

NOREF Report

The threat of growing extremism in Punjab

David Hansen

Executive summary

During the last few years Punjab has experienced a deep social crisis in which Islamist organisations have been able to challenge the Pakistani authorities' power – as certain Islamist organisations, including extremist ones, increasingly are filling the role of welfare providers to the people. Punjab is experiencing a shift from the traditional Barelvi (Sufi) Islam towards more orthodox interpretations of the faith – often in quite radical variants. Some of the most important extremist Islamist organisations instrumental in this reorientation have become involved in criminal activity and in settling scores

between competing bodies at the local level. Local judiciary, police and politicians often function as enablers for the extremists. This is not only troublesome for Pakistan: rising radical Islamist tendencies can be witnessed in Norway among certain Norwegian-Pakistanis. This policy brief describes some initial findings regarding the potential consequences of Punjab's social crisis, its patterns of extremism and the reorientation of religion in the province. It argues that in addition to being problematic for Pakistan, this development may have an adverse effect on diaspora communities living in the West.

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Introduction

Pakistan's Punjab province is currently experiencing a social crisis that, aided by a reorientation of religion, has indirectly led to a rise in religious extremism and criminal activity. Throughout the summer and into the fall of 2012, several large-scale attacks on governmental institutions occurred and there was a massive increase in violent sectarianism. This has the immediate potential to affect both development and stability within Pakistan, and might also have a spillover effect for diaspora communities living in the West such as Norwegian-Pakistanis living in Norway.

This policy brief addresses issues that may have an impact on Norway's strategic goals in Pakistan in light of the recent developments in Punjab. The focus on Punjab is of particular importance for Norway, as a majority (perhaps as many as 85-90%) of Norwegian-Pakistanis hail from that province. The high degree of mobility and the increasing degree of (Internet) information exchange will also have an impact on Norwegian-Pakistanis.

Inability of the Pakistani authorities and the Islamist response

The current political situation in Pakistan is adversely affected by the authorities' inability – or, worse, unwillingness – to fight organised crime, violent extremism and terrorism in their various forms. A corrupt judiciary and police force, and Pakistan's inability to provide a sustainable, predictable and stable economy are also problems. For quite some time the Pakistani authorities have been unable to maintain sufficient amounts of energy for private households and businesses dependent on it for continuous production. Thus, in recent years few domestic investments have been made and even less foreign direct investment (FDI) finds its way to Pakistan. Indeed, some analysts maintain that both domestic investment and FDI are at a 40-year low.¹ Moreover, the gas and petrol supply

situation hit an all-time low during the spring of 2012, causing deep resentment, social anxieties, demonstrations, and even occasional clashes between the populace and authorities. During the summer of 2012 the poor energy situation meant that for certain areas in Punjab drastic load-shedding programmes with power cuts of up to 20 hours a day were the norm. This most certainly causes further resentment among the people, severely disrupts local businesses' abilities to operate and, not least, further diminishes trust in and the legitimacy of the central government in Islamabad. Adding to this, Punjab has experienced a fast-growing process of religious radicalisation since 9/11 and has been affected by Pakistan's controversial role in the so-called "war on terror" during the last couple of years in particular. In the midst of this, radical and extremist Islamist movements have gained enormous ground in Punjab, and while terrorist attacks have declined, violent sectarianism and crime are on the rise.

The human security situation in south Punjab is dire and among the worst in the country, leading to massive recruitment into the extremists' cadres. The situation in central parts of Punjab, however, has largely been ignored, as it has been thought to be stable, under control and (more) secure, because educational levels and other human security indicators have been stronger there than in most other parts of the country. Yet in the last couple of years parts of central Punjab, including areas from which Norwegian-Pakistanis hail (e.g. Faisalabad, Gujranwala, Gujrat, Jhelum, Kharian, Lala Musa, Mandi Bahuddin, Sargodha, Sialkot, etc.), have experienced a significant shift towards non-violent and violent extremism alike. Religious minorities and Sufi shrines are under constant attack, Bareilvi and Deobandi factions clash with each other, Sunni and Shia groups are engaged in sectarian violence, and jihadi organisations are recruiting for their cadres. These areas are increasingly experiencing radical and even extremist interpretations of Islam and may thus be potential hotbeds of the further radicalisation of Punjab and elsewhere. This may ultimately pose a danger to Norway or Norwegian interests in Pakistan, as there are tangible signs of a reorientation towards more extremist interpretations of Islam among Norwegian-Pakistani Muslims in Norway. However, the

¹ See, for instance, Kamal Monno, "Competitiveness and investment", *The Nation (Pakistan)*, February 8th 2012.

Pakistani authorities seem to do little but deny the presence of extremists in Punjab. The situation is thus ripe for further social discontent and crisis in the area that may result in a security threat in Norway and/or against Norwegian state and non-state interests in Pakistan.

At the same time, where the state fails on its promise to deliver essential services to the public, Islamist (especially Deobandi- and Wahhabi-inspired) organisations gain ground and to a certain extent fill the role of providers of welfare services to the people. Included among these organisations are a few banned jihadi outfits, such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP), and of course the controversial parent organisation of LeT, Jama'at ud-Dawa (JuD). Many of these organisations have their own sub-organisations that provide welfare services similar to those of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or those that Hamas runs in Gaza and the Palestinian territories. Their welfare services range from offering clothing, food, gifts and other items during ceremonial holidays to running religious seminaries (*madrassas*, or in Arabic, *madaris*) for students who otherwise cannot afford regular schooling. In some areas of Punjab these jihadi groups have acquired political power, exert a great deal of influence in local politics and can even affect judicial proceedings. The extremist – often militant – Islamists are challenging the federally sanctioned power vested with the provincial authorities and thus also challenge the concept of “good governance”. Islamists have risen to the challenge and have provided comfort for people, who are increasingly turning to religion to find solutions for their practical problems. Thus, as such, Islamism presents itself as a non-state vehicle for social change and has filled the vacuum caused by the authorities’ inability to build a strong state and provide for the people for whom they are responsible.

Punjab is also experiencing a serious rise in crime, especially increased levels of brutal robberies, targeted assassinations and kidnappings for ransom.² On a general level, this adverse

development is in part linked to the poor economic situation in the country, in particular that of south Punjab. In addition to this, extremists have taken greater control of this criminality. The diminished influence of al-Qaeda may have led to decreased levels of funding for its extremist affiliates in Pakistan. Indeed, extremists like LeJ, Tehreek-e-Taliban – the so-called Pakistani Taliban – and others often engage in violent activities to finance their own terrorist activities. Also, in the last two years extremists have increasingly been involved in several violent robberies, assassinations and kidnappings for ransom. This trend is not limited to Punjab alone, although the situation there may be somewhat different to that in other provinces, because the province has mostly been spared such incidents in the past. Another troubling trend is the involvement of some extremists in ancient family feuds – in terms of which opposing groups and families “outsource” harassment and even targeted killings to certain extremist groups. Norwegian-Pakistanis are also known for “settling scores” in Pakistan. There is thus a potential for some extremist involvement in their vendettas. In Punjab extremists regularly receive support from local politicians and police, who are widely seen as being corrupt. The militants are thus mostly left alone to carry out these heinous acts. The following extract from a recent article in a Pakistani monthly magazine describes the increasing linkages between criminality and extremism in Punjab:

The situation in Punjab is particularly worrisome because of the increasing involvement of banned militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Lashkar-e-Islam (based in Khyber agency) in kidnapping for ransom cases as a means to finance their activities The nature of crime has changed over the last few decades because of rapid population growth and social and economic changes in our society.³

Extremists are seen by many as fighting “evil”, i.e. Western and Indian interests and targets, and thus have managed to attain legitimacy among

2 Kidnappings for ransoms in Punjab also include kidnappings of foreign nationals. Since July 2011 seven foreign nationals have been kidnapped and held for ransom in Punjab. For more on this issue, see Nasir Jamal and Mohammad Faisal Ali, “All roads lead to FATA: how kidnapping for ransom has become a thriving enterprise in Punjab”, *The Herald*, April 2012, pp. 42-46. Also see Ghulam

Dastageer, “The problem areas”, *The Herald*, April 2012, pp. 61-65 and Declan Walsh, “Taliban gaining more resources from kidnapping”, *New York Times*, February 19th 2012.

3 Jamal and Ali, “All roads lead to FATA”, pp. 43-44. Also see Ambreen Agha, “Pakistan: terror by abduction – analysis”, *Eurasia Review*, April 9th 2012, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/09042012-pakistan-terror-by-abduction-analysis>.

local populations. The authorities have shown little capability – or, perhaps, willingness – to clamp down on them (except for a few groups), perhaps as they themselves experience a relative reduction in attacks against their own personnel and facilities due to this reorientation by extremists. Even worse is the fact that for some areas local authorities share the same worldview as and even benefit from their connections to extremists. In many cases, extremism is blamed on “the foreign hand” or described as being “natural responses towards external intervention” (e.g. drone strikes), and thus is either seen as unpreventable or partly justified. In certain parts of Punjab the situation is so precarious that local extremist movements are given carte blanche to operate, often under the protection of corrupt local police authorities⁴ and/or local politicians giving them shelter and even co-opting them into political processes.⁵ There is seldom sound reflection on what agendas these types of movements have, as they are most often seen as “protectors of Islam” and often deliver essential services to the people. A study by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies conducted in Punjab in 2010 has the same findings and notes that:

Jamatud Da’waa (JuD) is among the main militant groups – most of the people know it as a religious groups or a welfare organization – which are most active and strongly networked in these districts. Gujranwala, Mandi Bahauddin and Jhelum districts are the focus areas of its activities. On [the] ideological front, JuD has great influence in these areas because the organization is operating there without any restrictions. Other sectarian outfits like Sipah-e-Sahaba also have their network in these areas. Sipah-e-Sahaba is active here with the new name Ahle Sunnat wal Jamaat led by Ahmad Ludhyanvi. The most violent sectarian outfit Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) is active in these areas, particularly Chakwal, Rawalpindi and Mandi Bahauddin According to Shakeel

Bajwa, a civil society activist in Gujranwala, Jamat-e-Islami is propagating anti-Western agenda in the city District administration, according to him, greatly overlooks their activities. Jamat-e-Islami, Jamatud Da’waa, Khaksar Tehrik and Jamatul Ahrar are promoting extremism in district Gujranwala in the name of Islam.⁶

In addition, there are constant allegations of centrally co-ordinated and even active support for militant extremists – a policy often argued to be adopted by the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence – although little contemporary information exists to verify such claims. During the last year the emergence of the somewhat obscure anti-Western coalition Difa-e-Pakistan Council (DPC), consisting of different religious parties, banned extremist groups, former military officers, policemen and others, suggested that such links are plausible. The DPC may be sponsored by (some sections of) the Pakistani military – or at least is given more leverage than other social movements in the country.⁷ During the last year the DPC has had considerable success in drawing in supporters by the hundreds of thousands in Punjab to its rallies. Moreover, despite bans on several of the key organisations in the alliance, the DPC has been allowed to hold its rallies without much objection from the authorities.⁸ The DPC’s

6 PIPS (Pak Institute for Peace Studies), *Understanding North Punjab in the Context of Pakistan Diaspora in Britain*, November 2010, pp. 27-28, <http://www.san-pips.com/download.php?f=134.pdf>.

7 It should be mentioned that the DPC was set up as a reaction to the U.S. attack on a Pakistani military post in Mohmand Agency on November 26th 2011 in which an estimated 24 Pakistani soldiers were killed and several others wounded. The DPC also draws its legitimacy from objecting to the current government’s decision on November 2nd 2011 to grant India the status of “most-favoured nation” – which is regularly seen as a serious attempt of rapprochement with the country’s arch-rival. The DPC’s official webpage can be found at <http://www.difaepakistan.com/>.

8 As a paradox, after a DPC rally in January 2012, the federal government in Islamabad had to ask a couple of ministers in the Punjab government to reconsider their stance after they provided support for the former head of LeJ, Malik Ishaq, when he participated in the rally. See the *Dawn* article “Centre to ask Punjab govt to stay away from banned outfits”, February 2nd 2012, <http://dawn.com/2012/02/02/centre-to-ask-punjab-govt-to-stay-away-from-banned-outfits/>. Although the DPC thus far has no intention of portraying itself as a candidate in the upcoming elections (due to be held by March 18th 2013), individual parties, especially religious ones, are seen as being able to reap benefits from its media exposure, its outspokenness against Western influence, and, not least, its aggressive and militant stand towards any rapprochement with India. Another potential troublesome outcome is the outspoken intentions of the Punjabi Taliban to enhance their efforts – or rather a reorientation of their activities – in Indian-administered Kashmir. The DPC and the potential patronage given to it by the Pakistani (military) establishment are seen as enabling factors for

4 See, for instance, Khaled Ahmed, “Keeping mum about the Punjabi Taliban”, *Express Tribune*, February 19th 2012.

5 For claims of the extremist-politician nexus, see, for instance, Mujahid Hussain, *Punjabi Taliban: Driving Extremism in Pakistan*, New Delhi, Pentagon Security International, 2012, pp. xiii-xxv, 25-26, 30, 44, 52, 61-63, 68, 103, 134-157. Hussain claims that the ruling provincial government of Punjab (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz) has instrumentally co-opted extremist movements in Punjab to gain legitimacy and political strength in order to challenge the political power of the Pakistan People’s Party.

appeal among the populace, in addition to its role in playing the “nationalist agenda card”, is likely related to a reorientation of religion from a traditional (so-called Sufi) Barelvi-inspired Islam towards orthodox versions of Islam in general, making parts of Pakistan (Punjab in particular) ripe for its campaign.

A reorientation of religion in Punjab and its consequences for the diaspora in Norway

Most parts of Punjab adhere to some kind of Sufi Islam, or a system of maintaining a relationship with a Sufi saint or his ancestors (in Pakistan often referred to as *piri-muridi* – i.e. the relationship between the saint, *pir*, and the disciple, *murid*). This system is severely challenged by the orthodoxy found among many Deobandi- or Wahhabi-oriented movements, which instrumentally works towards reorienting Islam in most parts of Pakistan. This is valid for both the rural and urban parts of Punjab.⁹ The JuD, for example, is one of the organisations encouraging this reorientation of religion in Punjab. It is very active as an NGO providing general services to the needy and served an important role in providing relief to affected people in the aftermath of the 2005 earthquakes and the 2010/11 floods. The movement has even manifested its presence through the establishment of more than 150 “model schools”, which are said to be schools for extremist indoctrination.¹⁰ A study in northern Punjab in 2010 emphasised that religion was changing and that the traditional (Sufi-inspired) Barelvi sectarian affiliations people had in the past had gradually shifted into support for the Deobandis and orthodox interpretations of Islam. Nonetheless, as many as 53% of respondents admitted to going to the yearly gatherings of the death of a *pir* (so-called ‘*urs* celebrations), indicating a strong and continued commitment to *piri-muridi*.¹¹

this, which could possibly have very serious and damaging repercussions – not least as the political leadership of the country is trying to pursue trade agreements and a general rapprochement with India.

9 Hansen, *Radical Rhetoric – Moderate Behavior*, 2012; David Hansen, “*Piri-muridi* in the twin cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan”, *Acta Orientalia*, vol 72, 2011.

10 ICG (International Crisis Group), “Pakistan: the militant jihadi challenge”, ICG Asia Report no. 164, March 13th 2009.

11 PIPS, *Understanding North Punjab*, 2010, p. 15. In my own re-

search I found around 31% of respondents (N = 475) admitting to the same (Hansen, *Radical Rhetoric – Moderate Behavior*, 2012, p. 120). The discrepancy in these figures is probably related to the fact that people in urban Punjab are, and have always been reported to be, more adherent to *piri-muridi* than their urban brethren. In this context, it should be mentioned that Barelvi Islam in Pakistan has been subject to transformations, paving the way for orthodoxy and radical assertions of religion commonly not associated with “Sufi Islam”. One example of this is the way in which the Barelvi segment in Pakistan has been in the forefront of campaigns both to defend the Prophet’s honour (e.g. the cartoon controversy and other blasphemy cases) and active in the persecution of minorities in Pakistan. Punjab’s governor, Salman Taseer, for instance, was shot and killed by his elite police bodyguard, Malik Mumtaz Qadri, who was a member of Daw’at-e-Islami, a Barelvi group. The killing of Taseer has been endorsed by a broad segment of society, not least from the Barelvis.

12 Hansen, *Radical Rhetoric – Moderate Behavior*, 2012, p. 184.

reorientation of religion as an opportunity for social mobilisation to break the bonds of the informal caste system still existing in Pakistan.

A deep social crisis had been ongoing for decades in southern Punjab. At the time, impoverished Sunni peasants were deadlocked in dealings with rich Shia landowners, while nothing was being done to resolve this at the federal level. Indeed, as the federal government in the 1980s was still dominated by the descendants of the refugees that arrived in Pakistan in 1947, there was no interest in disabling any intervention by members of the establishment, who wanted to protect their rural landlord brethren. This happened against the backdrop of an increasingly prosperous group of newly rich local Sunnis who had acquired their wealth from family remittances sent from the Middle East, where they had sought jobs. This “new money” could not effectively challenge the old powers of the feudal elite, who were often enmeshed in the system of *piri-muridi*. The feudal elite thus had to be challenged by (orthodox) religion. In this scenario, Deobandi movements started supporting people at the grassroots level who had few prospects for any kind of social mobility. Soon Deobandis opened up *madrassas* and started to challenge the old feudal structures in society, and violence through the actions of the hard-core SSP (from 1984 onwards) and LeJ (from 1990 onwards) became *one* means to fight injustices at the local level in Punjab. Orthodox movements present themselves as pure, without any non-Islamic interference, and thus challenge the power of the traditional Sufi-inspired Islam, which includes many pre-Islamic practices and rituals. This in turn means that a lot more focus is put on building orthodox *madrassas* and mosques – which in turn serve as “social equalisers”, diminishing the role of the traditional ruling elites.¹³

A similar reorientation of religion has also occurred among some Norwegian-Pakistanis in Norway. Such a change is not problematic as such, yet it needs further research as it may prove to have certain indirect repercussions for how religion is changing among diaspora communities. This may have played a role in the reorientation of religion among predominately Norwegian-Pakistani Muslims in Norway.¹⁴ This shift towards orthodoxy

often includes a much higher degree of religious devotion than has hitherto been the case among first-generation Pakistani immigrants to Norway, most of whom related to some form of (moderate) Barelvi Islam.

This shift may in part help explain the increasing degree of radical and extremist behaviour, expressions and tendencies among Norwegian-Pakistani (and other) Muslims in Norway over the recent few years. This shift is not necessarily dangerous; nonetheless there are some valid reasons for concern, as these types of orthodox movements are very active in collecting funds among diaspora communities living in the West.¹⁵ Because some of these organisations are banned and engage in terrorist activities, funding them is an illegal act and could lead to an increased threat of violent extremism in Punjab and even in Norway. Furthermore, this funding may be linked to the alarming trend of Pakistanis who live in Europe travelling to *madrassas* in Pakistan with a militant and global jihadist agenda. Some of these *madrassas* are famous for their anti-Indian and anti-Western worldviews, conspiratorial attitudes and propaganda, and a few have been accused of grooming students for terrorist attacks in the West.

Conclusion

The security situation Punjab is precarious and little has been done to map the growing extremism in the province, not least the increasing linkages between extremist organisations and criminality. There is a common perception among politicians and security authorities in Pakistan that terrorist

in rhetoric and dress/attire. Rhetorical shifts include the “Arabisation” of language, often reflecting an emphasis on the Muslim Brotherhood or an *ummah*-line of thinking, references to the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings (his Sunnah as found in *hadith* collections), and constant references to the Koran. In terms of dress and attire for both men and women, even young men, for instance, wear a beard, are obsessed with dressing as per the Prophet’s praxis (Sunnah), have stopped wearing shorts, and some even turn to Arabic garments such as the traditional *thaub*. Dress for women has been (excessively) discussed both in Norway and elsewhere in Europe; the trend is to adopt the Arabian-styled *hijab*, or even to wear the full-covering Arabian-styled *abaya* together with a head- and face-covering *niqab*, or even the Afghan-styled *burqa*. Yet there are still many signs of fusion of the “old” and “new”, mostly exemplified by the fusion of clothing and the continued wearing of gold chains, rings, etc. for men (it is considered illegal – *haram* – for men to wear gold in accordance with especially orthodox Islam).

¹⁵ See, for instance, PIPS, *Understanding North Punjab*, 2010, p. 29 and Hussain, *Punjabi Taliban*, 2012, p. 12.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 293-295.

¹⁴ Some tangible signs of this shift are easily observable, for instance

attacks have decreased, hence there is a reluctance to admit that the increasing sectarian clashes in Punjab need to be analysed and confronted. In this context Norway should explore the possibilities of conducting studies to map the sociocultural landscape in central parts of Punjab (i.e. in those areas from which a majority of Norwegian-Pakistanis come). These studies should be centred in local academic institutions and supervised by Norwegian scholars, since Pakistani academic institutions often lack methodological competence and do not hold to European ethical standards. This research may also uncover aspects of Pakistani rural culture that could bolster the self-image of an increasingly alienated and polarised Norwegian-Pakistani diaspora. Thus far, Norwegian-Pakistanis' search for identity is directly linked to Islam and often – as witnessed in Norway over the last few years – to its radical and even extremist assertions.

A reorientation of religion and a growing religious radicalisation have occurred in most parts of Punjab – including central parts of Punjab, from which a majority of Norwegian-Pakistanis hail. Norway should focus its efforts at the local level in these areas and limit projects elsewhere in Pakistan. Norway should also look into developing ties with members of the Norwegian-Pakistani diaspora who are willing to invest in these areas in joint public-private sector initiatives. Norway should refocus its development efforts in Pakistan toward funding projects that Pakistanis can take over and use as a continued source of revenue – not just giving aid to Pakistan, which often conflicts with certain notions of honour in Pakistani culture. As a relatively small actor, Norway should also seek out comparable countries with similar diaspora groups and similar operational challenges (e.g. Denmark) for collaborative purposes. Development efforts might be initially co-ordinated with local and/or provincial bodies in Punjab, preferably in a joint public-private sector framework. This may implicitly improve good governance and transparency, and may even serve to empower local judicial and police functions, which are considered excessively corrupt and dysfunctional.

Suggestions for further reading

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