



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**A Rise of TLP (Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan) and Barelvi Sect in Pakistan's Political and Social Arena**

**Dr. Sabir Ijaz**

Assistant Professor (visiting) Department of International Relations, National University of Modern Languages (NUML) Karachi Campus, Sindh, Pakistan

**Corresponding Author**

sabir.ijaz@numl.edu.pk.

**ABSTRACT**

The aim of the paper is to exclusively explain the politicization of the TLP and Barelvi sect in Pakistan. It explains how the sect associates itself with the teaching of syncretic Sufism which is peaceful and tolerant. Historically, the sect has remained peaceful with no political participation; however, recently under the tutelage of TLP the sect has started showing assertiveness through various audacious acts. One of Barelvis late clerics, Khadim Hussian Rizvi the founder of TLP, has openly provoked even policemen and other followers to kill the blasphemers. Such statements are very sensitive. It is a qualitative study. The study has mainly included books, scholarly journals and newspapers for discussion. The aggressive statements and protests by TLP can start a new wave of sectarianism. The party demand of the death of anyone who commits blasphemy might undermine social balance. It is recommended that government must ensure justice for all the individuals including minorities. No one should be exempted from deteriorating law and order situation in the country.

**Keywords:** Sectarianism, Blasphemy, Politicisation, Terrorism, Violence

**Introduction**

Pakistan Pakistan is a multi-religious society. Religion has historically been a significant force in Pakistan's state and society. The promotion of religion at the state level has resulted in serious clashes among different sects (Ahmad, 2013; Murphy, 2020). The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was the starting point of Saudi and Iran funding to Pakistan for religious and political goals (Firdous, 2009). The Saudi government funded billions of dollars in Afghan Jihad. The idea was to overcome Iran's Shia influence in post-Soviet Afghanistan (Irfani, 2004). Iran, as a reaction also started to counteract and support Northern Alliance to maintain its influence (Milani, 2006). The Saudi and Iran governments continued challenging each other's hegemonic interests not only on Afghan soil but on Pakistan as well. Saudi Arabia and Iran fought a proxy war on Pakistan's soil and supported Sunni and Shia madrassas financially respectively (Waseem M., 2004). With the assistance of foreign funding mainly from both these countries, the number of madrasa increased substantially. The network of Deobandi seminaries because of Saudi funding grown more strongly and rapidly. The number of Deobandi seminaries reached 7000, with 1585 Barelvis and 419 of Shias in 2002. The number of madrassas reached roughly 13,000 in 2013 and 35000 in 2015 (Pakistan Today, 2015; Qadri H. M., 2018). A majority of scholars have discussed how these madrassas have spread venom, extremism and extremism (International Crisis Group, 2007; Yaseen & Muzaffar, 2018).

**Literature Review**

The new wave of sectarianism is from the Barelvi sect, which has the majority of the Muslim population in the country (Suleman, 2018). This new wave of sectarianism is based on many core issues. Firstly, this wave is a struggle between the dominant Deobandis and resurgent Barelvis. Secondly, it is a resentment and antipathy against minorities,

particularly the Ahmadis. Thirdly, this wave of hate and anger is against those who support minorities. Fourthly, in this wave of sectarianism, Barelvis are aggressive and intolerant against those who compromise on the finality of Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH). Fifthly, the Barelvis are highly sensitive to Blasphemy laws and want to preserve these laws at every cost.

Before the Partition of United India, Barelvis supported the All India Muslim League (AIML). The Barelvis promoted the party's notion of a separate country for Muslims. Unlike the Barelvis, the idea of a separate country was severely opposed by the Deobandi Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind (JUH). JUH fervidly advocated for a United India and joined with the Indian National Congress (Qadri, Qadri, & Ahsan, 2016). It was Allama Shabbir Ahmed Usmani who sidelined himself from JUH and formed the Deobandi Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam (JUI) and supported the AIML. Following Pakistan's creation in 1947, Deobandis' Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam (JUI) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) surpassed the Barelvi Jamiat Ulama-e-Pakistan (JUP) in the political arena. Deobandis also organized and led the anti-Ahmadi protests in the 1950s. The Barelvis earlier showed reluctance to participate in these protests and were late entrants (Asif, 2018). JI's Maulana Abu'l Hasan Nadwi and Maulana Maududi and Deobandi were the prominent and active leaders in the anti-Ahmadi protests. These anti-Ahmadi protests gave huge impetus to Jamat e Islami (JI) fame. JI a political faction of the Deobandi sect became more influential and successful in the political and social realm because JI emphasized more on social activities than the Barelvi's Jamaat Ulma Islami (JUI) (Bano, 2012). Barelvis have paid less attention to organizing themselves along modern political lines which has gradually weakened their political strength (Siddiqui, 2017). In the 1970s general election, only 7 seats were won by JUP because of internal divisions (Behuria, 2008).

During Zia-ul-Haq's epoch (1977-1988), the disenfranchisement of Barelvi reached to apex. Zia's government supported the Deobandi militant groups to counter the proxy wars (Epping, 2003). The majority of the Deobandi madrassas during this period, served as jihadist recruitment to fight the Afghan and Kashmir wars. The Deobandi madrassas outnumbered the Barelvi madrassas in a very short span. The number of registered Deobandi madrassas were 1840 compared to 717 Barelvi madrassas in 1988. During this period, Deobandis rapidly increased their political networks across the country (Waseem & Mufti, 2009).

Moreover, the Pakistani state and military had also extended official patronage to organizations and individuals associated with the JUI and JI. Deobandis were assigned important legal and sociopolitical positions. "The close association of Deobandis with the state enabled them to secure a majority of the jobs in government and military-run mosques (Basit, 2020). Similarly, Deobandi graduates were also declared favorites for teaching Arabic in government schools. The Barelvis remained dormant and inactive in political and social activities in this period. The main reason for Barelvis' quiescent in politics and social structure was marginalization from the state and serious threats from Deobandis. Hundreds of Barelvis activists and prominent scholars were killed on different occasions. After 9/11, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) (Deobandi militant groups), regularly attacked on Barelvis' scholars, mosques and shrines (Kamran, 2009). It is estimated that around 6000 people have died solely in sectarian violence from the 1980s to 2011 (Yousaf, 2012).

This caused consternation within the Barelvi community. They feared that the Deobandis who have many differences with Barelvis would impose their form of Islam. These fears led Barelvis to rise politically. They started organizing themselves and establishing a political party known as Tehreek Labaik Pakistan (TLP) to protect their religious and political interests. The sect has been particularly active on the social and political domain since uniting under the TLP. However, it gained massive popularity with a violent dimension when it demanded the release of Mumtaz Qadri who killed Punjab governor Salman Taseer. Salman Taseer advocated for the rights of minorities and spoke for

the change of blasphemy law. Since then TLP's main political manifesto has been to secure the sanctity of the Prophet (PBUH) inside as well as outside Pakistan and spread the values of the Barelvi sect (Basit, 2020).

This manifesto has been seen in protests on many occasions whenever the prestige of the Prophet is violated nationally or internationally. TLP has organized massive protests against the French and Holland governments to condemn the infamous publication. It has forced the government to officially endorse boycotting French products and recall its envoy from both France and Holland. It threatened to block major cities if the government remained reluctant to comply with their demands. TLP has shown intolerance towards minorities. Leaders of TLP in their gathering have criticized the government and politicians for supporting minorities and protecting their rights. It organized massive protests against the release of Asia Bibi, a Christian who was charged with blasphemy. It called for the assassination of the court's judges who issued the order for her release. The appointment of Dr Atif Mian was also opposed by TLP. It strongly objected to his Ahmadi Faith. They argue that minorities must not be permitted to attain high-level posts in any field. It sternly objected to Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) for editing the Electoral Act 2017. In a twenty days long protest, TLP vehemently criticized the PMLN government for changing its stance over the finality of the Prophet. It demanded the sacking of Federal Law Minister over the "softening" of anti-blasphemy laws. Its followers carried out an assassination attempt on Interior Minister for changing blasphemy laws. They showed resentment for opening the Kartarpur corridor for Sikhs. Kartarpur is the birthplace of Guru Nanak who is the founder of Sikhism. Saad Rizvi (son of Khadim Hussain Rizvi) a newly appointed chief of the party has vowed to continue the spirit of his late father. He has been using the same religious rhetoric as his predecessor.

### **Who are Barelvis**

The Barelvi movement of veneration of the Prophet dates back to Ahmad Raza Khan (1856-1921) who was a mufti and religious scholar. Throughout his life, he averted political opposition to British colonial power. This segregated the Barelvis from other religious groups, such as the Ahl-e-Hadith, the Khaksar and the Deobandis (Gugler, 2015, pp. 173-174). Such apolitical Barelvis' stance and also their inclination towards mysticism and saint worship, established their image as pacifier (Schaflechner, 2019, p. 212). They have shown tolerance to non-Muslims and other minority groups. Their nonviolent behavior generally and Sufi culture particularly have won millions of hearts across the world. Barelvis are portrayed as advocates of soft Islam. They are believed to be providing the "counter-narrative" to hardline sects and follow the mystic traditions of Islam. The sect preaches nonviolence and promotes tolerance and pluralism (Hashmi, 2016; Alavi, 1988). Many of these common Barelvi practices are well-appreciated by other religions as well.

They highly believe in the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad. They have faith that the Prophet possesses specific special qualities like the understanding of the unseen world and regardless of the Prophet's physical death, he is present as a conscious being (Gugler, 2016). According to the Barelvis; the Prophet is elevated to a position greater than man but less than God and also Nur (light) (Philippon, 2014). It is the central part of Barelvis' faith. However, the Deobandi School considers the Prophet Muhammad only a human being (Reetz, 2006). Barelvis considered themselves religiously devoted to protect the sanctity of the Prophet by Blasphemy laws. This includes presenting no tolerance toward those who disgrace the Prophet (Khan, 2014).

### **Barelvis and Blasphemy Laws**

Barelvis' love for the Prophet Muhammad has resulted in diehard support for the blasphemy laws. These laws were introduced by General Zia ul Haq. The specific clause of these laws maintains that the blasphemy of Prophet Muhammad is punishable by death.

Blasphemy laws have stirred up controversy in recent years. Scholars from different sects maintain that these laws cannot be amended or abolished because such laws represent the Quran and Sunnat. However, liberal interpretations support the idea that the conflicted nature of blasphemy law makes them susceptible to abuse and is being used for personal vendetta. Statistics illustrate that there has been a sharp rise in blasphemy cases since the 1980s (Siddique & Hayat, 2008). The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported in 2016 that about 1472 individuals were accused of blasphemy from 1987 to 2016 (Kermani, 2018; HRC, 2016). Among the accused 501 were Ahmadis, 205 Christians and 26 Hindus. Schaflechner (2019) further finds that in 2015 alone, 15 out of 25 cases were filed on personal enmity (Schaflechner, 2019). Liberals in the country argue that the misuse of the blasphemy law can only be avoided by amending or abolishing it. Barelvis in particular have vehemently supported the 295-C clause. The 295-C clause exclusively revolves around the sanctity of the Prophet. For them, the 295-C clause is a uniting point. They have been agitating whenever they perceive the veneration of the holy Prophet is disrespected. The other religious groups also stress the prerequisite of protecting the Prophet's dignity; however, the Barelvis have surpassed all other religious groups in protecting the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad (Schaflechner, 2019, pp. 209-210). The extreme perceived veneration of the Prophet has repetitively led to tension between different religious groups, particularly the Barelvis and Deobandis.

### **Barelvis from Pacifism to Activism**

Religious extremism is not a new phenomenon in Pakistan. Different religious organizations and sects have behaved aggressively on different occasions (Karamat, Muzaffar & Shah, 2019). The Barelvis were anti-political in the days of their formation. However, Barelvis's pacifism leaned towards extremism since the beginning of the twenty-first century. They have become highly politicized over the last few years. The rise of violent engagement is not linked to a single factor. Many factors are involved in their violent activism. Their violent behavior is mainly related to the political expansion of Talibanisation of Pakistan's society (Philippon, 2014, p. 156). This expansion of Talibanisation has provided an impetus for the Barelvis' violent activism. The modest image of Barelvis began to erode more adversely with the assassination of Governor Taseer. They changed aggressively from nonaggression to extremism when Governor Taseer advocated amending the blasphemy laws. Taseer also promised Asia Bibi to take her clemency appeal to then-President Asif Ali Zardari. Such bold Taseer's stances irritated the Barelvis. Barelvis under the patronage of TLP protested against Taseer and in favour of blasphemy laws. Barelvis prominent scholars and clerics blamed Taseer for committing blasphemy and declared him worthy of being murdered. However, he was later murdered by his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri.

### **Material and Method**

This paper is mainly qualitative in its outlook. It has utilized books and journal papers to establish context of the paper. Newspapers have been included to analyze recent situation.

### **Results and Discussion**

The Barelvis, Deobandis, Wahhabis and Shias (these four sects are the prominent religious faction in Pakistani society) follow different doctrines and label each other as apostates. Already their disputes over different issues have caused serious sectarian violence. Further provocations can put them at risk of serious clashes. There is so sensitivity over the blasphemy laws. Government must establish a consensus of all sects on this very matter. Already at least 77 people have been killed since 1990 over the issues of blasphemy (Hashim, 2020). To avoid further conflicts and imbalance in the society, government also should ensure and implement measures to protect civilians.

## **Conclusion**

The Barelvis mostly practices are closer to Sufism which includes folk rituals revolving around saints, their graves and shrines. They believe in the sensational and miracle powers of saints. They also profess the dispensing of amulets. However, the recent politicization of the Barelvis could lead to serious clashes and violence as TLP which is the main political faction of the Barelvi sect, openly criticize Wahabis, Deobandis and Shias. Secondly, the sect's hyper-sensitivity on the issues of blasphemy, has led TLP to confront minorities, international communities, mainstream political parties and government officials. Such assertiveness can damage the country reputation, political and economic interests. Even with the advent of the first century, the country seems far away from effectively dealing with the menace of sectarianism in society. The state has remained unable to confine the resurgence of a new sectarian wave.

## **Recommendations**

At the societal level, different religious organizations have a close connection with society and provide significant welfare. The benefits of these welfare activities have rendered staunch support to these organizations on many occasions. In return, this socio-economic link enabled these organizations to persuade society for their interests. Government must have a plan to look such donations and welfare work.

After independence, the religious strife was mainly dominated by the Deobandis who presented themselves better at preserving, promoting and protecting the religious values in Pakistan. Government must ensure equality in giving proper representations to all sects including minorities groups.

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