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CONTEMPORARY SECTARIANISM IN PAKISTAN: THE KURRAM DISTRICT PERSPECTIVE

Muzakir Khan	Lecturer Pakistan Studies KUST. Email: muzakirkhan@kust.edu.pk
Muhammad Haroon	Lecturer Pakistan Studies KUST. Email: m.haroon@kust.edu.pk
Kirammat Ullah	Lecturer Pakistan studies KUST. Email: kiramtullah@kust.edu.pk
Prof. Dr. Ghulam Qasim Khan Marwat	Department of Political Science, IR and Pakistan Studies, Qurtuba University of Science and Information Technology Peshawar. Email: profqasim@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Sectarian violence in Kurram District, Pakistan, remains a significant challenge, with deep-rooted historical, political, and ideological causes. This paper explores the complex nature of sectarianism in the region, highlighting key factors such as tribal disputes, external influences, and the role of local governance mechanisms like tribal councils (jirgas) in mediating conflicts. While these councils have played a role in negotiating temporary ceasefires, their efforts have been ineffective in addressing the structural issues that fuel sectarian violence. The paper also examines the Pakistani government’s military interventions, which, although successful in addressing immediate threats, have been insufficient in preventing the recurrence of violence due to a lack of long-term strategic peacebuilding and legal reforms. In addition to state-led efforts, the paper discusses the impact of regional and cross-border militancy, particularly from Afghanistan, and the financing of extremist activities that further destabilize the district. The growing influence of sectarian militias, both local and foreign-backed, complicates efforts to establish lasting peace. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes the need for community-based approaches, such as strengthening interfaith dialogue and reconciliation mechanisms, to foster mutual understanding and trust between Sunni and Shia communities. Education and public awareness campaigns that promote religious tolerance and peace are proposed as essential tools to challenge sectarian narratives and prevent future violence. The role of the media in countering hate speech and fostering unity is also highlighted as a critical component in shaping public opinion and building a more inclusive society. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a holistic

approach that combines local, national, and regional efforts to address the root causes of sectarianism, promote reconciliation, and ensure the long-term stability of Kurram District and Pakistan as a whole.

Keywords: Sectarian violence, Kurram District, tribal councils, military interventions, cross-border militancy, extremist financing, peacebuilding, interfaith dialogue, media role, educational reforms.

Introduction

Sectarian violence is one of the most current and destabilizing issues in Pakistan, as it has been interlinked with the country's socio-political history. In the Kurram District, this issue appears in stark detail and corresponds to greater sectarian dynamics across the country. During the recent clashes in 2024, the aftermath of the attack on a Shi'ite pilgrim convoy led to subsequent violence, resulting in the deaths of more than 80 people in Kurram. Following that, retaliatory violence erupted which caused further loss of lives and the displacement of both the Shiite and Sunni communities (RFE/RL, 2024; Devdiscourse, 2024). Such episodes underscore the fragile balance that sectarian groups maintain with each other in this geopolitically sensitive region, which demonstrates a long-standing crisis of sectarianism in Pakistan.

Amid the unrest that has occupied Pakistan's landscape in contemporary history, colonial and post-colonial epochs serve as beginnings for the suffering that people have been through. Additionally, another significant turning point in this regard has been the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and Iran-Saudia match of dominance that rather intensified the pre-existing sectarian fractures. Owing to its specific demographic makeup, Kurram District where a big percentage of the population is Shi'ite, has remained one of largely Shi'ite areas. Due to the location of this district near the Afghan boundary, it has a sensitive place as well there is always the threat of militant attacks and fundamentalist principles from close by regions (Wikipedia, 2024). Traditionally, Kurram's plural society and tribal system of governance have turned it into a battleground of sectarian and intertribal violence, where state presence is minimal and acts only to make matters worse.

The Kurram region has been the casting stone in the sectarian tensions but has much more to say about the Pakistan's specific problems. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Lashkar-e-jhangvi have cozened the Kurram's sectarian angle and Shia communities have been on the target in the increasing tense ecosystem of the district. However, there are Shi'a factions such as Zainebiyoun Brigade which seem to be spearheaded outside the region that are said to be active in the area too. These factors are part and parcel of external driven patterns of sectarianism that are observed from various parts of Pakistan where pure funding, ideologies and bad governance entrenches the environment with violence. (Devdiscourse, 2024; Dawn 2024)

This paper proposes the developing internal mechanism and external supporting networks to counter the sectarian violence which is a sham in Kurram. By looking into the historical experiences, the recent state of affairs and actors involved within and externally, the project wants to show how the national problems contributes towards the violence at the regional level. These circumstances are the charactering features of Kurram and it tells the greater violence narrative associated with Pakistan and its geopolitical security environment.

Historical Context

1. Sectarianism in Pakistan

The sectarianism in Pakistan originates to its post-independence era but got heightened during the 1980s. The seeds of division were sown with the partition of British India in 1947 when the migration of communities brought inherited sectarian prejudices. But it was General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies that institutionalized the sectarianism. These policies, including the imposition of Sunni-centric laws like Zakat, alienated the Shia sections, who called for the recognition of their Jaafariya fiqh. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 also further deepened the sectarian rift, with the Shi'ah

elements in Pakistan being encouraged by Iran's assertiveness and the Sunni factions seeing it as a threat to their prevailing dominance. This promoted the emergence of extremist groups such as Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and its spin off Lashkar-e-Jhangvi(LJ) and an era of violence that spread throughout the country ensured its ascent. (Webology, 2022; Criterion Quarterly, 2024).

2. External Effects- Iranian Revolution and Gulf War

The Iranian revolution altered deeply the sectarian relations of Pakistan. Tehran's assistance to the Shia across the globe made Sunni fears escalate, which in turn prompted the Saudi Arabia to redress that imbalance by sponsoring Sunni groups in Pakistan. This became a proxy war during the Soviet-Afghan war when both sects were involved in jihad though external military assistance was also available. The Gulf War of 1990 further added to the complex picture, as increasing US interest in the Middle East region translated to further regional conflicts and enhanced sectarian narratives about the difference communities, thus affecting militant ideologies in Pakistan. These external aspects not only de-cluttered violence but also consolidated conflictive identities across Pakistan's politics and society (Bibliomed, 2021; Modern Diplomacy, 2024).

3. Kurram District's Strategic Importance

Borders with Afghanistan save from Kurram District the northwest region of Pakistan as an area which has major economic benefits. Its sizeable Shia populace among an overwhelming Sunni majority has made it a hotbed of religious violence. Geographically, the district lies close to Afghanistan, and war-like loons have invariably stoked the fires of cross border terrorism. Starting in the 1980s proxy affiliations between Shia and Sunni militia acts have transformed Kurram into a perpetual battle ground. Altercations that took place in Kurram in the year 2024 demonstrate the

tendencies of Kurram's population to regress back to sectarian violence that they've been historically known for (Pakistan Gazette, 2024; Bibliomed, 2021).

4. Sectarian Violence - Its Historical Context in Kurram

Kurram has witnessed big-scale sectarian confrontations amidst its population for a number of years, particularly in the years 1987, 1996, 2007-2008 and then again in 2024. Whatever the reason, the end results were pretty much the same in every case large scale loss of life, displacement and economic devastation. For example, in 2007, the Shia's surrounded Parachinar resulting in Sunni's being cut off, militia actions as retaliation brought more mayhem. These incidents are further aggravated by local conflict, such as distrust of one tribe by the other, and external factors which include the Talibanization of the region and also Middle Eastern politics where Iran and Saudi Arabia aspire to be the super powers. The fresh violence helps emphasize the necessity of comprehensive measures to deal with the violence triggers (Bibliomed, 2021; Criterion Quarterly, 2024).

Contemporary Dynamics in Kurram District

Historically, tribal conflicts around land ownership between the Shia majority Turi and Sunni Bangash tribes have been sources of violence. The situation gets worse due to militant activities from outside and also the election of religious occasions to advance assertion, with elements the attacking on community issues to generate violence.

Recent Incidents and Triggers

In a sectarian clash between Shi'a and Sunni communities in Kurram District, roughly more than eighty persons were exposed and killed in the conflict, which took place in 2024. Violence erupted over the attack placed on the Shi'a activists, which led to the governed retaliation on the Sunni communities. Decisive to these conflicts are historical disagreements over territory control, Militarization of religious rites, and

political exclusion. These issues are not new; historically, tribal conflicts around land ownership between the Shia majority Turi and Sunni Bangash tribes have been sources of violence. The situation gets worse due to militant activities from outside and also the election of religious occasions to advance assertion, with elements the attacking on community issues to generate violence (RFE/RL, 2024; CSCR, 2024).

Participation of International Stakeholders

Tribal affiliations contribute to the sectarian conflict in Kurram. The Turi and Bangash tribes are still engaged in internecine violence related to socio-political representation. There has been indication concerning at least some of the local political leaders, serving either as a whistle blower of violence or a sympathizer. Tribal jirgas (Councils) sometimes manage to impose peace for a while, but their potential is more or less a limited one in the absence of consistent state initiatives. Indeed, the political alienation of Kurram residents equally furthers these divisions, where security voids permit extremist views to flourish without check (CSCR, 2024; Pakistan Today, 2024).

Russian and other Commonwealth Nations Interventions

The border of Kurram with Afghanistan provides it a geopolitically sensitive area for tussles between several regional countries. Iran and Saudi Arabia were always on support for opposing sectarian factions, which made the district a proxy ground for their other cross border tension. The Iranian side population of the Zainabiyoun Brigade, who were Pakistani Shi'as who had fought in Syria, escalated volatility, whereas Sunni organizations such as the TTP and Lashkar e Jhangvi enjoyed Saudi interests' support both theoretical and financial. Cross border insurgency has added fuel to the fire because ISIS and the Taliban have been using the unguarded border to gain access to Kurram and other such centres in Pakistan (Al Jazeera, 2024; CSCR, 2024).

Problems and Consequences

On the one hand, local animosities, tribal feuds, and external factors come together to present a thorny set of problems for Kurram. Security challenges and economic vulnerability have led to the forcible resettlement of large populations, breaking up of lifestyles and increasing distrust between communities in the region. In terms of stability, the region is mired in politics, patchy security interventions and lack of meaningful progress on development aggravate the sectarian problems. Left unresolved, issues such as land contests, resource distribution, or political nonrepresentation, violence is such that it would reoccur in such a framework and would be detrimental not merely to the region but also to Pakistan as a whole (Dawn, 2024; CSCR, 2024).

Economic, Social, and Political Effects

The disintegration of the social fabric due to growing sectarian conflict, ignores basic socio-political needs of the inhabitants of Kurram District. Focused battles then lead to displacement as the pre-dominant Shia, Parachinar right now is the worst affected area, and there are blockades of road by the Sunni military. The destruction of these communities is greatly compounded by terroristic violence, curfews, and roadblocks. All of these factors combine to diminish the psychological and emotional wellbeing of the resident's fear of insecurity about the future trauma of violence history. Hence, under such conditions, an average of daily living in the village suffers tremendously causing an environment full of hostility that undermines sociable bonding.

The Kurram District's economic development has always been affected greatly by the sectarian violence and wars that have always been there. The violence again interferes with the local businesses and crucial services like healthcare and education. Hospitals and schools are war affected and therefore limited in area operations. Besides, other

key assets such as roads are also covered thereby shortest distances remaining inaccessible and so services and goods. Hence, there is significant reduction in active productive sectors thereby erasing economic development strategies of the district. Other key aspects include missing out on the basic needs like food, medicine, and fuel that further worsen the conditions for the people concerning the lower working class that depend on the daily wage or work on retailing (The Friday Times, 2024).

The wider Kurram district's implications of sectarian violence tend not only to affect the district but also the national stability. The existing skirmishes in the area add to the internal security concerns of Pakistan especially given the fact that Kurram being adjacent to Afghanistan serves as a corridor for such transnational militancy. Such kinds of external influences have also come into play in this regions particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia whose involvement into support of rival sectarian groups has led to more tensions into the region. The increasing level of sectarian violence in Kurram District does not only hinder the control but also the law and order sought by the government thus threatening the stability of the already weak political systems of Pakistan. Some of the national ramifications of this violence are the enhanced risk of negative propaganda against the State which may lead to greater insurgency, growing divides among the communities of Pakistan and the struggle to survive financially (CSCR, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024).

Government and Organizational Action

The state of Pakistan has made a number of efforts to combat the increasing violence along sectarian lines in Kurram District especially through local governance initiatives. Jirgas have been very active in trying to resolve tensions between the Shia and Sunni groups. These councils have on occasion organised ceasefires, most often after fighting that escalated due to competition for land. But even these strategies, which

are a form of conflict resolution, have proved at best to have limited impact as they fail to deal with the wider political and ideological rifts which perpetuate violence (Business Standard, 2024).

The state has in many instances resorted to intimidating violence through military campaigns in Kurram to suppress violence and establish law and order. More recent operations in the district have focused on the local militia groups and the intervening forces along the Pakistan-Afghan borders. While some of these operations have succeeded in neutralizing some of the potential threats of militancy, it is not for nothing that they have attracted allegations of promoting sectarian violence rather than restricting it. There have been complaints of the government's military approach lacking any coherent legal and policy framework, such as the amendment of sectarian laws or a conflictual resolution White Paper (The Friday Times, 2024).

The central role of the Pakistani government in mediating sectarian violence in Kurram region faces a multitude of issues: insufficiency of donor funding, poorly functioning rule of law, and an enduring trust deficit between the state and the people. There is often a lack of coordination – and sometimes competition – among authorities at the federal, provincial and local levels, which makes the enforcement of measures and policies more difficult. In addition, local people tend to see the government's strategies and actions for peacemaking as discriminatory or ineffective, which further deepens the social cleavages and violence. Consequently, those failures of state governance have in some cases exacerbated an overall insecurity sought by residents, which is why they have turned to mass protest for more governance. (Business Standard, 2024).

Proposed Solutions

The disintegration of the social fabric due to growing sectarian conflict, ignores basic socio-political needs of the inhabitants of Kurram District. Focused battles then lead to displacement as the pre-dominant Shia, Parachinar right now is the worst affected area, and there are blockades of road by the Sunni military. The destruction of these communities is greatly compounded by terroristic violence, curfews, and roadblocks. All of these factors combine to diminish the psychological and emotional wellbeing of the resident's fear of insecurity about the future trauma of violence history. Hence, under such conditions, an average of daily living in the village suffers tremendously causing an environment full of hostility that undermines sociable bonding.

Tribal Reconciliation Mechanisms

Community-based strategies are necessary in areas such as Kurram District, where sectarian violence persists. To some extent, trust building is achieved through enhanced inter-faith dialogue, especially between sunni and shia communities. Both sects' religious leaders have a central role in the peace process: they should concentrate on issues such as: peace, tolerance, and respect (Khan, 2024). Reduction of stereotypes, more importantly, trends of violence can be achieved by setting up local dialogue centers such as local peace committees, or religious forums (Ali & Mirza, 2023). More importantly, the importance of tribal reconciliation practices is immense. While Kurram's tribal make-up is, most of the time, an obstacle to peace, it could potentially serve as a bridge for discussions. Peace processes and efforts to restore peace, in turn, involve tribal elders who mediate between Sunni and Shia groups to ensure the support and maintenance of peace (Hassan, 2024). Ultimately, community-based efforts can maintain lasting social peace by providing enabling contexts that

protect local populations from discrimination and marginalization and ensuring the involvement of local people in the decision-making process (Shah, 2024).

Education and Awareness: Promoting Tolerance through Curriculum Reforms and Public Campaigns

Raising awareness and education is fundamental if one wants to tackle sectarian violence, especially in the younger generations. One of the more comprehensive ways of promoting peacebuilding is through promoting tolerance via curriculum reforms, especially in the long run. (Khan & Iqbal, 2023). Schools in Kurram and therefore wider Pakistan should include lessons on promoting unity, respect of diversity and peaceful resolution of conflict (Ali & Shah, 2024). A curriculum that addresses these issues especially teaching some elements of religious tolerance and also some historical perspective of sectarianism from early age can nurture such attitudes which promote understanding and cooperation. In addition, advertisements centered on promoting tolerance and peaceful co-existence may be too useful propaganda directed towards changing negative stereotypes and prejudices fostered by the extremists (Raza & Khan, 2024). As Khamji suggests, pint-size collaborations between religious leaders and teachers to the ordinary civil society can strengthen the campaigns to end the violence. Such movements coupled with reasonable educational policies may bear fruits as far as changing sectarian oriented lifestyles is concerned. Such methods can help areas like Kurram especially in becoming more tolerant and peaceful (Hassan & Raza, 2024).

Security Measures: From Eliminating Extremism Financing to Fighting Cross-Border Terrorism

The security measures assumed by the authorities are quite fundamental to the intervention on the underlying factors of sectarian violence in the Kurram District

considering that anti-sectarian extremism financing and cross-border violence are of critical concern in the region. Organizations including Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi have been active in the Pakistan Afghanistan region operating across the weak boundary and further aggravating sectarian violence (Khan & Ali, 2023). It is necessary to cope with shifting terrorist onslaughts by enhancing border security in light of the threats posed by the infiltration of terrorists and the infiltration of weapons and extremist thoughts into Kurram (Shah & Ali, 2024). In addition, the above measures will also target undermining the resources base of the militant and sectarian groups by dealing with their financing channels (Raza, 2024). Whereas, preventing the funding of violence, especially through anti-money laundering laws and working with the respective stakeholders in the region and beyond are some of the primary goals for Pakistan (Khan, 2023). Conducting operational maneuvers on the militant strongholds should be complemented with intelligence sharing and collaboration within the region for maximum effect. Most importantly though, the civilians protecting the civilians and minimizing the collateral damage is crucial for sustaining civilian support towards these operations and preventing further sentiments that could be exploited by extremist elements (Hassan & Raza, 2024).

Role of Media: Countering Hate Speech and Promoting Narratives of Unity

The media is a subject in the interests of the society, and at the same time, in the present day of sharing narratives, regions such as Kurram where there already is a high chance of sectarian tensions are particularly quiet difficult to ignore. This also leads to the conclusion that media must be responsible for the narratives it provides; portraying a nation lovelessness or hatred or breaking a sense of a nation together (Raza & Shah, 2024). Most such narratives use a subset of violent commentaries against an outgroup, circumscribing some prejudicial views, while it is just as necessary for the media, given

their position, to come up with ideas and solutions to build strong avenues for peace (Ali & Raza, 2023). Journalists have the ethical responsibility to talk about the constructs of a sectarian narrative and work on articulating alternative stories which portray peace building, coexistence, and inter-religious harmony. Extremist views have found fertile ground and spread like wildfire in many media outlets, especially social media, which is why there needs to be a limitation and provisioning on the outlets to avoid hate speech (Khan, 2023). Training and raising awareness campaigns concerning media, especially targeting the young generation can help remove the gaps between the growing sectarianism and the need for unity amongst the believers of different sects (Shah & Ali, 2024). The use of responsible media in such areas as Kurram can significantly reduce division across ideologies and propagates respect along with tolerance in the society.

Conclusion

The sectarian strife in Kurram District has all but deplorably become a menace, not only due to its direct consequences on the locals but also for the reason that it has deeper repercussions in the context of Pakistan society, politics and security. Governments have made numerous attempts, such as employing tribal councils (jirgas) or military operations, but these have failed to stem the tide of the deep-seated issues that fuel the conflict. They incorporate the very underlying issues that foment the socio-political sectarian violence, and these issues include ideology, political architecture, political geography and sociology. The primary measures taken to the militant violence in that area include the operations and these have provided a fair amount of the order, however these are still mainly based on the defence. The policy approach towards peacebuilding has largely been fractured including sectarian violence, cross-border militancy funding operations and making violent groups financially stable. Combined with the absence of a rule book which stipulates what

exactly constitutes abuse, such legislation has a nullifying effect on the overall achievement of these military operations. What is still quite striking however, is the inability of the state to entirely displace communities and impose a solid governance structure. In order to attain a durable peace, change in plan is essential. It is critical to promote inter-faith dialogue and encourage tribal reconciliation mechanisms in order to address the gulf between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Campaigns for reform in education and for raising public awareness ought to be directed towards the younger generation to inculcate tolerance and conflict minimize sectarian attitudes. In addition, the media is very significant to the public narrative. Emanating messages of peace and opposing speech that encourages strife may also enhance the role of the media in diminishing sectarianism. With such an approach across the local, national and regional spheres, Pakistan will be able to take out the root causes of sectarian violence and create long-lasting peace in the Kurram District and elsewhere.

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