

# Rise of Barelvi Extremism: Policy Options for Pakistan

Maheen Ahmad

May 2021

## Executive Summary

Barelvi extremism is a growing concern for Pakistan. The rising influence of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), especially its vast street power and agitational politics, has demonstrated its ability to challenge the writ of the government. Of particular concern is the fact that segments of Barelvi activism have revealed potentially violent tendencies. The mainstream religio-political parties have historically done poorly in Pakistan's electoral politics, due to which, they normally exercise their influence through organized street pressure to oblige the government to accede to their demands. However, the extremist religio-political movements-turned political parties, like the TLP bear the growing tendency to achieve political goals through violent expressions of their demands. In the long term, this would radically transform the social fabric of our society into becoming a more intolerant religio-political culture rampant with mob mentality. The policy brief offers some recommendations to address this alarming phenomenon of using radical means, like blockades and use of force, to pressurize government and ordinary citizens. It also makes some long-term recommendations on how the religion, particularly the far right, should intersect with the governing mechanisms of the country. Key recommendations as under:

- The Political Parties Order 2002 should be extended to include provision that binds political parties not to disturb public order by blocking highways or other public places, or mobilizing violent protests.
- FIRs should be lodged against the TLP and other sect-based religious parties on grounds of disrespecting Chapter II, clause 3c of *The Political Parties Order 2002*.
- Religious and political leaders must be co-opted in consultations on the government's response whenever sectarian trigger incidents like Charlie Hebdo caricatures occur.

## Issue to be Analyzed

The recent tendency in some religious movements turned political parties to resort to violence as a means of pressurizing the government to accept their political demands has emerged as a serious issue of governance. If this tendency is left unchecked, it will not only deepen the sectarian divide of Pakistani society but also set wrong precedents for political activism and encourage violence rage in society.

## Analysis

Barelvi extremism is on the rise, challenging a long-held assumption that Barelvi Islam, that was known for its Sufi-leaning religious practices, was more moderate and pacific. Barelvi groups were generally among those to eschew violence and decry the Wahhabism of Pakistani society<sup>1</sup>. However, the outpouring of Barelvi support for Mumtaz Qadri, who murdered Governor Salman Taseer on the allegation of supporting someone accused of blasphemy, and the subsequent rise of the TLP and its leader Khadim Rizvi (late), encouraged potential violent extremist tendencies within the Barelvi groups.

Broadly, there are three factors that contribute to the street activism of some of the Barelvi groups. Firstly, Barelvi groups have complained they were sidelined in the past and wanted to reclaim political space, commensurate with their role in the society. One of their reported grievances has been that Deobandi school of thought received state patronage during the Zia-ul-Haq era. Secondly, Barelvi groups have repeatedly contended that they are frustrated that their community and places of worship are frequent targets of attack by extremist Sunni groups like Lashkar e Jhangvi<sup>2</sup>. A greater show of strength, according to them, is intended to enhance the security of Barelvi followers. Thirdly, as Barelvi Islam attaches central importance to the veneration of the Holy Prophet (pbuh), it owns a deep-seated sense of obligation to defend the Prophet (pbuh), which can in turn, sometimes lead to over-zealous, even violent behavior.

It is this last factor that has mostly been used to swell the numbers of the TLP at the instigation of late Khadim Rizvi. The failure of other Barelvi groups to achieve their political goals through peaceful activism created a power vacuum that was exploited by the TLP to assert its presence. The danger is that the rise of the TLP could set a wrong precedent for the right-wing parties to use similar street power to dictate their will on the government of the day. Another long-term implication of this phenomenon is the potential mis-use of the good name of Islam for politically motivated objectives.

The TLP draws its support from the Barelvi community's lower middle-class youth, which are prone to mob mentality<sup>3</sup>, and are vulnerable to the exposure of social media<sup>4</sup>. Regardless of what future lies ahead for the TLP (on account of the demise of Khadim Rizvi), one thing is clear – it will retain its grassroots support from the underprivileged sections of society, who are

---

<sup>1</sup> Khan, Ismail. "The assertion of Barelvi extremism." *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 12, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Most of protests organized by Rizvi have resulted in youth venting their frustration by destroying private and government properties, attacking vehicles and blocking main highways.

<sup>4</sup> Basit, Abdul. "Barelvi Political Activism and Religious Mobilizing in Pakistan: The Case of Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP)." *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 21, no. 3 (2020): 374-389.

persuaded by religious clerics that their salvation lies in renewing their love for Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). Their anguish is exploited by leaders on the premise that the government is not responding to the sacrilege committed against the Holy Prophet (PBUH) by some foreign governments such as France. This is alarming because socioeconomic grievances, coupled with religious zealotry, can make a combustible mix. Barelvi clerics exploit such grievances in order to increase their political weight and relevance.

The Pakistani society has a sectarian mix and with considerable effort, the government has been able to control sectarian violence in the country. The government can ill-afford to allow the resurgence of sectarian conflict of any kind. Any rhetoric or activity that might involve sectarian violence would be highly detrimental for the peace and harmony of Pakistani society. It is, therefore, important that government clearly articulates the state policy that anyone trying to flout the law, like the TLP, would be dealt with an iron hand. To achieve this, it is absolutely vital for the government to enforce state writ in the face of hardliner demands, as buckling under the demands of Barelvi extremist elements or for that matter any other sect that displays violent extremism, may encourage other sectarian based extremist elements to adopt agitational politics. Simultaneously, it is important for the government to take into account religious sensitivities of all sects of Muslim faith in order not to evoke any backlash from any particular sect. This is with the hopes that eventually, Pakistani society nudges more towards tolerance, pluralism, and the diversity of beliefs and practices.

## Recommendations

- All political parties, including the religious political parties, are already committed as per clause 3c of chapter II of *The Political Parties Order 2002*<sup>5</sup>, that they would not indulge in promotion of ‘sectarian, regional or provincial hatred or, animosity’. To this, another provision needs to be added binding them not to disturb public order by blocking highways or other public places, or mobilizing violent protests.
- The government may seek an affidavit from the leadership of all political and religious parties to respect provisions of chapter II of *The Political Parties Order 2002*<sup>6</sup>.
- FIRs should be lodged against the TLP and other sect-based religious parties under *The Political Parties Order 2002*, Chapter II, 3 (4) (b) (c)<sup>7</sup> whenever they display open incitement to agitation on sectarian grounds. The aim should be to disqualify these parties from participating in political activities if they condone violence and to send the message that religious hard-liner groups cannot be mainstreamed into politics if they openly incite violent extremism.
- At the district and *tehsil* level, community organizations may be formed to engage more actively with local leaders of various religious parties to promote inter-faith harmony

<sup>5</sup> The text states:

Notwithstanding anything contained in sub-section (1), a political party shall not:

(a) propagate any opinion, or act in a manner prejudicial to the fundamental principles enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan; or

(b) undermine the sovereignty or integrity of Pakistan, public order or public morality or indulge in terrorism; or

(c) promote sectarian, regional or provincial hatred or, animosity; or

(d) bear a name as a militant group or section or assign appointment titles to its leaders or office-bearers which connote leadership of armed groups; or

(e) impart any military or para-military training to its members or other persons; or

(f) be formed, organise, set-up or convened as a foreign-aided political party.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

and to pre-empt, with the help of intelligence agencies, any potential violent protest. The Government should immediately ban the carrying of prohibited bore fire arms in the name of security to individuals. Strict punishment should be given to those carrying illegal arms.

- Whenever sectarian trigger incidents (such as the Charlie Hebdo caricatures) occur, religious and political leaders must be co-opted in consultations on the government's response and rationale. The consulting body can be formed and members invited to participate during that time. This also needs to be done publicly to gain public sympathy for the government initiatives.
- Create a 'hate-crime' task force in a separate directorate under all provincial police departments. This would serve to identify any unlawful act that that was motivated in whole or in part by a person's identification with race, caste, sect, gender, age, disability, ancestry. This can be modeled after the Hate Crime Task Force created by the New York City Police Department (NYPD).

The democratic polity of the country allows for the freedom of assembly. However, this freedom must not extend to violent protests on public highways and major entry points of the capital and other cities. No one should be allowed to paralyze the state machinery and so, the parliament should draft legislation that prohibits mass demonstrations on public highways. An iron fist is a difficult option, but a necessary one in order to rein in radical elements.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Maheen Ahmad is currently actively engaged with the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) as an Assistant Research Associate. She pursued her post-graduate studies in International Public Management and Public Policy from the Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands and her undergraduate studies in Economics and Management from the University of London. Her research interests include conflict resolution and transformation, terrorism and extremism, social-psychological dimensions to peace and conflict studies, the study of behavior as a collective phenomenon, and the psychological and socio-cultural makeup of national identities. She contributes regularly to national and international newspapers, writing on various contemporary international and domestic issues. She tweets at @whatmaheensays.

**Maheen Ahmad**

Maheen Ahmad  
maheen.ahmad@ipripak.org