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Bar-Ilan
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Pakistan and Its Militants: Who Is Mainstreaming Whom?

James M. Dorsey



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 158

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Pakistan and Its Militants: Who Is Mainstreaming Whom?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pakistani militants of various stripes collectively won just under 10% of the vote in the July 2018 parliamentary elections. Some represented longstanding legal Islamist parties, others newly established groups or fronts for organizations that have been banned as terrorists by Pakistan and/or the United Nations and the United States.

The militants failed to secure a single seat in the national assembly but have maintained, if not increased, their ability to shape national debate, mainstream politics, and societal attitudes. Their ability to field candidates in almost all constituencies, and, in many cases, their performance as debutants enhanced their legitimacy.

The militants' performance has fueled debate about the Pakistani military's effort to expand its longstanding support for militants, which serves its regional and domestic goal of nudging them into mainstream politics. It also raises the question of who benefits most: mainstream politics or the militants. Political parties help to mainstream militants, but militants with deep societal roots and significant followings are frequently key to mainstream candidates' electoral success.

Perceptions that the militants may stand to gain the most are enhanced by the fact that decades of successive military and civilian governments, aided and abetted by Saudi Arabia, have managed to deeply embed ultra-conservative, intolerant, anti-pluralist, and supremacist strands of Sunni Islam in significant segments of Pakistani society.

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Former international cricket player Imran Khan's electoral victory may constitute a break with the country's corrupt dynastic policies, which had ensured that civilian power alternated between two clans, the Bhuttos and the Sharifs. However, his alignment with ultra-conservatism's social and religious views, as well as with militant groups, offers little hope that Pakistan will become a more tolerant, pluralistic society and move away from a social environment that breeds extremism and militancy. On the contrary: Policies enacted by Khan and his ministers since taking office suggest that ultra-conservatism and intolerance are the name of the game.

If anything, Khan's political history, his 2018 election campaign, and his actions since coming to office reflect the degree to which aspects of militancy, intolerance, anti-pluralism, and supremacist ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim Islam have, over decades, been woven into the fabric of segments of society and elements of the state.

The roots of Pakistan's extremism problem date to the immediate wake of the 1947 partition of British India, when using militants as proxies was a way to compensate for Pakistan's economic and military weakness.

They were entrenched by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the 1970s and General Zia ul-Haq's Islamization of Pakistani society in the 1980s. The rise of Islamist militants in the US-Saudi supported war against Soviet occupation troops in Afghanistan and opportunistic policies by politicians and rulers since then have shaped contemporary Pakistan.

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MEET THE MENGALS

Ramzan Mengal, a virulently anti-Shiite, Saudi-backed candidate for parliament in Pakistan's July 2018 election, symbolized the country's effort to reconcile contradictory policy objectives in a nearly impossible attempt to keep both domestic forces and foreign allies happy. A candidate in a Baloch electoral district, Mengal highlighted Pakistan's convoluted relationship with Islamic militants at a time when the country faced a financial crisis and risked being blacklisted by an international anti-money laundering and terrorism finance watchdog.

His candidacy also spotlighted Pakistan's tightrope act in balancing relations with Middle Eastern arch rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran while trying to ensure security for the US\$50 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the crown jewel of China's infrastructure-driven Belt and Road initiative and its largest single investment. It also publicly highlighted the risks involved in China's backing of Pakistan's selective support of militants as well as the Pakistani military's strategy of trying to counter militancy by allowing some militants to enter the country's mainstream politics. Nowhere are the risks more acute than in Balochistan, a resource-rich but impoverished, troubled, and violence-wracked region that is thinly populated by around 12 million people, or about 6% of Pakistan's 200 million inhabitants. As the country's largest province, Balochistan holds significant gas, gold, and copper reserves and accounts for half of Pakistan's gas production.¹

An Islamic scholar, Mengal heads the Balochistan chapter of Ahle Sunnat Wal Jammāt (ASWJ), a banned successor to Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP) or The Army of the Companions of the Prophet, an earlier outlawed group responsible for the deaths of many Shiites in the past three decades that is believed to have long enjoyed Saudi financial backing.² Dressed in traditional white garb, a waistcoat, and black turban, the bearded militant frequently marched in recent years on the streets of the Baloch capital of Quetta shouting sectarian slogans.

A frequent suspect in the killings of Hazara Shiites in Balochistan, he has led crowds chanting “Kafir, kafir, Shia kafir [Infidels, infidels, Shiites are infidels],” but is now more careful to avoid violating Pakistani laws on hate speech. That ensures that he remains in the good books of Pakistan’s powerful military despite his history of militancy and extremist views. Speaking to *Al Jazeera* days before the July 2018 election, Mengal was uninhibited about his relationship with Pakistan’s security forces.³ “No restrictions at all. I have police security during the election campaign. When I take out a rally in my area, I telephone the police and am given guards for it,” he said. Mengal also stated that of the 100 ASWJ operatives arrested in the previous two years, only five or six remained behind bars.

Mengal, one of many hundreds of militant candidates, was the norm rather than the exception in the election. Video clips on YouTube⁴ show Mengal’s fellow ASWJ candidate, Aurangzeb Farooqi, in a district of Karachi not only denouncing Shiites as infidels but also Iran as a threat to Pakistan.⁵ Unlike ASWJ leader Muhammad Ahmed Ludhianvi and Farooqi, his deputy, who faces charges of spreading religious hatred linked to the murders of several Shiite activists, Mengal was not put on Pakistan’s terrorism list. Farooqi was able to stand as a candidate for parliament in the July 2018 election after an election tribunal ruled that there was insufficient evidence to bar him and others from running for office. His candidacy was approved despite the fact that he remained on Pakistan’s terrorism list, which, in theory, should have barred him from interacting with crowds in public, traveling outside certain areas, and using bank accounts. However, the list contains no guidelines for eligibility for public office.

“Farooqi has always had an interest in electoral politics and a desire to get mainstreamed, to be accepted as a political force, and to get rid of his baggage as a militant. They [ASWJ] see this as the future, the only way forward with the establishment,” said Omar Shahid Hamid, the senior police superintendent for Landhi Industrial Area, the southern, impoverished Karachi district where Farooqi grew up and ran for office. The establishment is a commonly used term in Pakistan when referring to the military. “We believe in democratic process. I am from the area. If I am elected, I will be representative of the people and try to resolve their civic issues,” Farooqi said as he sidestepped garbage and potholes while walking through his electoral district in the run-up to the election. He greeted and shook hands with dozens who expressed respect for him by chanting “Teacher! Teacher!”⁶

Shafiq Mengal was also allowed to stand as an independent despite the fact that the Balochistan Levies, a paramilitary law enforcement agency, have, since 2014, been asking authorities for his arrest because of his alleged association with Baloch Musalla Difa Tanzeem (BMDT), another banned militant anti-Shiite, anti-Iranian group. BMDT operated as a death squad that mainly targeted secular Baloch nationalists. It was widely seen by analysts and scholars as one of the religious arrows in the military’s quiver of ultra-conservative militants deployed to counter Baloch separatism and nationalism.

The Levies were seeking Mengal’s arrest on suspicion that he had been involved in the killing of eight of their officers.⁷ Moreover, witnesses in a separate judicial investigation of a mass grave filled with mutilated bodies discovered at about the same time the officers were killed linked Mengal to the mass murder.⁸ Mengal, the scion of an official who served in the military regime of General Zia-ul Haq, which contributed significantly to the Islamization of Pakistan, was a one-time student at Karachi’s Binori Town madrassah, widely viewed as a jihadist alma mater that fanned anti-Shiite violence.⁹ He is a member of the Mengal tribe, whose members have played a prominent role in longstanding militant and mainstream Balochi efforts to achieve greater autonomy for Balochistan. So is Akhtar Mengal, a provincial lawmaker and former chief minister of Balochistan who endorsed assertions that his namesake is a violent militant. “Wherever you find missing persons in Baluchistan, you find Shafiq Mengal,” Mengal told *The New York Times*.¹⁰

Amid an increasing number of incidents in Balochistan, Pakistani security sources asserted in June 2017 that political violence in the districts of Wadh, Mastung, and Jhal Magsi, some of Pakistan's most heavily securitized regions, could only be countered by neutralizing Shafiq Mengal.¹¹ The violence in the area became a matter of urgency in October 2017 after two Chinese nationals were kidnapped in Mastung and murdered.¹² The security sources spoke to Pakistani media after Sindh Province's Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) warned, in a letter to the interior ministry, that Sipah-e-Sahaba and its violent, secretive offshoot, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (Army of Jhangvi), constituted a major security threat.¹³

Elections in the 2018 polling were cancelled in Mastung's PB-35 district after 55-year-old Siraj Raisani, the leader of the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), was killed alongside 149 others in a bombing of a campaign rally that was claimed by both the Islamic State and the Taliban. It was Pakistan's second-worst incident of political violence.¹⁴ Police said the suicide bomber, the scion of a militant family, had radicalized while studying at a madrassah in Karachi funded by sources in Saudi Arabia. His sisters were married to Islamic State operatives in Afghanistan.¹⁵ Other members of the family moved to areas in Afghanistan controlled by the Islamic State. It was unclear whether the Saudi funds originated from within the government or came from private donors with or without tacit government approval. The madrassah, Siddiquia, was one of 94 mostly Saudi-backed religious seminaries in the city and Sindh province that were under surveillance because they had produced jihadis and perpetrators of attacks, according to Pervez Ahmed Chandio, the head of Karachi's counterterrorism department.¹⁶

With the bombing, Balochistan's vicious cycle of violence had caught up with Raisani, seven years after he defied a warning by Balochistan separatists not to attend a soccer tournament in Mastung's Shaheed Nauroz Football Stadium. Raisani, who was known for his close ties to the military, escaped when he was attacked with hand grenades during the tournament's final, but his son was one of two people killed.¹⁷ Populated by what prominent Baloch journalist Malik Siraj Akbar described as "pro-Islamabad tribal notables and self-identified electable leaders," BAP, which was established only four months prior to the July election, backed the military's policy in the region and was critical of Baloch nationalists who wanted to wrest

control of Balochistan's resources from the central government and the military.¹⁸ In a demonstration of the BAP's relationship with the armed forces, Lt. Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, Pakistan's top military commander, flew to Balochistan to attend Raisani's funeral.¹⁹

The attack on Raisani's rally, the latest in a series of assaults on civilian and military targets in Balochistan, highlighted the risks involved in the military's use of militant proxies against both Baloch nationalists and India. This risk has been further highlighted by the fact that the military has sought to counter the violence by killing militant leaders, creating a vicious tit-for-tat cycle in the process. Pakistani journalist Zahid Gishkori calculated that around 1,050 people were killed and 1,570 others were injured in 52 major incidents of political violence in the province over the past 12 years.²⁰

TIME OF RECKONING

The vicious circle of violence suggests that the military's effort to ease militants into mainstream Pakistani politics can succeed only if the military drops its selective support of militant violence and ensures that militants-turned-politicians sever their ties to extremism. A series of attacks on at least 12 girls' schools in Gilgit-Baltistan barely two weeks after populist Khan won the 2018 election demonstrated the breadth of the problem.²¹ "There remains a violent extremism embedded in communities across Pakistan that needs to be forthrightly addressed," *Dawn*, Pakistan's foremost English-language newspaper, said in an editorial.²²

The roots of the extremism problem date to the immediate wake of the 1947 partition of British India, when militants were used as proxies to compensate for Pakistan's economic and military weakness. Militants were "the first elements of Pakistan's foreign and defense policy," said Pakistani scholar Arif Jamal.²³ "The Pakistan-militant nexus is as old as the Pakistani state. From its founding in 1947 to the present day, Pakistan has used religiously motivated militant forces as strategic tools...[They are] the centrepiece of a sophisticated asymmetric warfare campaign, painstakingly developed and prosecuted since Pakistan's founding...Supporting jihad has been one of the principal means by which the Pakistani state has sought to produce security for itself," added national security expert S. Paul Kapur and political scientist Sumit Ganguly.²⁴

The Pakistani military's support for militants fits a pattern adopted by countries like Saudi Arabia and Yemen. In some ways, it was an early expression of a lack of confidence in the reliability of the United States as an ally that spurred greater assertiveness of US allies in the Gulf, starting with the ascent of Barack Obama to the presidency. The military's ambivalence toward the United States, grounded in a perception that it had repeatedly abandoned Pakistan, was evident when senior army corps commanders resisted post 9/11 cooperation in the war on terror because it would endanger the country's national security.²⁵ Pakistan's military brass, years into a tenuous cooperation with the United States, believed that it, together with Indian and Afghan support for anti-state jihadists and Baloch separatists, was the trigger for mounting domestic political violence.

Columnist Zahid Hussain thundered in an article in *Dawn* entitled "Conspiratorial Paranoia" that "it is about time we came out of this dangerous delusion of being victims of some foreign conspiracy. These are our own people who are blowing up our schools, homes and religious places. Thousands of Pakistani soldiers have been killed battling the groups which were once developed as security assets. These groups have now turned to jihad inside. Defying the bans on them, they are not only still active, but have also expanded. They are certainly not outsiders but home-grown militants trying to impose their retrogressive worldview through force."²⁶

Pakistani military distrust of the United States was, however, too deeply rooted in its definition of the keys to Pakistani national security to heed Hussain's outcry. It saw the country's security defined by a need to undermine Indian regional hegemony, gain control of Indian-administered Kashmir, and ensure that Afghanistan was governed by forces friendly to Pakistan. Fear, a sense of encirclement by India and Afghanistan, and Pakistan's inherent weakness drove the military's perception of national security. "The collective mental archive of Pakistani nationalism has always tagged India as the arch enemy in a zero-sum battle with Pakistan," charged prominent Pakistani journalist and author Khaled Ahmed. "The US and Israel are the new ingredients in this national prescription. The problem is that no one in the world agrees with it. Last time it happened, in 1971, we lost East Pakistan. There are no exceptions to this paranoid consensus. The chemistry of surrender is at work and the only smell striking the nostrils is that of fear."²⁷

The anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan that defeated and forced a superpower to withdraw became the model for Pakistani efforts to recapture Kashmir²⁸ and ensure that it was a dominant player in post-Soviet Afghanistan. To achieve those goals, Pakistani intelligence employed ultra-conservative militants in the 1990s to transform an indigenous insurgency seeking to achieve the independence of Kashmir into one that demanded the region's integration with Pakistan and backed Islamist groups in Afghanistan, including the Taliban.

The Pakistani effort spotlighted the fact that militancy was woven into the fabric of the Pakistani state and society. Like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan promoted Islam at home, empowered its religious establishment, included religious leaders in the power structure, and sought to direct Islamists and jihadists toward the country's foreign enemies. Countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia promoted militants "to counter external threats, undermine geopolitical competitors, boost domestic legitimacy, and reorient challengers' focus to outside the country's borders," said counterterrorism scholar Stephen Taniel.²⁹

In the early days of independence, Pakistan already saw Islam and the nourishing of an Afghan Islamist movement as a way to redress a regional balance in which it saw itself encircled by India and Afghanistan.³⁰ In the run-up to full-scale Pakistani backing of the post-1979 Islamist jihad against Soviet forces, Pakistan, starting in the mid-1970s, granted sanctuary and financial and logistical support to Afghan Islamists opposed to the Soviet-sponsored communist government in Kabul.³¹

The Islamization of Pakistani society kicked off in the 1970s when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was prime minister and was accelerated by General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq after he grabbed power in a military coup in 1978. This process, coupled with massive Saudi financial support for the anti-Soviet *mujahideen* and Pakistan's extensive network of ultra-conservative, anti-Shiite, Sunni Muslim madrassahs established militancy as a deeply embedded social and political force in Pakistani society.³² Sectarianism became a fixture of Pakistani education.

"Since the 1970s, when Pakistan Studies was introduced as a compulsory subject in schools and colleges, it is the distorted and sectarian version of history that is fed to the overwhelming majority of

children and youth who are not privileged to travel the O and A level road. During the decade of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's rule the trend toward sectarianizing the educational system advanced to the point that Sunni and Shiite were assigned separate Islamiyat syllab[i], a practice which continues today," said political scientist Eqbal Ahmad.³³

Ultra-conservatism and associated militants provided Pakistan, groping for a cohesive national identity, with a badly needed narrative that would provide the glue to bind its multiple Muslim sects, religious minorities, and ethnic groups, as well as both its indigenous population and the millions of *muhajirs* — Muslim immigrants — from what had become India. That was no truer than in the wake of the 1971 war with India that gave birth to Bangladesh, a war that was fought conventionally. The secession of Eastern Pakistan not only undermined the notion of Pakistan as a state founded on a Muslim identity that united the faithful of all stripes, but reinforced the military's belief in the utility of militants as proxies.

As a result, Pakistan "has failed to crack down on terrorist activity at home and encouraged its citizens to adopt views that may make them more receptive to extremist positions. Pakistan has continued to insist ... that only a renewed national commitment to Islam will be able to unite the disparate ethnic groups, tribes, and minorities that coexist within the country. These views are taken to the extreme by Islamic militants, who seek to destroy India altogether and to turn Pakistan into a sharia state governed exclusively by Islamic law," said author and journalist Ahmed Rashid.³⁴ The country's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, added Lashkar-e-Taiba expert Samina Yasmeen, "selected diverse religious-based organizations in Pakistan to be trained on the Afghan front and then to develop sufficient capacity to shape the future directions of the Kashmiri independence movement."³⁵

The military is likely to come under increased pressure to rethink its approach toward militants as Prime Minister Khan struggles to resolve his country's economic and financial crisis by possibly seeking a US\$12 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and reinforcing anti-money laundering and terrorism finance measures to avoid being blacklisted by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an international watchdog.³⁶

Similarly, Khan, who earned the nickname Taliban Khan, is likely to have to counter his record of allowing government funds to go to militant madrassahs, his advocacy for the opening in Pakistan of an official Taliban Pakistan office,³⁷ and his support of the Afghan Taliban.³⁸ In February 2018, his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-headed government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa gave \$2.5 million to Darul Aloom Haqqania, a militant religious seminary.³⁹ Dubbed a “jihad university,”⁴⁰ Darul Aloom Haqqania is headed by Sami ul-Haq, a hard-line Islamist politician known as the father of the Taliban. The university’s alumni also include Mullah Omar, the deceased leader of the Taliban, Jalaluddin Haqqani, the head of the Haqqani Network, Asim Umar, leader of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, Mullah Omar’s successor, who was killed in a 2016 US drone strike.⁴¹

The provincial government also removed “objectionable material” from schoolbooks, such as pictures of young girls with their hair uncovered, Christmas cakes, and crosses rather than crescents on ambulances, and which used the phrase Good Morning instead of *Assalamu Aliakum* or Peace Be Upon You. The Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party that had complained about the content of schoolbooks said the deleted material would be replaced by content proposed by the party.⁴²

Khan’s defense of the Taliban and opposition to iron-fisted military actions against Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Pakistani Taliban, raised the question of whether his vow to combat corruption targeted only politicians who abuse their positions of power to enrich themselves or whether it also included proponents of his country’s counter-terrorism policies. Denouncing liberal supporters of military action against the TTP as “scum of this country” and fascists who supported drone attacks and the bombing of villages,⁴³ Khan endorsed a plan to invite pop band Duran Duran, whose lyrics were allegedly anti-military and derogatory to minorities, saying that the group propagated hatred only toward bad people. “You know, dollar *khors* [people on the US payroll], US agents, liberal scum and killers of endangered elephants. They [Duran Duran] are actually a great bunch of people. Very patriotic but misunderstood.”⁴⁴

Speaking to *The New York Times* in 2012, Khan charged that “the Westoxified Pakistanis have been selling their souls and killing their own

people for a few million dollars.”⁴⁵ A year earlier, Khan declared that “there were no militant Taliban in Pakistan and in any case the Taliban were not terrorists, but fundamentalists. We went in for dollars. Our ruling elite have always sold us for dollars. Some 20 years ago we were in this for dollars again, acting as a frontline state. We were creating jihadis for dollars then and now we are taking dollars to kill the same people.”⁴⁶ Khan’s remarks were as applicable to the Pakistani military that has backed him in recent years as they were to many among the country’s political elite whom he views as corrupt.

Taking issue with Khan’s assertion that militancy in Pakistan was the result of the United States’ ill-conceived war on terror rather than the history of support for militant proxies that is written into the country’s DNA, Sana Bucha, a prominent Pakistani television anchor, suggested that by portraying the country’s politicians as having bought into it because of the US funding that it garnered, Khan was, in effect, doing the military’s bidding. “These jihadists supported by the I.S.I. were in Kashmir well before 9/11. And why does Imran blame Zardari for the drone attacks when everyone knows that the president has no power and the military gave the Americans permission to use the drones? It is because the military and intelligence agencies are backing Imran,” Bucha said, referring to Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan’s main intelligence service, by its initials and former Pakistani president Asef Ali Zardari.⁴⁷ Khan’s line of argument is also one that fits the ultra-conservative Muslim agenda, according to South Asian scholar Ahsan I. Butt. “If terrorism is not indigenous to Pakistan, and merely imported, then it follows that no larger reckoning of the state’s and society’s relationship with religion can or should take place — a convenient conclusion for religious hardliners,” Butt said.⁴⁸

Khan may well owe his electoral victory in part to the military, but he appears to have an ambivalent attitude toward it. Returning from a visit to Turkey in 2012, at a time when its Islamist government was still being touted as an example of the compatibility of Islam and democracy and celebrated for successfully subjecting the military to civilian control, Khan hinted that Turkey was a model he would like to emulate.

“Abdullah Gul and Erdogan — they are such impressive people. I last went to Turkey on my honeymoon. In 15 years, they have totally transformed

the country! ...The most interesting thing is how they have controlled the army, which ruled Turkey for such a long time. You can of course do that if you have moral authority invested in you by the people,” Khan said, referring to then-president Abdullah Gul and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who was prime minister and is now the country’s authoritarian head of state. “In order to survive as a country, Pakistan has to change the way it’s been governed — and that means the army, too. The army should be dealt with inside the constitutional system. You have to tell them, ‘Look, this is the way it’s going to run now,’” Khan said in an interview that same year.⁴⁹

If Khan is a potentially loose cannon from the military’s perspective, his electoral victory, his ultra-conservatism notwithstanding, fits a global trend toward populism and nationalism. It expresses voters’ loss of confidence in traditional politicians and anger at mismanagement and corruption, and, in the case of Pakistan, at dynastic politics. Khan “is neither a Bhutto nor a Sharif, and this is significant for a country where civilian political power has alternated between these two clans throughout the 1990s and well into the twenty-first century,” said Saloni Kapur, a doctoral student whose research focuses on the impact of the international community on Pakistan’s internal security. In defeating Pakistan’s political dynasties, Khan’s interests were aligned with those of the military. Kapur takes an optimistic view of Khan’s rise by arguing that his “victory is a democratizing event that indicates that power can no longer be the closely guarded prerogative of a tiny military-political elite, but that new actors are finding their voice, and social control is being dispersed.”⁵⁰

A HARSH REALITY

In order to pre-empt blacklisting by FATF, Khan will have to ensure the cooperation of the military. He will also have to withdraw from many long-held positions that would put him at loggerheads not only with the watchdog but also with segments of the military and Pakistan’s closest allies, including China. That is easier said than done. Khan is likely to be caught in a Catch-22 of centrifugal forces, including the conditions he needs to meet to structurally tackle Pakistan’s financial crisis and the consequences of militancy that are rooted in what Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells termed “the rise of the networked society.”⁵¹ The militants’ intolerance and supremacism is enabled not only by a literal interpretation of the Qur’an and the Sunnah — the verbally transmitted record of the

teachings, deeds, sayings, and silent permissions or disapprovals of the Prophet Muhammad — but also the advances in information technology and proliferation of media that in Castells' approach created “a world of uncontrolled, confusing change” that compelled people “to regroup around primary identities; religious, ethnic, territorial, [and] national.”

Khan's harsh reality is that Pakistan's handling of men like Abdul Rehman al-Dakhil is likely to serve as a litmus test of the seriousness of its measures. Al-Dakhil, an alleged ‘operational leader’ of Lashkar-e-Taiba (Army of the Righteous; Taiba is also the historic name of Medina), an internationally outlawed militant group, who was captured in Iraq by British forces and held in US custody for a decade before being handed back to Pakistan in 2014, together with two ‘financial facilitators,’ Hameed ul Hassan and Abdul Jabbar, was identified by the US State Department as a globally designated terrorist in 2018. The State Department said Al-Dakhil was serving as a senior Lashkar-e-Taiba commander in Kashmir, a position he likely adopted with the backing of the Pakistani military. “Today's action notifies the U.S. public and the international community that Abdul Rehman al-Dakhil has committed, or poses a significant risk of committing, acts of terrorism,” the State Department said.⁵² Hassan's Saudi-based brother, Muhammad Ijaz Safarash, was designated a terrorist by both the United States and the United Kingdom in 2016.⁵³ Hassan was effusive in his praise of the Pakistani military on his Twitter feed, which identifies him as the head of Lashkar-e-Taiba front Jamat-ud-Dawa in Kashmir.⁵⁴

The fate of Hafez Saeed, the alleged mastermind of the 2008 attacks in Mumbai and leader of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamaat-ud-Dawa (Organization for Preaching), constitutes a similar litmus test as Imran Khan seeks to demonstrate to FATF his compliance with agreed measures to counter money-laundering and terrorism finance in his bid to avoid being blacklisted and jeopardizing Pakistan's ability to secure the support of the IMF and/or China and Saudi Arabia in resolving his country's financial crisis. Saeed, despite being designated a global terrorist by the United Nations Security Council and the US State Department with a bounty of US\$10 million on his head, remains a free man and was able to field candidates in the July 2018 election. This crucial fact figured prominently in FATF's decision in February 2018 to put Pakistan on a grey list with a warning that it could be blacklisted if it failed to demonstrate compliance.⁵⁵

To demonstrate its sincerity, Pakistan, in advance of the July election, passed the Anti-Terrorism Ordinance of 2018, giving groups and individuals, including Saeed, designated by the United Nations as international terrorists the same status in Pakistan for the first time.⁵⁶ At the same time, it sought to curtail the ability of Saeed's organizations to perform social and charity work, a pillar of their popularity, by confiscating ambulances operated by his charity, the Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation, closing Jamaat-ud-Dawa offices, and handing control of its madrassahs to provincial governments.⁵⁷

Lashkar-e-Taiba was both a militant group focused on waging a violent jihad that would undermine Indian control of parts of Kashmir and an ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim missionary group whose madrassahs served not only as recruitment grounds but as vehicles for the transformation of Pakistan into a Shari'ah-based state. "The provocative texts it publishes and the textbooks it assigns in schools offer a strictly sectarian interpretation of the Qur'an and testify to the group's strong belief in jihadist violence," said journalist Rashid.⁵⁸

Lashkar-e-Taiba's utility as a proxy in the dispute over Kashmir, missionary ambitions, and original roots in the Saudi-backed Jamaat Ulema-e-Ahl-e-Hadith (Society of the Islamic Scholars of the People of the Traditions of the Prophet) ensured that it had funding from both the Pakistani military as well as the kingdom. It ensured grassroots support by creating an efficient social welfare operation that could compete with the government's healthcare system. However, the group's relationship to Saudi Arabia, where several of its leaders, including Saeed, had studied and built ties to private and government NGOs as well as the Pakistani diaspora was complicated by the fact that it defined jihad primarily as a military obligation rather than a spiritual struggle within oneself against sin and to improve society and only secondarily as defensive warfare if and when the faith was attacked.⁵⁹

Counterterrorism scholar Stephen Tankel estimated that, in 2009, Jamaat-ud-Dawa operated 173 madrassahs with an estimated 20,000 students across the country. The madrassahs' curriculum put as much emphasis on information technology as it did on concepts of jihad,⁶⁰ and it was taught by teachers who had participated in military operations.⁶¹ Jamaat-ud-Dawa operated six hospitals, including one in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, 143 medical facilities in

often underserved, remote areas of the country, and Pakistan's second largest fleet of ambulances.⁶² The group was at the forefront of providing effective emergency relief in the wake of the devastating 2005 earthquake. Its field hospitals were well-stocked and equipped with X-ray machines, a dental facility, and a makeshift operating theatre. Keen to reap public relations benefits, the group ensured that journalists had proper access.⁶³ The group similarly distributed food, medicine, and cash to hundreds of thousands affected by floods in 2010.⁶⁴ "What Pakistanis saw in terms of its public behaviour was not militancy as much as social work and religious activism," Tankel noted.⁶⁵

The fact that Saeed's candidates and other militants did not bag National Assembly seats in the July 2018 election would, at first glance, suggest that it would be easier for the military to radically alter its approach to extremism. That, however, ignores the significance of their capturing almost 10% of the vote⁶⁶ and helping deprive Khan's main rival, ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), of votes in crucial electoral districts, according to an analysis of the Pakistan Election Commission's results by the constituency⁶⁷ as well as a Gallup Pakistan survey.⁶⁸ Moreover, the militants garnered political legitimacy by competing in 90% of Pakistan's constituencies and faring well as debutants in the election. "I ... feel that Hafiz Saeed is fond of becoming a television celebrity: he barks more than he bites," said Miftah Ismail, the official who headed the Pakistani delegation at the February 2018 FATF meeting in which Pakistan was grey-listed.⁶⁹

Often allied with a mainstream political party, the question arises who benefits the most, the party or the militants. Political parties help mainstream militants, but militants with deep societal roots and significant following are frequently key to a mainstream candidate's electoral success. Writing in the run-up to the 2013 election, journalist Mushahid Hussain noted that parties know that "any candidate can easily win the election provided he has the patronage and support of the local jihadists."⁷⁰ Political scientist Niloufer A. Siddiqui, in an unpublished working paper, argued that "individuals who were affiliated with sectarian actors were significantly more likely to win [an election] than those who had no sectarian support." Siddiqui calculated that 58.14% of the PML-N National Assembly candidates in the 2013 election who had

a sectarian connection won a parliament seat as opposed to only 30.75% of those who had not aligned themselves with a militant group.⁷¹

The militants benefitted whether or not they made it into either a provincial or the national assembly. Scholar Aasim Sajjad Akhtar argues that Pakistan's religious right, including militants attempting to enter mainstream politics, want a share of Pakistan's patronage-based power pie. In Akhtar's view, the effort constitutes a successful way for the disenfranchised to carve out a stake for themselves by ensuring that they have a place in status quo politics.⁷² "The JuD has developed into a formidable political-religious force. Even those officials who may not sympathize with the group nevertheless fear its political clout," Tankel concluded as far back as 2011.⁷³

"In Pakistan, parliamentary seats alone do not a victory make. The religious political parties, particularly the newcomer extremist variety, may not have won big, but they have much to celebrate. Primarily, they can revel in their successful hijacking of this election's political narratives. Rather than moderate their positions in order to compete, they managed to radicalize part of the mainstream political discourse," added journalist Huma Yusuf.⁷⁴ Peshawar-based analyst Khadim Hussain warned that "sectarian political parties will actually try to blackmail the mainstream political parties for laws or amendments in laws of their own choice. It will take the whole society or the state more towards radical or extremist views."

Exploiting what governance expert Rashid Chaudhry dubbed "the politics of emotion,"⁷⁵ Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan, a recently founded ultra-conservative group, emerged from the election as Pakistan's fifth-largest party and the third-largest in Punjab, Pakistan's breadbasket and most populous province.⁷⁶ It garnered 4% of the vote, even if it only won two seats in Sindh's provincial assembly⁷⁷ and one in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The Gallup Pakistan survey stated that anecdotal evidence showed that TLP votes pushed PML-N to second position in many districts, "one reason for the loss of PML-N seats." It said that of the 9% of PML-N's votes lost in 2018 compared to the 2013 election, up to 4% had gone to TPL. Ludhianvi's association with PML-N notwithstanding, ASWJ endorsed 71 PTI candidates as opposed to only 16 of PML-N in the July election.⁷⁸

“The party’s singular target was the PML-N and it appeared to have been successfully hit in Punjab in many cases. Barelvi voters have traditionally been loyal to the PML-N....It can perhaps be safely assumed that majority of voters who voted for TLP were formerly PML-N....In 14 NA [National Assembly] constituencies, the PML-N lost apparently due to TLP....Relying on oratory and verbosity, parties like the TLP amass support and traditional leaderships have to side with them or face further decline in their support,” Chaudhry said, referring to the Barelvi sect, one of two strands of Islam dominant in Pakistan.⁷⁹

The militants’ role as a party spoiler for the PML-N to the benefit of PTI is one reason, alongside his purported relationship with the military and his ultra-conservative instincts, that Khan backed their mainstreaming. “Our policy is to talk to all political players. These so-called extremists in Pakistan should be brought into the mainstream; if you marginalize them, you radicalize them,” Khan argued.⁸⁰

That was what Khan did when his Tehreek-i-Insaf announced that Maulana Fazlur Rehman Khalil had joined forces with it.⁸¹ Khalil is an Islamabad-based Islamic scholar and former fighter in Afghanistan who counts a Saudi woman among his wives. He heads Ansarul Ummah, believed to be a front for the outlawed militant group Harkatul Mujahideen al Islami, which was designated a terrorist group by the United Nations.⁸² Khalil also serves as secretary general of the Saudi-funded Movement for the Protection of the Two Holy Cities (Tehrike Tahafaz Haramain Sharifain). Khalil, who appears together with Hafez Saeed at pro-Kashmir rallies, was globally designated a terrorist by the United States⁸³ because of his relations with Osama bin Laden and alleged support for Al-Qaeda.

The fluidity that is prevalent in the world of militancy, with operatives being associated simultaneously with different groups, was also evident among Pakistan’s political parties, including Khan’s PTI. Javed Hashmi, a prominent Pakistani politician and author who moved from PML-N to PTI only to break with Khan and return to PML-N, described Saeed in 2012 when he was still president of the former cricket star’s party as “a preacher of peace in the world.” Hashmi charged that “declaring him terrorist [is] the real threat to the peace of the world.”⁸⁴

THE TAIL WAGS THE DOG

Examples of militant influence in mainstream politics, in an already ultra-conservative country, are numerous and predate their participation in the July 2018 election. Khan's statements and actions on his two-decade-long journey to power are exemplary. Khan told Islamist leaders weeks before the July 2018 election that he backed the principle of *Khatam-i-Nabuwwat*, or the finality of Muhammad's prophethood, that pervades Pakistan's body politic. "We are standing with Article 295c and will defend it," Khan said, referring to a clause in the constitution that mandates the death penalty for any "imputation, insinuation or innuendo" against the prophet Muhammad.⁸⁵

In so doing, Khan effectively aligned himself with *Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan*, which campaigned on a platform calling for strict implementation of Islamic law as well as Pakistan's draconian blasphemy law,⁸⁶ part of a legal system that, in journalist Rashid's words, "tends to support extremist thinking."⁸⁷ *Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan* was formed to rally mass support for Mumtaz Qadir, who, in 2013, assassinated Salman Taseer, a governor of Punjab who had stood up against the blasphemy law. Qadir was subsequently sentenced to death and executed. Salman was the last Pakistani politician to speak out publicly against Pakistan's blasphemy law. *Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan* supporters ransacked an Ahmadi mosque in the city of Faisalabad less than a week after Khan was sworn in, shooting and wounding six people.⁸⁸ Three months earlier, TLP and PTI supporters targeted an Ahmadi house of worship in Sialkot.⁸⁹ Ahmadi is a persecuted sect that was designated as non-Muslim in a Saudi-inspired 1974 amendment of the Pakistani constitution because it does not recognize Muhammad as the last prophet.

"Our main goal is the imposition of Islam in the country. And the way to do that has been clearly written in the Quran and Hadith. If any of our actions contradict the Quran and Hadith, please point them out...No Muslim can sit quietly if our prophet, peace be upon him, is insulted. We don't take up arms for any personal reasons, but when it comes to Islam and the honor of our prophet, peace be upon him, it's mandatory for us. If we can't avenge insults against him, it's better that we die," said TLP spokesman Ejaz Ashrafi.

Khan's newly appointed human rights minister, Shireen Mazari, a controversial academic who, two decades ago, advocated nuclear strikes against Indian population centers in the event of a war, condemned, on her first day in office, a Dutch government decision to support an exhibition of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad.⁹⁰ Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan staged a mass demonstration demanding that the government cut diplomatic relations with the Netherlands. However, it called off a march on Islamabad after Geert Wilders, a militantly Islamophobic far-right Dutch opposition leader who heads the second-largest faction in parliament, cancelled the exhibition after receiving death threats and stated that he did not want to endanger people's lives.⁹¹

Khan's ultra-conservative attitudes were also reflected in the first actions of the PTI's provincial culture and information minister in Punjab, Fayyazul Hassan Chohan, who ordered a province-wide ban on "vulgar" and "indecent" film posters displayed inside and outside cinema houses.⁹² "If any vulgar poster goes up in or outside a cinema house in Punjab, there will first be a fine and if they continue the practice, the cinema would be shut down....Is this civilized? That you print out pictures of half-naked women and put up huge posters of them?" Chohan told a cheering crowd. Chohan went on to single out actress Nargis, saying he would force her to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca if he had the power to do so. "You would have seen her fast 300 days instead of [the] 30 [days of obligatory Ramadan fasts]," Chohan said.⁹³

Khan's embrace of the blasphemy clause, an issue long propagated by Saudi Arabia in the United Nations and elsewhere, constituted a reversal of his earlier condemnation of the fervor regarding the article. Writing in his autobiography, *Pakistan: A Personal History*, Khan denounced the fact that "no action was taken against religious leaders who in mosques arguably incited murder during the period of fevered debate [about blasphemy] that led up to the shooting [of Taseer]."⁹⁴

Khan was in good company in towing the TLP line and following a long-standing tradition among Pakistani politicians. PML-N deputy and Nawaz Sharif's son-in-law, Capt. (ret.) Muhammad Sardar, visited Qadri's grave in early 2018.⁹⁵ Sardar also successfully sponsored a resolution in parliament revoking a decision by Islamabad's Quaid-i-Azam University

to rename its physics department in honor of Abdus Salam, a winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics, because he was an Ahmadi.⁹⁶ More than two decades ago, former prime minister Raja Pervez Ashraf boasted at a Pakistan People's Party (PPP) about how his party had broken "the neck of Qadianis" (a derogatory term for Ahmadis).⁹⁷

The blurred lines between non-violent religious extremism and violent militancy were evident when, in May 2018, a gunman associated with TLP shot and wounded the then interior minister Ahsan Iqbal because of his allegedly lax attitude toward the Khatam-i-Nabuwat principle. TLP condemned the shooting.⁹⁸ Similarly, in a tell-tale sign, the bombing of Raisani's election rally in Balochistan failed to prompt mainstream parties to demand strict implementation of Pakistan's anti-terrorism National Action Plan adopted in 2015 or to reform and affirm regulation of the country's religious seminaries.

By the same token, the long-ruling PML-N's close ties with militants were put on public display when caretaker Pakistani PM Shahid Khaqan Abbasi met with Ludhianvi,⁹⁹ the militant Saudi-backed anti-Shiite ASWJ leader, in the run-up to the 2018 election. Ludhianvi subsequently prided himself publicly on having provided "armed support" to PML-N candidates campaigning in Punjab.

Sardar Ebad Dogar, an ASWJ activist who had put a 10 million Pakistani rupee (US\$81,000) bounty on the head of Salman Taseer, the assassinated Punjab governor, stood in 2013 as a PML-N candidate in the Punjab district of Muzaffargarh and was reelected in 2018. "I will not consider anyone, including myself, a true Muslim and follower of Islam if he is not a Sipahi of Sahaba," Dogar said after his initial 2013 nomination.¹⁰⁰ Amir Mir, a Pakistani journalist, reported that the PML-N saw Dogar's ASWJ affiliation as key to winning Muzaffargarh. "The footprints of the SSP/ASWJ are scattered all over in Muzaffargarh district of South Punjab, which is home to thousands of large and small seminaries," Mir reported.¹⁰¹

ASWJ's alliance with ousted PM Nawaz Sharif's party was brokered almost a decade ago by senior PML-N politician and then provincial law minister Rana Sanaullah Khan, who campaigned together with Ludhianvi in a 2010 Punjab by-election.¹⁰² The two men struck a deal by which ASWJ would support PML-N and allow its members to run

for office on the party's ticket and ensure that the Punjab provincial government headed by Sharif's brother, Shahbaz, would not prosecute ASWJ operatives despite pressure from federal authorities. In exchange, the militants would provide the party with physical muscle.¹⁰³

In February 2010, Sanaullah cemented the alliance by visiting the graves of Maulana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, Sipah-e-Sahaba's founder, and Azam Tariq, another of its murdered leaders, who were buried alongside other prominent operatives in the courtyard of a Sipah madrassah in Jhang.¹⁰⁴ Tariq was allowed a year before his death to stand in the 2002 election from prison. He was released after winning a seat in parliament despite the fact that there were non-bailable warrants out against him on terrorism-related charges.¹⁰⁵

Sanaullah concluded his deal with ASWJ after Riaz Basra, a founder of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the even more militant Sipah offshoot, and a former fighter in Afghanistan who was sentenced to death for the assassination of the director of an Iranian cultural center, allegedly masterminded a failed attempt to assassinate Sharif. Basra accused the Sharif government of having been influenced by Iran.

Chaudhry Abid Raza Gujjar, an alleged Lashkar-e-Jhangvi associate and assassin,¹⁰⁶ was one of the early beneficiaries of the evolving relationship between PML-N and ASWJ. Abid Raza was first nominated as a PML-N parliamentary candidate in 2008 after he pledged that the Taliban would not target the Sharif brothers during the election campaign, according to Abid Raza's brother, Naim.¹⁰⁷ Abid Raza won a third term as a PML-N deputy in the 2018 election.¹⁰⁸

Pakistan's election commission approved Gujjar's candidacy after he served five years in prison. His sentencing to death for killing six people in a failed attempt to assassinate a former Gujarat governor was overturned by the Lahore High Court. Following his release from prison, Abid Raza was again detained on suspicion of involvement in two attempts on the life of then-president Pervez Musharraf, but he was later released. He reportedly admitted that Al-Qaeda operative Amjad Hussain Farooqi, who allegedly organized the attempts as well as the 2002 kidnapping and beheading of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, had stayed at his home but asserted that he was not aware of Farooqi's jihadist affiliation.¹⁰⁹

Sipah's impact on the 2013 election was evident in Punjab as it witnessed a wave of sectarian violence. Graffiti in Karachi, Pakistan's financial capital, showcased Sipah's initials, SSP, painted on walls in red alongside billboards on which sultry models displayed designer apparel. Law enforcement's lax response was believed to be the result of a combination of ASWJ's popularity among police as well as police officers' concern that they would be targeted by militants if they cracked down. "Attacks on Shiites have increased exponentially. The militants know that with elections around the corner neither the police or the political parties have the appetite to confront them," a prominent Pakistani journalist said at the time.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, law enforcement officials complained that the alliance between mainstream political parties and militants has persuaded politicians to support militant Islamic scholars associated with banned groups in their refusal to register their madrassahs and to divulge their sources of funding and donations made for the operation of their seminaries.¹¹¹

"These anecdotes point to a growing trend of sectarian influence in present-day Punjab, which has been home to violent organizations and anti-Shiite militant groups since the mid-1980s," said Siddiqui, the political scientist.

PML-N's deal with ASWJ nonetheless poses "a puzzle" in Siddiqui's mind. Siddiqui notes that the alliance risked the PML-N being held responsible for potential ASWJ violence. It also went against the grain of a majority of the party's supporters who rejected violence and were concerned about the rise of Islamic extremism.

Siddiqui points out that the alliance was not without its problems. Even though the party cooperated with ASWJ in the 2013 election, it simultaneously backed the candidacy of Sheikh Waqar Akram, a staunch opponent of the group and feudal lord in its home base of Jhang. Preceding the alliance, Riaz Basra, a founder of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, allegedly masterminded a failed attempt to assassinate Nawaz Sharif, the since-disgraced leader of PML-N. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, more focused on Iran than Sipah, accused the government of having been influenced by Iran.

TWO PEAS IN A POD

Khan's backing of the blasphemy law has served as a ramrod against minorities, a means to whip crowds into a frenzy, and at times, even as a means of turning them into lynch mobs and inspiring vigilante killings. Shortly after Khan's election, Butt, the South Asian scholar, noted that "Khan's ideology and beliefs on a host of dimensions are indistinguishable from the religious hard-right."¹¹³ Khan, despite his occasional flip-flops, has a track record of affinity with ultra-conservative religious views. Pakistani journalist Abdul Majeed Abid described Khan's speeches during a 1994 fund-raising tour of 29 smaller towns and villages as "rousing, quasi-religious sermons attacking feminism, atheists, politicians, 'evil' Western values, and the 'brown sahibs,'" the latter of which is a derogatory term for Pakistani elites who allegedly mimicked the country's past colonial masters.¹¹⁴ In his first post-election speech, Khan promulgated seventh-century Medina as the model for the welfare state that he envisioned.¹¹⁵

Similarly, shortly after his election, Khan proved unwilling or unable to stand up to extremist pressure to reverse the appointment of prominent Princeton University economist Atif R. Mian to his economic advisory council on the grounds that Mian is an Ahmadi. "For the sake of the stability of the Government of Pakistan, I have resigned from the Economic Advisory Council, as the Government was facing a lot of adverse pressure regarding my appointment from the Mullahs [Muslim clerics] and their supporters," Mian said in a statement on Twitter.¹¹⁶ Mian's forced resignation persuaded two other council members to step down in protest.¹¹⁷ Information minister Fawad Chaudhary ultimately justified the government's decision to demand Mian's resignation, stating that "Khatm-i-Nabuwwat [belief in the finality of the prophethood] is a part of our faith," after first insisting that the government "will not bow to extremists."¹¹⁸

Prominent journalist and human rights activist Gul Bukhari, who was mysteriously kidnapped in June 2018 by men believed to be associated with Pakistani intelligence and released hours later as a result of an international outcry,¹¹⁹ noted that "Mian is a renowned professor, writer and economist. But Pakistan chose to debate his religion instead for

days – not his experience or qualification, nor his ideas on how to fix the economy and Pakistan’s myriad human development problems.... This is....a case of the poisoned chalice for the current government,” Bukhari said, linking Mian’s fate to TLP support for Khan during the election. “The government fails at its first real test against an entrenched and powerful lobby – the religious right in Pakistan. [It’s] providing further space to the religious right and emboldening them,” added sociologist Umair Javed.¹²⁰

Earlier, Bukhari, in an evaluation of Khan’s first weeks in office, concluded that “far from inspiring confidence, the performance of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf [PTI] government, so far, has been theatrical and successful only in rousing ridicule or fear for the future in the public. One controversy breaks on the heels of the previous, and the honeymoon of the new government looks all but over.”¹²¹

Khan’s demons were the demons of Pakistan’s militant Islamists. His PTI joined numerous militants in abstaining from signing the Paigham-e-Pakistan or Message of Pakistan, issued in January 2018 as an anti-extremism fatwa by 1,829 Islamic scholars and drafted by the Saudi-run International Islamic University of Islamabad at the behest of the Pakistani government. The fatwa denounced the use of force to impose Shari’ah, oppose the state, or settle ethnic, geographical, religious, and sectarian conflicts. It included decrees issued by various Islamic schools of thought banning suicide attacks, calls to jihad by individuals, and sectarian killings.¹²² According to prominent Pakistani analyst Muhammad Amir Rana, Khan’s abstention reflected his populist recognition that ultra-conservatism’s intolerance, anti-pluralist, and supremacist aspects resonated with significant segments of the Pakistani population.¹²³

“So far, the Paigham-i- Pakistan has failed to create any significant impact.... Pakistan is caught in a vicious cycle of extremism, where state institutions and leaderships have become hostage to hate narratives. Certain religious leaders and groups are pushing society towards chaos....On the societal level, the situation is even worse and often takes the form of discrimination against weak religious communities. While militant violence is condemned, the underlying mindset, especially where it pertains to people of different faiths, is rarely addressed,” Rana added.

South Asian scholar Butt noted that “little about Khan’s rhetorical palette has changed in the two decades since.”¹²⁴ By the time of the July 2018 election, “Khan had already worked closely with Islamists. His Justice Party had governed Khyber Pakhtoon Khaw province for the past five years, forming a political alliance with the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami party,” said journalist Rashid.¹²⁵

Voting alongside the religious right in parliament in 2006, Khan opposed a women’s rights bill that would have nullified legislation based on *hudud*, punishments which, under Islamic law, are mandated and fixed by God. The *hudud* in question required a woman to present four male witnesses when reporting a rape lest she be accused of adultery.¹²⁶ A decade later, Khan’s PTI-controlled provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was the last holdout in adopting women’s rights legislation. It only did so after being the only province to submit the draft legislation to the Council of Islamic Ideology, a state-appointed body populated by ultra-conservatives that ensures that a legislation does not violate Islamic law.

Ultimately, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa passed a watered-down version of the legislation¹²⁷ after the original draft was rejected by the council.¹²⁸ In his autobiography, Khan appeared to be advocating Saudi-style gender segregation when he noted that “in today’s Lahore and Karachi....rich women go to glitzy parties in Western clothes chauffeured by men with entirely different customs and values.”¹²⁹ Speaking in an interview a month before his electoral victory, Khan denounced feminism as having “degraded the role of a mother.”¹³⁰

Khan’s ultra-conservatism did not fundamentally differ from that of Saudi Arabia’s, whose electoral footprints were reflected in the victory of PML-N parliamentary candidate Hafiz Abdul Karim in Deri Ghazi Khan in southern Punjab.¹³¹ A Wahhabi scholar and former communications minister, Abdul Karim returned to Deri Ghazi Khan as one of the district’s richest men after working as a labourer in Saudi Arabia. He cemented his position in the district by opening a madrassah and funding development projects in flood-hit areas.¹³²

SUBVERTING THE SYSTEM FROM WITHIN

Pakistan's military argues that mainstreaming of militants serves a national interest. It amounts to "a combination of keeping control over important national matters like security, defense and foreign policy, but also giving these former militant groups that have served the state a route into the mainstream where their energies can be utilized," a senior military official said.¹³³

The military's strategy is not without risks for China that, in contrast to its South Asian ally, has adopted an iron fist approach in dealing with dissent of its own, particularly in the troubled north-western province of Xinjiang where China has implemented extreme measures to counter Uyghur nationalism and militant Islam.¹³⁴ If successful, it would create an alternative approach to counterterrorism. If not, it would reflect poorly on China's selective shielding from United Nations' designation as a global terrorist of a prominent Pakistani militant, Masood Azhar, a fighter in Afghanistan and an Islamic scholar who is believed to have been responsible for a 2016 attack on India's Pathankot Air Force Station.¹³⁵

If critics are to be believed, China has little to fear. The military's strategy is bound to fail, the critics say. "Incorporating radical Islamist movements into formal political systems may have some benefits in theory....But the structural limitations in some Muslim countries with prominent radical groups make it unlikely that these groups will adopt such reforms, at least not anytime soon....While Islamabad wants to combat jihadist insurgents in Pakistan, it also wants to maintain influence over groups that are engaged in India and Afghanistan," said Kamran Bokhari, a well-known scholar of violent extremism.¹³⁶

Citing the example of a militant Egyptian group that formed a political party to participate in elections, Bokhari argued that "though such groups remain opposed to democracy in theory, they are willing to participate in electoral politics to enhance their influence over the state. Extremist groups thus become incorporated into existing institutions and try to push radical changes from within the system."

Bokhari didn't need to cast his glance beyond Pakistan's borders. The streets of Islamabad in late 2017 and the city's High Court told a similar story. A sit-in led by Rizvi that blocked a key Islamabad traffic artery and propelled his movement toward a political party forced then-law minister Zahid Hamid to resign after he was accused of altering an electoral oath declaring the prophet Muhammad as God's final prophet.¹³⁷ In a ruling months before the 2018 election, controversial Islamabad High Court judge Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui ordered parliament to "take measures which can completely terminate those who scar this belief." Referring to the *Khatm-e-Nabuwat* principle, Siddiqui further ruled that it should be mandatory for anyone joining the judiciary, armed forces, civil service, or other government jobs.¹³⁸

A year earlier, Siddiqui defined blasphemers as terrorists in a case related to the kidnapping and abuse by unidentified men allegedly tied to ISI, the Pakistani intelligence agency, of five bloggers because of their criticism of the military and supposedly blasphemous writings.¹³⁹ The case petitioned the court to ban social media pages, including those of the five bloggers, that contained derogatory posts about Islam and Prophet Muhammad.¹⁴⁰ The issue was so emotional that Siddiqui broke down in tears during each of the case's three court hearings.

"This is complete surrender to hardline Islamists. It's a sad day for Pakistan: it shows that the state is so weak, and that we can't stand up to blackmailing," said political analyst and journalist Zahid Hussain.¹⁴¹ The sit-in and the elections were two ways of mainstreaming militants, some of whom, according to Pakistani police, have taken jobs as drivers, cleaners, guards, cobblers, and garbage collectors as cover to carry out reconnaissance of potential targets, transport weapons and explosives, and launch attacks.¹⁴²

The TLP's success and Siddiqui's ruling serve as examples of how militants can potentially reshape the political landscape of a nuclear-armed Muslim country of 208 million people with their anti-Western rhetoric and calls for ever-stricter interpretation of *Shari'ah* even if they falter in elections. "The ostensible attempt to mainstream the religious right-wing is not making these parties take relatively moderate positions. But rather, it's radicalizing the mainstream," said Saroop Ijaz, a lawyer for Human Rights Watch.¹⁴³

In an editorial published on the eve of the election, *Dawn* warned that none of the militants who ran for office had renounced the politics of hate and violence, putting a question mark over the state's counterterrorism strategy. "If extremists are allowed to contest for seats and make it to the legislatures without renouncing violence, what is to be made of NAP's goal three which states that 'militant outfits and armed gangs will not be allowed to operate in the country'? What good is banning organizations when they reappear with new names, and when militant leaders run for office? As for political parties courting extremists for votes, they should realize that should the hardliners get their way, the whole democratic edifice will be wrapped up and replaced with something much darker," the newspaper said, referring to the government's anti-terrorist National Action Plan (NAP).¹⁴⁴

Some PML-N and PPP members of the Senate warned in the run-up to the election that allowing militants to run risked Pakistan's next parliament including deputies who refuse to recognize the legislative's institutional supremacy. "Be afraid of the day when these people will be sitting in this house," warned PML-N senator Pervaiz Rasheed.¹⁴⁵

Speaking to *Dawn* in the run-up to the 2018 election, TLP leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi appeared to confirm Rasheed's worst fears. "Democracy will be subservient to Islam, of course. What sort of an Islamic system is this where the Shariah court is subservient to the Supreme Court?" Rizvi said. Envisioning a top-down system, Rizvi asserted that "power always comes from the top. You cannot make a clerk pious and ask him to hold someone senior to him accountable for theft. It doesn't work that way." By implication, Rizvi appeared to suggest that the use of force was justified to achieve his goal. "The seed [of TLP] was planted by Mumtaz seven years ago when he defended the sanctity of the finality of Prophethood (peace be upon Him). Then it became a small plant and we are on our way to becoming a tree," Rizvi said, referring to Mumtaz Qadri, the bodyguard who assassinated Punjab governor Taseer.¹⁴⁶

The mainstreaming of militants also risked fueling differences between Pakistan's Sunni Muslim majority and its Shiite minority, the world's largest. Muhammad Ilyas, a detained bomb-maker for TTP,

the Pakistani Taliban whose leadership included Lashkar-e-Jhangvi militants, told his interrogators how he and other militants had been instructed to participate in clashes between Sunnis and Shiites in Kurram Agency in which some 75 people were killed.¹⁴⁷

Voters in the mountainous province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa traditionally voted along sectarian lines with Sunnis opting for religious parties and Shiites for the secular Peoples Party Pakistan or supporters of former military strongman General Pervez Musharraf, who built the Lowari Pass (which eased the remote region's access to the rest of Pakistan). In the 2018 election, however, voters took sectarian divisions a step further by voting primarily for candidates of their own sect.¹⁴⁸

In the Punjabi town of Jhang, a flashpoint of ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim sectarianism and Sipah-e-Sahaba and ASWJ's cradle, Syed Masood al Hasan, a leader of the Shiite community, portrayed an atmosphere in which ultra-conservatives set the tone irrespective of what the law said. When Al Hasan attempted to get a man jailed without trial for converting to Shiism, police officers acknowledged that conversion was not a crime but that they had to detain him for some time to avoid protests.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, Sunni-Shiite couples in Jhang are ostracized. "People are taught that whoever kills a Shiite will get a virgin in heaven," Al-Hasan, a tall man with a carefully cropped beard and curly hair, said. Waseem Abbas, a former Shiite militant-turned-liberal and political science graduate whose uncle was sentenced to death for killing Sipah founder Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, said he was afraid to publicly express an opinion. "I voice my opinions only in closed circles of friends and family," Abbas said.¹⁵⁰

CLASS STRUGGLE CLOAKED IN SECTARIANISM

In May 2018, Pakistan's National Commission for Human Rights reported that 509 Hazaras had been killed since 2013.¹⁵¹ Many of those killings were laid at the doorstep of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a violent group that split from Sipah/ASWJ but, according to a founding member of Sipah, still has close ties to the mother organization.¹⁵² ASWJ denies that it is still linked to Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a group that graduated from a small town sectarian militia into a pillar of Pakistani militancy and a backbone of its evolution.

The question is, said Pakistani political commentator Mosharraf Zaidi, “how did Lashkar-e-Jhangvi [LeJ] from [the Punjabi town of Jhang] end up in Quetta killing sons and daughters of Genghis Khan, how did the Hazaras get into the crosshairs of the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi? How did a local militant movement in Jhang metastasize....into the kind of toxicity that the LeJ represents? Let’s not forget what the LeJ became. The LeJ was the platform factory of the alphabet soup of terrorists in Pakistan.... The entirety of the TTP’s capacity was built on the back of the LeJ’s skills....Part of the reason that the LeJ is still around in Balochistan is because of the offset that it provides in response to the Baloch terrorist separatist groups.”¹⁵³ Zaidi was referring to Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), better known as the Pakistani Taliban.

In 2009, Tariq Pervez, former director general of the Federal Investigation Agency, described the TTP network that included Sipah as well as its associates and offshoots, as “ideas, logistics, cash from the Gulf [and] Arab guys, mainly Egyptians and Saudis.”¹⁵⁴ The International Crisis Group reported that same year that “Punjab-based radical Deobandi groups like the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan [SSP] and its offshoot Lashkar-e-Jhangvi [LeJ] provide weapons, recruits, finances and other resources to Pakistani Taliban groups, and have been responsible for planning many of the attacks attributed to FATA-based militants. The SSP and LeJ are also al-Qaeda’s principal allies in the region.” The group said that the Pakistani Taliban relied on “long-established Sunni jihadi groups and their countrywide networks of mosques and religious seminaries, or madrasas.”¹⁵⁵ Journalist and security analyst Rana Jawad asserted that “in all major terrorist attacks in Pakistan there is irrefutable evidence that the LJ [Lashkar-e-Jhangvi] and SSP [Sipah-e-Sahaba] were used.”

Scholars Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy and journalist Mubasher Bukhari who have long covered Pakistani militancy argue that Sipah, Jaish-e-Muhammad (JM), an ISI-sponsored anti-Indian group founded by activists of the outlawed militant group Harkatul Mujahideen al Islami (HuM) that was designated a terrorist group by the United Nations,¹⁵⁶ and LeJ were wings of one and the same group. Harkatul al Islam was founded by Maulana Fazlur Rehman Khalil, the Imran Khan ally who was designated a terrorist by both the United Nations and the United States.

“The SSP was a political umbrella while JM and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi [LeJ], named after Sipah founder Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, were the jihadi and domestic military wings respectively,” Abou Zahab and Roy wrote.¹⁵⁷ The reality may have been more complex. LeJ is believed to have been formed in the mid-1990s in response to efforts by then-Sipah leader Tariq Azzam, a member of the Pakistani parliament, to purge the group’s ranks of its violent elements.¹⁵⁸

Differences within the militant groups may help explain the pattern of continued Saudi support even after the rise, in 2015, of Muhammad bin Salman, Saudi Arabia’s powerful crown prince who has vowed to moderate Islam.¹⁵⁹ In 2017, Pakistani militants reported that Saudi funds were flowing into militant madrassahs in Balochistan¹⁶⁰ while the kingdom has been cooperating with Al-Qaeda in the Saudi-led war against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.¹⁶¹ To be clear, continued Saudi Arabia support for militants has been restricted to funding the furthering of the kingdom’s goals in its existential rivalry with Iran rather than as unconditional aid to militants.

Sipah, founded in 1985 by Maulana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, a low-level Deobandi scholar in the bustling Punjabi city of Jhang, a dusty provincial capital 200 kilometers south of Lahore at the crossroads of transnational drugs and arms smuggling networks, made declaring Shiites infidels its core demand. To achieve its goal, Sipah openly advocated violence and incited riots in various Pakistani cities, including Karachi, Multan, Kabirwala, Peshawar, and Jhang, the latter of which is characterized by roads pockmarked by colorfully painted trucks, donkey carts laden with bricks, repair shops, and stalls hawking food, drinks, clothes, and sacks of rice. Perceptions of the Shiite threat were reinforced by demands by Shiite activists as well as Iranian officials that Pakistan remove public references to the Prophet’s first three successors — including Bab-i-Umar, the Gate of Umar, and the second caliph — from Jhang.

Jhangvi, a graduate of Karachi’s Saudi-backed Jamia Uloom-e-Islamia madrassah, the alma mater of many of Pakistan’s most militant Islamists, who hailed from a poor rural family, earned his intolerant spurs in anti-Ahmadi and anti-Sufi campaigns waged by Sipah’s spiritual father, Jamiat-e-Islami, the Saudi-backed Islamist party founded by Syed Abul

A'la Maududi. Jhangvi was the party's deputy leader in Punjab.¹⁶² Jamat-e-Islami and Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Islam, led by Sami ul-Haq, initially encouraged Jhangvi to front the anti-Shiite fight conceived during two conferences organized by the Saudi-backed Jamaat Ulema-e-Ahl-e-Hadith in the first half of the 1980s.¹⁶³ Jamat-e-Islami broke with the group in 1989. Sipah and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi fighters fought alongside the Taliban and helped them gain control of the country in 1996, according to Bahukutumbi Raman, a former Indian government cabinet secretary and head of Indian intelligence.¹⁶⁴

Jhangvi argued that obscurantist practices of Shiism served to perpetuate the Shiite grip on power and prepare the ground for Sunnis who stray from the path of literal Islam to convert to Shiism. He became the first Pakistani ultra-conservative to demand that Shiites, like Ahmadis earlier, be declared non-Muslims because they refuse to recognize Muhammad as the last prophet.¹⁶⁵ In doing so, Jhangvi aligned local concerns with Saudi Arabia's larger geopolitical aims.

Jhangvi singled out prominent Jhang politicians like Syeda Abida Hussain, a former Pakistani ambassador to the United States, and Faisal Salih Hayat, a Shiite politician and former minister from Jhang and long-standing adversary who is also the hereditary keeper of a Shiite shrine. Siddiqui, the political scientist, concluded from a survey of Punjabi PML-N members of parliament in 2013 that 66.43% were landlords.¹⁶⁶ Clerics like Jhangvi and Ludhianvi were "able to offer an alternative—and seemingly more equitable—power structure to those individuals previously beholden to their feudal benefactors [They were] able to capitalize on this overlap between sectarian identity and economic exploitation to gain support," said Siddiqui.¹⁶⁷

Shiite and Sunni college teachers and medical doctors gathered on a Sunday afternoon in the spring of 2017 in Jhang explained the rise of Sipah and its sectarianism in terms of class struggle. Their rhetoric, like that of Sipah, resembled the terminology of class struggle that had long been adopted by Jamat-e-Islami, Pakistan's oldest and most established Islamist party founded by Islamist scholar Abul Ala Maudud that was the first of its kind to develop an ideology based on the modern revolutionary conception of Islam.¹⁶⁸

“Religion was only a pretext as anti-Shiite rhetoric proved to be a powerful means of mobilization in the mid-1980s and also way to get support both from state and from foreign sources,” said Abou Zahab.¹⁶⁹ The teachers and doctors argued that Pakistani and Saudi Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatives exploited the fact that powerful Shiite businessmen, or the “feudals” in their words, whose wealth initially stemmed from large landholdings, dominate Jhang’s predominantly agricultural economy. Many in Jhang agree with their assertion that the feudals had deliberately kept the region among Pakistan’s more underdeveloped in a bid to maintain their grip on power.

Indeed, the rise of Islamic militants symbolized the dwindling power of the feudal classes whose practices often created a breeding ground for militancy. Reporting on the 2011 election campaign in Gujranwala, a city north of Lahore, *Dawn* reporter Cyril Almeida concluded that traditional feudal or kinship relations were on the wane. “The old tug of biradarism [brotherhood] ... has been partially supplanted by the arrival of staunch Islamism,” Almeida reported.¹⁷⁰ “Feudals see their power waning. Deobandism with its close ties to the military has weaponized Islam to a degree that feudal landlords have to watch their step,” added author and journalist Khalid Ahmed.¹⁷¹

Land reforms substantially diminished the landlords’ holdings originally acquired from British colonial rule, yet they maintained their historic legacy and have since built substantial businesses. Sheikh Waqas Akram, a member of Pakistan’s national assembly for Jhang and owner of one of Pakistan’s largest bus companies as well as the region’s Shell gas station franchise, was the prime target of the teachers and doctors’ ire. “Sipah attracted the poor. Its leaders came from downtrodden families. Religion gave them a justification to stand against the feudal lords. Anti-Shiism was the best tool he could use. People voted for Sipah to escape the Sheikh. He has fuelled extremism with his humiliating behaviour. Might is right. His bus drivers drive with impunity. I have to move to the side of the road when he passes in a convoy of four or five Land Cruisers. He is arrogant and rude to the people,” said Bahauddin Sakeb, a 30-year old political scientist who hails from one of Jhang’s wealthier Sunni families.¹⁷²

The complaints echoed the rhetoric of Maulana Masroor Nawaz Jhangvi, the son of assassinated Sipah founder Haq Nawaz Jhangvi and the operator of an ultra-conservative madrassah that is home to the graves of seven leaders of the group who died violent deaths. Speaking during a campaign in a 2016 by-election in which he insisted that “we have the right to speak and fight against Shiism,” Jhangvi asked his audience, “Do you get food, water and petrol? Do you get electricity in your homes? Don’t you pay through the nose for fuel? This democracy has given us nothing!” Amidst a diatribe against Shiites, Jhangvi called for the replacement of democracy with a caliphate in Pakistan.¹⁷³

Sipah’s anti-Shiism built on a legacy of sectarianism in Jhang that harks back to provincial elections in the 1950s when Maulana Ghulam Hussain campaigned on an anti-Shiite crusade. Ghulam’s ire focussed on Colonel Syed Abid Hussain, Syeda Abida Hussain’s father, who he accused of being a feudal. Ghulam was backed by Sunni landlords who won four of the five seats in the provincial assembly. Sectarianism faded until Ghulam defeated Hussain 20 years later in the wake of Sunni-Shiite riots in Jhang over the naming of the Bab-i-Umar gate in Jhang.¹⁷⁴

Three decades earlier, the widely held perception of the power of Shiite landlords was the basis for Jhangvi’s insistence that emancipation from feudalism was inextricably intertwined with adhering to a Saudi-like interpretation of Islam. In doing so, Jhangvi aligned Jhang’s local power with the kingdom’s effort to counter Iran by fomenting sectarian strife between Sunnis and Shiites. The linkage between local politics and Saudi geopolitics was evident when, in 1990, Jhangvi was shot at close range in the head and chest and killed on the doorstep of his home. Sipah blamed the oligarchy together with Iran for their leader’s death and targeted the Islamic Republic in response.

Moreover, funding from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries shifted traditional power dynamics in mid-size Pakistani towns and villages by liberating ultra-conservative preachers and Islamic scholars from dependence on local landlords and wealthy businessmen. “The imam of the local mosque, who was dependent on the alms from the local community only two decades ago is now a multi-millionaire and has become a symbol of power,” noted journalist Hussain Mujahid.¹⁷⁵ Saudi

Arabia benefitted from the fact that, in the words of South Asian scholar Matthew Nelson, the “relationship between ‘traditional’ rural and ‘rising’ middle class rivals, [was] channelled through sectarian and electoral battles focused on the capture of land.”¹⁷⁶

“The ground was fertile for proxy wars: the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq war and the Afghan jihad were the enabling factors which gave scale and sustenance to the sectarian tensions ... and led to the internationalization of sectarian politics. Religious parties radicalized by foreign influences started receiving foreign funds. Mosques and madrassahs with sectarian affiliations were built everywhere ... and a new kind of maulvi [Muslim legal scholar], the ‘donor funded maulvi,’ appeared moving around in a [Mitsubishi] Pagero with armed bodyguards. Religious scholars started travelling to Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Kuwait and their influence with the local administration became tremendous,” said Pakistan scholar Mariam Abou Zahab.¹⁷⁷

Empowerment allowed militant clerics and businessmen associated with them to operate as vote banks. Their popularity was based on the services they provided, including free boarding and meals for students at their seminaries which provided economic relief to impoverished families as well as the resolution of marital and water-sharing disputes. Their credibility and ability to recruit was enhanced by backing up their sermons with threats of violence.¹⁷⁸ During a recruitment drive in 2014, ASWJ signed up some 50,000 new members in the province of Sindh that long prided itself on its diversity and tolerance. The drive benefitted from the fact that ASWJ had established an estimated 4,000 madrassahs in the province. “We give them a religious education. We feed and house them and provide them a bursary that goes to their families. We even pay for their medical expenses. We take better care of the students than even their own parents,” said an ASWJ spokesman.¹⁷⁹

Journalists Huma Yusuf and Syed Shoaib Hasan concluded, in a United States Institute of Peace report, that “these leaders have growing local networks among politicians and police, which landowners are increasingly unable to match. They are also able to enhance their credibility by emphasizing the Islamic correctness of their decisions.”¹⁸⁰ Their popularity and ability to deliver votes enhanced their value to established political parties eager to benefit from their grassroots strength.

Sipah's violence and Jhangvi's assassination unleashed a wave of tit-for-tat killings that were not restricted to Pakistani Shiites and Sunnis but also targeted Pakistan-based Iranian officials. In 1990, gunmen killed the Iranian cultural attaché in Lahore in retaliation for the assassination of Jhangvi a year earlier. Seven years later, Sipah activists torched Iranian cultural centres in Lahore and Multan in response to a bomb blast that killed several of the group's leaders. Five Iranian military officers were assassinated that same year in Rawalpindi. With numerous Sipah leaders having met a violent end, one of the group's leaders quipped that Ludhianvi has emerged as the first to live beyond the age of 40.¹⁸¹

The rise of Sipah, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and its since-banned successor, Ahle Sunnat Wal Jammāt, as both a militant group and a political party that contested local and national elections, radicalized Pakistan's Islamist politics. Decades of sectarian agitation, coupled with the activities of other Saudi-backed groups, shaped public discourse and hardened the battle lines between Sunnis and Shiites.

"Sipah's electoral campaigns often involved young men with scraggly beards performing a war dance on stage shouting 'Shia Kafir; Shia Kafir, Kafir, Kafir; Shia Kafir [Shiites are infidels]' to the beat of drums and revved up music," recalled a Shiite activist.¹⁸² Speakers at rallies promised that a vote for Sipah would be a ticket to heaven and an invitation to Allah to bring his wrath down on politicians like Hussain who were certain to burn in hell.

SECTARIANISM AND MIDDLE EASTERN RIVALRY: AN EXPLOSIVE BREW

Sipah's sectarianism fed not only on the dynamics of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran but also on changes in the social structure of Jhang where politics was long dominated by Shiites who controlled the region's power structure based on wealth they had accumulated as feudal landlords prior to land reforms in the late 1950s and 1970s. Their power was challenged with the influx of remittances from Pakistani workers in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf that fuelled urbanization and nourished the emergence of Sunni traders and merchants demanding a say of their own.

Sipah and its associates projected themselves as the voice of the new middle class as well as of a Sunni peasantry toiling on lands in Jhang district that were two-thirds owned by Shiites,¹⁸³ even if the land reforms had reduced their holdings to 4% of the region's holdings.¹⁸⁴ Campaigning in 2013 at a shrine for the twelfth century warrior priest Khalid Walid in the Punjabi town of Kabirwala, Maulana Abdul Khaliq Rehmani, an ASWJ candidate, told an enthused crowd of farmers: "Feudalism has paralyzed Pakistan. By the will of God, every poor person in this district will vote for us!"¹⁸⁵

Rehmani, who is believed to control up to 20,000 votes, not enough to win a seat but sufficient to swing a vote, garnered 12,495 votes in the 2018 election.¹⁸⁶ Rehmani was campaigning against Syeda Abida Hussain's husband, Fakhar Imam, a member of a large and politically influential family and former speaker of parliament who had joined Khan's PTI. Imam's brother was wounded in a sectarian attack in 1991.

Sipah benefitted from the support of the Pakistani intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). "ISI wanted to please the Saudis. They did nothing to impede the spread of Wahhabism. Turki, like all Sudairis, was interested in spreading Wahhabism. Sectarian conflict was the price, the ISI was willing to pay," said Hussain, who defeated Jhangvi in parliamentary elections in 1998. Hussain was referring to Prince Turki bin Faisal al Saud, a scion of the powerful Sudairi clan within the kingdom's ruling Al Saud family, who, as head of Saudi intelligence, was ISI's main Saudi counterpart in the 1980s and 1990s.

In a chilling letter sent in 2011 to the Hazara community in Balochistan, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi warned that "all Shiites are *wajib-ul-qatl* [worthy of killing]. We will rid Pakistan of [these] unclean people. Pakistan means land of the pure, and the Shiites have no right to be here. We have the fatwa and signatures of the revered ulema in which the Shiites have been declared kafir [infidel]. Just as our fighters have waged a successful jihad against the Shiite-Hazaras in Afghanistan, our mission is the abolition of this impure sect and people, the Shiites and the Shiite-Hazaras, from every city, every village, every nook and corner of Pakistan. Like in the past, our successful Jihad against the Hazaras in Pakistan and, in particular, in Quetta continues and will continue. We will make Pakistan their graveyard — their houses will be destroyed by bombs and suicide

bombers. We will only rest when we fly the flag of true Islam on this land Jihad against the Shiite-Hazaras has now become our duty.”¹⁸⁷

Anti-Shiite sectarianism was core to Saudi Arabia’s four-decade-long overt and covert campaign to implant a supremacist Sunni Muslim worldview in Sunni communities worldwide.¹⁸⁸ In 2015, that campaign entered a new phase with the rise of Saudi King Salman, another Sudairi, and his powerful son, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. Anti-Shiite and anti-Iranian agitation in Balochistan, with its border with Iran, took on added significance as the Trump administration targeted Iran by withdrawing from the 2015 international agreement designed to curb Iran’s nuclear program, the re-imposition of US sanctions, and suggestions that the United States was attempting to engineer a change of regime in Tehran.

Ramazan Mengal became the alleged conduit for large amounts of Saudi money that poured into the militant madrassahs that dot Balochistan.¹⁸⁹ The funds, despite the fact that it was not clear whether they were government or private monies, and if they were private whether the donations had been tacitly authorized, were widely seen as creating building blocks for a possible Saudi effort to destabilize Iran by fomenting ethnic unrest among the Baloch on the Iranian side of the Pakistani border.

A potential Saudi effort, possibly backed by the United States, would complicate an already difficult security situation in Balochistan, home to the port of Gwadar, which is a key node in China’s massive investment in Pakistan and has witnessed attacks on Chinese targets. It would risk putting Saudi and Chinese interests at odds and upset Pakistan’s applecart, built on efforts to pacify Balochistan, while not allowing its longstanding close ties to the kingdom to strain relations with its Iranian neighbor.

CONCLUSION

What happens in Pakistan — a nuclear power and the world's second most populous Muslim nation, which borders on global flashpoints, Afghanistan, and Iran and maintains close ties with China and Saudi Arabia — resonates geopolitically across the Asian expanse from the Gulf to China. If that were not reason enough to focus on Pakistan, its troubled relationship to ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim Islam and militancy should be an issue of concern, particularly as relations with the country's long-standing ally, the United States, head for the deep freeze.

The recent rise of international cricket player Imran Khan to the position of prime minister following elections in July 2018 promises to be a double-edged sword. Khan fits the global trend of voters, angry at economic and social mismanagement and corruption, who have lost faith in traditional politicians and confidence in their political system, opting instead for populist outsiders. Khan's victory has indeed broken the Pakistani mold of dynastic politics that had been dominated by the Bhutto and Sharif families.

Khan's track record is one of a maverick and a loose cannon who has, at times, questioned the very structure of Pakistani politics, which assigns a powerful role to the country's powerful military and intelligence organizations. Faced with a financial crisis and the threat of blacklisting by an international anti-money laundering and terrorism finance watchdog, Khan risks being caught in a Catch-22 in which the country's ingrained relationship with ultra-conservatism and militancy clashes with the reforms he would need to introduce to put Pakistan on a stable path toward reduced violence and economic growth. His longstanding ultra-conservative instincts and ties to militants raise questions, however, about his ability to guide Pakistan out of the morass.

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