



The Rise of Barelvi Political Activism in Pakistan

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Executive Summary

Pakistan is witnessing the rise of a new form of Barelvi political activism. The Barelvi school of thought is a Sunni reform movement that arose in the Indian city of Bareilly in the late 19th century. Its followers revere Prophet Muhammad and Sufis, and ascribe to Sufi shrine-based religious practices. The increasingly assertive political role that the Barelvis are poised to play in the political realm is reflected in the emergence of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) as the fourth largest party in the recent elections. Post-elections, the TLP and other Barelvi organisations have heightened their efforts to influence the government through the use of social media, political pressure and mass protests.

This paper argues that this burgeoning strand of Barelvi activism is the result of intra-Islamic contestations and changing patterns of official patronage of Muslim movements. It shows that:

- i. This new form of Barelvi activism emerges out of sectarian and intra-Barelvi contestations for influence and official patronage.
- ii. The Pakistani state and military, which promoted Barelvi organisations as a means to counter Taliban inspired militancy, played a role in legitimising the TLP.
- iii. The expansion of social media facilitated the rise of new religious leaders and impacted upon religious and political discourse.

The paper also provides an assessment of the impact of this new strand of Islamic politics on the socio-political landscape of Pakistan. It demonstrates that:

- i. Organisations like the TLP are making headway by employing openly sectarian discourse.
- ii. Barelvi organisations are attempting to broaden their political canvas beyond issues relating to Islam in Pakistan to include issues like India-Pakistan relations with a view towards expanding their appeal and influence.
- iii. The government has recognised the potential of the emerging Barelvi vote-bank and has not only conceded to demands made by Barelvi movements, but has also consciously employed language that appeals to Barelvi voters.

A New Strand of Barelvi Activism

Pakistan is witnessing the rise of a new strand of Islamic politics. An emerging group of Barelvi preachers and organisations are aggressively using social media and mass protests to galvanise the community into a political force.

The Barelvi school of thought is a Sunni reform movement that arose in the Indian city of Bareilly in the late 19th century. Despite constituting the majority in Pakistan, the Barelvis, thus far, played a limited political role. The realm of Islamic politics has been dominated by their sectarian rivals – the Deobandis and Islamist movements like the Jamaat-e-Islami. In contrast to the more literalists Deobandis, the Barelvis revere Prophet Muhammad and the Sufis, and ascribe to shrine-based religious practices. This has led to commentators, simplistically, portraying the Barelvis as the apolitical face of Islam.

The increasingly assertive role that Barelvis are poised to play is reflected in the emergence of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), one of the organisations seeking to represent Barelvi interests, as the fourth largest single party in terms of its vote share in the July 2018 elections. Post-elections, the TLP and other Barelvi organisations have heightened their efforts to influence the government. Mass protests were organised and demands made for the government to suspend relations with the Netherlands following the announcement by the Dutch right-wing figure, Geert Wilders, that he would be organising a competition to caricature Prophet Muhammad.

Barelvi movements also played a key role in pressuring the government to remove Atif Mian, an acclaimed economist based at Princeton University, from the government's Economic Advisory Council. Mian belongs to the Ahmadiyya community, which is deemed as heretical because its founder's claim to spiritual leadership is seen to contravene the belief that Muhammad was the last of the prophets.

This burgeoning strand of Barelvi activism is the result of intra-Islamic contestations and changing patterns of state patronage of Muslim movements in Pakistan. It also marks the emergence of a new group of leaders within the Barelvi community.

Official Patronage

From the 1970s, the Pakistani state and military had extended official patronage to individuals and organisations associated with the Deoband and the Jamaat-e-Islami movements. The military dictator, Zia-ul-Haq, who ruled Pakistan from 1977 to 1988, found the religious interpretations of these movements to be in line with his own efforts to Islamise Pakistan. Members of these movements were also willing to legitimise his rule in exchange for being able to shape religious and social policy. Externally, the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 led Pakistan, the United States and Saudi Arabia to fund and arm groups associated with the Deoband and the Jamaat-e-Islami movements. These groups were deemed to be best able to legitimise and fight a jihad against 'godless communism'. In the aftermath of the withdrawal of the Soviet Union, Pakistan backed the Taliban, a group that had emerged from Deobandi *madrasas*.

Within Pakistan, Deobandi and Jamaat-e-Islami leaders were appointed to important socio-political and legal positions. The former were given control over a number of religious sites and appointed in disproportionately high numbers to state bodies like the Council of Islamic Ideology, which was established to advise the government on issues pertaining to law and Islam. This caused consternation within the Barelvi community. They feared that the Deobandis would impose their form of Islam.

Confronted by the rise of Taliban inspired militancy in Pakistan, the state and the military began to extend patronage to movements that they believed would be able to counter the religious discourse that the militants drew upon. This manifested itself in the step taken by President Pervez Musharraf in 2006 to establish a National Council for the Promotion of Sufism to 'promote Sufi Islam in the face of terrorism'.¹ In line with this, a Barelvi religious scholar was appointed as the federal minister for religious affairs and six Barelvis were appointed to the Council of Islamic Ideology. Musharraf's successor, President Asaf Ali Zardari and his party the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) furthered this official approach of presenting Sufism as a means to countering militancy. The PPP's manifesto in 2008, for instance, directly equated Sufis with non-violence and Islam with the teachings of Sufis.²

Various Barelvi organisations and leaders now positioned themselves as natural allies in the battle against the Taliban. The popular Canada-based scholar, Tahir-ul-Qadri, was quick to position himself as a link between the Barelvis and the establishment. He was especially keen to reach out to the military. He regularly described elected officials as systematically corrupt and praised the military as the only organisation that could secure the future of Pakistan.³ He openly condemned the Taliban and called upon the military to root them out.⁴ Tahir-ul-Qadri also formed his own political outfit, the Pakistan Awami Tehreek. In 2012 and 2014, he flew back to Pakistan with much fanfare and launched mass movements against two different elected governments.⁵ These rallies and his high-profile return to Pakistan could not have taken place without support from the military.

Barelvis in the Political Arena

Tahir-ul-Qadri's religious influence notwithstanding, his political outfit was unable to garner substantial political support. Indeed, prior to the rise of the TLP, Barelvi organisations had failed to capture the political imagination of the community. The Jamaat Ulema-i-Pakistan, a political body established by religious scholars in 1948, made a mark in the 1970 election by winning seven seats in the National Assembly. The religious leaders were, however, unable to transform the organisation into a modern political party and failed to cultivate a mass constituency. Its authority was further challenged by the rise of rival Barelvi organisations.

¹ Pervez Musharraf, 'A Plea for Enlightened Moderation', *Washington Post* (1 June 2004), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A5081-2004May31.html?noredirect=on>. Accessed 25 September 2018.

² 'Pakistan People's Party Manifesto 2008: Towards Peace and Prosperity in Pakistan', <http://www.pppp.org.pk/manifestos/manifesto2008.pdf>. Accessed 24 September 2018.

³ Interview with Tahir-ul-Qadri on Geo TV (6 May 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzeIYbJD0hE>. Accessed 27 September 2018.

⁴ Television interview with Tahir-ul-Qadri, *Dastak* (23 November 2013).

⁵ 'Long March Ends', *The Tribune* (17 January 2013), <https://tribune.com.pk/story/495303/another-deadline-qadrigives-90-minutes-to-government/>. Accessed 27 September 2018.

The TLP first came into the limelight in 2017 when it organised a three-week long *dharna* (sit-in) which crippled Islamabad. The *dharna* was launched in opposition to a change in electoral forms that was deemed to water down an assertion of one's belief in the finality of the prophecy of Muhammad. While the government of the day argued that this change in wording had been the result of a clerical error, the TLP asserted that it infringed upon the honour of Muhammad and reflected a desire to legitimise the Ahmadiyya.

This *dharna* ended not with a security crackdown but with a signed agreement between the government and the TLP. The agreement was brokered by the military with an official from the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) signing on as a guarantor. According to the terms of the agreement, the Law Minister of Pakistan was to resign. The government was to release protestors arrested and establish a body, which would include the TLP, to inquire into police action against the protestors. After the signing of the agreement, the Director General of the Punjab Rangers, Azhar Hayat, was filmed distributing cash to the protestors.⁶ Military officials have claimed that General Hayat's presence was simply to ensure that the protestors would have funds to return home. The amount of support the military extended to the TLP protest remains a moot point. What is clear is that the role of the military and ISI in the negotiations served to legitimise the TLP and ensured its prominence amongst Barelvi organisations. In a short period of time, the TLP went on to attract the support of a wide range of Barelvi leaders and associations.

Khadim Hussain Rizvi, the leader of the TLP, astutely associated the issue of the change in the wording on the electoral form with the defense of Barelvi religious beliefs. These, he argued, could only be secured through political influence. The TLP's subsequent election campaign focused upon defending the honour of Prophet Muhammad, safeguarding Barelvi religious sites and preserving Pakistan's blasphemy laws. In its rallies, its leaders openly glorified Mumtaz Qadri, the policeman who assassinated the governor of Punjab in 2011 in response to the latter's critique of the blasphemy laws.

Such a valorisation of Qadri is not unique to the TLP. A number of Barelvi preachers and organisations have openly valorised Qadri and linked his execution to the state's neglect of Islam. What stands Rizvi apart is his ability to give voice to a sense of Barelvi victimhood. The TLP has been particularly effective in using social media, songs and fiery rhetoric to appeal to voters. The TLP has an active presence on platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. Moreover, a number of popular religious singers and preachers have joined the TLP. They have campaigned extensively for the party and composed songs for it. Music videos of their songs and recordings of their sermons are widely circulated online. Rizvi himself is a charismatic figure who uses a mixture of Urdu poetry and colloquial Punjabi – with a generous dose of Punjabi humour and vulgarities – in his speeches.

Rizvi and the TLP are challenging other sectarian movements and rival authorities within the Barelvi fold. The expansion of social media has led to the emergence of new and multiple sources of religious influence. Rizvi's rise from a government servant to a leading Barelvi figure is itself the result of astute use of mass agitation and the social media. Over the past

⁶ Amir Wassim, 'Faizabad sit-in ends as army brokers deal' (28 November 2017), <https://www.dawn.com/news/1373274>. Accessed 25 September 2018.

year, Rizvi has launched a virulent critique of other Barelvi leaders. He has particularly attacked Tahir-ul-Qadri who has condemned the actions of Qadri and positioned himself as a “moderate”.⁷ Rizvi has attacked him for, in his words, not “defending the honor of the Prophet” and described him as an instrument of Christian preachers.⁸

The TLP was one of a number of Barelvi parties that contested the recent elections. The major faction of the Jamaat Ulema-i-Pakistan formed an alliance with the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal, a grand alliance of religious parties that cuts across sectarian lines. A large number of smaller Barelvi organisations formed an alliance called the Nizami-i-Mustafa Muttahida Mahaz. The fact that the TLP opted not to ally with any other party demonstrates a unique aspect of the TLP’s political messaging. While other Barelvi leaders and organisations speak in terms of representing broader Sunni interests and position themselves as potential leaders of the Muslim community in general, Rizvi and the TLP locate themselves firmly in the Barelvi camp and employ openly sectarian discourse.

While it failed to win any seats in the National Assembly and won only two seats in the Sindh Provincial Assembly, the TLP emerged as the fourth largest single party in Pakistan in terms of its vote share. Its vote share is more significant than the number of seats it won. With 2,234,316 votes, it received more electoral support than any of the established religious parties. Particularly striking is the fact that it actually played an important role in ensuring the defeat of the Nawaz Sharif government in the politically crucial province of Punjab. According to a poll by Gallup Pakistan, 46 per cent of voters in Punjab who voted for the TLP had previously voted for Sharif’s party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). The survey further demonstrated that the PML-N’s defeat was due to it losing nine per cent of its vote share; four per cent of these votes swung towards the TLP.⁹

Conclusion

Buoyed by their performance in the 2018 elections, the TLP leadership has announced that the party will be fielding candidates in the upcoming by-elections in Sindh in October 2018. One of these seats was vacated by Imran Khan who had contested in five seats in the recent elections. Thus far, the leadership of the TLP has not defined any sort of political structure that it envisions for Pakistan. It has, however, sought to broaden its political canvas. In the lead up to the by-polls, the TLP has raised geopolitical issues like Kashmir and India-Pakistan relations. At a meeting on 24 September 2018, the TLP leader in Sindh, Ameer Mufti Ghulam Ghaus Baghdadi, expressed concerns over Indian military action in Kashmir and called on Pakistanis to culturally boycott India. He further stated that every member of the TLP was ready to provide a “befitting reply to India” under Rizvi’s leadership.¹⁰

It remains to be seen if the TLP and other new Barelvi figures will be able to displace established Deobandi groups as the main recipients of state and military patronage. What is

⁷ Tahir-ul-Qadri, <https://twitter.com/tahirulqadri/status/1006279839668686848>. Accessed 25 September 2018.

⁸ Rizvi on Tahir-ul-Qadri, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwJlzHp43Mk>. Accessed 27 September 2018.

⁹ *Gallup Pakistan Special Press Release*, 31 July 2018.

¹⁰ ‘TLP for cultural boycott of India’, *The Nation* (25 September 2018), <https://nation.com.pk/25-Sep-2018/tlp-for-cultural-boycott-of-india>. Accessed 27 September 2018.

clear is that the government has recognised the potential of the emerging Barelvi vote-bank. Both as a candidate and Prime Minister, Imran Khan has employed language and referred to concepts that appeal to the Barelvi voters. His repeated statements in support of the blasphemy laws and the removal of Atif Mian from the Economic Advisory Council are cases in point.

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