
Pakistan

Sectarian war a threat to Bhutto government

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

The senseless killing of 20 members of the Shia community by unidentified gunmen inside two Shia mosques in Karachi on Feb. 25 portends the beginning of yet another wave of sectarian warfare between the majority Sunnis and minority Shias of Pakistan, to be conducted through local groups on behalf of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Already, revenge killings have been reported from the port city of Karachi.

The gruesome killing of the Shia worshippers, reminiscent of the Hebron massacre in the Israeli-occupied West Bank by a Zionist fanatic last year, intended to topple the Israel-Palestine peace efforts, will put an extra burden on the already-beleaguered government of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, which is completely at sea about how to deal with the steady breakdown of law and order in the country. This is particularly so in Karachi, the commercial capital of Pakistan and by far the most important port city of the country.

The Mohajir Qaum Movement (MQM)—a grouping of those who had left India to take up residence in Pakistan since the 1947 partition of the subcontinent—has continued its violent activity in Karachi, and some other cities in the province of Sindh where the Mohajirs have a dominant presence. The MQM is demanding more economic power and political clout and challenging the home base of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the main ingredient in the ruling alliance that administers Pakistan today.

The level of violence caused by the agitation over more than a decade by the MQM is unprecedented, and there is no indication whatsoever that the government in Islamabad has any clue as to how to resolve the conflict through negotiation. Instead, over the years, Islamabad has retaliated with its own disregard of law and order; as a result, Karachi has emerged today as one of the most dangerous cities in the world. Perhaps worse is the fact that Karachi has become the weak link of Pakistan, where proxy wars are fought by external forces, causing sectarian and religious conflicts and subverting the integrity of the nation from within. So far, the feudal Pakistan has found no answer to it.

The newer problem

By contrast, the Shia-Sunni strife in Karachi is a rather recent development, although the two sects have been at each

other's throats in Punjab, the North West Frontier Province, and Azad Kashmir—the Pakistan-held part of Kashmir—for years. Provocations against the Shias in Karachi go back to 1984, when Sunni extremists burnt down a Shia mosque and several surrounding stores owned by individuals belonging to the Shia community, during the ceremonies to mark Ashura, the festival of martyrs. But in subsequent years, the battlefield for extremists belonging to the two communities was elsewhere, while Karachi was experiencing heavy doses of violence orchestrated by the heroin and hashish traffickers, MQM and PPP activists, overzealous law and order men, Sindh secessionists, and the orthodox Jamaat-backed Muslim Leaguers and their student front groups.

Pakistan, a nation of 110 million people, is Sunni-dominated; Shias number anywhere between 20 to 30 million. Prior to 1980, or more precisely before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and at the time that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was coming to power through a violent Islamic revolution in Iran, violent incidents between Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan were too rare to cause any concern to anyone. But the success of the Islamic revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini, and the Pakistani ruling elite's decision to become a strategic partner of the West to counter the Soviet threat to the "free nations" of South Asia, pitchforked Pakistan into the center stage of broader intrigues and conflicts. While drug running and illegal arms smuggling became the part and parcel of maintaining the so-called Jihad in Afghanistan, foreign interests in Pakistan were enhanced significantly.

Islamic interests

For the Saudis, Pakistan was a natural ally that needed consolidating. Most of the Sunnis, belonging to the orthodox Deobandi order, were more receptive to the orthodox Wahabism of Saudi Arabia than to the prevalent Sufism of Central Asia. Saudi interest in Pakistan, often propelled by western theorists and geo-strategists, has been to help bring into power in Islamabad a leadership which is pro-Saudi and keen to influence its neighbors—big and small—while promoting goodwill on behalf of the Saudi government. Large Saudi-funded mosques, like the impressive Faisal Mosque in Islamabad, were the visible end of the Saudi support-spectrum. The invisible end consists of Saudi support for political parties; umpteen academic institutions as well as many Islamic schools, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami; and such trained assassins as the Anjuman Sipah-e-Sahaba (ASS) in Punjab and the alleged Feb. 25 killers in Karachi, the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). While the Jamaat's role was to use Wahabi-style Islamic orthodoxy as the battering ram against all democratic political forces, the Sipah-e-Sahaba has been used to decimate pro-Iran interest groups and eliminate Shia leaders and movements.

If the Saudi agenda for Pakistan seems ruthless, it is no more so than what was promoted by Iran under the guise of



Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. The killing of 20 Shia worshippers in Karachi puts an additional strain on her government.

“friendly moves by a friendly country.” The Shia groupings of the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-Jaffriya (TNFJ) of the North West Frontier Province, or the Tehrik-e-Jaffriya (TJ), active in Karachi, have all along been acting like paramilitary forces and an exact replica of the ASS. It is also evident that while the Sipah-e-Sahaba is politically linked to the Pakistan Muslim League, particularly to the Nawaz Sharif group—the major opponent to Prime Minister Bhutto’s ruling coalition—the TNFJ is aligned with the PPP. It is yet another matter how close the TNFJ will remain to the Bhutto government in the coming days unless the Feb. 25-style killings are not stopped forthwith. The killings at the two Shia mosques in Karachi are likely a message sent to Prime Minister Bhutto about things to come in the next wave of violence.

The first big Shia-Sunni conflict in recent years came to light in May 1984, when reports indicated that about 200 to 300 people were killed in a clash between the Shias and Sunnis in Gilgit in Azad Kashmir. Those clashes occurred around Gilgit and its neighboring villages, and eyewitness reports indicate that the Army and police took a “passive” role during the killings.

Pakistan’s chief martial law administrator at that time, Gen. Zia ul-Haq, resorted to sacking the Azad Kashmir government, censoring the news, and dissolving the Azad Kashmir provincial assembly. During the clashes, foreign diplomats, who reported on the incidents, claimed that the Shia community activists had raised slogans such as “Down with Saudi Arabia” and “Down with Pakistan.”

Grooming of the killers

Soon after the Gilgit incident came to light, the Anjuman Sipah-e-Sahaba group made its appearance in Punjab. It was widely known at that point that the ASS was the militant arm of the Jamaat-e-Islami, a pro-Saudi political grouping with a small base, but a lot of money. Soon Punjab became the happy hunting ground of the ASS, and one senseless killing followed another.

Despite a massive hue and cry from peace-loving Pakistani citizens, no action was taken to curb the violence perpetrated by the ASS. In 1988, weeks before Zia ul-Haq was killed in a plane crash along with a number of his close Army associates, the assassination of the TNFJ chief Allama Husseini had caused a furor in the North West Frontier Province. Iran did not take the matter lightly either, and sent a personal emissary from Ayatollah Khomeini to attend Allama Husseini’s funeral. The assassination of Allama Husseini and the hatred preached by the ASS toward the minorities in general and Shias in particular, all helped the Shia community to recruit more cadres to confront the ASS. The ASS was also accused of killing two Iranian diplomats in Punjab. Despite protests issued by Teheran, it was evident that Islamabad was not capable of effectively curbing either the ASS or the TNFJ.

Meanwhile, the proxy war between the two Islamic rivals in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and Iran, continues to be fought in Pakistan at the expense of innocent Pakistanis. Pakistan’s endless tampering with Afghanistan, perhaps at the goading of some western powers, has furthered tensions between the Shia extremists and Sunni assassins within Pakistan. In Afghanistan, both Saudi Arabia and Iran, having staked their claims for a slice of the Central Asian pie, are vying with each other for an Islamic sphere of influence, through which trade with and religious conversions in Central Asia can be carried out with abandon. Neither the Saudis nor the Iranians have shown any intention of taking their hands off Afghanistan, and Pakistan, of course, continues to warm its hands in the Afghan fire.

The latest burst of violence, however, may pose a direct threat to the Bhutto government itself. MQM leader Altaf Hussain, self-exiled in London for over three years, has expressed anguish over the killings of Shia Muslims in Karachi, his claimed turf. It was not long ago that the Baluch secessionist movement was being conducted from London by Baluch leaders, and the increasing tendency of the MQM leaders to let it be known that the Mohajirs want Karachi as a separate entity, something akin to the Crown Colony arrangement the British have had with Hongkong, is to the point. In addition, the *Iran News* from Teheran has accused the Bhutto government of failing to provide adequate security to the Shias of Pakistan. The Tehrik-e-Jaffriya secretary general, Hasan Turabi, has said that “it is a conspiracy to create differences between the two sects,” and has accused the Bhutto government of dividing the Muslims.