

SECTARIAN VIOLENCE & RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

1. INTRODUCTION:

“Communalism, religious intolerance and the sectarian violence are scourge of any society and repugnant to the teachings of Islam. The word Islam means peace and harmony and forbids bigotry and religious fanaticism. It teaches generosity and tolerance even to the followers of the other religions.”

The PM, Shaukat Aziz, is also right in pointing out that a two-pronged strategy – preventive as well as curative is required to control both the manifestation and root causes of sectarian conflict, which has claimed the lives of thousands of Pakistanis since the 1980s. The toll in 2005 alone was over 200 dead and 400 wounded. Earlier this month, Shi'it cleric Allama Hasan Turabi was assassinated in Karachi while nearly 40 Ashura-day mourners were killed in a bomb blast and related violence in Hangu in February 2006. The sectarian scourge, in its current form, is clearly deep-rooted and cannot be eliminated easily. It has its origins in the jihadist militancy fostered by Gen Zia ul Haq and subsequently fanned by misguided adventurers and religious bigots. The situation as it now stands is that an entire generation has been poisoned by the preachers of hate.

In the words of Syed Mohammad Ali in his article “Pakistan’s sectarian problems”, “Vested interests, misplaced policies and discriminatory laws have drastically reduced the scope for a religiously tolerant state and society in Pakistan. Hate ideologies have damaged our valuable cultural and intellectual heritage. While challenging institutionalised sectarianism is certainly not easy, strengthening the common cultural heritage of Pakistani people offers a less-confrontational way to reverse hate-based indoctrination.”

2. Dr Hasan Askari Rizvi writes in an article “Religious extremism and violence”, “The government cannot contain religious extremism and violence by simply issuing executive orders. It requires a comprehensive approach that entails monitoring supporters of the militant groups in the civil and military administration, curtailing societal sources of support, and strict action against the hard-core militant elements that use violence. The government must adopt measures to address socio-economic inequities which have increased during the last six years.”

3. Kamila Hyat writes,

“The fact of the matter is that a problem which has taken root over two decades or so may take at least as long to eradicate. After all, numerous studies have shown that prejudice of all kinds is an insidious social phenomenon, which can take generations to wipe out. It is, however, essential that the effort to tackle sectarianism begin immediately. This effort must be underpinned with far greater commitment and a longer-term strategy than has so far been the case. Mere cosmetic measures, revolving around policing militancy by locking up dozens in jails for weeks, or deploying security forces in an effort to keep vigilance over every street corner, is neither feasible nor wise.”

4. FACTORS FOR THE RISE OF SECTARIANISM IN PAKISTAN:

- 1) Religious Intolerance:
- 2) Political factors:
- 3) Economic factors:
- 4) Indian Interference:

5. EFFECTS OF SECTARIAN VIOLENCE:

- 1) Social disorder:
- 2) The politicisation of religion:
- 3) Impact on religious activities:
- 4) Law & order situation:
- 5) Political instability:
- 6) Widens Antagonism among different sects:
- 7) Impact on economy:

6. SCENARIO IN PAKISTAN:

R

epetitive negative depictions of Pakistan are fuelled largely by the many conflicts that plague our country. Besides lingering tensions with India and the discontent among provinces, sectarian violence continues to blemish our national image. While the extent of sectarian violence is not large in terms of the casualties caused by it, the problem has led to a very perturbing fragmentation of the society. There is a range of sects and sub-sects embroiled in sectarian violence. Understanding sectarianism requires digging much deeper than just looking at the immediate reasons for a particular incident.

1) The politicisation of religion is a major reason for sectarian aspirations taking root in Pakistan. The conflict between sectarian groups is not merely ideological; often it is impelled by the desire to obtain political power. The evident patronage of the clergy by various governments has steadily raised their public profile and influence, culminating in the current setup, in a meteoric rise of religious parties. But the responsibility for helping religious parties into political power does not lie with the Pakistani state alone. During the 1980s many influential players, including the US and some Middle Eastern governments, lent support for the militarisation of religious identities for a proactive role in the Afghan jihad. The decision to use right-wing religious parties to pursue geo-strategic goals first in Afghanistan, and then in Kashmir, led to further politicisation on the basis of religion.

2) The International Crisis Group (ICG) blames the sectarian conflict squarely on the state policies of Islamisation and the marginalisation of secular democratic forces. Several governments in Pakistan are criticised for co-opting the religious right and continuing to rely on it to counter civilian opposition rather than empowering the people. The ICG holds the state responsible for patronising particular religious leaders who used religion as a means to create political distraction. Their pulpits were never used to highlight people's rights and development issues. Moreover, it is pointed out that laws like the Hudood Ordinance created operational bias against women. The problems were compounded by enforcement of the Islamic law of evidence in 1984 that excluded women's testimony in cases of Hadd crimes and halved the value of their evidence in civil matters. Non-Muslims were not even allowed to give evidence. There have been numerous cases of people being victimised under these laws.

3) Peripheral theological debates provide the basis for volatile divisions in the hands of those seeking power over people. Press reports indicate that sectarian zealots kill around 200 people a year across the country. Analysts have pointed out that over the years sectarian violence has spread from the more traditional rural arenas to major urban areas. The pattern of targeting high-profile opponents has expanded to include public places — even mosques — and religious gatherings. Even judges presiding over cases of sectarian militancy in anti-terrorist courts are frequently

forced to hold trials in jails.

4) Yet because of the political utility of religious leaders, the recently announced law requiring registration of seminaries seems to have been sidelined. Whether the Hudood laws will finally be repealed also remains to be seen. There is an evident need for government to start taking measures that reflect the country's religious diversity. Besides removing all forms of religious discrimination, there is need for invoking constitutional restrictions against private armies. Hate speech needs to be curbed to avoid extremist violence. One of the suggestions put forth in this regard is to provide constitutional and political rights to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the northern areas by finally deciding their constitutional and legal status and linking up courts in these areas to Pakistan's mainstream judicial institutions. The tribal lashkars need to be outlawed.

5) Human rights organisations and legal experts continue to demands such measures. There has been a lot of loud and vocal criticism of discriminatory laws and some efforts have been made to help victims of these repressive laws — particularly minorities and women. The Human Rights Commission for Pakistan, a notable stalwart in this regard, has been recommending that instead of merely changing procedures, all laws that sanction discrimination against minorities and women should be repealed outright.

6) An unfortunate combination of vested interests, misplaced policies and discriminatory laws has drastically reduced the scope for a religiously tolerant state and society in Pakistan. Hate ideologies have damaged our valuable cultural and intellectual heritage. While challenging institutionalised sectarianism is certainly not easy, strengthening the common cultural heritage of Pakistani people offers a less-confrontational way to reverse hate-based indoctrination.

7) Some civil society organisations have begun working on conflict resolution. There are already a small number of peace activists in Pakistan. More poets, writers, artists, journalists, lawyers and young volunteers need to lend support to this movement. To diffuse tensions between different religious groups civil society groups can facilitate dialogue or support moves to remove discriminatory practices exacerbating the sectarian rifts. In addition to promoting interventions to narrow the sectarian fragmentation, more research is needed on the religious and cultural communities of Pakistan. Debates in the mainstream media to highlight our common intellectual heritage would also be useful.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The compulsions fuelling religious conflicts are certainly complex. They have multiple negative implications as well. Nonetheless, this is not a problem that will go away on own its own. It needs to be actively addressed if Pakistan is ever to become an enlightened and moderate state.

In Hasan Askari's words, "The government must adopt measures to address socio-economic inequities which have increased during the last six years. Unless poverty and underdevelopment are addressed effectively, ideological appeals and militancy will continue to attract the alienated youth. The government must also open up the political system to mainstream and liberal political forces so that they can help inculcate moderate and tolerant values among the people. Internal harmony and cultural and political tolerance cannot be promoted without establishing an equitable socio-economic system and a participatory political process."