
Sectarianism in Pakistan: A Profile of Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan (SSP)

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There are a number of general studies of sectarianism in Pakistan,¹ most of which link increased sectarianism with Zia ul-Haq's Islamization, the Afghan War, the proliferation of Deobandi *madrāsas*, and the Iranian Revolution. This essay shows how sectarian mobilization intersected with and competed with *biraderi* (patrilineal kinship networks) politics in the district of Jhang, a city in southeastern Punjab. It also situates sectarian militancy within the context of a rising urban commercial class that was locked out of political power by landowners who traditionally dominated district politics. Local traders and bazaar merchants who had wealth but no political clout extended unequivocal support and funding to sectarian Sunni organizations such as Sipah-e Sahaba (SSP) and its offshoot Lashkar-e Jhangvi (LJ).

Like most militant struggles, the anti-Shi'a campaign of the SSP thrived on bloodshed. Sectarian killing began with the murders of Ehsan Ellahi Zaheer in 1987 and Tehreek Nifaz-e Fiqh Jafariya Pakistan (TNFJ) leader Allama Arif ul-Husseini in 1988. On February 22, 1990, Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, the SSP's founder, was killed in a retaliatory bomb attack. Following Haq Nawaz's death, his successors² used the cult of the martyr — around which, ironically, Shi'a theological discourse is structured — to enhance the SSP's electoral standing and its renown. Scores of martyrs and ongoing sectarian strife afforded the SSP “functional utility”³ that contributed immensely to perpetuating its hold.

The SSP's rhetoric always had been aggressive, but following Haq Nawaz's death, its deeds matched its words. In 1996, Lashkar-e Jhangvi (LJ) emerged as an armed offshoot of SSP. Militancy not only intimidated Shi'ites, but also increased the SSP's electoral support. From the outset, the SSP leadership sought influence in the National Assembly



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1. Vali Reza Nasr, “The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan: The Changing role of Islamism and the Ulema in Society and Politics,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2000); Qasim Zaman, “Sectarianism in Pakistan: The Radicalization of Shii and Sunni Identities,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (1998); Mohammad Waseem, “Political Sources of Islamic Militancy in Pakistan,” in Ian Talbot, ed., *The Deadly Embrace: Religion, Violence and Politics in India and Pakistan 1947-2002* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.145-163. The Crisis Group Asia Report No. 95 on *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan* adopts a similar approach.

2. Maulana Zia ur Rehman Faruqi became the Chief Patron of SSP after Haq Nawaz Jhangvi's assassination. Before that he was *Imam* and *Khateeb* of a mosque run by Auqaf Deptt at Sumundri, in District Faisalabad. *Zindagi*, Lahore, March 14-20, 1991.

3. Paul R. Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), p. 377.

in order to amend the Constitution and create a Sunnification of the Pakistani state. On that occasion, the government of the Punjab was visibly perplexed about the law and order situation during the period of mourning, as this followed hard on the heels of the murder of Haq Nawaz. As a pre-emptive measure, the government called together urban notables and the leaders of the SSP to negotiate. Malik Saleem Iqbal, the Health Minister of the Punjab, presided over the proceedings. Members of the Jhang District administration, the SSP leadership, and other notables were included in negotiations that led to an *Aman Muahida* (peace treaty).⁴ But only a few days after the accord was reached, a bomb exploded in Jhang, killing three Sunnis and injuring 28. This effectively sabotaged the peace efforts. Indeed, the site of the bomb explosion was not far away from Amanullah Khan Sial's *haveli* (mansion) in Jhang city.⁵ This is highly suggestive that the efforts to bring peace to the conflict-ridden city were stymied because important *biraderis* had been excluded from the process.

The SSP expanded beyond its roots in sectarian rivalries and *biraderi* politics in Jhang. It organized itself remarkably well at the district and *tehsil* level. According to one estimate, by the time that the SSP was outlawed in January 2002, it controlled 74 district- and 225 *tehsil*-level units. In addition, the SSP ran 17 foreign branches, in countries that included Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Canada, and the UK. With its 6,000 trained and professional cadres and 100,000 registered workers,⁶ the SSP was the best organized Islamic party in Pakistan after Jamaat-e Islami.

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The SSP's growing influence was accompanied by an association with violence. While Jhang was the scene of many sectarian killings, they spread to other areas of Punjab and beyond. Although the SSP attempted to distance itself from the activities of its armed offshoot, Lashkar-e Jhangvi, this was never done convincingly. The LJ had links with "international terrorist" movements, which led then-President Pervez Musharraf to ban it and the SSP. The ban merely drove supporters of the SSP and LJ underground.

The Taliban had been a great source of inspiration for SSP leaders, who sought to replicate their policies in Pakistan. In October 2000, Azam Tariq, while speaking at an International Difah-e Sahaba Conference in Karachi, stated that "the SSP aims to transform 28 large Pakistani cities into model Islamic cities where television, cinema and music would be

4. Along with Malik Saleem Iqbal, Arshad Lodhi, the Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police, the persons who took part in the negotiations were: Maulana Rashid Ahmad Madni, Mohalla Chandanwalla, Dildar Ali (Secretary Anjuman-i-Tajran), Haji Muhammad Ali (President, Anjuman-i-Tajran), Mian Iqbal Hussain, Muhammad Zahur Chuhan Advocate, Sheikh Muhammad Iqbal (Chairman Municipal Committee, Jhang), Muhammad Farooq (President Anjuman-i-Tajran, Jhang City), Muhammad Rafique Saqi (General Secretary Anjuman-i-Tajran Jhang city), Muhammad Aslam (Joint Secretary Anjuman-i-Tajran, Jhang City) and Maulana Esar ul-Qasimi. See, *Aman Muahida (Manzur Shuda) Zilai Intizamia wa membreaan e Committee Anjuman-i-Sipah-i-Sihaba wa Muazizeen-i-Jhang* (Jhang: 1990).

5. Amanullah Khan is a leader of a *sial* clan in Jhang and adheres to the sect.

6. See *Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan*, Terrorist Group of Pakistan, South Asia Terrorism Portal, June 21, 2004, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp?countries/Pakistan/terroristoutfits/ssp.htm>

banned.”⁷ Azam Tariq was an ardent supporter of *jihād* in Indian-controlled Kashmir. When Masud Azhar founded Jaish-e Mohammad in the aftermath of his release in Kandahar, following the hijacking of an Indian aircraft in December 1999, Azam Tariq pledged to send 500,000 *jihadis* to Jammu and Kashmir to fight Indian security forces.⁸

The SSP extremists had two major modes of operation: targeted killings and indiscriminate shootings in places of worship. A number of leading Shi’ites were assassinated. By 1992, the SSP activists had gained access to sophisticated weapons systems. Saudi Arabia was the major source of funding, while Iran provided financial support to Shi’a outfits. In June 1992, SSP adherents used a rocket launcher in an attack that killed five police officers.⁹ The attempted assassination of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in January 1999 is yet another example of the growing scale of SSP attacks.

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During the 1990s, Iranian officials who were serving in various capacities in Pakistan also were victims of SSP militants. Most prominent among them was Agha Sadiq Ganji, the Iranian Consul General, who was gunned down on December 19, 1990.¹⁰ (Although Ganji was widely believed by SSP supporters to have masterminded Haq Nawaz Jhangvi’s murder, there is no tenable evidence of his involvement other than his presence in Jhang that day.) Muhammad Ali Rahimi, an Iranian diplomat, was another victim of a targeted killing in Multan in 1997. The Iranian Cultural Centre at Lahore was set ablaze in January of that year, in retribution for the assassination of Zia ur-Rehman Farooqi along with 26 others at the Lahore Session Court.

Five members of the Iranian armed forces were fatally ambushed in Multan in September, sparking a serious diplomatic row between Islamabad and Tehran.

Sectarian polarization enabled the SSP to increase its vote bank. In the central Jhang constituency in the 1990 election, Maulana Esar ul-Qasimi, Haq Nawaz’s successor and Vice Patron, secured victory with a considerable majority. As the Islami Jamohri Ittehad’s (IJI) candidate for the National Assembly, he obtained 62,486 votes. He also contested a Provincial Assembly seat as an independent candidate, defeating the IJI ticket holder and favorite, Sheikh Iqbal, by the margin of almost 10,000 votes.¹¹

Nawaz Sharif’s crackdown on militancy during 1997-9, together with an atmosphere of the general disapproval of violence and militancy, saw a considerable decline in sectarian killing in Punjab. From January 1999 to December 2000

7. *Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan*, Terrorist Group of Pakistan, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/Pakistan/terroristoutfits/Ssp.htm>

8. “In the Spotlight: *Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan* (SSP),” July 9, 2004, [http://www.cdi.org/.../friendly version/printversion.cfm](http://www.cdi.org/.../friendly%20version/printversion.cfm).

9. *Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan*, Terrorist Group of Pakistan, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/Pakistan/terroristoutfits/Ssp.htm>.

10. *Zindagi*, Lahore, December 14-20, 1991. Sheikh Haq Nawaz was hung in Mianwali on February 28, 2001. Kaka Balli, a relative of Amanullah Sial, was sentenced to life imprisonment for the assassination of Haq Nawaz Jhangvi. *Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan*, Terrorist Group of Pakistan.

11. General Elections Report, p. 243. He contested that election from the JUI (Sami ul-Haq Group) quota. See *Zindagi*, Lahore, March 14-20, 1991.

not a single incident of sectarian violence was reported. The military takeover on October 12, 1999 may be one of the reasons that militant groups had assumed a low profile. However, the 2002 elections, which were held under military rule, reversed the process. Azam Tariq won the election despite being in jail. Although both the LJ and the SSP, along with their Shi'a rivals, the SMP and the TNFJ, had been banned,¹² Azam Tariq was allowed to contest the elections as an independent candidate. This decision evoked a sharp reaction from many quarters. Azam Tariq's victory was quite unexpected, though it fits well into a pattern whereby representatives of religious militant outfits tend to do well in conditions of "guided democracy" because of the marginalization of mainstream parties. However, after 9/11, figures such as Azam Tariq have had to act circumspectly. After securing electoral victory instead of siding with the opposition alliance of religious parties the MMA, Tariq went along with the pro-Musharraf Muslim League (PML-Q) and managed to secure the release of imprisoned SSP activists.

In October 2003, Azam Tariq was killed in Islamabad. There had been 20 previous attempts on his life. Azam Tariq's murder may be the death knell of the SSP or Millat-e Islamiya (the name given to the organization after it was proscribed in 2002). The resulting leadership vacuum has rendered the organization rudderless. Consequently, its immediate future seems bleak. Yet, the nature and scale of violence in post-Saddam Iraq and the role and tenacity of Hizbullah in Lebanon suggest that sectarianism has become a salient feature of the contemporary Middle Eastern and South Asian landscape. The possibility of a "clash within Muslim civilization" cannot be ruled out.

12. See for further detail Ch. Akhter Ali, "Reference under 6(2) of the Political Parties Act (as amended)", Supreme Court of Pakistan, Islamabad, January 29, 2002.