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**The State’s Reaction to Shia Genocide in Pakistan**

The blood of 24847 Shia civilians stains the banner of religious inclusivity, expressive independence and social acceptance that Jinnah waved in the early 1940s in a bid to gain a safe, inclusive and independent dominion for religious minorities in the subcontinent. (HRW) 95 bomb blasts and 1013 firing incidents teeming with sectarian violence against Shia Muslims in Pakistan between 2001 and 2019 have left the Shia community in tatters. (HRW) Many dissociate from their ethnic names while others curb their social activity in an attempt to preserve candor and honor, sacrificing freedom of expression for tentative security. A trip down memory lane to Wadi-e-Hussain (Shia graveyard for martyrs of targeted killing) in Karachi (Batool) unveils the mask of secrecy, illusion and forbearance donned by the society in the face of ethnic cleansing. Each epitaph is but an obelisk of hope among a myriad of lesser creations – a symbol of the hypocrisy of the nation as it condones the oppression of Muslims in Uyghur, Kashmir, Palestine and Syria while turning a blind eye to the systemic wipeout of Shia influence in the Pakistani society. Yet, the point remains. Although the imminent threat of extreme political backlash from Sunni religious parties deters the Federal Government from taking a strong stance against the Shia genocide, the State needs to exercise its political influence against those guilty of such crimes against minorities in Pakistan. Because the State prides itself on freedom of expression, belief and thought, willful ignorance on part of the general populace and apathetic responses by the State discourage citizens representing minorities in the country, thereby, engendering disunity, division and possible rebellions.

The Punjab Assembly passed the Tahaffuz-e- Bunyad-e-Islam Bill in July 2020 (Shahid), ideally aiming to sate the qualms of the Sunni community in regards to prevalent, often misconstrued, blasphemy rulings in the country. The bill had far-reaching consequences though, as it opened up the religious minorities (primarily Shia Muslims) in Pakistan to ‘legal’ persecution by ascertaining Sunni beliefs as the one true interpretation of Islam. Before long, Sunni activists had already registered 42 cases of blasphemy against religious minorities in Northern Punjab, 40 of which implicated Shias – a three-year old Shia baby named as a perpetrator in one such case (Hussain). In the aftermath of the disastrous ruling that crippled basic human rights of over 70 million Shia Muslims in the country, one would expect a public outcry against the ruling, especially during Muharram – a sacred month for Shia Muslims in which they observe Ashura (a day of remembrance in respect of the late Imam Hussain – grandson of the Prophet Muhammad). However, in a surprising turn of events, Sunni activist groups including Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), Ahl-e-Sunnat-Wal-Jammat (ASWJ) and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) mobilized their supporters and took to the streets as a show of power and solidarity of the Sunni community in the fight against religious ‘usurpers’ and ‘pretenders’(Shahid). Anti-Shia protests and hate speeches were organized by Sunni mobs and demonstrations all over the country, including in the capital – Islamabad. The mod led originally by religious activist Khadim Hussain Rizvi called for the blood of Shia scholars who had allegedly used their sermons to ‘spout indignities’ about the early Khalifas of Islam. “Kill infidels, kill Shias, kill infidels!”, the mob chanted belligerently (Shahid).

But what sparked this hatred, disunity and spite in the community? When did the State’s response to Shia genocide become a political maneuver and not a humanitarian incredulity? Why has something so brazenly polarizing become a normalized behavior? Why is the government a party to the ethnic cleansing of 30% of its population? A study into the historical context of the problem lays down necessary framework for the analysis of state policy in this regard.

Operation Red Dawn 2003 took the whole world by storm (Guardian). The capture, arrest and imminent execution of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein kindled an arms race between neighboring Muslim countries, all of which ceded to the power vacuum left behind by the execution of President Saddam. Saudi Arabia and Iran, two of the biggest Muslim nations representative of the world’s Sunni and Shia community centers respectively, sought to cement themselves as the face of the Muslim world in the aftermath of the operation. Gulf donors spent in excess of 100 million dollars per annum to fund Sunni activist groups (Fair) such as the Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba and regional terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda and its emissaries in a bid to choke Iranian influence on the ideals of the Shia community in Pakistan, thereby engendering an anti-Shia movement in the country. Offshoots of these terrorist organizations incite disunity among the population by the kidnapping and subsequent brainwashing of young children – preparing them to fight for a war they were never a part of in the first place. Within a few years of ‘training’ (Fair), the youngsters relinquish control of their ideals, beliefs and often, life, and are enlisted to carry out suicide bombings, target killings and assassinations of Shia Muslims with the promise of grandeur, heaven, ‘jihad sawab’ and more. The disillusionment of these Gulf-sponsored freedom-fighters (Fair) is shared by the state as it works out the opportunity cost of international standing, foreign aid from Saudi Arabia and the United States and moral values. To save a crippling economy, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic lockdowns, the State has to remain subservient to the international actors in play here and play a more idle role in the fight against communal violence in the country.

Sectarianism apostatized the Ahmadi community from Islam in the late 1970s following the curb in democratic rule amidst the Islamization under Zia Ul Haq’s martial law (Siddiqa). The Shia community, albeit much larger in number, dreads the same fate as a result of the nonchalant attitude of the State in this regard. The anti-Shia militia around the country is obedient to the establishment (Pakistan army) to this day, with the militia being used to conduct covert and democratically unfeasible operations in lieu of the army in recent years. Allowing Sunni religious extremists to freely slaughter the Hazaras in the past decade (Nishapuri), to target Shia mosques and religious centers with malice and to mobilize with hundreds of thousands of activists calling for the death of all Shias in the nation projects the notion that the establishment has coalesced with said activists, for reasons yet unknown. General Qamar Bajwa surrendered sensitive information regarding compromised military officers (Musa) in the army who had turned rogue and were instead working alongside the militia to destabilize the government by being complicit in the innumerable terror attacks on the Shia community in the early 2010s. The State’s power to deal with the Islamic activist groups in this fight is severely crippled by the absence of aligned goals (Musa) between the establishment and the State.

The Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) have committed atrocities against the Shia and Hazara population around the country, especially in Quetta, in recent years – killing thousands of Shias in the span of two years between 2011 and 2013. The Alamdar Road Snooker Club suicide bombing in January 2013 and the Vegetable Market Bombing in Quetta (HRW) a month later drove the half a million Hazara population underground. The community lives in fear. Students are unable to walk to school. Shopkeepers wear veils or dark shades to hide their Mongolian facial accents. Shias travel without identification – fearing a massacre akin to that in Mustang in September 2011 where a bus full of Muslims was first separated into Sunni and Shia members (Fair). The Sunni migrants were asked to run while the militia opened fire on the helpless Shia travelers, killing all 40 in the massacre. Another 3 native Shias were killed in a cowardly attack by the militants when the Shias attempted to haul the bodies of their dead to the morgue later that day (Hassan). The CM of Balochistan released a statement desensitizing the nature of the killing by remarking that forty dead in a city in Balochistan was not indicative of communal violence in the country and that the people should just move on instead of asking for vengeance against the attackers (Shahid). There was no investigation, accountability or vengeance for the act. Instead, the provincial and local authorities granted safe passage to the LeJ for their operations and continued with the systemic oppression of the Shias in the region. The lack of accountability of LeJ’s actions left a sour taste in the mouth of the Shia community and served as a reminder of the atrocities committed against them. The region is being ruled by fear – not a sustainable means of territorial control by any means. The incidents and the situation in Balochistan set a precedent for inaction on part of the government when it comes to sectarian violence in the country. The religious minorities such as the Christians, Hindus and Sikhs suffer silently fearing repudiation by their peers. Jinnah’s Pakistan was built around the cornerstone of religious freedom and freedom of expression. Instead, the inertness of the State in the face of Shia genocide only curbs the authoritative power of the State in subsequent incidents, as evidenced by the Asia Bibi case a few years later.

The Pakistan Army and ISI created tenacious Islamic fighters to combat the Russian and Indian presence in Afghanistan (Guardian). Islamic activist groups such as LeJ and SSP formed the core of the combatants in Afghanistan and the State collaborated with these groups in order to win the war in Afghanistan. The separatists from these factions, however, formed the Taliban-e-Pakistan after Pakistan accepted American assistance in the war against Afghanistan following the fall of the twin towers. The Taliban planned to hamper the Pakistan military because of its collaboration with foreign powers and change in allegiances. The Anti-Shia sentiments of the LeJ and SSP resonated in the new Pakistan Taliban who proceeded to target Shias, Barelvis, Ahmadis and other religious minorities in Pakistan in an attempt to fight ‘fi-sabih-lillah’ (for God) and to eradicate the ‘evil non-Muslims’ from the country (Nishapuri).

It can be argued that the State’s nonchalance to Shia genocide came as a compromise to stop a bigger civil war. As the Taliban carried out terrorist attacks on Sufi sites, churches, Shia masajid and civilian minority holdings, the State turned a blind eye to the atrocities being committed in a bid to prevent a greater fallout. However, negotiating with terrorists gives them power over the state. Terrorists grow bolder with every attack and this boldness culminated in the horrific attack on APS Peshawar in December 2014 where the Taliban killed 132 children as ‘vengeance’ for being used as pawns by the Pakistan army in America’s war against Afghanistan (Haider). The Pakistan Army initiated the National Action Plan in a bid to establish communication channels with international actors in the Pakistani war with the Taliban. The State realized that nonchalance in the face of genocide would only really lead to unending atrocities against the citizens. Operation Zarb Azab was authorized by the government leading to the eventual crackdown on the terrorist organizations behind the attacks – proof that swift, decisive action can curtail terrorist activities in the country without severe consequences too.

The socio-economic impact of this nonchalance cannot be discounted either, with the Islamic activist groups reinventing themselves as political pawns using the current administration as a conduit to achieve their goals. In a surprising turn of events, the Tehreek e Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and Ahl Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ) were both allowed to run in the elections of 2018. The Islamic activist parties supported Imran Khan’s claim to the throne by funding close to 70 Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf (PTI) ‘s candidates in the elections (Nishapuri). President of PTI, Imran Khan, eventually succeeded Mian Nawaz Sharif as the Prime Minister of the country. However, this backing came at a cost and the TLP and ASWJ got a breath of fresh air after the election win. The parties conduct rallies, hold demonstrations, spew hate speech on live TV and use their influence to further their own anti-Shia agendas (Siddiqa). The PTI government has struggled to pull the country out of the pit of dept the previous governments had lugged the nation into and the economic backing of the TLP and ASWJ has been instrumental in revitalizing the economy of the state in recent years. Khan’s minister Fouad Chaudary acknowledged the actors playing this wicked game in a press conference, “Unfortunately, due to the history that Pakistan has had, especially with regards to security, this remains a huge problem” (Batool).

A key factor in dictating the state’s approach to this matter was the Barelvi allegiance shift. After Operation Radul Fasad in 2017-19, the Barelvi TLP allied with the Deobandi against the Shia community in a bid to possibly gain social standing and acceptability in the society. Prime Minister Khan addressed the Shia-Sunni divide in a meeting with the Senate in September 2019 where he urged the media to curb the coverage of anti-Shia activism in the nation so as to avoid unnecessary flagrance between the two communities (Siddiqa). This response came as a surprise to the Shia community who expected Prime Minister Khan to take a more authoritative stance against the wrong-doers using their office for personal vendettas. JUI-F’s leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman, leader of the Deobandi voters in Balochistan, expressed his disgust at the State’s inaction in a statement later in November 2019, “If you can’t handle this matter then leave. Let the State go.” (ARYNEWS) Key to note here is the political pressure compounded on the State by bystanders who are ready to shift their allegiances to the opposition in a blink of an eye. The State finds itself at a standstill, balancing control of the House with the outrage of the community. The State has shown the nation how it can deal with religious extremists and terrorist organizations. However, satiating every political house is an impossibility – something Prime Minister Khan has endeavored to do ever since he took office. The office of Prime Minister of Pakistan comes with a hefty responsibility and tons of expectations. One can expect the moral compass of Prime Minister elect to guide him through the diplomacies of the office, all the while protecting the rights and, by extension, lives of the Shia community. Albeit, political ineptness has curbed the progress being made in bridging the gap between the Sunni and Shia communities in Pakistan, one can expect the State to improve upon its existing efforts in the future in a post-pandemic period where economic and political uncertainties pose less of a threat.

The historical context of the Sunni-Shia revolt shed light on the sectarian violence in Afghanistan and the trickle-down effect on FATA in Pakistan. The Anti-Shia sentiments engendered by brainwashing and training of super soldiers led to the systemic oppression of the Shia community in Pakistan. Interesting to note is the concern shared by international actors (Saudi Arabia, United States, China, Russia and India) in the wicked game. In a world where fight or flight was the only instinct this generation of ‘mujahideen’ grew up with, there are no winners. As Copernicus put it, man loses the right to judge the actions of his fellow man once he cheers him on that part. The State created these ‘monsters’ that are now plaguing the nation. Everything that happens is an amalgamation of the millions of choices made by those in power. Some chose wrong. Some chose right. What one can choose to do is restricted by the context one has on the matter. Unfortunately, the Shia community has not been afforded that choice for a generation. Lives are lost, forgotten and blemished. Dr. Abdus Salam, one of only two Pakistani winners of the Nobel Prize had his tombstone engraving vandalized by the State. His crime was that he was a Shia scientist. He follows a long line of Shias who have been defamed and discredited because of their religious inclination after their death – Z.A. Bhutto, M.A. Jinnah, Iskandar Mirza, Yahya Khan, Mamnoon Hussain, Abrar Hussain Shah and Qaim Ali Shah among others. The State of Pakistan has had to deal with socio-economic implications of supporting the Shia community, often risking political backing of religious activists in its venture, but has yet to choose a side. Perhaps politics is not that black and white. And perhaps one day, the tables may turn and the Sunni community would be facing ethnic cleansing and discrimination. The State needs to come up with an amendment to the constitution returning Pakistan to the Pakistan envisioned by Jinnah – a safe haven for all religious minorities. Until then, this blood on its hands shall never wash away.

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