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# The Pakistani Shi'a

*Hassan Abbas*

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The Shi'a Muslims of Pakistan, constituting roughly 18-20% of the country's 170 million inhabitants, are a vibrant and energetic minority. Shi'a financial and political leaders, including Pakistan's founding father Muhammad 'Ali Jinnah, played important roles in the Pakistan movement of the 1940s. Since then, they largely have remained part of the political mainstream. Traditionally, they have been well represented in the country's civilian and military power structures, and in the media.

The marginalization and, in some cases, the victimization of the Shi'a minority is a recent phenomenon rooted in three critically important events of the late 1970s: the redefinition of Pakistan by the military dictator, General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq; the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the consequent Afghan "jihad" sponsored by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the West; and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. These developments changed the status of Pakistani Shi'ites in dramatic ways.

## *THE REDEFINITION OF PAKISTAN UNDER GENERAL ZIA*

By and large, Pakistani Shi'ites always had aligned themselves with liberal and progressive political parties. Being a minority, it suited them to remain close to comparatively secular and non-religious political forces. Their en-bloc support for the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto-led Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s substantiates this. Before the rise of General Zia, who was a conservative Sunni with Deobandi inclinations, Shi'a-Sunni relations in the country largely had been peaceful and cordial (though some sectarian conflict did occur in 1960s in a limited area in Sindh province). Zia's "Islamization" policies, which were meant to introduce Sunni Hanafi law in the country, changed this. Zia used religion to legitimize unconstitutional acts. In the name of "Islamic reforms," he severely damaged the sectarian harmony in the country. Sunni and Ahl-e Hadith (Wahhabi-influenced) political parties largely supported these efforts. However, Shi'ites rose in protest under Mufti Jafar Hussein, a leading Shi'a cleric, who resigned in protest from the official Council of Islamic Ideology.

## *THE IMPACT OF IRANIAN DEVELOPMENTS ON PAKISTAN*

Parallel to the religious transformation imposed on Pakistan by Zia, the rise of Shi'ism as a popular religious symbol in Iran under the inspirational leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini significantly influenced Pakistani Shi'ites. Even some Sunni politi-



*Dr. Hassan Abbas is a Research Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs and is the author of Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army and America's War on Terror.*

cal forces, such as Jamaat-e Islami initially supported the revolution in Iran, seeing in it a model for Pakistan and a role for themselves. In contrast, Pakistani Shi'a initially were reluctant to take a clear position, because historically they had been supportive of the Shah of Iran and were more connected with the Iraqi Shi'a clerical establishment, who believed in remaining aloof from the political arena. This began to change as the younger Shi'a generation in Pakistan was galvanized. Young Pakistani Shi'ites felt empowered by the rise of "Shi'a" Iran and attracted to the anti-imperialist and revolutionary tone of the movement in Iran.

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The year 1979 also marks the emergence of the Tehrik-e Nifaz-e fiqh-e Jafria (the Movement for the Implementation of Jafaria Law, or TNFJ). Through the TNFJ, Pakistani Shi'ites started demanding from the Zia government a) the recognition of Shi'a law by the courts and the appointment of Shi'a 'ulama' to judicial positions, b) the formation of a Shi'a *Waqf* (endowment) Board, and c) Shi'a representation in educational committees tasked with crafting the country's educational policies. The Shi'a minority threatened

Zia with agitation unless their demands were met. Though initially Zia was unmoved, a three-day siege of the Federal Secretariat in Islamabad in July 1980 by approximately 100,000 Shi'a forced him to listen to these demands more attentively, at the very least. The expanding Iranian religious fervor was palpable.

#### THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE AFGHAN JIHAD

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan started supporting the Afghan resistance. Within a short time, the "freedom struggle" of Afghans was converted to a "jihad project" in order to add religious zeal to the effort and attract fighters from Muslim countries. Western support (especially from the United States and Britain) helped Pakistan in this endeavor. Saudi Arabia, disturbed by the "Shi'a revolution" in Iran, helped to finance the anti-Soviet effort. As a result, the Afghan *mujahidin* received ample funds to wage their ultimately successful guerrilla war against Soviet forces. However, few realized at the time that these religious warriors launched from Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) were staunchly anti-Shi'a. The Saudi-sponsored *madrasa* network played its role in this scenario. For the new religious warriors produced by this network, Shi'a assertiveness was deemed very threatening. Meanwhile, the new clerical regime of Iran, which was indeed interested in expanding their influence in the region, provided financial aid to various Pakistani Shi'a organizations. Hundreds of Pakistani Shi'a traveled to Iran and, benefiting from Iranian scholarships, studied in the theological centers of Qom. These opportunities reinvigorated the self-assertion of Pakistani Shi'a identity.

With the outbreak of a Saudi-Iran proxy war in Pakistan, sectarian conflict intensified. Shi'a leaders and activists increasingly became victims of targeted killings, and in a few cases, Pakistani Shi'a responded in kind. Iranian diplomats in Pakistan also came under attack. The rise in 1985 of Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan (the army of the companions of the Prophet, or SSP), a rabidly anti-Shi'a militant group added fuel to the fire. In a tit-for-tat response, Sipah-e Mohammad (the

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army of Muhammad), a Shi'a militant group, emerged in the early 1990s. The ascendancy of the Taliban in Afghanistan after 1994 provided a safe heaven to anti-Shi'a militants while Islamabad stood idle as the country became engulfed by sectarianism. These groups were finally banned by General Pervez Musharraf in 2001. Experts believe that although Iranian funding for the Shi'a militant group in Pakistan subsided in the late 1990s, Saudi influence in the country through the Wahhabi *madrassa* network is still largely intact. Of late, the Saudi-Iran rivalry in Pakistan is diminishing, but the sectarian confrontation that it generated has become deeply rooted in the process. Being a minority, Pakistani Shi'a remain the more affected group, as is evident from regular attacks (including suicide attacks) on Shi'a religious centers, most recently in Peshawar, Chakwal, Kohat, and FATA's Kurram agency.

#### CONCLUSION

The Talibanization of FATA and NWFP today is a product of Zia-era domestic and foreign policies and Pakistan's ill-advised and counterproductive support for the Taliban in the 1990s. Support of militant groups in Indian-controlled Kashmir in the 1990s was a natural corollary of the Afghan *jihad*, further complicating India-Pakistan relations. The Islamic Revolution in Iran was a separate development in this scenario, as different social, political, and economic factors were involved in its genesis. However, due to their geographic proximity to Pakistan, the turmoil in Afghanistan and the revolutionary transformation of Iran had a considerable, long-lasting, and largely problematic impact on the country's social, political, and religious dynamics.

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