate the feelings of animosity among contending sectarian factions. The national narrative like *Paigham-e-Pakistan* which has been recently declared jointly by 1827 famous scholars from all sects must be given due publicity across the country to eradicate religious militancy. *Paigham-e-Pakistan* declares that armed sectarian conflicts, Sectarian violence, and imposition of one's dogma on others by strength is in clear violation of the orders of Shari'ah and it creates disorder on earth.²⁸ The wrong narratives about other sects should be strictly forbidden by state and strict measures should be taken against defaulters to bolster sectarian harmony which will further help in national integration. General public must be educated to show respect for each other's beliefs and no one should disapprove or interfere in others religious affairs. No tolerance should be shown for agents of sectarian violence and indiscriminate actions must be taken. Mainstreaming of Madaris must be done on priority as it was decided in the National Action Plan so that these breeding grounds of sectarian violence may be converted into centres of excellence for religious education and sectarian harmony which in turn will yield to national integration. The political parties must be scrutinized for their linkages with sectarian outfits. Media should play its role in creating unity, harmony and peace in the society by avoiding any segmentation and dissection of society on the various bases including sectarianism. Media must adopt the policy of fair and honest reporting without any prejudices. The media personnel must be given proper training so that the media should play a positive role for peace, prosperity, communal harmony, and national integration.

Conclusion:

The sectarian violence and extremism is widespread in Pakistan owing to direct outcome of our state policies like Islamization and Afghan Jihad, Conflicting national interests of regional powers and politics/policies of Major power players at global level. The sectarian conflict in Pakistan can be seen as most dangerous owing to linkages between Pakistani sectarian

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outfits and transnational groups which are crafted and funded by major powers. Our society is divided due to politicizing of religion by different political parties for their own benefit. The political, religious and the social nuances in Pakistan are under transformation and resonant international scrutiny. Various sectarian groups are struggling violently for power in garb of legitimacy causing polarization of society on sectarian grounds. The implementation of NAP and effective operationalization of NACTA are also positive indicators of change in thinking of state and institutions for eradicating the menace of sectarian violence from Pakistan. However, the ability, dedication, will and perseverance of the state, nation and institutions will determine the outcome in the longer run. In order to counter any kind of terrorism and sectarian violence which is now domestic problem with various local and external offshoots, Pakistan needs a collective and integrated response by the nation and institutions.

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