

Moral Suasion or Policy Reforms? How to Tackle Sectarian Violence in Pakistan: The Case Study of Gilgit-Baltistan

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Abstract

The existing literature in social sciences and humanities analyzing root causes of sectarian and religious conflicts focus mostly on micro-factors. The inability of market and state factors to control sectarian conflict for last seven decades remains understudied by the contemporary literature. This article aims at filling that gap and seeks to identify certain market and government failures that have implications on sectarian and religious conflicts. More specifically, it identifies four market failures namely asymmetries of information, externalities, equity and public goods and three government failures, which include democracy failure, bureaucratic failure and implementation failure. In contrast to the literature shedding light on the impact and gravity of sectarian and religious violence in the country, the purpose here remains to highlight important aspects of public policy reforms for peace making and peace building. This article, based on the aforementioned market and government failures, suggests a whole new set of policy reforms.

Key Words

Extremism, Policy-reforms, Pakistan, Religion, Sectarianism, Government-Failures, Violence.

Introduction

Since its independence, Pakistan has undergone harrowing episodes of sectarian violence, although intermittently; the main contenders being the Sunnis and the Shias in the country (Shah, 2014). However, the sectarian intolerance is not limited to the two major sects in Muslims. The recent episodes of sectarian intolerance in the country speak volumes of the increasing nature of intra-sect and inter-religion conflicts. On the other hand, even after seven decades, policy-makers at the helm of affairs seem helpless in crafting policies that could mitigate the sectarian violence in the country. This in the backdrop, an important question that the existing literature in social sciences and humanities has failed to answer is whether the governments should rely on moral suasion, as in the existing case, as a policy tool or it should introduce a set of policy reforms to reduce sectarian violence in the country. This research aims at filling this gap. Furthermore, the existing literature investigating the root causes of the sectarian conflicts rely mainly on the religious aspects and micro-factors of the conflict. In contrast, this research examines failures on behalf of the market and government as a cause of the sectarian and religious conflicts.

As a multi-sect and multi-ethnic province with a history of sectarian violence for over five decades, Gilgit-Baltistan makes a perfect test-bed to analyze the failures of market and government to control sectarian violence and craft long-term policies to address it. The policy implications that this research suggests are, however, generic and replicable across the country both on provincial and federal levels.

Creating and sustaining peace in contemporary Pakistan seems more imperative than ever. On the one hand, the \$60 billion investments under aegis of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are promising seismic changes in the economy (Alam et al, 2019). On the other hand, persisting sectarian violence and increasing sectarian intolerance undermines and poses a threat to the success of the project. This in the background, building and maintaining peace in the country in general and Gilgit-Baltistan, being the gateway of CPEC, in particular, seems imperative.

For the policymakers, however, it is important to understand that restoring and sustaining peace should not only be based on the principals of morality and virtuousness; it is a policy issue seeking a clear set of policy reforms. Likewise, sustainability of the peace in the region is conditional on a continuous process of policy reforms that has no clear beginning or end. However, the necessary condition to postulate adequate policies for settlement of sectarian issues is introducing a complete set of policy reforms. Lack of such a set of policy reforms to address sectarian strife in Gilgit-Baltistan and in the rest of country implies the lack of understanding of the policy process.

Rest of the paper is structured as: the following section delves into the historical context of the sectarian violence. The next to following section briefly overviews previous literature on conflict,

violence, and peace. Section three discusses the market failures and government failures. The specific public policies to address these failures are discussed in section four. The paper sums up with concluding remarks.

Background

As argued by Grare (2007) that “sectarian violence is not a monocausal phenomenon; it has deep social, political and geopolitical roots.” In order to understand the desired public policy process, therefore, we first must identify the historical, political, religious and socio-economic factors that facilitate the occurrence of sectarian violence. Grare (2007) further argues that the sectarian clashes between Shia–Sunni were rare before the partition of the sub-continent. However as a result of Zia ul-Haq’s Islamisation policies followed by Iranian revolution, sectarian intolerance became commonplace. The 20 percent Shia population in order to escape the Islamisation drive preferred to vote in the secularly-oriented Pakistan’s People’s Party (PPP) thus polarizing the country on sectarian basis. However, the country was already set on the path of religious polarization as soon as the Ahmadiyyas were declared non-Muslims by the country’s first constitution adopted by the parliament in 1973. Leaders of the right-wing Islamist political parties had already taken an anti-Shias stance giving rise to sectarian tensions in Karachi, Punjab, Gilgit-Baltistan.

However, not much has been written on the history of sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) but Feyyaz (2011) argues that that sectarian violence existed even in the pre-partition era albeit British rule ‘completely uprooted’ it. The post partition history of sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan can be traced to early 1960s-1970s when the religious leaders of Shia and Sunni sects, the two major sects in Muslims, started attacking on each other’s faith (Shekhawat, 2011). Many researchers believe that the first ‘official’ violence took place in 1988 when hundreds of Shias were being killed by Sunnis. It must be noted that Gilgit-Baltistan is a Shias majority region whereas Pakistan is an official Sunni country. This was followed by a series of sectarian violence in 1994, 1998, 2000 while the latest episode occurred in March-April 2012 killing 15 people. Along with the religious factors, political isolation seems an equal candidate for the protracted conflict in the region. In 1974, the small princely states were abolished by the government of Pakistan thus establishing a single administrative unit under the federal government; the Northern Areas of Pakistan (it was renamed as Gilgit-Baltistan in 2009). Since then, the region has been controlled and administrated by federal bureaucracy though introduction of different governance packages remained a part of the process. The latest governance package was announced in 2009 giving the region a semi-autonomous status. Even this governance package could not recognize the region as a constitutional part of Pakistan by denying them the right of vote in the national elections. This political isolation gave birth to religion-based political ideologies with Sunni advocating the annexation of the region with Sunni majority Kashmir while Shias struggling for a separate identity. This political-religious clash is now an important aspect of the sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan. Furthermore, the causality between sectarian violence and socio-economic factors in the region cannot be rejected. It has been suggested that “sectarian violence can impede the process of development whereas low economic opportunities have the potential to create violence” (Beyg 2014). The government is unable to create enough employment opportunities as the development fund is most often diverted towards security needs. High unemployment rate for a region with high literacy rate is one of the reasons for sectarian violence in GB, says the Inspector General of GB Police (Tribune 2012). Along with these reasons, violence related corruption impeding the peace building process is an important feature of contemporary sectarian violence in GB.

Building on the aforementioned factors, this article seeks to identify certain market and government failures that have implications on sectarian violence in the region. This article has identified four market failures; asymmetries of information, externalities, equity and public goods and three government failures; democracy failure, bureaucratic failure and implementation failure. To my knowledge, none of the studies on Gilgit-Baltistan do shed light on important aspects of public policy reforms for peace making and peace building, but limit their scope of analysis to the impact and gravity of sectarian violence. This article, based on the above mentioned market and government failures suggests a whole new set of policy reforms.

Literature Review and Theoretical Background

According to Javaid (2011: 10) “The South Asian societies in contemporary environment are confronted with religion based violence, sectarianism, extremism, communalism and even regionalism” Likewise, Shah (2014) argues the history of South Asia is full of religious, ethnic and cultural clashes.

In line of agreement with Grare (2007), Qureshi (1989) and Zaman (1998) consider General Zia’s Islamisation program to be the major reason for the remarkable rise in sectarian violence in Pakistan further fueled by the Iranian revolution and the Afghan war. These processes had an impact on sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan argues Ali (2008). Many researchers including Feyyaz (2011) and Shekhawat (2011) are in agreement with Ali (2008) suggesting Pakistan’s General Zia’s radical Sunni approach being the main reason for sectarian strife in Pakistan in

general and Gilgit-Baltistan in particular. The demolition of State Subject Rule that allowed non-natives to purchase land in Gilgit-Baltistan created structural imbalances thus pushing it towards violence, argues Feyyaz (2011).

In line of agreement with Copson (1994), All and Matthews (1999) argued that autocrat leadership, “exclusionary politics and discriminatory political institutions and the cynical manipulation of social difference” are equally responsible for the violence creation. Many other studies like Zartman (1995); Widner (1995); Ayoob (1996); Herbst (1996/97); Cliffe and Luckham (1999) suggest that the prolonged strife could be because of ‘failure’ or ‘collapse’ of certain state organizations. While examining the root causes of sectarian violence and religious intolerance, these factors have been ignored by most of the researchers. This study builds on the premise that factors discussed by Feyyaz (2011), Shekhawat (2011) and Ali (2008) lead to certain market and government failures as discussed by Zartman (1995); Widner (1995); Ayoob (1996); Herbst (1996/97); Cliffe and Luckham (1999); Copson (1994) and All and Matthews (1999) thus creating a rationale for the policy reforms.

Though I could not trace even a single article on policy reforms for Pakistan, some studies do suggest different generic policies to curb violence in different parts of the world. Migdal (1988); Barker (1990) and Khadiagala (1999) highlight the importance of effectiveness of institutions in providing “order, security, dispute settlement mechanisms, etc.” allocating socio-economic assistances, creating and maintaining societal cohesion. Many other researchers have emphasized on the need for “transparency,” “confidence building,” effective monitoring, “organizational cohesiveness,” and other institutional measures to curb uncertainties, violence and strife (Rothchild 1995; Hampson 1995; Hartzell, 1999). Likewise, Stedman (1997) has explained the bureaucratic processes that lead to failures resulting in sectarian violence.

It is crucial to understand that the policy design is conditional on the understanding of market and government failure. The following two sections discuss the market and government failures, respectively. Policies to address these failures are discussed in the sections next to the failures section.

Market Failures

According to Beyg (2014) “the policies introduced by the government of Gilgit-Baltistan in last forty years could not address the market failures. The reason seems simple; the government could not identify the prevalent market failures and thus could not design relevant policies to address these failures”. The four market failures, externalities; information asymmetries, equity and public goods that I identify are discussed below.

Information Asymmetries: In Gilgit-Baltistan, lack of proper communication systems, lack of trust, relying on myths, lack of information sharing regulations and misinformation for private benefits lead to asymmetries of information. Myths are based on misinformation and propaganda that lead to the failure of the system and there can be pre and post conflict myths. Busumtvi-Sam (2002) explains the role of myths during sectarian violence as:

“...myths allow a group to overlook internal differences, exaggerate external differences with other groups, and mobilize members for collective political action. Indeed, processes of myth-making have been present in every case of protracted conflict in the contemporary period”

Busumtvi-Sam’s (2002) analysis is very much relevant to Gilgit-Baltistan’s sectarian strife. Ali (2010) in her study ‘Sectarian Imaginaries’ asked students to specify their sect on a form, in a school in Gilgit city, narrates that:

“In my class, I noticed that children were now more aware of each other’s sect. They started to self-segregate, with Sunni ones sitting and socializing with other Sunnis, Shias with Shias, and so on. Several teachers noticed this tendency in their classrooms”

Though Ali (2010) calls it a “sectarian imaginary – a normalized mode of seeing and interacting with the sectarian other through suspicion and resentment,” but what is the origin of such a ‘sectarian imaginary’. It has its origins in myths; the myths about other sects these students carry either from elder guys in the street or from their parents (Beyg, 2014). And sooner or later these myths would become the reason for violence. Based on these myths, fifteen people were killed in April 2012 in Chilas, a city in Gilgit-Baltistan (The News 2012). Further, most taqteeb and imams (one who leads prayers in mosque and is custodian of a specific mosque) are not properly literate but their followers blindly believe in their preaching that often ends up spreading hatred against the other sect. Myths and misguided preachings advocate the government intervention in the form of policy reforms to correct the information failures.

Equity: The sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan is affecting even those who are not the stakeholders in the violence--- those who do not belong to the two rival sects and those who have high priority for peace. The concept of ‘sectarian imaginary’ introduced by Ali (2010) is applicable to equity as well; if you belong to the rival sect; you are seen through ‘suspicion and resentment’ even though you are not religiously biased. In fact, violence seems affecting everyone’s rights. An anecdote explains this situation very well: Salima is a government school teacher in Aliabad Hunza, a town in Gilgit-Baltistan. Here she tells me her story:

“I am a government school teacher at Aliabad, my hometown. I teach primary class students. One day, I saw an advertisement by United States Education Foundation in Pakistan asking for applications from government school teachers for one year training in US. I applied; I was shortlisted and finally got selected. It was like a dream coming true. I thought about it, everyone in town was excited and I was busy receiving wishes and compliments. The next step was to apply for my passport and visa. The day I came to Gilgit city for getting my passport and then soon after the city was struck with violence. The army took over and imposed curfew for next four weeks. I couldn't get my passport, I couldn't get my visa, I couldn't go to US and I couldn't get my dream, perhaps never again. It was not my fate, it was the violence.”

Salima is not the only one who suffered, there might be many more that we do not know and violence silently took away their dreams and their fate.

Public Goods: Controlling sectarian violence is directly related with law and order, security arrangements, regulations and mechanisms to curb violence and build peace. All of these are public goods being the responsibility of the government. Migdal (1988); Baig and Yi (2016); Barker (1990), and Khadiagala (1998) highlight the importance of effectiveness of institutions in providing public goods “(governance, order, security, dispute settlement mechanisms, etc.).” The protracted conflict in Gilgit-Baltistan reflects the flaws in provision of the security related public goods. Furthermore, persistence of violence shows ineffectiveness on behalf of the government institutions.

Externalities: Post violence negative externalities include killing of individuals from non-Shiite and non-Sunni sects. During the recent sectarian strife, five individuals from a third Muslim sect, Ismailis, were said to be killed in cross firings. Likewise, brain-drain of the talent is yet another externality. Violence leads to decrease in tourists' inflow that makes people to lose jobs and income.

Government Failures

Brown (1996) argues that ‘bad leaders’ had a role in states failure while Zartman (1995) suggests that government's power games make its affairs ineffective. Critics suggest that political isolation of the region has created the religion-based political ideologies that are now an important aspect of the Shia-Sunni conflict. Officers in the civil services safeguard the interests of their own sect rather than working for the state, which leads to interruption in the transparent system and gives rise to the violence corruption (Beyg 2014). Beyg further argues that “violence corruption is widespread, systematic and often interlinked that is yet another barrier in building sustainable peace in the region”. This in the backdrop, I identify three types of government failures as the features of the contemporary sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Democracy Failure: The concept of ‘bad leaders’ in state failures by Brown (2006) could be seen during the periods of sectarian strife. Governments constantly get blackmailed by the so-called clerics working for their own sectarian interests thus making it paralyzed. The army takes the reins of the government. The sectarian power seems to be a parallel government to the one elected by the people. But the actual government rests with the former. The existing democratic system in Gilgit-Baltistan is a candidate for a drastic revamp.

Bureaucratic and Implementation Failure: The bureaucratic failure is the outcome of principal-agent problem. The weak principal, who are the elected representatives, create opportunities for the bureaucracy, the powerful agent, to shirk. The inability on behalf of the principal to monitor the agent has resulted in widespread, interlinked and systematic corruption; the violence corruption. According to official estimates, the government of Gilgit-Baltistan has been spending millions of rupees for maintaining peace. The violence provides an opportunity for rent-seeking. Sectarian violence comes as an excuse for lack of proper monitoring and accountability. The high shirking by the bureaucracy due to weak monitoring and accountability mechanisms has made it a stakeholder in the violence creation.

Policies to Address Market Failures

The Gilgit-Baltistan government has so far relied on short-term informal policies for building and sustaining peace in the region. These policies include but not limited to formulation of peace agreements, establishment of peace committee and negotiations with religious leaders. But it failed to introduce any short-term and long-term policy that directly addresses the four market failures. Some key policies to address the market failures to create a sustainable and long-term peace process, the following policy reforms are required:

Legislation: Legislation is the beginning of a good public policy process that ensures the enforcement and implementation of the government writ. The Gilgit-Baltistan government should introduce bills and make laws that would build peace and curb violence in the long-term. These should include but not limited to:

- Laws on publication and dissemination of hatred spreading material
- Laws on punishments for culprits involved in sectarian violence

- Laws on regulating print and electronic media
- Defining accountability mechanisms

Provision of Public Goods

Providing security to its citizens is the responsibility of the state. A well-established and professional police department minimizes the conflict. Police department in Gilgit-Baltistan is the major candidate for an institutional reform. With a sectarian-biased police, the agenda of peace building will never be fulfilled. Two types of reforms are needed within the police department. First, increasing salaries and providing professional training would enhance their loyalty with the police department and second, developing a proper mechanism of accountability that would ensure strict compliance of the police code of conduct.

Addressing Asymmetries in Information

As myths play an important role in spreading the violence, encountering them should be the first strategy to address information asymmetries. This can be done by developing an unbiased school curriculum that teaches moral values, brotherhood, and the concept of humanity. All those informal schools teaching sectarian-biased curriculum should either be banned or strictly monitored. Specifying sect in school and college forms should be optional. Illiteracy is the root of myths and misinformation that often lead to strife. A long-term strategy to raise the literacy rate would ensure long-term and sustainable peace. A continuous and rigorous media campaign to discourage violence, announcing punishments for those involved in creating violence and programs on interfaith harmony would effectively encounter the asymmetries of information,

Creating Equity

Businesses are shrinking and government development funds are diverted towards fulfilling security needs. Providing employment opportunities is among the responsibilities of the government. Sectarian violence is making the private businesses suffer as well. The unskilled labor remains unemployed during violence episodes. Building peace is the necessary condition for creating employment and job opportunities.

Policies to Address Government Failures

Government Sharing Formula

Democracy failure suggests that the religious-guised-political factors in the region can handicap the government by their blackmailing and threatening tactics. This failure is advocating a revamp of the current government system. Because political isolation was the reason for the emergence of religion-based politics, integrating the regional politics into the national politics by giving the region constitutional status would increase the writ of government by weakening religion-based politics. Furthermore, building sustainable peace would require a government sharing formula among all the sects including the minorities in the region. Yet decentralization of political powers to grassroots levels would disintegrate the religious affiliations and encourage political affiliations.

Anti-Corruption Agencies

To address the issue of bureaucratic failure, establishment of an anti-corruption agency seems the appropriate solution. Because the principal (elected is weak) and the agent (bureaucracy) is strong, the probability of shirking and cheating is higher. The existing anti-corruption institutions are unable to deliver and are candidates for an institutional and structural revamp. Establishing an anti-corruption agency would take the role of principle.

Conclusion

This study builds on the premise that certain market and government failures lead to the creation of sectarian violence. To address the protracted conflict in Pakistan in general and Gilgit-Baltistan in particular, some market and government failures have been identified and policies of reforms have been suggested to address these failures. So far, no study has focused on policy reforms for building sustainable peace in the region and this study is the first of its kind.

As factors other than moral values and religious beliefs can have implications in the process of creating and fueling sectarian and religious hatred among the masses that ultimately become the root-cause of violence, the importance of market and state factors in designing policies for controlling sectarian intolerance is undeniable. However, crafting policies are conditional on the understanding of market and government failures that may lead to sectarian intolerance. This research identifies four market failures namely asymmetries of information, externalities, equity and public goods and three government failures, which include democracy failure, bureaucratic

failure and implementation failure. In contrast to the literature shedding light on the impact and gravity of sectarian and religious violence in the country, the purpose here remains to highlight important aspects of public policy reforms for peace making and peace building. Based on the aforementioned market and government failures, this research has suggested a whole new set of policy reforms. If policy reform is implemented in its true spirit, it has the potential to create enduring and sustainable peace in the country.

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