



**Farooq Yousaf**

SADF COMMENT

## Sectarianism in Pakistan: Less visible, yet pretty evident

Are we Muslims and equal citizens of Pakistan? That is what Pakistani Shia identity has come down to. This question of their faith (or non-faith) has led to a number of sectarian attacks on Shia mosques or busses loaded with pilgrims, with the state taking little or no notice of it. Adding to that, Pakistan's current religio-political landscape is rife with intolerance aimed at increasing power at the cost of minority persecution.

Things weren't that bad at the time of inception of Pakistan. Jinnah, Pakistan's founder, was an Ismailia Shia himself, whereas one of his cabinet ministers belonged to the Ahmadi faith - another at-risk minority community targeted by the militant organizations. Jinnah once tipped Pakistan to be a "laboratory of Islam". This prophecy was taken quite literally by the militant outfits, whose experiments have precipitated a Sunni-dominated narrative in the country.

Pakistan is in the midst of coming out of a deadly 13 year terror streak, with a successful operation against the militant factions in the FATA region. Yet, many Pakistani security experts underrate the importance or significance of countering the sectarian violence in the country that has haunted Pakistan for many decades now.

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Unlike the past, the attack on Shias are not confined to places of worship alone, rather convoys and buses of Shia pilgrims, in Karachi and Balochistan, have come under attack from Sunni militant outfits.

In the current year, there have been no less than 6 major anti Shia terrorist attacks in Pakistan, with the most recent one being a suicide blast during a procession in Southern Pakistan killing 23, on October 22. Two of the other major attacks included one in Shikarpur on 30<sup>th</sup> of January killing at least 60 and in Peshawar, during Friday prayers on February 13<sup>th</sup>, killing 21.

Where Jundullah and Lashkar e Jhangvi claim responsibilities for anti-Shia attacks in Sindh and Balochistan, the notorious Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) now carries the anti-Shia baton in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Since 1989 alone, there have been more than 3000 sectarian and anti-Shia attacks in Pakistan, killing more than 5000 people. In 2015, a total of 46 major and minor sectarian attacks have taken place, taking more than 250 lives. Since 2002, more than 100 mosques have been targeted in sectarian related incidents killing close to 1300 Pakistanis. A total of 2500 Shias have been killed since 2001 in sectarian attacks and targeted killings.

These numbers and incidents, though smaller compared to overall terror attacks since 2001, present a dangerous picture of the state of affairs when it comes to protecting religious minorities in the country. During the recent Shia processions in Pakistan, the government deployed 10,000 troops in various cities to beef up the security measures, yet failed to prevent attacks from militant outfits.

Shias make up a significant 20% of the 200 million Pakistani population. Many Pakistanis fear that the persisting anti-Shia violence, mainly in Balochistan, is fanning fears and sentiments of isolation among the Shia community.

Pakistan's dilemma of tackling sectarianism is closely tied to its "holy" ally, and an alleged sponsor of anti-Shia Wahabi outfits, Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom has time and again offered help and refuge to a number of Pakistani leaders, including the current Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. On the other hand, the Saudi ideological warfare with Iran, a Shia dominant country, has resulted in a major proxy war compelling Pakistan to side with its ideological (Sunni) kin.

For that reason alone, the Saudi funnelling of funds into the religious seminaries in Pakistan goes either unnoticed or deliberately unchecked. The same funding and seminaries are serving as primary breeding ground for training of anti-Shia and anti-minority terrorists in the country.

Support for Saudi Arabia in Islamabad has always remained strong. The Kingdom recently faced scathing criticism both in print and electronic media for its mismanagement of the Mecca stampede killing close to 1500 people. Unwilling to accept any criticism, the PML-N government ordered the media to refrain from any criticism on its “brotherly” ally.

A starting point for the resolution of Shia-Sunni conflict and reduction of sectarian violence in Pakistan could be dealing with both Saudi Arabia and Iran on merit. As long as Pakistan maintains a bias in its policy favouring Riyadh and ignoring Tehran, things would only get worse. Furthermore, the government needs to ensure that the no foreign funding from Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, meant for Wahhabi/Sunni religious seminaries goes unchecked. Without such measures, the raging spiral of sectarian violence would remain on an upward trajectory, multiplying problems for the government in Islamabad.

**Biography of the author:**

Farooq Yousaf is a PhD Politics Candidate from Pakistan currently pursuing his studies in Australia. He has previously completed his Masters in Public Policy from University of Erfurt, Germany. He also consults Islamabad-based Security think tank, Centre for Research and Security Studies, and occasionally writes for various news and media sources on issues such as counter radicalisation, conflict resolution and regional security. He is specializing in Indigenous conflict resolution and counter insurgency. He tweets at @faruqyusaf and can be reached at faruqyusaf@gmail.com