

‘Everything has shattered’ – rising levels of violence against Shi’a in Pakistan

By Farah Mihar

Introduction

‘We have contributed so much to Pakistan and we are treated like animals. At least animals are killed for food, why are we killed?’

Shi’a activist, Islamabad, December 2013

Attacks by extremist groups against Pakistan’s Shi’a have been on the increase since the 1980s, but targeted killings reached unprecedented levels in 2013, with some 700 Shi’a murdered.¹ Many of those killed were Hazara Shi’a in the province of Baluchistan.² The death toll exceeded the previous high of 2012, described by Human Rights Watch as ‘the bloodiest year for Shias in living memory.’³

The recent attacks have mostly been carried out by three militant groups - Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). All three follow an extremist Sunni Islamic ideology under which the Shi’a are deemed heretics and apostates, punishable by death. These groups are also engaged in anti-Shi’a propaganda and hate speech at every level of Pakistani society.⁴ As a result, Pakistani Shi’a throughout the country are living in constant fear.

“Everything has shattered, everyone is suspicious of each other. Those old days when there was no question of who belongs to what community now don’t exist. Now people first think – are you a Shi’a? Are you Hazara?”

Shi’a activist, Islamabad, December 2013

This briefing paper provides an analysis of the present situation of the Shi’a and Hazara communities in Pakistan. It details the manner in which they are targeted and the nature of these incidents. It also discusses the role of the state, in some cases failing to take sufficient action against

the perpetrators, in others accused of collusion. It concludes with recommendations to the international community and the Pakistan government.

In addition to a desk review of recent statistics and reports on the situation of religious minorities in Pakistan, this briefing draws on primary field research. The author travelled to Islamabad in December 2013, where she conducted in-depth interviews with 10 Hazara and five Shi’a activists. At the time, due to the threat of an imminent attack against Shi’a, many other activists were not able to provide interviews. For security reasons, the names of those interviewed have been anonymized.

Who are the Shi’a and Hazara?

Shi’a are the second largest denomination of Muslims worldwide and comprise approximately ten to 15 percent of the population in Pakistan.⁵ They differ from the Sunni majority over the leadership of the Muslim community after the death of Prophet Muhammad, with Shi’a recognizing the line of Ali, the fourth and last caliph and the son-in-law of Muhammad. Shi’a live throughout Pakistan and include a number of different ethnic groups. In recent decades, the inclusive vision of Pakistan’s founding father, Muhammed Ali Jinnah, has given way to increased sectarianism and the growth of discrimination and hate crimes against the Shi’a.

Hazara are an ethnic group of Mongolian-Turkic origin who speak a Persian language. Most practise Shi’a Islam, though a few are Sunni. Hazara are distinct from other Shi’a in Pakistan due to their language and facial features.⁶ While the majority of Hazara are in Afghanistan, Pakistan also hosts a large Hazara population – estimates range between 650,000 and 900,000 in the country as a whole – with around 500,000 based around the city of Quetta.⁷

History

The roots of the militant attacks against Shi'a in Pakistan can be traced to the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq, who held the presidency from 1978 following a military coup the previous year and remained in power until his death in 1988. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, many majority Sunni states including Pakistan began to fear the export of Shi'a Islam. In an attempt to counter this, Zia strengthened relations with Saudi Arabia and opened Pakistan's doors to a brand of Sunni radical Islam known as Wahhabism.⁸ Saudi Wahhabi literature and religious preachers were welcomed into Pakistan, establishing madrasas and other learning centres where this ideology was widely disseminated. The main targets of these religious leaders were Shi'a Muslims and Sufis, who are followers of Islamic mysticism.⁹

In 1985, Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP) was formed with the main objective of aggressively promoting Sunni Islam. A decade or so later a breakaway faction of the group went on to form the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), with the aim of transforming Pakistan into a Sunni state through violent means. The LeJ's founder and leader until 2002, Riaz Basra, was known in the 1990s for orchestrating an attack on Iranian diplomat Sadiq Ganji and killing Iranian Air Force cadets on an official visit to Pakistan.¹⁰ The group was banned in Pakistan in 2001 for provoking sectarian violence and subsequently listed as a terrorist organization by the United States government in 2003.¹¹ The LeJ was also implicated in the assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 2007¹² and is suspected to have played a role in the 2009 grenade attack on the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team.¹³

From their inception, both organizations have publicly called for the killing of Shi'as in Pakistan and conducted a number of violent attacks against them. The SSP, having been banned in 2002 by the Musharraf government, was subsequently re-established under the new title of Ahl-e Sunnat Wal Jama'at (ASWJ) before being banned again in 2012.¹⁴ More recently, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), or the Pakistani Taliban, became associated with targeted killings against Shi'a. They claimed responsibility for a pair of bombings in Karachi in late 2013 and vowed to conduct more attacks.¹⁵

Escalation of violence

The escalation of violent attacks against Shi'a in the last decade has occurred alongside a general deterioration in the country's security context. According to the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, the number of people killed in terrorist attacks during 2013 rose by 19 per cent from the previous year. In 2013, militants carried out 1,717 attacks, killing 2,451 people and injuring 5,438 people. The Institute further states that 46 suicide attacks took place in 2013 – a 39 per cent rise from the previous year. TTP

carried out most of the attacks, while LeJ was responsible for a number of other incidents.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the specific attacks against Shi'a and other minorities in Pakistan are distinct in character and intent to most political killings, armed conflict deaths and indiscriminate violence against civilians. Thus the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies records a total of 687 sectarian killings during 2013 – up 22 per cent from the previous year.¹⁷ The majority of victims were Shi'a. However, detailed records of Shi'a attacks compiled by networks of Shi'a civil society organizations have produced significantly higher totals. This is both because they record individual incidents not picked up by general media reviews, and also because the final body count in mass attacks is often larger than that given in initial reports. The International Imam Hussain Council thus records a total of 675 Shi'a killed in targeted attacks and bombings in 2013, and 1,061 injured.¹⁸ Another compilation of incidents recorded by Shi'a activists gives 732 'directly killed' in 2013 and 1,169 injured.¹⁹ The actual number is almost certainly higher, however, as these figures only cover targeted attacks and do not include those Shi'a killed in the course of indiscriminate attacks on civilians.

The largest death tolls have occurred as a result of suicide bombs and grenade attacks in crowded Shi'a areas. Some of the most deadly incidents in 2013 include:

- *Quetta, Baluchistan, 10 January 2013*: An initial suicide bombing in the predominantly Shi'a area of Alamdar Road, followed by a car bomb in the same location moments later, killed 91 people and injured at least 190 others.²⁰
- *Quetta, Baluchistan, 16 February 2013*: 110 people were killed and 200 others injured in a remote-controlled bomb attack targeting a bazaar near Hazara Town.²¹
- *Karachi, Sindh Province, 3 March 2013*: 50 people were killed and many others injured in two explosions that ripped through a Shi'a neighbourhood outside a mosque.²²
- *Quetta, Baluchistan, 30 June 2013*: 30 people were killed and dozens injured when a suicide attack occurred near a Shi'a mosque in Hazara Town.²³

Militant groups have openly stated that their targeting of Shi'a is on religious grounds and this has been explicitly showcased in recent attacks. For example, one open letter issued by the LeJ militant group reads:

'Like in the past, our successful jihad against the Hazaras in Pakistan and, in particular, in Quetta, is ongoing and will continue in the future. We will make Pakistan the graveyard of the Shi'ite Hazaras and their houses will be destroyed by bombs and suicide bombers. We will only rest when we will be able to fly the flag of

*true Islam on this land of the pure. Jihad against the Shi'ite Hazaras has now become our duty.'*²⁴

There have been a number of attacks on Shi'a pilgrims travelling to and from Iran to attend holy sites and festivals. The 700-km highway connecting Pakistan to Iran runs through Baluchistan and is vulnerable to militant attacks. In December 2012, 20 people were killed and 24 injured when a car bomb ripped through a convoy of buses carrying pilgrims.²⁵ A similar incident in October 2013 was narrowly avoided when police noticed a parked car and stopped a pilgrim convoy. Two police officers were killed in the subsequent bomb explosion.²⁶ In January 2014, at least 22 Shi'a pilgrims were killed in another suicide attack in the same area.²⁷

Shi'a mosques have also been targeted by militants and many of the larger attacks have taken place during religious festivals, particularly the Ashura processions in the Shi'a holy month of Muharram. In 2012 and 2013, there were a number of incidents during this period. In 2012, between 21 and 24 November, four major bomb attacks took place in Karachi (Sindh province),²⁸ Rawalpindi (Punjab),²⁹ Dera Ismail Khan³⁰ and Lakki Marwat (Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa).³¹ More than 30 people were killed and many others injured in these incidents. In 2013, a gun attack on a Shi'a mosque in Rawalpindi on 15 November reportedly killed at least eight Shi'a and injured 30.³²

The other notable form of targeting has been killings of Shi'a professionals and officials – doctors, lawyers, politicians, prominent businesspeople and local traders.³³ Activists interviewed for this briefing argued that incidents such as these were unique to their community and intended to demoralize them by undermining their academic and professional success.³⁴

'I feel doubly vulnerable and targeted. I feel I am on a hit list. Often I get mysterious calls asking me, "Why are you writing about these issues, correct yourself or a bullet will find you".'

Shi'a activist, Islamabad, December 2013

The Shi'a community is not only affected by the wave of killings and suicide bombings. Shi'a have also been subjected to various forms of hate speech, most commonly as campaigns in mosques, schools, public spaces and increasingly on social media. Shi'a are vilified as a community for their religious beliefs and individuals are also picked out for criticism. The campaigns openly label them as apostates or heretics, and call on Sunnis to kill them. For example, LeJ maintain that:

'[All] Shi'ites are worthy of killing. We will rid Pakistan of unclean people. Pakistan means land of the pure and the Shi'ites have no right to live in this country. We have the edict and signatures of revered scholars, declaring Shi'ites infidels. Just as our fighters

*have waged a successful jihad against the Shi'ite Hazaras in Afghanistan, our mission in Pakistan is the abolition of this impure sect and its followers from every city, every village and every nook and corner of Pakistan.'*³⁵

In January 2013, a case was filed in the Multan courts against the SSP for inciting violence against Shi'a. Evidence produced for this case included quotations from speeches by SSP leaders at a prayer meeting in the locality, where people were called upon to kill Shi'a. Another case also called for action to be taken against eight individuals who were responsible for writing hate speech on walls in the area.³⁶ Activists reported that graffiti inciting violence against Shi'a was now common and rarely removed, as both the police and general public were afraid to do so.

'A new generation has grown up in Pakistan, reading this hate material. Prior to the 1970s, this kind of hatred did not exist.'

Shi'a activist, Islamabad, December 2013

Social media such as Facebook have also become a platform for hate speech and incitement. The SSP and other extremist religious groups have their own sites and profile pages featuring violent campaigns against Shi'a. These feature public calls for the killing of Shi'a and the glorification of attacks against them. In one instance, the SSP called on other militant groups, including the TPP, to engage more actively in anti-Shi'a violence.³⁷

Such extremist views are unlikely to find favour, however, with the majority of Pakistan's Muslims, many of whom practice a version of Islam influenced by Sufism. Some Shi'a activists emphasize the point that the vilification of the Shi'a is peculiar to a hardline interpretation of the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam, whose followers are themselves a minority in Pakistan. However, sectarianism is growing in Pakistan, and some Barelvi clerics have also made anti-Shi'a statements.

The situation for Hazara in Quetta is now particularly serious. Because of their clearly identifiable features, it is dangerous for them to travel out of their neighbourhoods. In addition to the high-profile attacks that reach the headlines, there are frequent incidents of shootings and other attacks against individuals or small numbers of Shi'a in Quetta. These have contributed to an acute sense of insecurity and vulnerability.

'When we go to Quetta, it is so sad to see our houses, the streets, the mosques. When we get closer and closer, we should be happy but I feel suffocated, I have to hide my fear but not one single moment is certain.'

Hazara activist, Islamabad, December 2013

Hazara activists also told MRG that they often faced incidents of discrimination, particularly those employed in

government services. They reported that women in particular were suffering because their freedom of movement was clamped down on more than men's due to security fears. In addition, many women who had lost family members in bombings and other attacks had received no compensation, leaving them in very difficult financial situations.³⁸

Pakistan government's response

Although Pakistan is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the government is clearly falling short of its human rights commitments, particularly with regard to article 6 (the right to life), article 18 (freedom of religion) and article 27 (minority rights). On 2 March 2012 the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, UN Independent Expert on minority issues and UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief wrote to the Pakistani government to raise two recent cases of mass killings of Shi'a in the Kurram tribal region and in Kohistan.³⁹ In the Kohistan incident, attackers dressed in military fatigues were reported to have stopped a bus, checked the identity documents of all passengers, removed the Shi'a and shot them by the roadside. At least 18 were killed.

In a statement, the three Special Rapporteurs warned that 'sectarian violence threatens to worsen if the government does not respond swiftly and decisively to confront it'. While noting official government condemnation of the incidents, they went on to emphasize that 'such serious incidents demand, and communities have the right to expect, the most rigorous response possible from the government'.⁴⁰

While the Pakistani government is itself a target of militant attacks, its response to the increasing levels of violence against Shi'a and Hazara has been heavily problematic. The state has been criticized for failing to protect the Shi'a community and even accused of colluding with militants.⁴¹ While there has recently been a change of government, with the election in May 2013 of the Pakistan Muslim League (N), led by Nawaz Sharif, so far the handover appears to have brought little change for Shi'a, Hazara and other minorities, who remain vulnerable to militant attacks.

The inadequate response of authorities is illustrated by the case of Malik Ishaq, the leader of LeJ, who has been implicated in a number of high-profile militant attacks and was reported in 1997 to have admitted involvement in the deaths of more than a hundred people. Despite this, after 14 years in prison he was released by the Supreme Court on July 2011.⁴² Since then, Ishaq has participated in public events where hate speech against Shi'a was propagated. He was briefly arrested in August 2012 and subsequently released before being arrested once again in February

2013.⁴³ Though he was refused bail in January 2014, in March 2014 his request for bail was granted.⁴⁴ Though the US State Department in February 2014 listed Ishaq as one of its most wanted international terrorist leaders,⁴⁵ many believe that Pakistan's police and judiciary are afraid to take action against him.

'I saw him tell a judge once, if you punish me you will not go home.'

Shi'a activist, Islamabad, December 2013

An earlier incident, in January 2008, also suggests some level of official complicity with militants. This involved the escape of the chief of LeJ's Baluchistan chapter, Usman Kurd, together with his deputy Dawood Badini, from a high security jail where they had been held in detention. It was subsequently suggested that there may have been a conspiracy at the prison, with the Hazara guards who had been watching the two militants relieved of their duties on the night of their disappearance.⁴⁶ Since then, Usman Kurd is believed to have been involved in a number of violent attacks.⁴⁷

More recent accusations of government failure to protect Shi'a Hazara were made after the attack on Hazara in Quetta on 16 February 2013. A leaked police secret dossier showed the police had information on the impending attack, including names and photos of the key perpetrators. Despite being privy to this, neither the Frontier Corps (FC) nor the police took action to make arrests. Had they done so at the time, the subsequent mass killing of Shi'a could have been avoided.⁴⁸

The issue is complicated further by the conflict in Baluchistan. In 2004, conflict resumed between Pakistan's security forces and armed separatists in the region. The Pakistani military and intelligence services have been accused of perpetrating serious human rights violations in Baluchistan, including extrajudicial killings and disappearances.⁴⁹ Many Hazara believe that the Pakistani forces support militant attacks against Shi'a as they distract from its conflict with separatists and enable the continuation of human rights violations.⁵⁰

'In Baluchistan security agencies are doing this to neutralize Baluchi militants. Baluchistan is a difficult terrain, it is not easy to move regular forces, so the military's strength now lies in using these militants as proxy forces.'

Shi'a activist, Islamabad, December 2013

Activists interviewed for this report also stated that Pakistani authorities were not taking adequate action against the spread of hate speech and targeted violence across the country.

'The Punjab government has done nothing to curb these groups. We don't see any action at the state level or

even the judiciary. We rarely see arrests made or militants convicted.'

Shi'a activist, Islamabad, December 2013

The Pakistani authorities have shown some signs of action in response to pressure from the community and moderate Sunnis. In 2013, after both the 10 January and 16 February bombings in Hazara Town, family members refused to bury their dead until the authorities took action against the militants.⁵¹ Subsequently, in March 2013 some 100 people were detained in Punjab Province⁵² and similar raids were conducted in Karachi in May.⁵³ However, some activists have expressed scepticism about the level of commitment behind these actions.

'For face saving they take some action, arrest someone then release them. Move a checkpoint from one place to another, but generally the militants have a free hand.'

Shi'a journalist, Islamabad, December 2013

In February 2014, Pakistan began peace talks with the Taliban with the aim of ending years of conflict.⁵⁴ Shi'a representatives have previously expressed their resistance to negotiations with the Taliban⁵⁵ and protests were held by Shi'a groups in Karachi in response to the talks.⁵⁶

Conclusion

'Our community feels insecure, we feel like we are an underclass, like second rate citizens. We can't see the route ahead, we have no idea what to do. It is only the state that can stop them'

Shi'a activist, Islamabad, December 2013

For too long, Pakistan's minority Shi'a and Hazara communities have been facing violent attacks, destruction of their homes, vandalism, intimidation and terror because of their religion and ethnicity. Against a backdrop of rapidly deteriorating security and a sustained hate campaign, members of the Shi'a community live in constant fear for their lives. The government's failure to hold to account those responsible has helped foster a climate of impunity for perpetrators.

The principal responsibility for attacks on the Shi'a population lies with the extremist groups directly involved, including the SSP, LeJ and the TTP, and in particular their leaders. The widespread and systematic nature of the deadly attacks on Shi'a civilians, and the fact that these appear to be perpetrated in furtherance of an organizational policy to destroy the Shi'a, indicate that crimes against humanity are being committed. Those responsible for such crimes should be prosecuted and punished, according to international standards.

At the same time, the Pakistani government has completely failed to protect its Shi'a and Hazara populations and has not been able to successfully counter

allegations that it is protecting militants. Under international law the responsibility to provide security for citizens and to promote and protect human rights lies with the state. Pakistan's failure to do so is therefore in clear violation of its international human rights obligations.

'For me, there is just one call – let us live. My people, let us live. We need to be alive to do anything.'

Shi'a activist, Islamabad, December 2013

Recommendations

Recommendations to the government of Pakistan:

1. Take immediate steps to stop attacks against Shi'a, including Hazara, and provide effective protection, particularly in areas vulnerable to militant attacks, in consultation with representatives of the communities themselves.
2. Ensure that those involved in attacks and incitement to violence are prosecuted in line with international standards and punished.
3. Undertake an independent and impartial investigation into recent targeted attacks against Shi'a and Hazara.
4. Develop appropriate and effective mechanisms to curb the use of incitement to violence and other forms of hate speech against the Shi'a and other religious minorities, including in places of worship and online.
5. Take action to halt funding and other means of support currently being provided to militant and extremist groups involved in attacks against Shi'a and Hazara.
6. Ensure all families of those killed and injured in bombings and attacks are properly supported, including through appropriate financial compensation.
7. Invite the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues and the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to visit Pakistan; provide them with full access to investigate and report, as per their mandates; and work with them to implement their recommendations.

To the international community:

1. The UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues and the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief should visit Pakistan to conduct a thorough investigation on the escalation of killings, other attacks and hate speech directed against the Shi'a. The findings should be presented in a report to the UN Human Rights Council, with recommendations to the Pakistan government.
2. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) should make available technical and

other assistance to support the Pakistan government in meeting its human rights obligations, particularly on issues of freedom of religion or belief and the protection of minorities.

3. Foreign governments, including in the Gulf, should take action to monitor and prevent financial support being made available to extremist groups in Pakistan with a history of perpetrating or inciting deadly violence against the Shi'a.

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Notes

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Minority Rights Group International 54 Commercial Street, London E1 6LT, United Kingdom
Tel +44 (0)20 7422 4200 **Fax** +44 (0)20 7422 4201 **Email** minority.rights@mrgmail.org
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