

blame the government's pro-Sunni stance for their perceived political and economic marginalization.

- Violence leads to displacement of people, the breakdown of local social support systems and bitter memories that lead to a hardening of social attitudes and increasingly separate identities, which are reflected in increased ghettoization.
- The public discourse, which links religion and politics, reinforces social tensions. The state is perceived by citizens alternately as a remote system of authority given to the arbitrary exercise of power (sometimes to safeguard its own interests and sometimes to protect citizens) and as a symbol of public morality and justice, duty bound to contain violence, rehabilitate displaced persons and punish the guilty. In Jhang and Gilgit, its ability to resolve the conflict and prevent further violence and establish an equitable social order proved to be weak.
- In 2010, there is an uneasy peace in both cities, but trust in the state is limited, political and socio-economic inequality has not been addressed, the underlying causes of sectarian conflict remain, sporadic sectarian violence continues to occur and there are few efforts to build a lasting peace.
- Religious organizations in Pakistan are almost always sectarian in nature and also have ideological and financial links with the state and regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Therefore, they cannot build bridges between rival communities. Even development organizations with non-discriminatory policies such as the Aga Khan Foundation are hampered by their

perceived sectarian associations. In addition, non-religious civil society organizations are almost entirely absent in both Jhang and Gilgit, leaving post-violence relief to be provided - and occasional efforts at dialogue to be initiated - by the state, often with the help of local community leaders.

- However, the state has alternated between attempting to impose its secular legal-institutional authority and taking a partisan (pro-Sunni) stance. This runs the risk of undermining both its ability to contain sectarian conflict and its legitimacy.

### Policy implications

- A counter-discourse based on pluralism, equal citizenship, and separation between religion and politics must be developed by the state, to refashion the ways in which identities are perceived and remove the justification for sectarian violence provided by the current public debate.
- The principle of a neutral and inclusive state can and should be implemented through the educational, political and legal systems to ensure that the politics of sectarian exclusion are not rewarded and policies are not discriminatory.
- Measures are needed to reduce the availability of weapons.
- Non-sectarian civil society organizations should be fostered, to assist the state in addressing socio-economic inequalities and building bridges between people belonging to different sectarian traditions.



## Religions and Development Research Programme

### Sectarian conflict and its aftermath in Jhang and Gilgit, Pakistan

Many of the violent conflicts in Pakistan are sectarian – that is, they are between Muslims with different sectarian affiliations, particularly Sunnis and Shias. They are often protracted, reflecting longstanding social tensions, and have lasting effects on the people involved. This research sought to develop a better understanding of such conflicts and their aftermath in two urban centres in different regions of Pakistan, in order to identify how positive and lasting peace might be achieved.

Most studies of conflict between Muslims in Pakistan focus on the sectarian rivalry that results in violence. The ways in which protracted conflicts characterized by targeted attacks impact more widely on the communities affected and how such conflicts can be transformed have not been addressed. This research set out not only to understand and explain the dynamics of conflict in two contrasting urban centres within Pakistan, but also to explore the wider effects of the violence and suggest how to restore peace and prevent future violence.

It found that the origins of the Sunni-Shia conflicts in Jhang and Gilgit lie in the effects on the existing social order of the population movements associated with partition, Pakistani government policies and regional politics. The violence peaked in the 1990s, taking the form of targeted murders, street riots and attacks on holy places and processions. It was instigated by rival groups of activists engaged in identity politics. The case studies of two contrasting urban centres reveal the complex interactions between demographic change, pro-Sunni policies and regional power struggles that underlie what are ostensibly doctrinal conflicts.

- In Sunni-majority Jhang in the Punjab, a militant sectarian political party (Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan) used violence to advance its cause of displacing the traditional Shia landed elite from political power.
- In Shia-majority Gilgit in the Northern Areas, which was directly administered from Islamabad, the state has attempted to change the demographic, social and economic balance of the town in favour of Sunnis, alienating Shias and fuelling violence.

In both towns, the insecurity has reinforced sectarian identities and bitterness and led to increased residential segregation. The state has alternated between pro-Sunni politics and policies at the national and local levels and occasional attempts to contain the violence, establish its writ when this is threatened and restore basic peace. However, it has often failed to actively prevent violence, provide adequate relief or bring the perpetrators to justice, further reducing its legitimacy in the eyes of many citizens.

### Background

Endemic social conflicts in Pakistan are often marked by high and low points of violence. Following a period of relative peace from the 1950s to the 1970s, there was an upsurge in Sunni-Shia sectarian violence during the 1990s, followed by the current uneasy peace. Perhaps a thousand people were killed during the 1990s. The number of incidents, deaths and injuries peaked in 1990, 1994, 1998 and 2001. Since then, sectarian violence has occurred less frequently.

## Policy Brief 9 - 2011



This document is an output from a project funded by UK Aid from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

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### Further information

Kamran, Tahir (2009) Contextualizing sectarian militancy in Pakistan: a case study of Jhang. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 20(1), pp. 55-85.

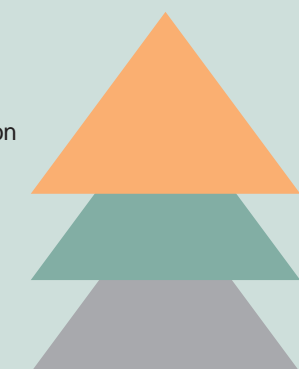
Mohammed Waseem in association with Tahir Kamran, Mukhtar Ahmed Ali, Katja Riikonen and Abdur Rehman (2010) *Dilemmas of Pride and Pain: Sectarian Conflict and Conflict Transformation in Pakistan*, Birmingham: Religions and Development WP 48.

<http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk/index.php?section=47>

The views expressed in these publications reflect those of the authors and not necessarily the RaD research programme as a whole

Because of its deep roots and the involvement of many actors, including the state, sectarian violence must be tackled by

- The state promoting a non-sectarian discourse based on pluralism, equal citizenship, and separation between religion and politics, to change the ways in which identity is perceived and remove the justification for sectarian violence provided by the current public discourse.
- Ensuring that the educational, political and legal systems are based on the principle of a neutral and inclusive state, to ensure that the politics of sectarian exclusion are not rewarded and policies are not discriminatory.
- Introducing measures to reduce the availability of weapons.
- Encouraging non-sectarian civil society organizations to play a role in addressing socio-economic inequalities and building bridges between people from different sectarian traditions.





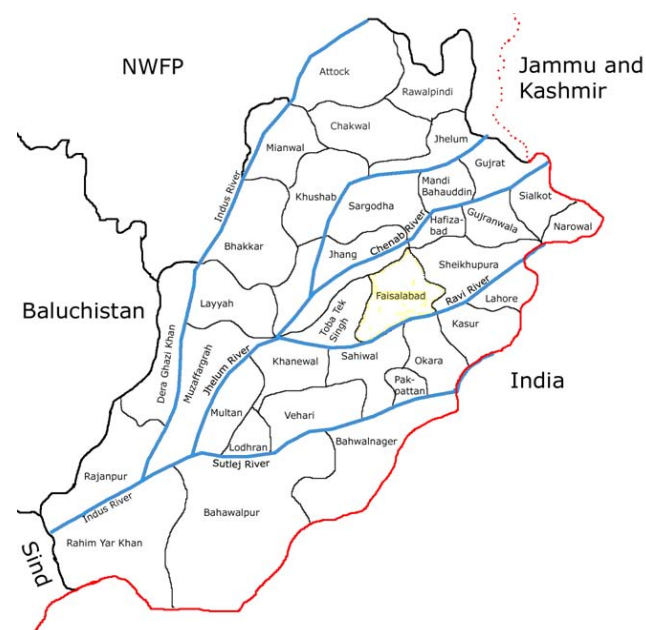
The district of Jhang became the epicentre of violence against Shias in the late 1980s and 1990s, with anti-Shia violence and Sunni retaliation spreading to other parts of Punjab and Pakistan. Gilgit, a Shia majority district in the strategically important border area, has been denied political representation in national government and subjected to pro-Sunni migration and security policies.

Although there has long been sectarian rivalry in South Asian Islam, the frequency and extent of the violence since the late 1980s has been quantitatively different. The conflicts are local, national and regional at the same time, and can only be understood by bringing a range of causal factors into play, from the short-term instrumental input of individuals and organizations to long-term structural social, economic and political changes.

## Methodology

The research drew firstly on existing published and official sources. In addition, during visits to Jhang in October 2008 and March 2009, fifteen key informant interviews were carried out and a focus group discussion held with local professionals. During a visit to Gilgit in May 2008, twelve key informants were interviewed. Because winter weather, insecurity and travel restrictions prevented a return visit to Gilgit, a focus group discussion was organized with professionals from Gilgit and Azad Kashmir working in Islamabad in March 2009. The findings were discussed at a seminar in Lahore in February 2010 and a workshop with policy makers in Islamabad in May 2010. The conclusions and policy implications summarized in this brief reflect feedback received from these audiences.

The genealogy and features of the 1990s sectarian conflicts in the two contested urban centres are summarized in Boxes 1 and 2.



Source: Kamran (2009), p 58 (with permission)

## Box 1: Jhang

Capital (estimated population 566,000) of a rural district in south-west Punjab, 210 km from Lahore, the provincial capital.

A small Shia landed elite (two rival families), which had been supported by the British during colonial times (mid-19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century), was politically dominant before and after 1947. Elements used sectarianism as an instrument in intra- and inter-family political rivalry, but the established social hierarchy was able to contain and manage feuds and disagreements.

By Partition, the majority of urban residents were Sunni, with a Sufi orientation. At Partition, large numbers of Sunni artisan migrants from East Punjab were allocated property and a large number settled in the town.

The Sunni urban commercial class became increasingly prosperous (helped by remittances and returnees from the Middle East). Influenced by Deobandi Islam, they (and initially the national government) backed sectarian Sunni organizations that were explicitly anti-Shia, especially the Sipah-i-Sahaba religious political party (SSP) and its Taliban-inspired and trained zealots. They and the Sunni *ulema* manipulated Shia-Sunni differences to challenge the political dominance of the traditional Shia elite.

The 1969 Shia-Sunni riots changed the complexion of the political situation, with the largely Sunni electorate outvoting the Shia elite. The 1990 assassination of a prominent radical Sunni cleric, allegedly by Shias, provoked an increase in sectarian conflict and violence (targeted murders, indiscriminate killings at places of worship, car bombs, tit-for-tat killings)

Sunni attacks on prominent politicians, Iranian officials and the security forces (in Jhang and beyond) led in the late 1990s to a government crack-down on militancy. Key SSP leaders were killed, splits emerged within the party, and support for militant elements declined. Finally, in 2002 the party was proscribed.

The government struggled to restore order and provide relief, but excluded religious organizations from the relief and rehabilitation efforts because of a fear that they would exacerbate tensions due to their sectarian affiliations. The performance of the district administration was judged according to whether it established peace.

The insecurity adversely affected Jhang's economy and led to residential segregation and out-migration. Indigenous Sunni support for the violence and militancy associated with the Urdu-speaking migrant community declined, reflected in reduced electoral support for radical Sunni politicians from the late 1990s onwards.

Since 2000 there has been an uneasy peace characterized by sporadic attacks on religious minorities and mistrust between the different social groups, cynicism over the government's commitment to justice for the victims of violence, and a return of the local elite to political dominance. No religious organizations are working to promote harmony, although peace committees periodically convened by the district administration, as well as the Traders' Association, play a role in preventing violence during potential flashpoints.

## Box 2: Gilgit

An urban centre with a population estimated to be between 60,000 and 300,000, capital of the sparsely populated Northern Areas (now Gilgit-Baltistan), which is administered directly from Islamabad, although there have arrangements for local political representation since 1999.

The British ruled this region marked by tribal conflicts and external conquests indirectly through the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. At Partition, fearing Shia domination, Sunni leaders successfully campaigned for the area to be in Pakistan, although it is only part of the disputed area of Kashmir. It has a strategically important location on the main trade route to China.

With a Shia-majority population in Sunni-majority Pakistan, the town's population is roughly equally divided between Twelver Shias, the Ismaili Shia sub-sect and Sunnis. The government has encouraged Sunni in-migration to change the demographic balance.

Shia resentment has been fuelled by the district's lack of representation in national politics, the limited powers of the regional assembly, the imposition of a Sunni administrative elite and state encouragement of in-migration by Sunni businessmen. The 2009 Gilgit-Baltistan reforms, followed by elections and formation of a government, partially mitigated the situation.

A government ban on the traditional Shia Muharram procession in 1974 was the first of many sectarian clashes, including killings, protests, kidnappings and destruction of property. Shias perceive much of the violence as engineered by the state, to justify its resistance to political representation or full autonomy. Following escalating clashes between Sunnis and Twelver Shias, in 1988, a military operation to restore order was led by Brigadier (later President) Musharraf, who is also alleged to have encouraged (Sunni) Pakhtun and Afghan tribespeople to migrate into Gilgit.

Local Shia feelings of marginalization and opposition to the alliance between Sunni bureaucrats, the Punjabi and Pakhtun-dominated security forces and economically successful Punjabi settlers were expressed through protests or sectarian violence. Government failure to maintain security and bring the perpetrators of violence to justice has increased Shia resentment. In the face of pervasive insecurity, sectarian groups consolidated and armed themselves, although Ismailis remained aloof from the sectarian violence throughout.

In the mid-1990s, the government made an effort to restore peace, convening a meeting of members of all the communities, strengthening the law enforcement agencies and compensating victims of violence. However, periodic clashes continued to occur. After major incidents in 2004 and 2005, the Pakistani army took over security and the civil administration.

Chronic instability continued despite the army presence. Sectarian violence and state-sponsored in-migration has resulted in hardened boundaries between social groups, increased residential segregation on sectarian lines, deteriorating services and out-migration.

Since 2008, there has been 'peace', although Sunni attacks have targeted the offices and staff of the Ismaili Aga Khan Foundation, which operates successful non-sectarian rural development programmes in rural parts of the district. Since 2009, a PPP-led elected government has been in place and an uneasy calm prevails.



Source: Map drawn by Mirza Yousaf Baig

## Key findings

- The local conflicts in Jhang and Gilgit originated in the social, political, ideological and demographic changes brought about by the partition of India. The delineation of Pakistan resulted in a Sunni-majority country, in which large-scale population movements at the time of partition changed the demographic and religious composition of whole districts. The government promoted Sunni-majority nationalism, rather than adhering to constitutional provisions for the equal status of all citizens and non-discrimination on the basis of faith. This resulted in sectarian conflict and violence. The religious dimensions of this conflict are often manipulated to advance class, ethnic, economic and political interests.

Local tensions reflect and have been exacerbated by

- national and regional factors, including the Iranian revolution, which encouraged Shias to become more politically active (e.g. opposing the introduction of Sharia law based on Sunni jurisprudence and their political marginalization at the local level);
- the government's search for legitimacy, which led it (especially under Zia) to adopt a Sunnification agenda, including backing for Sunni Deobandi-oriented organizations, tolerate public discourses in which Shias are labelled apostates, and promote in-migration into Shia majority Gilgit;
- the effect of the Pakistani government-sponsored *jihad*s against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s and Indian occupation of Kashmir in the 1990s, which led to the strengthening of Deobandi influence in Pakistan, its increasing militancy, acceptance of violence as a legitimate means of achieving religious ends and the easy availability of weapons.
- Sectarian conflicts are energized by the *ulema* (clerics) but in reality are often about economic and political competition rather than doctrinal differences. The violence is stage-managed for political purposes. In Jhang a militant sectarian party operated as agent provocateur, although competition between kinship groups for political power is also important. In Gilgit, the state itself tried to change the demographic and socio-economic balance of the town in favour of Sunnis. Shias