

Analysis and Discussion

Sectarian Intolerance in Pakistan: An Analysis of Causes, Challenges, and Solutions

ABDUL QUDDUS SUHAIB*
FARHAT AZIZ**

Abstract

Islam provides a complete code of life. It respects the rights of the individual and balances them with the duties that one owes to society. As a result, Islam not only recognizes differing opinions but also gives them due respect. However, there are Muslims who deny this right, marking a critical point where religious extremism begins. Today Muslims are divided into many groups and sects. Instead of expressing joy and unity with their co-religionists under the spirit of the Ummah, some Muslims are bent on destroying their brothers through sectarianism. This problem has become particularly relevant in the case of contemporary Pakistan, where sectarianism has become a poison that threatens national unity. This analytical write-up discusses the reasons for sectarianism in Pakistan and outlines the external and internal elements that have influenced it. It also provides several suggestions and policy recommendations that will help prevent sectarianism.

Keywords

Pakistan, sectarianism, causes, solutions, analysis.

Introduction

The picture presented by extremists to suggest that the Muslim world is sectarian and hopelessly divided is based on a false assumption that Muslims always had monolithic approaches. However, it is important to understand that a range of diverse opinions existed amongst Muslims from the early period of Islam as a result of differences in their approaches to religious matters.

Many matters of religion are clear and unequivocal, such as Allah is One and He has no partner; Muḥammad (peace be on him) is the last Messenger of Allah; Islam is Allah's last and most complete religion for

* Director, Islamic Research Centre, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan.

** Professor, Department of Islamic Studies, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Pakistan.

humanity; the world will perish one day; it will be followed by the Day of Judgement; and the Qur'ān is the word of God and His last Book. Throughout Islamic history, these points have been universally accepted. When disagreement appeared, it was in areas of law and theology that were outside these agreed-upon matters. Most of the disagreements that existed amongst Muslims can be traced to political and not religious or intellectual debates. For example, after the demise of the Prophet Muḥammad, there was a dispute over who would become his successor. The two major groups in the Muslim community, Sunnis and Shiites, developed the doctrines of *khilāfah* and *imāmah*, respectively, to deal with this political conflict.

In modern Pakistan, observers will notice several different groups, such as Deobandis, Barelvis, Ahl-i-Ḥadīth, etc. Before suggesting that these sects were intentionally introduced to Islam, one should ask whether they have a political background. There was no conspiracy behind them. Rather they have intellectual and historical origins. All of these groups are considered part of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah, although there are real and principled differences between them.¹

Sectarian Intolerance in Pakistan: Causes and Challenges

Pakistan is still in the process of reconstruction and regularly deals with internal and external elements that intend to intervene in its affairs. The beginning of these conflicts and the first step towards the appearance of sectarianism in Pakistan can be traced to the misuse of the two-nation theory or the idea that British India should be separated along religious lines. Although this seemed promising at that time, Muslim sects started denouncing each other as infidels and used the two-nation ideology as a shield. This division deepened during the formative years of Pakistani nationhood, with the question of resettling refugees, two wars between India and Pakistan, and the issue of Kashmir. All of these events contributed to the emergence of religious extremism.

After the separation of East Pakistan from West Pakistan in 1971, the remaining citizens of Pakistan were called to come together to protect and nurture their homeland towards a better future. However, Pakistan started a new process of internal conflict and political parties were formed with a strong religious element. Internal division and sectarianism flourished along the following lines: Sunni vs. Shiite and Deobandi vs. Barelvi, Ahl-i-Ḥadīth, and Jamā'at-i Islāmī.²

¹ Ḥasīb Aḥmad Ḥasīb, "Islām, Musalmān aur Firqahvāriyat," *Dalīl*, January 20, 2018.

² Abū 'Ammār Zāhid al-Rāshidī, "Maslakī Ikhtilāfāt aur Imām-i Ahl-i Sunnat kā Dhauq-o Mizāj," *Mahnāmah al-Sharī'ah*, Gujranwala, March 2010, 2-9.

In addition to internal conflicts, sectarianism and extremism in Pakistan also have foreign roots. The foreign policy of the government has been very moderate since the country's establishment, with efforts made to reach peace agreements with all countries of the world. Despite these efforts, unfriendly states, anti-state elements, and even some friendly nations have interfered in Pakistan's domestic politics and, sometimes unintentionally, promoted sectarianism. For example, although the relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were established immediately after the freedom of Pakistan, they flourished during the time of President Zia-ul-Haq (d. 1988). He made twenty-seven official visits to Saudi Arabia during his tenure. Pakistan made every effort to maintain close ties with Saudi Arabia and millions of Pakistanis work in the Kingdom. The Deobandi and Ahl-i-Ḥadīth sects gained significant ground as a result of Saudi influence and its support of religious seminaries.

The relationship between Pakistan and Iran began on a solid footing after Pakistan's freedom. Iran was the first country to recognize Pakistan's geographical position as a nation and established political relations with it. Given the shared border, the reasons for this relationship are logical but also reflect ancient cultural, historical, religious, and literary ties. Few countries are connected in so many ways, like Pakistan and Iran. The two countries share a valuable common heritage that is integral to their identity:³ the Persian language, 800 years of history, ancient relics and letters of scholars, rulers, poets, and religious leaders, and thousands of manuscripts written in Persian. There is also a special role of Persian in the formation of Urdu.⁴ Apart from the mutual popularity of poets such as Rūmī (d. 1273 CE), Sa'dī (d. 1291 CE), Ḥāfīz (d. 1387/89 CE), Iqbāl (d. 1938), and others, these are the foundations that unite the two nations.⁵ These relations were very strong before the revolution of Imam Khomeini in 1979.⁶ However, after the fall of Mohammad Reza Shah (d. 1980), a new chapter in Iran-

³ Ahmed Awais Khaver, Muhammad Awais Umar, and Shafqat Munir Ahmad, *Research Report, Evaluating Foreign Policy of Pakistan in the Context of Strategic Coercion* (Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 2019), 1-13.

⁴ Omar Khalidi, "A Guide to Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu Manuscript Libraries in India," *Middle East Librarians Association* 84 (2011): 1-85.

⁵ Syed Musa Hussani, *Irān aur Pākistān kē Bāhamī Ravābiṭ* (Karachi: Consulate General of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2006).

⁶ Raja Muhammad Khan, "Towards Harmonization of Pak-Iran Relationship," *Margalla Papers* (2010): 88-111.

Pakistan relations began⁷ and the relations between the two countries sometimes deteriorated.⁸

The relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have always been uncertain. Afghanistan was the only country that voted against the recognition of Pakistan. Although diplomatic relations were established between the two countries in 1948, a Pakistani airstrike on a border village in Afghanistan plunged relations into a trench of tension that has yet to recover. The war between the United States and the Afghan Taliban gave birth to the Pakistani Taliban, who are believed to be involved in a variety of violent terrorist activities in Pakistan.

Besides external and internal conflicts, a cause of sectarian intolerance in Pakistan is ignorance and a lack of understanding of the importance of tolerance to the practice of Islam. Some religious-minded people misuse Islam for their vested interests, not to please Allah. The following sections discuss the issue of sectarianism and its solutions from an Islamic perspective.

Sectarianism from an Islamic Perspective

The subject of sectarianism is outlined in the Qur'ān through the following verses: “(Adhere to the true faith and) turn to Him, and hold Him in awe, and establish prayer, and do not be of those who associate others with Allah in His Divinity. Those who have split up their religion and have become divided into sects, each party exulting in what they have.”⁹ Thus, the Qur'ān views sectarianism unfavourably. In addition, it states:

Believers! Fear Allah as He should be feared, and see that you do not die to save in the state of submission to Allah. Hold fast together to the cable of Allah and be not divided. Remember the blessing that Allah bestowed upon you: you were once enemies then He brought your hearts together so that through His blessing you became brothers. You stood on the brink of a pit of fire and He delivered you from it. Thus, Allah makes His signs clear to you so that you may be guided in the right way.¹⁰

The Qur'ān also clearly commands that there is no room for coercion and force in Islam and states, saying “There is no compulsion in religion. The Right Way stands clearly distinguished from the wrong. Hence, he who rejects the evil ones and believes in Allah has indeed

⁷ Farrar-Wellman, “Pakistan-Iran Foreign Relations,” July 5, 2010, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/india-iran-foreign-relations>.

⁸ Farooq Darwaish, “Khitāh-i Īrān sē Uthnē Vālē ‘Ālamī Fitnūḡ ki Tārīkh,” *Voice of Pakistan*, December 10, 2019.

⁹ Qur'ān 30:31-32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:102-3.

taken hold of the firm, unbreakable handle. And Allah (Whom he has held for support) is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.”¹¹ This means that Allah, who has ultimate power and authority, does not want to oppress anyone. Then, how can a person have the authority to do so? When terrorists commit their acts, wreaking havoc by launching relentless attacks on the centres of various Muslim sects and places of worship of other religions, they directly contradict the commandments of the Qur’ān. Another verse prohibits such destruction:

Those who were unjustly expelled from their homes for no other reason than their saying: “Allah is Our Lord.” If Allah were not to expel some through others, monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques wherein the name of Allah is much mentioned would certainly have been pulled down. Allah will most certainly help those who will help Him. Verily Allah is Immensely Strong, Overwhelmingly Mighty.¹²

According to the Qur’ān, the division did not appear amongst the believers except through political and personal desires. It states, “They did not split up except after knowledge had come to them, and then only because they wished to commit excesses against each other. Had your Lord not already decreed that judgement would be made later at an appointed time, the matter between them would surely have been decided once and for all. Indeed those who were later made the heirs of the Book are in a disquieting doubt about it.”¹³ The Qur’ān’s primary message is peace. It has no room for extremism and hatred. Therefore, Muslims should avoid any group that commits oppression and violence in the name of Islam. Due to their ignorance, some groups misinterpret the Qur’ānic verses on *jihād*. Muslims must reject these groups outright.

Looking at the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, one finds that he showed love and tolerance for all. In one report, the Prophet stated that the real Muslim is the one “from whose tongue and hands the other Muslims are secure.”¹⁴ In another report, he said, “Indeed the children of Israel split into seventy-two sects, and my Community will split into seventy-three sects. All of them are in the fire except one sect.” When asked which one will be saved, he responded, “The one that follows me and my Companions.”¹⁵ Therefore, only those who follow the Prophet and his Companions will be saved and adopt the correct path based on the Qur’ān and *sunnah*.

¹¹ Ibid., 2:256.

¹² Ibid., 22:40.

¹³ Ibid., 42:14.

¹⁴ Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), ḥadīth no. 1512.

¹⁵ Muḥammad b. ‘Isā al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, kitāb al-‘Imān, bāb mā jā’a fī iftirāq ḥadhihi al-ummah.

The difference between juristic opinions through reasoning (*ijtihād*) is of great importance in the Qur'ān and the Prophetic traditions.¹⁶ The first addressees of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīths* were the Companions. They were directly blessed by the Prophet and their understanding of the meanings of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* is authentic. Later, the jurists' differing views resulted from differences among the Companions. For example, Abū Ḥanīfah Nu'mān b. Thābit (d. 767 CE) presented his work systematically, clarifying and defining the bases of legal principles. He stated that before he formed an opinion about an issue, he looked for a solution in the Qur'ān. If he did not find it there, he turned to the *ḥadīth* and *sunnah*. If a solution was not available there, he turned to the sayings of the Companions.¹⁷ If he found a collective position, it was accepted. However, if there was a disagreement between them, he adopted one of them and did not go beyond the scope of these opinions.¹⁸

When jurists differ on a matter, one of the two views is erroneous. However, the error is forgiven.¹⁹ Therefore, in jurists' decisions, there is always a right and a wrong opinion. Those who follow the wrong opinion will not be called invalid because they, too, have reached this conclusion after their hard work. For a person unfamiliar with theology, principles of Islamic jurisprudence, and the causes of differences, it is difficult to understand how two contradictory opinions can be accepted at the same time. The fact of the matter is that there is no difference of opinion between the *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*, nor is such difference permissible. Rather, a jurist reaches a conclusion considering the effects and interactions when an answer is not available in the sacred texts. Even if there are contradictory views, everyone has the right to act on their opinion and each opinion will be entitled to the reward due to the effort made.²⁰

There is a pressing need to create tolerance at both the grassroots level and at the level of scholars. Muslims need to promote a positive environment and respect for the dignity of each human being. What is more, they must eliminate prejudice. It is wrong to believe oneself to be always right.

¹⁶ Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Fī Fiqh al-Awlawiyyāt* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Wahbah, 1995), 76.

¹⁷ Muḥammad Bahā' al-Dīn Ḥusayn, *Tarjmat al-Qur'ān al-Karīm: Ḥukmuhā, wa Ārā' al-'Ulamā' fihā*, 3rd ed. (n.p.: Al-Jāmi'ah al-Islāmiyyah al-'Ālamiyyah, 2006).

¹⁸ Zāhid al-Rāshidī, "Ḥazrat Imām Abū Ḥanīfah kē Ijtihādī Uṣūl aur 'Aṣr-i Ḥazir," *Rūznāmah-i Islām* (Lahore), November 3, 2017.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Solutions to Sectarian Intolerance in Pakistan

The Role of the Qur'ān and Sunnah

Muslims can be united by the authority of the Qur'ān. Therefore, it is necessary to make the teachings of the Qur'ān known to all Muslims. Spiritual purification and the treatment of moral problems should also be done through the Qur'ān. Young people should be introduced to Qur'ānic sciences so that they could dedicate their lives to understanding the Qur'ān. Over time, some scholars began to place more importance on the Prophetic traditions than the Qur'ān, with their different interpretations of these narrations leading to sectarianism. Scholars should now re-examine these narrations in light of the commands of the Qur'ān.

Today, sectarianism has become so intense that Muslims have taken up arms in its name. Violent incidents occur due to sectarianism, in which many innocent people are killed or tortured. The individuals who commit these acts harm Muslims. The Prophet Muḥammad warned about this situation, stating, “Do not turn back into disbelievers after I am gone, striking one another’s necks.”²¹ Muslims have a common responsibility to make the commands of the Qur'ān and the *sunnah* be practised.

The Role of Interfaith Harmony

Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance. It acknowledges the legitimacy and identity of other religions. It regularly calls others to join Islam but does so without coercion, as stated in the Qur'ān, “There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion.”²² In this verse, Allah describes the general approach of Islam to other religions. Mankind was called to the straight path by numerous Prophets (peace be on them), but the basis of that call is non-compulsion.

The natural state of equality confirmed through the Qur'ān and *sunnah* is an essential requirement of the covenant that man made with his Lord. Turning away from Allah’s command is a violation of that covenant. Every step in that direction breaks its provisions.²³ Man can

²¹ Muḥammad b. Yazīd b. Mājāh, *Sunan* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1952), ḥadīth no. 3942

²² Qur'ān 2:256.

²³ For details see, Tiffany R. Beaver, “Responsibility and Obligation in the Face of Modern Day Slavery: The Demands on Global Citizens to Fight for Justice for Slaves” (PhD diss., University of South Carolina, 2019).

never be truly free from the responsibilities of the covenant unless he accepts Allah's guidance.

Tolerance in Islam requires that opposing views be heard with patience, as the Prophet Muḥammad never forced any non-Muslim to accept Islam. Rather, people became Muslims after observing the exemplary character of the Prophet Muḥammad. This point was acknowledged by the famous English writer H. G. Wells when he stated, "Although the sermons of human freedom, fraternity and equality were said before . . . and we find a lot of them in Jesus of Nazareth, but it must be admitted that it was Muḥammad who for the first time in history established a society based on these principles."²⁴ Therefore, we should not force anyone to embrace Islam but let them go freely after conveying the truth to them according to the *sunnah* of the Prophet. Muslims can be united if they sincerely follow the divine commands by holding fast to the footsteps of the Messenger. Today, Muslims are divided into sects and happy with the belief that they hold the truth and that all other sects are doomed. By doing so, they tear apart the unity of religion and consider themselves saved.

The Role of Difference in Opinions

Throughout history, Muslim scholars had a great degree of love and devotion and did not call each other misguided and wrong. For example, Mālik b. Anas (d. 795 CE) learned from the people of Medina and recorded their narrations from the Prophet Muḥammad. Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820 CE) differed with Mālik on many issues, but he never labelled the opinions of Mālik as wrong. Rather, he said, "I am a jurist, and he is a jurist too." When asked whether it was permissible to pray behind a follower of Mālik, al-Shāfi'ī became angry and said: "Do I not pray behind Mālik?"²⁵ There are many other examples. However, the purpose is to bring forward precedents which show that differences existed from the time of the Prophet Muḥammad.

The Role of the State

The Pakistani state has worked hard to prevent sectarianism and this work must continue. Without it, overcoming sectarianism in Pakistan is very difficult and even impossible. Firstly, the government must enact

²⁴ H. G. Wells, *A Short History of the World*, ed. Michael Sherborne (London: Penguin, 2006).

²⁵ Ṭāhā Jābir al-'Alwānī, *Source Methodology In Islamic Jurisprudence: Uṣūl al-Fiḥ al-Islāmī* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1411/1990), ch. 4.

effective legislation and, at the same time, make changes to school curricula which will change the mindset of students and inculcate a sense of national unity in them. Secondly, the government should call for a convention of scholars representing all sects. Suggestions should be taken from them to establish peace and reconciliation in the country. Based on these suggestions, laws should be made to punish anyone who promotes sectarianism. In addition, scholars should refrain from making any kind of statement that intentionally incites sectarianism. Religious scholars can play an important role in shaping the minds of people by emphasizing harmonies. Despite these efforts, the situation has not improved significantly. The nation demands a ban on provocative speeches and sectarian material.

The Role of Establishing a Conducive Environment

Several legal steps should be taken to end sectarian activities. Firstly, those working for nefarious purposes and inciting the public to commit dangerous actions should be banned immediately. Secondly, a supreme council should be set up, comprising representatives of all sects in Pakistan, to create a spirit of love, unity, and solidarity and to prevent hatred. A reconciliation commission should be established at the government level to uproot disputes between sects. In particular, vital steps should be taken to resolve the Shia-Sunni divide, as these two sects regularly fight against each other. The military wings of all organizations should be completely banned, organizations that have arms should have them immediately confiscated by the government.

It has often been observed that when the government pays attention to sectarian elements and people are arrested on a public complaint, they are released due to political influence. The government should immediately impose sanctions on such individuals so that the scourge of sectarianism can be eradicated. *Madrassahs*, which are responsible for providing religious education and building the character of their students, should be subject to stronger oversight from the government. Their curricula should be reformed to free them from sectarianism.

The Role of the Media

In the current situation of sectarianism in Pakistan, the media, including electronic media, plays an important role in providing news, supporting the public, and promoting positive behaviour. If events broadcasted by the media are positive and promote religious tolerance, love and unity, it will have a positive effect on society.

Despite the proliferation of the Internet and electronic media, most Pakistanis continue to receive most of their political, social, and religious information from traditional sources. Some sectarian elements have misused the media and print material that incites hatred and fans the flames of sectarianism. Although the government has taken measures on several occasions to confiscate such material and ban the institutions that publish it, such material is still being disseminated to the public under various headings. The government should take strict disciplinary action against all such institutions and publications, punishing the editors of such magazines and destroying the sectarian contents of libraries across the country.

One may ask whether Pakistan's more than 80 television channels play a positive role in building and developing society properly. During primetime shows, people should be exposed to healthy entertainment that is completely informed by the country's laws, social values, and traditions. If a violation occurs, the concerned authorities should be consulted to find a just solution.

As a nation, we must convince the media to maintain a balance and present more "good news." One possibility is to look for stories that have elements of suspense, courage, and sacrifice. Additionally, more advocacy is needed for a free and fair media that reduces sectarianism with stories that reflect interfaith understanding. Challenging media standards in both public networks and online forums and advocating for socially responsible journalism can lead to a better balance in reporting. Creating media monitoring agencies will put more pressure on editors, producers, and reporters to create healthy content.

Online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter have connected people all over the world. At the same time, due to the lack of proper filters, viewers regularly upload sectarian content. If interfaith harmony and tolerance programmes are provided in a greater volume, they can lead to peace and harmony. Appropriate filters to block sectarian uploads must be applied.

Finally, a code of conduct for the use of the Internet should be proposed. These steps will consist of three levels which should be strictly followed. First, all actors should agree to strictly adhere to the Cyber Crimes Act. Second, those who upload immoral content on social media under fake profiles should be prosecuted according to the law.²⁶ Third,

²⁶ For details, see Tariq Rahim Soomro and Mumtaz Hussain, "Social Media-Related Cyber Crimes and Techniques for Their Prevention," *Applied Computer Systems* 24, no. 1 (2019): 9-17.

filters should be installed on the Internet to curb the proliferation of sectarian material and cancel the accounts promoting such material.

Conclusion

Sectarianism has been based on a sense of individual pride and stubbornness. Whenever these traits develop in people, they begin to consider themselves superior to others. By persuading the rest of society with their ideas, they present themselves as part of a separate group and create a new sect. Islam is a religion of unity and commands its followers to avoid sectarianism. Muslims should try to avoid clashes based on their natural differences and inculcate a positive attitude among Muslims based on the examples of the Prophet.

Sectarianism in Pakistan is not new. Even before the freedom of the country, sectarianism was rampant. Looking closely at sectarianism today, one may conclude that sectarianism prevails due to political and ideological causes. However, Muslims can eliminate hatred, stubbornness, and transgression.

The National Action Plan is the most important document for promoting national security. If fully implemented, sectarianism, terrorism, and extremism will be significantly reduced. Civil society should also be employed to help eradicate sectarianism and extremism so that Pakistan can be part of a global society in the modern world.

Another important initiative is the Paigham-e-Pakistan (The Message of Pakistan). The narrative developed by this initiative can help prevent sectarianism in Pakistan. Ideological differences are a fact, but keeping these differences within rational limits is necessary. In this regard, it is important to remember the sanctity of the Prophets (peace be on them), their spouses, the Companions, and the Ahl al-Bayt. It is unacceptable to impose one's ideology on others or commit violence under the guise of sectarianism.²⁷ Finally, it is also necessary to maintain the respect and dignity of each human being for collective benefit. Muslims must remain united despite their differences. Differences should not be used as a means of divisiveness or extremism.

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²⁷ For details, see *Paigham-e-Pakistan* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 2018).