

The phenomenon of violence in Pakistan. Understanding cause and effect relationship

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The phenomenon of violence in Pakistan has developed through a very long period of time, therefore it is necessary to articulate the discussion in different phases. My contribution will be divided into three main parts: first, I will analyze the various forms of sectarianism and violence that have erupted in the last seven decades since the formation of the Pakistani state in 1947; secondly, I will discuss the roots of violence and the relationship of cause and effect; last but not least, I will consider the strategies that the government of Pakistan should examine, some of which are already underway, in order to overcome the causes of violence.

In order to understand the emergence of sectarianism and religious extremism in Pakistan, it is important to highlight that the state of Pakistan has come in existence in the name of religion, and that religion became one reason for the division of the society in colonial India. The various sectarian orientations, which evolved slowly and gradually in 1946, ultimately developed into two different blocks, supporting or opposing the case for Pakistan. Therefore, Indian society was divided along conflicting lines, with some sections declaring themselves in favor of a united India, and others supporting the creation of Pakistan. Those people who defined themselves in terms of religion supported Pakistan and migrated to the new state in 1947.¹

¹ For the historical context of Muslim separatism and the 1947 Partition of India see: Robinson 1974, Jalal 1985, Talbot 1998, Shaikh 2009.

Thus, the circumstances in which the Partition of India took place, and the nature of the ideological conflict, explain how Pakistan came to be supported by religiously motivated sectors of the society. In particular, the influential role played by the Muslim religious scholars - or *ulama* – contributed to making religion the dominant issue in the political debate throughout the country. Therefore, the phenomenon of religiously motivated extremism started immediately in 1947 and evolved gradually, together with the deteriorating situation of law and order in the country.

We must therefore emphasize the relevance of the public discourse about religion, which very early became the bone of contention in Pakistan. Various experiments with religious discourse were attempted by the state. This was the case of the very first military dictator in 1958, General Ayub Khan, who after coming to power elaborated its own political discourse about religion.² As a consequence of the state's attempt to use the religious legitimacy for its own end, the religious clerics or scholars felt threatened by the state authority. On the other hand, religious scholars in Pakistan had many different sectarian orientations or schools of thought. For example, there were the Deobandis as well as scholars with other backgrounds. The variety of religious schools and points of view had an ambiguous impact on the institutional organization of religion. From 1958 till 1985, we found various religious representatives within the Islamic education boards, representing the various sects or schools. There was one for the Deobandi, one for the Jama'at-e-Islami, and others for the various Shi'a communities. However, the religious minorities felt threatened because Christians, Hindus and the Sikhs were not provided the same institutional instruments.³

We must now attempt a definition of sectarianism. We may refer to sectarianism as a conflict or a division between various further subdivisions of the same religious orientation. In general terms, sectarianism is less a phenomenon of violence than a cultural habit or mentality. The various schools of thoughts, and the followers of these schools, find it difficult to accommodate different ideas. Therefore, the role of different schools of thought in bringing this attitude to the public discourse on religion has led to divisions among the citizens of the country. Thus, this division becomes a phenomenon of religious extremism, intolerance and militancy; it develops into a conflict, especially between the Sunni and the Shi'a, and – among the Sunnis – between the Barelvi and the Deobandi schools. Therefore, this phenomenon of religious extremism and violence gradually became the single dominant phenomenon over the past six or seven decades in the country.⁴

² Ewing 1983, Talbot 1998.

³ Binder 1961.

⁴ Nasr 2000, Qasmi 2014, Zaman 1998.

In the analysis of religious conflict, it is also necessary to underline the responsibility of the political actors in the history of the country. The Zia-ul-Haq regime had a major impact in the development of religious sectarianism. The regime's application of the Islamization policy and the affirmation of Islam as the center of the government's agenda have contributed significantly to the phenomenon analyzed here. Zia's Islamization agenda was also influenced by international factors, such as the Iranian revolution of 1979, the involvement of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from 1985 onwards, and finally the cross-border movements of people from Central Asia and Afghanistan.⁵

Therefore, by examining the external factors, and comparing them with the internal factors, it is noted that the internal factors are connected more than anything else to the class of religious elites, those who have always posed various threats to the existence of people, and who have constituted one of the main internal reasons for violence and extremism in Pakistan; for example, the blasphemy or litigation laws have cost the lives of many individuals; and this sectarianism gradually evolved into violence over time.

Thus, part of the phenomenon is related to the fact that certain sections of people have had limited and restricted places and experiences, and those experiences are very different from each other. Diversity is therefore a new phenomenon for them, and it is perceived as a threat. Particularly in the last two decades from 2001 onwards it has been observed how the sectarian orientation of the people has been targeted. Therefore, this became the challenge of sectarian violence, which exploded and turned into religious extremism and violence.

This point brings us to the main theme of the cause-effect relationship. One element that emerges clearly is that religion has been used in various ways in the case of Pakistan. There have been various experiments by the state, such as the creation of the Islamic Ideology Council in Islamabad in 1961, the introduction of Muslim family law ordinances, or the creation of the Islamic Research Institute in 1962.⁶ These were all attempts to institutionalize religion which have contributed to polarize Pakistani society, introducing the message of the struggle against the "infidels". In order to understand this cause and effect relationship, it is necessary to reflect on the connection between society and the state's attempt to advocate religion. This does not imply that sectarianism has been sponsored by the state, but that the state has more or less favored certain sectors. Thus, the strategy of the state has placed the idea of social exclusion at the fore. Sectarianism has become one of the reasons people understand the importance of being accepted or denied by the state. This phenomenon has been evident in

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Binder 1961.

Pakistan since 1958. Up to now, this idea of the Islamization of society has become a leading question; Islamization has become an integral part of this cause and effect relationship.

The basic idea was that without the legitimation of Islam it would not have been possible to live in the state, which is the essence of the process of Islamization of society. We also find military action and inaction in many cases. This was the case with the violence, extremism and militancy that involved the provinces of the northwestern frontier of Pakistan. In these cases, the military's strategy has been to try to keep the peace in the regions, distinguishing between "good" and "bad" Taliban, performing actions and inertia in various hiding places and pockets.⁷ The use of this strategy by the military has become one of the elements that we can assume as the cause and effect of sectarian violence.

Therefore, this process of Islamization, going into action and inaction, has become a relevant phenomenon that we have been experiencing in Pakistan since 2001. The consequence has been that all uniformed forces - be they the police, the army or other personnel - are targeted by radical organizations, because of this cause and effect relationship, and because sectarianism has gone out of the way, not only for the religious groups, but also for the state.

Another important aspect of the cause-effect relationship concerns the role of the media and the way in which they have been more or less controlled; this is what we call the propaganda theory: whatever is reported, whatever is highlighted and shown to the world, may not be the soft image, but an image where everything is burning, and where the country is represented as the ship that will sink into the water. Therefore, understanding the role of the media, also in connection with the international context, is a further relevant topic for cause and effect analysis that needs a thorough understanding.

The above raises a question mark, namely why this analysis of the phenomenon of violence and the relationship of cause and effect has never been carried out in depth in Pakistan, nor taken seriously at the state level; and if the state has taken it seriously, something is still missing. Having personally conducted doctoral level research on religious seminaries and *madrassas*, thus observing the reality on the ground, I have found that there are actions and verifications that still need to be done. Since 2013, the government has launched a national action plan that has looked at various areas in both schools and *madrassas*, as well as religious organizations, religious political parties, and cases of violence that have erupted in various forms.⁸

⁷ Zaman 2018.

⁸ Bilal 2019.

However, we find that there is a lack of legislation to stop such violence, we only find recent legislation on blasphemy laws that has been provided or implemented. However, two state officials were recently killed in the name of this violence, on suspicion of favoring or supporting people from outside ethnic or religious backgrounds: Salman Taseer, the incumbent governor of Punjab, in January 2011, and later one of the national government ministers responsible for minorities – Shahbaz Bhatti – in March 2011. Therefore, there is no doubt that legislation is needed, but this is difficult to achieve; in the Pakistani political scene, whenever the situation of a suspended parliament arises, the political class becomes subject to the influence of people and collaborators in search of favors and support from political entities. Therefore, legislative activity is always hampered by different interests and pressure groups.

Secondly, there is a need for a revision of the textbooks at several levels, and this should be above any sectarian orientation. In particular, we need to understand what we are teaching, inculcating, incubating in young minds. It is evident, in fact, that textbooks are the first image in order to understand what path young people will take once they leave schools or seminars, at the end of their formal learning. Third, we must focus on the responsibility of print and electronic media to show not only accurate news, but also to follow the ethics of journalism. The goal should not be to punish the media, but at least to provide civic sense to such organizations; that is, to emphasize that what the media are showing will be the manifestation of the state and society to both the outside world and the citizens of the country.⁹

The cost of violence does not need to be elaborated here. The consequences of violence are represented by displaced persons, by people who have suffered trauma and need a long rehabilitation process. However, further elaboration is needed on what the cost of violence is. Last but not least, both the state and the citizens must take responsibility: whatever happens, both the state and society are responsible, instead of keeping those situations in bad faith, we must convert them into the good faith of society and of religion.

By way of conclusion of this discussion, it is necessary to highlight that if the state, society and citizens perceive the need to act to counter violence both in practice and by legal means, this will lead to effective results. If not, the trend will be towards a further explosion: sectarian and religious violence, extremism and militancy will further increase rather than decrease.

⁹ Ibidem.

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