

Political Activism and Religiosity: An Appraisal on Tehrik e Labaik Pakistan (TLP) and Pakistan Awami Tehrek (PAT) in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study explains the consolidation of religious and political forces in Pakistan in the shape of street power politics, oppositional resistance, mass movement, and elections. Islam is the state religion of Pakistan has a profound influence on its socio-political and constitutional setting. Islamic political parties tend to have a strong street power, which at times they have shown on several national and policy issues in opposition to the government. It is an interesting fact that despite having a large following among the masses, religious-based political parties have been unable to materialize this support in electoral politics. From the past several years, a new trend within the religious-based political parties is how a complex puzzle of political activism, religious movement, and electoral politics is used by the political parties in the name of religion. Pakistan Awami Tehrek (PAT) and Tehrik e Labaik Pakistan (TLP) are two political parties that expound this new trend of politico-religious activism. Therefore, this research intends to develop an illustration of the multifaceted political dynamics of PAT and TLP in Pakistan politics from 2013 onwards and the way these parties used religious rhetoric in the political landscape of Pakistan.

Key Words: Religion, Political Parties, Political Activism, Elections, Pakistan.

Introduction

Religion, politics and their interconnectivity with each other in the political discourse have been popular in the political and sociological debates. Religion is one significant factor to understand the social construction and beliefs of the society. The Industrial Revolution in Europe opened up a new debate encompassing religion, politics and social change. Emile Durkheim¹ in his perspectives on religion mainly divides society into beliefs and rituals (Priya, n.d.). He focused on the social construction of religion whereas Max Weber² perceived religion as a cultural need that is required for human beings and their development. His focus was on the human responses and meaning to the mystic side of religion. Most of the studies entailing religious identity and politics recognize spirituality as an important factor that contributes in shaping beliefs, ideas and narratives. Another perspective in the existing literature entails that political parties also

¹ He wrote The Elementary Forms of Religious Life in 1912

² He wrote the book Sociology of Religion in 1920

gauge support through the religious sensibilities of the people as religion acts as a dominant factor of belief, influence, ideology and emotional predisposition. In this context, religious parties are distinct from the other political parties in terms of their construction as they are developed mostly in resistance and response to the perceived threats from various societal agents and opposed ideologies. Therefore, they have an inherent mechanism of self-protection and the conviction of self-righteousness based on which they dominate their support base and intend to practice this conviction of self-righteousness after getting representation and domination in the political set-up (Rosenblum, 2003, pp. 23-53). On the other hand, from the perspective of social movements, most of the theoretical descriptions are Eurocentric that revolves around resource mobilization, structural and political process along with a critique of Marxist ideology (AVCI, 2016, pp. 125-130) but theories incorporating network approaches and new social movement (NSM) have included the factors of identity, ideology, ethnicity and religion as defining drives of collective action, networking, social change and participation. Therefore, it is evident that religion is a strong source of developing a network base driven by ideological and faith-based factors that eventually develops a homogenous group that people tend to differentiate from the other groups and the overall society. In this context, the global south from Middle East to North Africa and across various parts of Asia have witnessed religious ideology as a source of the political and social party base. It is an interesting phenomenon that how religious political parties like Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-i-Islami developed a strong coherent network of social welfare wing along with the political party wing with a strong organizational structure that eventually has been able to reach out to every tier of society. In this framework, this piece of exploratory research revolves around two fundamental questions.

From this perspective, Pakistan is one such case in which religion and politics have been connected deeply along with the culture of religious political parties. Religious political parties in Pakistan are well-organized in terms of party organization and structure. In addition, they have strong street power and leadership following though most of the religious political parties are unable to translate their street power into electoral votes through which they can form a government at the federal level. Another characteristic of Islamic religious parties is their formation on the lines of a particular Islamic jurisprudence. Therefore, most of the religious political parties differ in terms of their ideological school of thought and sectarian beliefs³. Another feature that illustrates their character is that some of the religious parties along with constituency-based politics, lead a religiously driven movement. For instance, Jamaat-e-Islami claims to lead an Islamic reformist movement along the lines of the Muslim Brotherhood. It along with a political outlook has a nationwide charity, religious, educational and welfare organizational structure. Similarly, JUI and its splinter groups head major

³ The main strands of Islam followed in Pakistan are Deoband, Ahl e Hadith, Bareilvi and Shia

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chains of Deoband madaris in Pakistan. Pakistan Awami Tehrek (PAT) started as a religious movement and later opted for political position as well. The educational and religious branches of Minhaj-ul-Quran are widespread and cater a large following. Recently, Tehrek Labiak Pakistan (TLP) started to gain popularity as a religious group that is currently leading the issue related to Blasphemy laws and *Namus-e-Risalat*. This trend explicates that traditionally religious political parties have been an important element in electoral politics and within the masses. The following historical description entails the role of religious political parties in the political arena.

Historical Backdrop of Religious Groups in Pakistan

Religious ideology predominates socio-cultural, political and even at times strategic characteristics of Pakistan. The political landscape of Pakistan since its inception has been entrenched within the deep-rooted religious, ethnic and regional traits. Before partition, Muslims in the sub-continent were geographically spread in different parts of British India and had distinct ethnic and linguistic identities. Therefore, it was religion as a common notion that was implied by the All India Muslim League to build unity and homogeneity of thought among the Muslims of the sub-continent. In this context, the culture of the formation of political parties on religious lines is a pre-partition phenomenon that continued in the post-partition years. For instance, Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind was established in 1919 and after partition Jamaat-Ulema-Islam was considered its off-shoot. After the inception of Pakistan, the demand of religious circles of making Pakistan on theological state gradually gained reinforcement. Religious parties including Jamaat-e-Islami, Majlis-e-Ahrar-e-Islam, Jamiat-e-Ulema Pakistan and Majlis-e-Ahrar-e-Islam all presented their ideological preferences regarding the future of Pakistan. The purpose of Islamization of the newly born state was on the agenda list of religious parties. This trend dominated the constitutional making discourse in Pakistan. Those parties especially Majlis-e-Ahrar and Jamaat-e-Islami who had been calling Quaid e Azam as *Kafir e Azam* during the Pakistan movement were able to bargain a space for themselves as they took Islam as a political ideology. It was 1950s that multiple *Dini* madras from different sects were formed. Interestingly, they were mostly affiliated with some religious parties. The first constitution of Pakistan enacted in 1956 declared Islam as a state religion and thus reflected the religious orientation of the constitution. The placement of religion in politics was very visible in the construction of constitution which also voiced the aspirations of the majority population. Thus this was the time when this politico-religious nexus was strengthened in Pakistan's political landscape.

In 1960s Ayub Khan had to face opposition from the religious circles along with other political groups as well. His secular cult was critical to religious circles as they thought that he has emasculated Islamic tradition. 1962 constitution was

opposed by JI on grounds that it does not fit in the frame work of ideological lines. It was the first time that Jamaat's member Khurshid Ahmad coined the word 'Nazaria –e-Pakistan'-Ideology of Pakistan. This connotation was not found in the words of Jinnah neither in the movement records (Paracha., 2013). Then, the controversial victory of Ayub Khan against Fatima Jinnah further empowered him but on the same hand gave a realization to Ayub that he need to approach Jamaat and other religious circles to diffuse the opposition. At that time, Jamaat-e-Islami was able to place a stronghold among the local cadres in the form of student unions and organization of its party to reach out the local tier of society.

Ayub Khan with his foreign minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto tried to capitalize on the Islamic sentiments, especially on Kashmir issue in the war of 1965. Maulana Maududi was able to get that limelight after declaring jihad on Kashmir through Pakistan radio, when he was asked by Ayub Khan in a meeting to do so. Maulana Maududi also came on the radio after the end of 1965 war to preach about Jihad in peacetime (Nasr, The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution, 1994).

Later under Z.A. Bhutto, religious ossification became dominant among the rightists and leftists. It was in 1966 that Bhutto campaigned for socialism, but it was not well received by the religious circles⁴. The controversy over the idea of socialism made Bhutto realize that to get popular support in elections, he need to index Islam with socialism. After winning the elections he described elections 'as a great victory for Islam'. Though religious parties were unable to gain any breakthrough in the first general elections in December 1970, but later on with the passage of time Bhutto appeased the religious sections to get their support. In addition, the enactment of 1973 constitution further strengthened Islamization and Islam was declared as a state religion. Further, the amendment in 1974 declaring Ahmadi as non-Muslims brought support of religious sections for the government (Paracha, 2012). Despite the fact that Bhutto tried to achieve a thaw in his relations with religious parties through the provisions of 1973 constitution, in 1977 they staged a coalition under the banner of Pakistan National Alliance (PNA), a nine-party alliance to contest elections Bhutto. The watchword of *Nizam e Mustafa* was catchy and soon became a popular politico-religious trend. Though Bhutto tried to appease the religious groups Bhutto had to later face opposition from the same religiously driven politico nexus. PNA use religion as a tool for de-stabilizing the government of Bhutto. This time the politico-religious nexus was surrounded by an intolerant and extremist opposition. Eventually, the military takeover by General Zia-ul-Haq on 5th July 1977 by overthrowing the elected government of Bhutto set the basis for eleven years of military rule and a new doctrine of statecraft in Pakistan which aimed to implement Islamization by infusing it in all sectors of society and polity ranging from legislation, foreign policy, economy, law, education and media. The framework of Zia's Islamization favored the religious political parties and they were able to consolidate a strong connectivity

⁴ Z.A.Bhutto used the slogan 'Islam, Democracy and Socialism'

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with the government cadres. After the death of Zia, Pakistan People's Party was able to make the government at the federal level, Benazir's PPP which had a more secular posture was confronted by pro-Zia, IJI⁵ (Islami Jamhoori Ittehad) led mainly by Nawaz Sharif. IJI had stronghold in NWFP and Punjab as they were able to secure more seats than PPP in these provinces⁶ (www.indusvalley.edu.pk). Thus the politico-religious connection continued to dominate the political backdrop of Pakistan. Even in the election campaign of 1988 slogans associating PPP with Jewish lobby and Kashmir card were used by IJI and other politico-religious factions (Waseem M. , 2007, pp. 421-435). It is pertinent to note that Punjab became central to religious lobbies and resultantly their complex interest specific amalgamation with political traditions gave space for radicalized elements to grow. Though Benazir Bhutto wanted to reverse Zia's approach, practically failed to completely change the national security dynamics mainly because of her cautious policy towards the religious circles and opposition. During 1990s, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif held power in intervals. It was the time when Punjab became a main tributary of Kashmir-based jihadi groups and sectarian groups. Furthermore, IJI was unable to preserve its role and consequently this space was taken up by JUI-F and JUI-S. Thus provocation of religious sentiments was frequently used by them which eventually transformed into intolerance and extremism in the society. The emergence and following of JUI contributed in bringing radical and rigid narratives particularly in NWFP and Baluchistan. The increasing influence and political coalition of Mulana Fazul-ur-Rehman bought Nawaz Sharif closer to JUI as compared to IJI. Therefore, factions of JUI gained support from the political apparatus and had street power as well. After the ouster of Nawaz Sharif's government in October 1999, Pakistan witnessed another long-term doctoral rule under General Pervez Musharraf in which again a dominant role of JUI-F was seen in providing legitimacy to the military government. In addition, in 2002 general elections JUI-F was able to form a coalition government in Baluchistan and NWFP (now KPK). This trend explicates that support of religious group was a significant element through which Musharraf was able to bring constitutional amendment as well.

Therefore, religious parties consolidate an important position in the political landscape of Pakistan. Along with constituency politics, they play a vital role in political coalition, political bargaining and most of the time as a strong pressure group because of their enormous street power. In this context, over the past few years' two religious groups significantly gained popularity as religious political

⁵ IJI was a nine party alliance formed in 1988 mainly to contest against PPP in elections. PML led by Nawaz Sharif and IJI were main leading parties in it. That is the reason it was also known as a pro Zia faction.

⁶ In Punjab, IJI secured 108 and PPP secured 93 out of 240 seats, See (Aziz, www.dawn.com, 2016) . Despite the fact that PPP secured highest number of seats in Sindh only, it was able to win the seats in all other provinces as well, though not the highest in number. PPP also secured the support of MQM, from whom they had dissent over ethnic issues. Consequently, In the center PPP was able to get 94 seats and Benazir Bhutto was elected as Prime Minister. On the other hand, Nawaz Sharif who was able to resurge Muslim League became chief minister of Punjab. On Benazir Tenure see (Shafiq, 1995, pp. 207-242)

parties. Pakistan Awami Tehrek (PAT) and Tehrek Labaik Pakistan (TLP) both follow the Bareilvi tradition of Islam. In this perspective, a troika of a political, religious movement and electoral politics defines the nature of politico-religious nexus in Pakistan. Therefore, political activism within the religious cadres to further enhance their constitutional, political and legislative role has gained a strong footing in Pakistan. Here, the concept of political alienation is linked with political activism as well. According to one school of thought political alienation can cause aloofness and frustration among the party ranks. Therefore, their participation is mostly unusual and aggressive including violent protests, riots, street demonstrations, and strikes to build pressure on the government and to get recognition among public as well as happened in Pakistan particularly after 2013 in which PAT and TLP were active in staging protests and demonstrations.

Politico-Religious dynamics of PAT

Pakistan Awami Tehrek was founded by Dr. Tahir ul Qadri in 1989, who belongs to Bareilvi school of thought and has large followers. He is religiously admired and followed by his followers as a writer, orator and politico-religious leader. For this reason, his political call is considered as an order by his supporters. Generally, PAT has not been able to consolidate a participatory role in electoral politics neither they got any major win in the elections. Therefore, despite being a registered political party they are considered more as a religious movement by their followers. The resurgence of PAT started in 2012, when they staged a sit-in against the sitting government and demanded political, societal and religious reforms. They raised the slogan of *siyast nahe Riasat Bachao*, (save the country and not the politics) (Imran shahzad, 2019). Despite this, PAT boycotted the general elections of 2013. While asking a number of supporters of PAT that why they did not vote in the elections, they responded that elections are un-Islamic and our leader Dr. Tahir ul Qadri has abstained to vote in elections. It is ironic that in 2014 local bodies' elections PAT contested the elections and campaigned for voting among their supporters. It entails that personality trait usually dominates such parties. They blindly trust and follow the orders of Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri. It was on 11th May 2014, that Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri presented this proposal for Green Pakistan Revolution that declared the then parliament of Pakistan as unconstitutional and demanded a new system of executive, legislation and judiciary (www.pat.com.pk, 2014). Then later on 15th August 2014, PAT along with Pakistan Tehrek Insaf (PTI) staged a sit-in of around thirty thousand protesters in Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan. This protest caused nationwide political unrest and turmoil. The roads of the major cities were blocked and later the daily activities of the capital city were completely disrupted. PTI demanded the resignation of the then prime minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif on account of alleged rigged elections on four national assembly seats, that were later approved to be incorrect. In addition, PAT also demanded the resignation on grounds an

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overall illegitimate and corrupt system. Tahir-ul- Qadri, himself came from Canada and was leading the protest and sit-in. Later in August 2014, sit-in protests became violent and clashes between law enforcement agencies and the protest resulted in killing of three people and injuring hundreds of protesters (Kronstadt, 2014, pp. 1-2). On 1st September 2014, an unprecedented incident took place, when the broadcast of national television PTV was halted for around half an hour. Usually such practice is linked with a military takeover but this time it was hundreds of PAT-PTI workers who entered the building of national television. Such visuals reflected a deeply induced intolerance and violence within the political cadres. This sit-in (*Dharna*) lasted for 126 days and ended due to the terrorist attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar where around children lost their lives (Mulla, 2017). To understand the influence of PAT on their party workers and supporters, a shopkeeper who used to sell breakfast in Lahore was interviewed. He told that he closed his shop for more than two months and went to Islamabad to participate in a sit-in on the call of his leader Dr. Tahir-ul- Qadri. He further stated that this sit-in was to bring change and reform in Pakistan and he will go again on the call of Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri. He was repeatedly questioned about the reason for the sit-in but he endorsed that he went on the call of his leader. Furthermore, he praised the religious conviction of Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri and his sons who have leading positions in the party cadre and overall work of PAT. This trend entails the strong influence of leadership and to what extent their followers blindly trust their leader. Another conversation was recorded with a female who was around fifty years old. She was a house wife and mother of four children. She participated in the 2014 sit-in with her daughter on the call of Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri. She told that she was injured during the tear gas shelling and was later admitted to the hospital. Her level of contentment with abiding by the order of his leader was quite astonishing. As she belonged to a middle class family and generally was very independent in traveling. But she went to the capital city for the cause which she was unable to define with clarity. She repeatedly said that “I went on the call of my religious leader and will again be part of this jihad. She also told that she did not voted in 2013 general elections and followed the party orders”⁷. The role of PAT has significantly declined in terms of street protest and parliamentary democracy after 2018 General Elections. In 2019, Tahir-ul-Qadri announced his retirement from the politics and as party chairman. He stated that, “Our legal battle for the Model Town incident will continue till my last breath. That is not a matter of politics, it is a matter of faith” (www.dawn.com, 2019). Therefore, it is being observed that PAT is not significantly active in politics or street agitation against the government but they have a strong religious following that they capitalize into street resistance whenever needed against the government.

⁷ These conversations took place in Lahore, Pakistan. The researcher went to meet the shopkeeper in his shop and the woman and her family in their house respectively

Politico-Religious Dynamics of TLP

The conversion of TLP from a religious group, then a protest group to a political religious party illustrates the religious-political nexus in Pakistan. In 2017, the leader of the movement named *Tehrek Labaik Ya Rasool Allah*, Allama Khadim Rizvi led a long march from Lahore to Islamabad on the *Khatm-e-Nabuwat* issue (Basit, 2020). Then in 2018 general elections party fielded around 178 candidates on NA seats across the country (www.nation.com, 2019). Their politics mainly started in the heart of Punjab Pakistan where they first time contested in the by-elections and scored around 14000 thousand votes. NA-124 is an important constituency not only in the politics of Lahore, the provincial capital of the largest province of Pakistan, Punjab but also in the overall political profile of Punjab. Firstly, it tends to be a traditional seat of Lahore in terms of culture and geographical layout as it covers most of the interior Lahore (old city). Secondly, voting behavior is derived from caste, *biradari* (clan), religious and party factors. Thirdly, this seat has been consistently won by Nawaz Sharif, who remained the leader of Punjab's largest political party, Pakistan Muslim League-N. During the day of election, the researcher had multiple conversations with people sitting in the party camps of religious political parties i.e., TLP, Mili Muslim league (MML), and JI. It was observed that they had very strong ideological affiliations and a strong sense of belongingness with their party ranks and leadership. In addition, they connected the whole election with a religious conviction that the current political setup is not in align with the true Islamic teaching. The followers of TLP repeatedly talked about the issue of death sentence of Mumtaz Qadri and Blasphemy laws in Pakistan whereas the followers of MMI were not very vocal. But their pamphlets, posters, and party songs focused on Kashmir Jihad and the personality of Hafiz Saeed. According to the data of Election Commission of Pakistan, TLP secured 2.2 million votes and emerged as the fifth largest party in the country and a major game player in changing the voting trend in many constituencies. In addition, another significant observation is that TLP scored 77 percent of its vote from Punjab and 19 percent from Sindh. (Electoral Analysis of TLP Vote Bank and Electoral Calculus in 2018 General Elections, 2018). In 2021, there was a week-long stalemate between TLP and the government on the issue of ambassador of France. Previously they demanded to expel the ambassador of France due to the remarks of the French president about Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). As a result of violent clashes between TLP workers and police, several people were killed and injured. Later, National Assembly of Pakistan bought a resolution to thaw down the crisis. In 2020, TLP was banned by the government of Pakistan and its leader Saad Rizvi was arrested by the government. In 2021, TLP again started protests against the detention of their leader which turned into violent clashes between the supporters of TLP and police in the central area of Lahore, the provincial capital of Punjab. According to the reports, four police officers were killed and around 250 were wounded (Gabol, 2021). On the other hand, several workers of TLP were also injured and lost their lives. It was significant that clashes broke out in one of the busiest and most populated areas of Lahore city which included Chauburji, Multan Road and Lower Mall (2021). It explicates their strong footing in the city. Internet services were disrupted for five days in the areas adjacent to the main headquarters of TLP where the shrine of Allama Rizvi is also located. The residents in the adjacent areas told that they faced an internet blackout for five days. It affected their official assignment, business, online education, and

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online delivery services as during covid-19, the trend of online services has significantly increased.

Trait Analysis of PAT and TLP

Both the parties belong to the Barelvi tradition with strong and captivating leadership, after the death of Khadim Rizvi, his son became the leader of the party. It in turn brings another character of inheritance in discussion. The son of Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri is also an active member of his PAT. In addition, both parties derive their motivation and valor from their religious conviction. People have strong associations with the teachings of their religious jurisprudence and practices which mostly makes it difficult to differentiate their religious and political roles. In addition, activism tends to dominate their party activities. The political behavior of both the parties tends to be vocal and outspoken about their policy lines on major religious issues. Furthermore, riots, street politics, political alignment, violence, and aggression describe their unusual political behavior. This is mainly because their placement within electoral politics is minimum but their following at the local grass root level is so intense that they can stage an effective pressure group strategy whenever required. Moreover, their educational and madras wing also provides them with a large number of indoctrinated youth. As far as funding is concerned, PAT get both external and internal funding as they have been able to develop international connectivity mainly due to the fact that mostly Dr. Tahir himself resides in Canada. On the other hand, TLP had strong sources of funding from local businesses and religious communities. In addition, another common trait is the state patronage which these parties have in different time period. Besides this, an important question that needs to be addressed is that how TLP in a short span of time has been able to build a strong footage within the electoral and political power corridors. One major reason is their strong stance and resistance on the issue of Blasphemy laws and the way they questioned the response of Pakistani government on the issue of Islamophobia in the west. The slogan of Laibak Ya Rasool Allah is very attractive to the masses. It is significant to note that it is a non-political slogan practiced across the Muslim community but TLP has used it as a political slogan that sometimes may exploit religious sentiments.

Conclusion

The emergence of PAT and TLP is similar to the emergence of other political parties. But their agitation-based politics have made them unique. Their political activism bought them in limelight and a complex political-religious pattern has emerged in which the division between religion and politics has become blurred. This trend can have future repercussions on the political landscape of Pakistan. In this context, it is observed that states that have a strong inclusion of religious forces in politics and society like Pakistan have a high probability of political activism grounded by religious forces. Through this strategy they can influence the power corridors through their street power and agitation-based rhetoric

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