

## The Rise of Spontaneous Vigilante Terrorism in Pakistan: Challenges and Prospects

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### Abstract:

*This paper looks at the alarming trend of spontaneous vigilante terrorism in Pakistan, which can be characterized as random, extrajudicial violence by individuals or mobs often leading to death especially in relation to the controversial blasphemy laws that are enforced in the country. Through a mixed-methods research design, the study employs the Constructivist approach to suggest that the phenomenon is largely based on a strong religious extremist tradition and lack of tolerance, augmented by historical incidences such as the Islamization of Zia-ul-Haq and consistent sectarian divisions instigated by regional interests. Quantitative information puts into light the aggregate of blasphemy-related violence especially in Punjab with Umerkot Incident being a case in point of the failure of law and order and the support of state actors. The conclusion of the paper recommends short-term and long-term counter-extremism measures such as democratic religious forums, reforming of curriculum and successful implementation of justice to curb regression of society.*

**Keywords:** Terrorism, Blasphemy Laws, Pakistan, Extremism, Sectarianism..

### Introduction

In simple terms, spontaneous vigilante terrorism can be described as an unorganized event where an ordinary individual, whether part of a group or not, takes violent action in a public space like a market or street at any time. Acting like a lone wolf, this person targets another, subjecting them to torture, even leading to their death, without any legal authority or trial. This type of terrorism, known as spontaneous vigilante terrorism, is something that is on the rise in Pakistan. The seeds of this form of violence were planted in Pakistan several decades ago, and now its flames have grown so intense that no one is safe—whether sane or mentally ill, politician or religious scholar, man or woman. If higher authorities fail to address this serious issue promptly, there is a real fear that society could regress into the ‘state of nature’ described by Thomas Hobbes. Ever since regulations about “blasphemy” were formulated in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly under the reign of former military ruler Zia-ul-Haq, are entering into a destructive phase and are becoming problematic. For the Pakistani State to at least amend them is a serious matter. Since then, it has already claimed hundreds of innocent lives, and now every single person is in danger of dying at the hands of a regular religious

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follower. It will cause enormous amounts of devastation if it ignores this egregious problem promptly. (Hashmi, 2009).

### **Review of the Literature**

Numerous incidences of this kind of terrorism have been documented globally. Many academics have identified several distinct causes behind it. This issue exists worldwide, in developed or developing countries, in one way or another. The socioeconomic divide in society is one of the main contributing causes to this, but there are also racial and cultural variables at play, such as intolerance of political disagreement. Still, these haven't done much to encourage vigilante terrorism in Pakistan. Upon analyzing the matter, taking into consideration both the historical context and the present circumstances, the author has concluded that religious politics significantly influence the occurrence of such incidents on a massive scale.

"The root cause lies in the context or the lack of tolerance for the other religious beliefs of people in the country."

Despite Muhammad Ali Jinnah's affirmation in his historic speech on September 11, 1947, regarding the independence of religious practices for minorities in Pakistan, this commitment has been largely confined to political rhetoric, remaining merely a promise and a gesture of goodwill. (Pakistan, 2024). Unless tangible measures are implemented, the lives of minorities will remain highly unsafe.

### **Understanding Vigilante Terrorism Using the Constructivist Approach:**

The "Constructivism" theory and the forecasts of Abul Kalam Azad and Hussain Ahmad Madani are perhaps applicable to this mob and terrorist mentality of the society since the issue affects both the state and the individuals themselves (Saul McLeod, 2024).

According to Jean Piaget, the creator of the constructivist method, learning arises from social interaction. According to his theory, knowledge is created when two variables interact. Based on their experiences, understandings, and relationships, society psychology emerges. (Saul McLeod, 2024). The constructivist method offers us a way to examine fundamentalism, extremism, terrorism, and the rise of mob psychology in the context of vigilante terrorism. The core of this theory is that these beliefs, whether they are of a mob mentality or a rigid dedication to religion, are socially produced and fashioned by interactions with both the social and the extremist religious context. This method aids in our understanding of vigilante terrorism and how extremist groups influence social attitudes through the dissemination of a common narrative. This explains why the person behaves viciously and murders others, either in an organized or unorganized manner, using explanations that are firmly ingrained in the socially manufactured mob mentality.

### **Religionism: its involvement in vigilante terrorism.**

Fundamentalist religiosity entails strong devotion to religious doctrine while rejecting modernist interpretations, which play a crucial role in shaping the intellectual

framework of vigilante terrorism. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani expressed their concerns about the creation of Pakistan, particularly in the name of religion, and actively warned against the possible emergence of religious fanaticism, which was expressed in an article written by Dr. Ishtiaq Ahmad, a history professor at Stockholm University in Sweden (Ahmed, 2022). They believed that the creation of a state founded on Islamic identity would intensify disputes between Muslims over sectarian matters, challenge the moral standing of Islam, and make non-Muslims feel uncomfortable, ultimately resulting in considerable internal and external conflict. They believed that the creation of a state founded on Islamic identity would intensify disputes between Muslims over sectarian matters, challenge the moral standing of Islam, and make non-Muslims feel uncomfortable, ultimately resulting in considerable internal and external conflict. Azad contended that the competing imposition of different interpretations of Islam would lead to tyranny and the loss of Islam's universal message of brotherhood. At the same time, Madani warned against the authoritarian nature of a state that was solely Islamic, foreseeing the need for force amid deeply held divisions (Ahmed, 2022).

### **Dynamics of Sectarian Rifts in Pakistan**

Pakistan has historically been the scene of sectarian strife, particularly between the Sunni and Shi'a groups. In Parachinar, KP, there is still one of the most horrible confronts in history. That concerns the lack of a well-thought-out, long-term plan to deal with sectarianism. In the meanwhile, the state takes a reactive response to the problem, which is best characterized as a "firefighting approach". Generally, violence breaks out during the months of "Muharram" and "Rabiul Awwal," and it eventually spreads when both receive the thoughtful assistance of Saudi Arabia and Iran, the governments that support their ideologies. (Haqqani, 2006).

The Islamization of the nation under Ziaul Haq strengthened the position of Sunni clergy and alienated the Shi'a minority. Ziaul Haq and his intelligence agencies interpreted the Shi'a's demands for the defense of their religious rights as a possible indication of Iranian infiltration. Most likely, the Iranians were providing financial support to the Shi'a in Pakistan, while Ziaul Haq urged the Saudis to aid Sunni sectarian groups. (Haqqani, 2006). To get the record set, Pakistan is a battleground for Iran and Saudi Arabia, where the two giants fight for their respective ideologies.

### **Influence of Hardline Islamic Clerics in Vigilante Terrorism:**

Extremism, in conjunction with terrorism, has undermined the moral and social fabric of Pakistani society. Pakistani society's moral and social character has been upset by extremism and terrorism. In his period, Pervez Musharraf established "Sufi Islam" in Pakistan to counter the threat. But when the blasphemy legislation controversy exploded and turned violent, his efforts were fruitless. The introduction of Sufi Islam, which was later adopted by the Bareilvi school of thought, was intended as a countermovement to Wahabi Islam, which peaked during and after the Afghan jihad. (Suleman, 2018). The

government has spread Sufism through social and political channels. Consequently, each other's counterattack was the outcome. To combat extremism, the PPP, which was in power in 2008, worked to propagate Sufism throughout Pakistan while simultaneously bolstering the Sunni Tehreek (ST) and the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) (Suleman, 2018). The government of Pakistan should be cautious of taking this approach, according to leading Pakistani scholar Ayesha Siddiqi. She was of the view that emboldening Sufi groups could lead to the corruption of the Sufi order (Siddiqi, 2009).

As it had been seen, in 2011 his bodyguard assassinated the Punjab minister Salman Taseer after he questioned the blasphemy laws, claiming that people were using them to settle personal grudges. Mumtaz Qadri, his gunman, later claimed to have been influenced by the speeches of Imtiaz Shah and Mufti Qari Haneef Qureshi, two Bareilvi preachers. (Suleman, 2018). Ironically, a formal complaint was filed in 2023 under Section 298-A alleging blasphemy against the same Qari Haneef Qureshi. (Times, 2023). Here, the adage had been interpreted in its truest sense: "He who digs a pit for others often falls in himself." Mufti Tariq Masud, a famous scholar with millions of followers, was criticized for making divisive statements about the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) and Quran Shareef, during his September 2024 video lecture. Later on, he apologized, claiming that his remarks had been misinterpreted, and reportedly left the country due to fear for his life. It should be mentioned here that he was previously known for his strict stance on blasphemy laws. (Times T. E., 2024). These two events exemplify the entire situation: individuals are being driven towards extremism by professors and religious leaders who incite the public, although it is evident that they too will ultimately be ensnared by the same consequences.

### **Data Set: Vigilante Violence and Blasphemy in Pakistan;**

We can infer from the following statistics that there is no treatment for this problem, and it is growing worse every day. The Centre for Research and Security Studies reports that from Pakistan's founding until 2021, 89 persons are said to have died in mob lynchings and that about 1500 allegation cases have been filed. The actual figures, which are significantly higher, may not have been disclosed because of press control. One province, Punjab (1,098), accounted for more than 70% of the accused, with Sindh (177), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) (33), Baluchistan (12), and Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK) (11) following suit. (Nafees, 2022).

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's annual report for 2021, there were 84 cases of blasphemy recorded that year. Of those, 45 were Muslims, 25 Ahmadis, 07 Christians, and 07 Hindus were accused of blasphemy. To elaborate, a total of 07 cases were filed in the Islamabad Capital Territory, 68 in Punjab, 03 in Sindh, 05 in KP, and 1 in AJK. Furthermore, 70 of the Ahmadi graves were desecrated and 3 Ahmadis were slain. The lynching of Priyantha Kumara Diyawadana was the most well-known case; it was covered by both national and foreign media. On December 3, 2021, in the Sialkot Punjab province, a 49-year-old man from Sri Lanka was lynched by a mob on the grounds of blasphemy. (Pakistan, 2022). In 2022, 171 persons were accused of

blasphemy laws, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's annual report, which mentions the Centre for Social Justice. Of them, Punjab accounted for 65% of the cases reported, KP for 47, and ICT for 9. A mentally ill person was stoned to death by the mob on February 12, 2022, in Tehsil Khanewal, Punjab, in front of the police, all because the victim was accused of blasphemy (Pakistan State of Human Rights In 2023). With the advent of a destructive phase, there is cause for concern among lawmakers and law enforcement agencies due to the increasing number of blasphemy occurrences and cases that have been documented throughout time. Muslims' lives are likewise at stake in addition to those of other minorities. The noteworthy case of Junaid Hafeez, a lecturer at Bahaudin Zakariya University and a Full Bright scholar, who was put to life in prison due to blasphemy accusations, is being brought to attention here. (Ahmed, 2019).

The Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights of Pakistan reported in 2023 that 215 people were detained on suspicion of blasphemy, with the provinces of Sindh and Punjab accounting for majority of the arrests that year. However, as of November 2023, Prison Department statistics in Punjab alone show that 551 people were serving prison sentences for blasphemy, with 506 adults being held pending trial and 45 being found guilty. The year 2023 was especially terrible for the Christian communities in Jaranwala town, Punjab. Two brothers were accused of defiling the Quran, which resulted in the demolition of about 100 houses and 22 churches (Shahid, 2023). Thus far, it appears that vigilante terrorism and blasphemy are related. The precise number of blasphemy accusation victims in 2024 is unknown, but mob lynching incidents have not decreased, and the so-called minorities are still not receiving any accommodations. In Madyan, Swat, a mob had killed a tourist who arrived. He was charged with using the Holy Quran arbitrarily. A lynching event was reported in Sargodha, Mujahid Colony, on May 25. A mob stoned a Christian man, Nazir Masih, to death (Gul, 2024). But the last two cases had occurred in Sindh and Baluchistan. The difference, however, here is that both blasphemy suspects were allegedly killed in police custody. (Zia-ur-Rehman, 2024).

### **Research Design and Methodology**

A mixed approach, both qualitative and quantitative, is being applied to the study of spontaneous vigilante terrorism in this article. Historical records based on the annual reports have been used as a quantitative method, while the qualitative method is also applied in terms of a case study that is discussed next. This research paper will underline the social and religious factors, in particular, for contribute to the spontaneous vigilante terrorism. In addition to this, it also aims to recommend policies i.e. both long-term and short-term, to address this grave issue.

### **Umerkot Incident: A Case Study of Vigilante Terrorism**

Umarkot serves as a bridge connecting Tharparkar and the remainder of Sindh province, and it is situated 60 km from the Indian border. Another notable fact about the city is that Akbar, the Mughul Emperor, was born there. Umerkot was the only state to join Pakistan that had both a Hindu king and a majority of Hindus before the subcontinent

was divided. Different castes, including Syed, Rajput, Mangniyar, Kunbhar, Charan, Bheel, Meghwar, Kolhi, Bajeer, Arisar, Rahimoon, Samejo, and Suthar, are represented in the communities that call Umerkot their city and its surrounding areas or isolated villages home. Umerkot's population, which is predominately Hindu, coexists peacefully. In the month of Ramadan, the Hindus celebrate Iftari, and in the month of Muharram, the Muslims come forward to attend Hindu festivals, thus sending a message of love, peace, and harmony. The city of Umarkot has produced renowned Sufi mystic poets, including Shah Abdul Karim Bulri, Mian Shah Inayat Shaheed, and Faqir Abdul Wahab Faqir. Their works often reflect their love for humanity, peace, and spirituality (Furqan Hyder Shaikh, 2020).

### **What Happened there?**

On the 12th of Rabi ul Awwal, it appeared to the media when a mob accused a person, Shah Nawaz Kunbhar, claimed by the mob that he had allegedly shared blasphemous content on social media. They gathered in hundreds of numbers and demanded an immediate arrest of the Kunbhar. They get violent in a period and burn the clinic owned by Shah Nawaz Kunbhar, the accused person. Even though Shah Nawaz claimed that he doesn't own that account and was hacked previously over which the blasphemous content was being shared. He handed over his phone to the police and the FIA, urging in a video message for a thorough investigation. (Veengas, 2024). According to Umerkot police officer Asif Baloch, a formal complaint (FIR) was filed under Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code against Shah Nawwaz. The Police Tracked Him Down and Arrested Him at Last. When the Mirpurkhas police announced that Kumbhar had been killed in a police encounter at the Sindhri village close to Mirpurkhas, tensions increased. Kumbhar and his company allegedly opened fire on a police officer, then returned fire, according to the FIR Mirpur Khas Police. However, Kumbhar was ultimately slain by his collaborators' gunfire. (Veengas, 2024).

Regretfully, though, his body was burnt by fanatics after they discovered it. To look into the event, the Sindh Provincial Government assembled a team headed by three top police officers. Two police officers from Mirpur Khas have also been suspended by the South Government. The religious clerics and groups in the area have showered DIG Javed Jiskani, the police officer, with flowers and accolades. 'Ghazi' has also been mentioned. According to the letter addressed to the Provincial Minister, the encounter was staged. This implies that the police, whose primary duty is to defend the accused and bring them before the court, killed Shahnawaz during the encounter (Veengas, 2024). Paradoxically, the police, whose job it is to maintain law and order in the community, are still involved in this disease, as evidenced by the two incidents that occurred recently in Quetta, Baluchistan, on 12 September 2024, where a man who was a victim of blasphemy was killed by a policeman. After a week, on the 19th of September 2024, a doctor facing accusations of blasphemy was killed in a fictitious encounter in the Umar-Kot district of Sindh province following the murder. The Sindh government has

acknowledged that the incident happened, despite the doctor's denials in a video that has been making the rounds on his Facebook account.

### **Prospects For Pakistan: What is to Be Done?**

#### **Counter spontaneous terrorism strategy**

Preventing this unorganized terrorism, which is undermining our society daily, is a significant challenge for the government and other state institutions. The complexity of the issue is further exacerbated by the fact that it not only threatens national security but also erodes public confidence in state authority. Since it has been stated in this paper that religious extremism is primarily the root cause for these incidents, this paper discusses several strategies through which the government and state can save the lives of the general public by closely adhering to the following guidelines. Both long-term and short-term solutions to this problem are possible, each requiring coordinated efforts between law enforcement, policymakers, and civil society. Immediate actions can help mitigate the risks, while long-term policies should focus on addressing the ideological and social factors fueling extremism. Here are some policy recommendations to address the issues;

#### **Democratic Religious Forums:**

With its many different cultures, faiths, languages, and other characteristics, Pakistan also faces the fundamental problems of religious extremism, sectarian bloodshed, and intolerance for others. Interfaith harmony is essential to addressing this specific problem and is also necessary for society to run smoothly in a stable and prosperous manner. Establishing a democratic forum that brings together people from all different sects and religions to encourage amicable communication and collaboration amongst religious communities is desperately needed nationwide.

The state and the government can create a better environment related to this serious issue by giving a peaceful interpretation of Islam to the people along with eminent scholars from different jurisprudence of the society. In this regard, the government should form committees at the district level in consultation with the scholars of all schools of thought, whose aim should be to ensure that all the people living in the society who have jurisprudence and religion or belief are religiously tolerant. Apart from this, the state should take legal action against such elements, especially religious extremist clerics, who spread communal or religious practices.

#### **Future directions for the curriculum**

The content that is taught in elementary and matriculated schools has a significant effect on students' mental health. The children would eventually regard their fellow non-Muslims with blatantly prejudiced views if they are exposed to discriminatory content and are taught such lessons as portraying minorities as inferior. While it is important to update the curriculum or remove any materials that portray minorities as inferior, it is also important to incorporate lessons on interfaith cooperation. This is a

time-consuming task, and the results will not be seen for a very long time. This can be utilized to combat the rising levels of personal insecurity by acting as a counter-extremist measure.

### **Effective execution of blasphemy laws**

As per the constitution of Pakistan, the person who allegedly was convicted of blasphemy shall be punished under Section 295, which can be a death to the person or an imprisonment of one to ten years. As discussed earlier, any shortcoming to the perfect execution of law ultimately leads to the extrajudicial killing of the convicted person by the people themselves. There is a dire need to fill the void and to execute the law effectively and efficiently to overcome the frustration of mobs. In other countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Turkey the least punishment for this crime is death.

### **Collaboration between Government and NGOs for Interfaith Harmony to Combat Vigilante Terrorism**

It will be regarded as an unceasing endeavor to curtail vigilante terrorism to work on interfaith peace with the government in cooperation with non-governmental organizations, particularly those that foster religious tolerance. To promote tolerance for one another and religious diversity, those specific NGOs have maintained a close relationship with the community at the grassroots level. Through several initiatives, the government can support NGOs in their efforts to engage the community, run educational campaigns, and create narratives that challenge extremism.

Together, they will eventually be able to identify growing rivalry and tensions and take appropriate action. By enhancing societal unity and resolving conflicts at the local level, this partnership can successfully combat the factors that lead to sporadic acts of vigilante terrorism and create a more resilient, peaceful society. The Centre for Human Rights Education Pakistan and the Rawadari Tehreek, which are active in Lahore, Pakistan, are two of the best examples of such an NGO. They build mutual understanding across the many religious communities by choosing members from all over the country.

### **Conclusion**

The rise in spontaneous vigilante terrorism in Pakistan is a life-threatening phenomenon that is making the society approach the state of nature that Thomas Hobbes cautions. As this study has shown, this disorganized violence does not exist in isolation, but is entrenched in the institutionalized religious intolerance and extremist discourses that have since blossomed since the controversial phrasing of the blasphemy laws. Using the Constructivist frame, we can observe how a pervasive mob mentality is a social creation in the failure to embrace moderate interpretations of faith and in the unwillingness to discuss historical sectarian fault lines, which are frequently created by outside state actors. The quantitative data vividly explains how these incidents are becoming more and more common with provinces such as Punjab being the centers of violence. Moreover, case studies such as the Umerkot Incident unveil a frightening



dynamic: the justice system of the state is not only rendered useless but in certain situations, It even turns into the accomplice of extrajudicial murders. Even hardliner clerics who first spurred this cycle of violence are now becoming caught up in the cycle, which highlights the pervasive nature of the risk of uncontrollable extremism. The only way to combat this menace is to apply both a short time and a long-term approach of reform. Short-term priorities should be the strict and transparent implementation of justice in order to recover the confidence of people in rules of law. At the same time, ideological detoxification should be addressed on a long-term basis: creating interfaith forums on the principles of democracy, reforming the school curricula to exclude discriminatory elements, and enhancing grassroots cooperation with NGOs. In the end, the security and moral fabric of Pakistan will be based on a holistic state action to deconstruct the extremist narratives that drive spontaneous vigilante terrorism.

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