

Political Factors and Sectarian Identities in Tribal Areas of Pakistan

Arshad Khan Bangash* Muhammad Farid† Fariha Bibi‡



Abstract

The study titled “political factors and sectarian identities in tribal areas of Pakistan” was carried out in tribal district Kurram under positivistic tools of the data collection. A sample size of 300 respondents was randomly selected with equal proportion of Shia and Sunni from the study universe and questionnaire was used as a tool of data collection. The data was portrayed at uni-variate level with the help of frequency and percentage distribution. The association between dependent (sectarianism) and independent (political factors) variables was ascertained through Chi-Square test statistics at bi-variate level of analysis. The study concluded that alongside the local people, state agencies are either involved in sectarianism or they are unable to handle the situations. Soviet-US proxy war and United States invasion in Afghanistan accelerate the occurrences of sectarian violence in the area that became most horrible after Pakistan entrance into US coalition in war against terrorism. The local militants are enjoying external patronage for carrying anti-state operations in the area. Previously, political activities were banned in tribal areas that not only affect the conventional politics but also restrict the intervention of nationalist political forces in the region. Further, mainstream political parties are taking less interest to resolve the issue, while some political parties also ideologically supporting sect-based politics. Strict ban on militant groups, formation of strict laws for preventing militancy, and keeping open eyes on external transitions in the area were forwarded some of the recommendations.

Key Words:

Sectarianism,
State Writ,
External
Patronage,
Militants,
Nationalist
Political Forces

Introduction

Shia constitutes 13 percent of the total Muslim population across the globe and the rest of 87 percent are Sunnis. In Pakistan, they are almost 20 percent and the remaining 80 percent are Sunni Muslims (Hunzai, 2013). Pakistan is the second

* Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Gender Studies, Bacha Khan University, Charsadda, KP, Pakistan. Email: arshad.dwhh@gmail.com

† M.Phil Sociology, Department of Sociology and Gender Studies, Bacha Khan University, Charsadda, KP, Pakistan.

‡ PhD Scholar, Department of Rural Sociology, Agriculture University, Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.

largest Shia populated country among the Muslim world after Iran (Yusuf, 2012), where Shia fall between 17 to 20 percent and comprising upon 30 million individuals (Ejaz, 2016). Likewise, conclusion was drawn by Blanchard (2009) who highlighted that Shia is the second largest sect of Muslim community with 10-15 percent of total Muslims population after Sunni who are in majority across the globe. These two major religious sects of Islam (Shia and Sunni) are different from each other in respect of ideologies, practices and beliefs in many ways along with certain similarities that make them opponent groups of each other by virtue of their actions and discourses on the basis of peculiar identifications. Shah (2014) stated that both sects claimed that they are on the right path and their religious ideologies are superior to the other, so that; they are fighting against one another. This ideological clash shifted the religion of peace (Islam) into an extremist and radicalized religion (Murphy & Malik, 2009). The conflict between the two warring sects further promotes intolerance in the country by targeting each other's (Yusuf, 2012). Along with other associated factors such as economic, religious, educational and social, political also enlarge clashes between Shia and Sunni in the country. This mainly includes political instability, government involvement, feeble writ of state, absence of democratic institutions for long period, exclusion of nationalist political forces from mainstream politics, external funding, and available support for violence in the manifesto of some political parties etc. Sectarian conflict cannot be solely understood as a war of beliefs but it could be linked to Ummayyed and Abbasid empires, effects of Iranian revolution, Saddam Hussain control on Iraq and pre and post 9/11 afghan war.

According to Yusuf (2012) that in the past sectarian belligerent groups and organizations enjoyed both financial and operational support extended by security establishment of Pakistan in the purview of rivalry against India. Since 1980s, extremist organizations were used as proxies by state authorities to execute their foreign policies that promote an aggressive struggle among diverse sects. They struggled to grow political figures and inroad into politics (Fair, 2014). State authorities further employed Islamist militants for achieving their goals in India and Afghanistan since independence (Swami, 2007; and Fair, 2011). The state has also been failed with respect of militant's stoppage from entering to the country. Saudi Militants entered into Baluchistan, Pakistan via Tehran, Iran through legal documents with the help of vivacious smuggling community to avoid the routine scrutiny from law enforcement agencies of Pakistan (Gunaratna & Anders, 2008). The labeled violent identity and spiritualism are being used to obscure material agenda and assumption about violence identity (Ahmad, 1998 & Waseem, 2010). The Pakistani security establishment is incapable to act accordingly, whenever Haqqani network get involved in a matter (Dressler & Jan, 2011). Further, Ejaz (2016) disclosed in a similar way by stating that state authorities in Pakistan has been failed in pace against sectarianism and minimizing or ending violence. Their efforts are non-genuine especially taken by military governments for political

purposes, conflict legitimization and geo-political interests. Although, it is a recognized fact that strong hold of local government and strict laws can minimize sectarianism (Irfani, 2004). Similarly, states with strong holds of local government result lack of sectarianism in the region. The absence of democratic environment rise fragmentation, militancy and alliances between Mullah and military turned the society into a bleeding era of sectarian clash in Pakistan (Pieters, 2002 & Irfani, 2010). The Indian intelligence agency (RAW) and Afghanistan is also some time being reported for their involvement in sectarian clashes (Gillani, 2011).

Pakistani Taliban and Al-Qaeda provided logistic support, trainings, funding, and sanctuary to Sunni rebellious organizations that grow the nexus among them. Farook (2015) concluded that the authoritative movement led by Al-Qaeda, Afghan and Pakistan Taliban and other offshoots groups struggling for establishing Islamic laws deepen rift between Shia and Sunni. The recent waves of sectarian conflict increasingly grow the gap between Shia and Sunni in the area. Militants from both sides received substantial external patronage, where Shia militant namely *Hizbullah* and *Mehdi* Militia are supported by unknown Iranian elements that also worsen sectarianism in Kurram (Zahab, 2009). The Iranian revolution is also assumed a leading factor in strengthening sectarian conflict in Pakistan (Majeed & Hashmi, 2014). On the other hand, Sunni organizations and Deobandi Maddrassas received weapons and financial resources from Saudi Arabia (Yusuf, 2012). In the past, they also received funding from United State in the context of anti-Soviet Jihad that makes Pakistani state as a battle ground for sectarian clashes as a proxy state. Zarif (2011) contended that Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan militants received funding from Iran who appeared as heroic being defending killing of Shia masses. The US state department report on terrorism published in August 08, 2011 described Iran as the most active sponsor of terrorism by providing material, financial and logistic support for many terrorist and militant groups. The continuous threat to Shia communities also invited Iran for playing their role and protecting them by expanding their financial and logistic support (Vatanaka, 2012). Further, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan is tried to impose Islamic laws and to overthrow Pakistani state authorities and played a key role in sectarian conflict of Kurram (Yusuf, 2012). The Taliban commander Hakimullah Mehsud was reported behind these resurgent violence (Jan, 2009). The phenomenon also inflected by anti-Soviet *Jihad* in Afghanistan (Haqqani, 2005). The Afghan *Jihad* further strengthens militants with automatic weapons, Kalashnikovs (AK-47), machine guns, rockets, and sophisticated explosive devices that increases the rate of casualties in Pakistan and destroyed the harmonized social fabric of the country (Jalazai, 1993). This violence gets enlarged in the decade of 2000s in Kurram, as the followers of Bin Laden did not expect Shia resistance in Kurram. But approximately 200 of their followers were handed over to Pakistani state authorities by Shias in lower Kurram in December 2001 (Dressler & Jan, 2011).

Methods and Procedure

The study titled the “role of political factors in constructing sectarian identities in tribal areas of Pakistan” was carried with the core objectives to ascertain the association between internal political factors that promote sectarianism and to describe the relationship between sectarianism and external factors attached with sectarian conflict. The nature of the study was quantitative and a questionnaire consisting upon three levels (Yes, No, and Uncertain) was used as a tool of data collection. The universe of the study was tribal district of Kurram and 300 respondents were selected through simple random sample method from different villages of tehsil Alizai, Satta and Parachinar with equal ratio i.e. 150 from both Shias and Sunnis. The collected data was analyzed and presented at uni-variate and bi-variate levels. For drawing discernible picture of the data, the data was presented at uni-variate level with frequency and percentages. The relationship between dependent (sectarianism) and independent (political factors) variables was dig out with the help of Chi-Square test statistics at bi-variate level.

Study Results at Uni-Varite and Bi-Variate Levels of Analysis

Political Factors	Perceptions	Yes	No	Uncertain	Total	χ & P Values
No involvement of state agencies in sectarianism	Yes	2.70%	14.00%	26.20%	43.00(14.30%)	$\chi=2.510$ (P=0.643)
	No	13.30%	68.60%	128.10%	210.00(70.00%)	
	Uncertain	3.00%	15.40%	28.70%	47.00(15.70%)	
Success of state agencies in prevention of sectarianism	Yes	4.30%	22.20%	41.50%	68.00(22.70%)	$\chi =7.526$ (P=0.111)
	No	11.40%	58.80%	109.80%	180.00(60.00%)	
	Uncertain	3.30%	17.00%	31.70%	52.00(17.30%)	
Local community are responsible for sectarianism	Yes	10.90%	56.20%	104.90%	172.00(57.30%)	$\chi =9.223$ (P=0.05)
	No	6.70%	34.30%	64.10%	105.00(35.00%)	
	Uncertain	1.50%	7.50%	14.00%	23.00(7.70%)	
Interest of political parties in resolving sectarianism	Yes	4.60%	23.50%	43.90%	72.00(24.00%)	$\chi =4.254$ (P=0.373)
	No	11.80%	60.80%	113.50%	186.00(62.00%)	
	Uncertain	2.70%	13.70%	25.60%	42.00(14.00%)	

Sectarianism is the outcome of the state weak writ	Yes	15.60%	80.70%	150.70%	247.00(82.30%)	$\chi=23.43$ (P=0.000)
	No	2.50%	12.70%	23.80%	39.00(13.00%)	
	Uncertain	0.90%	4.60%	8.50%	14.00(4.70%)	
No implicit role of foreign agencies in sectarianism	Yes	0.80%	3.90%	7.30%	12.00(4.00%)	$\chi=3.587$ (P=0.465)
	No	15.80%	81.70%	152.50%	250.00(83.30%)	
	Uncertain	2.40%	12.40%	23.20%	38.00(12.70%)	
No impact of Afghan proxy war against USSR on sectarian hostilities	Yes	2.90%	14.70%	27.50%	45.00(15.00%)	$\chi=5.583$ (P=0.233)
	No	11.70%	60.10%	112.20%	184.00(61.30%)	
	Uncertain	4.50%	23.20%	43.30%	71.00(23.70%)	
PAK-US coalition have nothing with sectarianism	Yes	1.50%	7.50%	14.00%	23.00(7.70%)	$\chi=4.075$ (P=0.396)
	No	14.70%	75.80%	141.50%	232.00(77.30%)	
	Uncertain	2.90%	14.70%	27.50%	45.00(15.00%)	
Role of political administration in sectarianism	Yes	12.10%	62.40%	116.50%	191.00(63.70%)	$\chi=10.120$ (P=0.038)
	No	4.40%	22.90%	42.70%	70.00(23.30%)	
	Uncertain	2.50%	12.70%	23.80%	39.00(13.00%)	
Ideological support for sectarianism in the manifesto of some political parties	Yes	11.50%	59.50%	111.00%	182.00(60.70%)	$\chi=19.25$ (P=0.001)
	No	2.60%	13.40%	25.00%	41.00(13.70%)	
	Uncertain	4.90%	25.20%	47.00%	77.00(25.70%)	
No effects of sectarianism on political spheres	Yes	1.60%	8.20%	15.30%	25.00(8.30%)	$\chi=6.184$ (P=0.186)
	No	16.30%	84.00%	156.80%	257.00(85.70%)	
	Uncertain	1.10 %	5.90 %	11.00%	18.00(6.00%)	
Long standing absence of political activities in tribal areas	Yes	8.20%	42.50%	79.30%	130.00(43.30%)	$\chi=2.687$ (P=0.611)
	No	7.70%	39.50%	73.80%	121.00(40.30%)	
	Uncertain	3.10%	16.00%	29.90%	49.00(16.30%)	
	Yes	13.70%	70.60%	131.80%	216.00(72.00%)	$\chi=7.281$

Absence of true nationalist political forces promote sectarianism	No	1.70%	8.80%	16.50%	27.00(9.00%)	(P=0.122)
	Uncertain	3.60%	18.60%	34.80%	57.00(19.00%)	

Description of Study Results at Uni-Varite and Bi-Variate Levels

Study results in the above table shows that majority of the respondents i.e. 210.00 (70.00%) discarded the statement regarding no involvement of state agencies in the promotion of sectarianism and the association of the statement with sectarianism was non-significant (P=0.643) at bi-variate level of analysis. The local communities in-itself are also responsible for sectarian occurrences in the area as endorsed by majority respondents i.e. 172.00 (57.30%), followed by a significant association (P=0.05) between the variables. In contrast, study results showed that majority respondents opposed 180.00 (60.00%) the notion that success of state agencies in the prevention of sectarianism and contention was non-significantly associated (P=0.111) with sectarian conflict. Further, regarding the interest of political parties in resolving sectarianism majority of the respondents 186.00 (62.00%) were against the statement and same was also non-significantly associated (P=0.373) at bi-variate level. However, it is believed among the majority respondents i.e. 247.00 (82.30%) that sectarianism is primarily the outcome of feeble writ of the state in the area and the association of the statement was highly significant (P=0.000) with sectarianism. In contrast, majority respondents 250.00(83.30%) rejected the statement about no implicit role of foreign agencies in sectarianism and was non-significant P=0.465 in relation with sectarian violence. Study results further disclosed the statement regarding no impact of Afghan proxy war against USSR on sectarian hostilities and the same was discarded by majority respondents i.e. 184.00 (61.30%). This statement was found non-significant (P=0.233) in relation to sectarianism as well. Moreover, majority respondents 232.00(77.30%) negated the contention that US-PAK coalition have nothing to do with sectarianism and both were non-significant (P=0.396) with each other's. Regarding the role of political administration in sectarianism most of the respondents 191.00 (63.7) were in favour of the statement, as well the same significantly associated (P=0.038) with sectarianism. Likewise, the statement about the presence of ideological support for sectarianism in the manifesto of some political parties was acknowledged by majority respondents i.e. 182.00 (60.70%) and the relations between the variables was significant (P=0.001). Opposite of the previous results, majority i.e. 257.00 (85.70%) of the respondents rejected the notion that there is no effects of sectarianism on political spheres and was also non-significant (P=0.186) at bi-variate level of analysis. The association between sectarianism and the statement that absence of long standing absence political activities contributed towards sectarian clashes was non-significant (P=0.611) and the same was endorsed by majority respondents i.e. 130.00

(43.30%) at uni-variate level of analysis. Lastly, majority respondents 216.00 (72.00%) favoured the statement that absence of true nationalist political forces in the area promote sectarianism and the same was non-significantly associated ($P=0.122$) as well.

Discussion

Kurram Agency remained a hub of sectarian violence throughout the history after the independence of Pakistan. The existing situation further deteriorated after Soviet-US proxy war in Afghanistan. US invasion in Afghanistan and the emergence of talibanization across the borders also fuelled the phenomenon either directly or indirectly that resulted a massive killing of thousands of innocent people. The devastating effects of the clash between Shia and Sunni were not only limited to killing of innocent people but as well negatively affected the overall socio-cultural and economic dynamics of the area. Thousands of home, hundreds of holy places, schools, government buildings, and business centers were fired during the war, that compel thousands of thousands individuals to left their native areas and to migrate other parts of the country. After thorough and comprehensive analysis of the issue at hand, it was dig out that sectarianism in the area are multi faced that are perpetuated and enlarged due to social, cultural, religious, political, administrative, and economic reasons. Study results disclosed that the involvement of state agencies with regard to sectarianism cannot be ignored. In the adjacent mountains of different villages of district Kurram, check posts has been made. Further, across the border side, army personals had been deployed since long. Their presence in the area and occurrences of sectarian conflicts provides an opportunity for public to raise fingers over the role of state agencies by assuming that have been failed in preventing sectarianism from the area. Ahmad & Junaid (2010) & Ali (2013) described that the presence of terrorist's elements in the area splashed the bendable picture of Pakistan by challenging state writ. The lose control of law enforcing agencies emerged new actors and scenes resulted feeble state writ in the area. The silent role of law enforcing agencies either in normal situation or during conflict period further triggered people perceptions regarding their involvement in the state of affairs. That is why, people believed that state agencies do not play their role in true spirit due to their hidden agenda or they are intended to achieve certain political and administrative goals in the area. Further, tribal areas of Pakistan were kept marginalized throughout the history and being discriminated in different walk of life. Such negligence in one hand and greater state intervention in the local affairs by state authorities on the other hand also provide a room that similar affairs could not be continued without proper support of the state machinery. Majeed & Hashmi (2014) concluded that the religion of Islam has also been used for political purposes both by civil and military rulers that promote an antagonistic struggle in between assorted sectarian groups.

Moreover, it is not only due to the role of state agencies in sectarianism but their incapability's of coping the situation either willing or unwilling as well restrict their effectiveness in preventing sectarianism from tribal areas. An absence of sustainable democratic process in Pakistan, religious extremists, militants and undemocratic forces has been empowered in the past that is one of the major governance issues in the country (Hussain, 2014). Similarly, certain other factors such as continuous threat on India border with Pakistan be channelize most of the state energies to safeguard the border from external invasion that left little resources to fully intervene in the adjacent territory of Afghanistan. In return, anti-state elements get an opportunity to expand their operations freely in the areas. The efforts of the state were not genuine in sustaining peace in reaction to sectarianism in the country, thus; Pakistani state authorities has been failed to reduce violence (Ejaz, 2016). Moreover, neither state nor external forces can play an effectual role in an alien area until enough number of supports is not extended from the local dwellers. In this context, the sectarian phenomenon has been injected in mindset of the local people through the process of social engineering and as a result they get easily indulged in clashes. The prevailing high rate of illiteracy and strong hold of religious clergy mushroom a particular mentality that provides an easy platform for militants to carry out their activities. Hunzai (2013) disclosed that the increasing nexus of local belligerent with national networks triggered violence as emotional reaction to instant media reports of sectarian attacks on kin. Pakistani Political governments in general and political administration of Kurram in particular can also be blamed for sectarian conflict. For strengthening and powering sectarianism, Pakistani state has been mobilized these identities (Ejaz, 2016).

Previously, political process and activities were banned in tribal areas and only limited numbers of *Maliks* (local elites) were allowed for vote to elect their legislative members without any political affiliations. This restricted franchise continued till 1997 and even though it's applicable to provincial assembly till date. Although; the situations are much better now as the local people are electing their members through universal adult franchise and have the right to vote for candidates. Due to an absence of political activities and ban on political parties in the area left no space for them to intervene in tribal affairs and to focus on the very basic issue of the local people related to security. Being a region without political interests, the area remained left behind than other parts of the country in many ways. It is also worth mentioning, that Pakistani politics can be divided into orthodox and moderate political forces that can be further divided into religious and secular forces. Generally considered a non-militant Islamist political party, Deobandi Jamiat Ulema-e-Islami is significantly tied with Deobandi militant groups that provide an opportunity to militant for political patrons (Fair, 2015). Secular political forces in the country have nothing to do with anti-state elements but some religious political forces strongly linked with anti-state elements. In this

regard, Zahab (2009) highlighted that fighters from both sides received external patronage where Shia fighters divided into *Hizbullah* and *Mehdi Militia* are backed by Iranian elements. Likewise, Majeed and Hashmi (2014) concluded that the adoption of patronage policy for co-opting religious parties from military governments of Pakistan, religious extremists obtained a potential to masquerade a leading threat to the brass tacks of state and society. Along with political isolation, tribal's were also denied from an access to formal justice system and their local affairs were run through an informal laws i.e. *Turizuna* formed in 1940s by British empire and continued even after the independence of Pakistan and still continued. The political agent has complete authority to exercise the power of administrator and judge and being responsible for all affairs.

The phenomenon further enlarged when external actors extend their support and intervene in the local affairs through paid agents. Such like situations are very common in Pakistan. Gunaratna & Anders (2008) concluded that sectarian conflict in Pakistan is the outcome of given accommodation to extremists by army and government, proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran and ill equipped army. Many foreign agencies have vested interest in the area and playing unspoken role in promoting sectarianism. To achieve their hidden interest, they appoint likeminded agents and sponsored them for perpetuating anti-state operations. Both Shia and Sunni fighters obtained earth-shattering resources and patronage (Zahab, 2009). The US invasion in Afghanistan, and Pakistani state support for American also contributed a lot in promoting sectarian clashes in tribal areas. Ejaz (2016) added that since Afghan *Jihad* Deobandis gained moral and financial assistance from United State through Pak-government that empowered them to build armed militia. This attack also organized and mobilized various militant groups across the border. United State invasion in Afghan initiated on 7th October 2001, many Taliban and Al-Qaeda associated fighters sought refuge in tribal areas of Pakistan (Fair, 2015). That is why, some important places for US national security included tribal belt adjacent to Pak-Afghan border (Markey, 2008). Militants find sanctuary across Pak-Afghan borders for carrying out attacks on state machinery and running transnational criminal enterprises (Lamb & Hameed, 2012). Similarly, US-Soviet proxy war in Afghanistan in the past altered the peaceful dynamics of the area once exist in tribal areas. Afghan- Soviet war remained a great source of ammunition and weapons that introduced a Kalashnikov (AK-47) culture in the area. Sunni Afghan migration in Kurram further affected the population dynamics and destroyed the equilibrium of the area by supporting their nearest ideological groups. Since long extra regional events such as anti-Soviet *Jihad*, Iranian revolution and war between Iran and Iraq inflected sectarian conflict in Pakistan (Haqqani, 2005).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concluded that after independence of Pakistan tribal district Kurram remained a hub of sectarianism that is either the outcome of state involvement in the events or the result of their incapability to cope with the situation being failed in preventing sectarian conflicts from the area. In the past, Soviet-US proxy war in Afghanistan equipped militant groups with highly advanced weapons that were being used in sectarian operations by militants. Similarly, the event of 9/11 and US invasion in Afghanistan provide an opportunity for anti-state elements to get mobilized and destabilize the writ of the state in the area; in return, it's enlarged the existed clash between Shia and Sunni. The situations get further devastated when Pakistani government entered into the war that was carried against Taliban and Al-Qaeda known as war against terrorism. Likewise, the availability of external funding for militant groups in the form of logistic, sanctuary and cash also boom the phenomenon in tribal areas of the country. Pakistani society also remained under martial control for long era and as a result democratic organizations did not flourished as it was required. On the other hand, political parties can also be blamed in this respect as the manifesto of some political parties even contains ideological sects-based materials and support. Since long the area remained an alien place for conventional politics as they were not allowed for contesting elections in the area. The nationalist political forces were also totally condemned to expand their hold over the local people. Such like factors directly or indirectly contributed in the way of sectarianism in tribal areas in general and district Kurram in particular. State authorities are required to extend their true writ in the area, imposition of ban on militant groups without the notion of good or bad Taliban and militant, check and balance on external funding in the area, and legislation about special laws with strict punishments for anti-state elements were forwarded some of the policy recommendations.

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