

ISAS Brief

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Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Pakistan's Widening Sectarian Divide

The latest targeted killings in Pakistan have not only exacerbated its sectarian tensions but also exposed the failings of the civil administration in a country where the Army, despite its historic role, cannot be the sole guardian of internal peace.

Sajjad Ashraf¹

Sectarian killings spread wider in Pakistan on 13 May 2015 when six gunmen stopped a bus, with 57 Ismaili Shia passengers, on its way to their community centre in Karachi, and indiscriminately shot at them. The death toll was 45. The victims were both men and women. The Chief Minister of the Sindh Province, whose capital Karachi is, subsequently announced the arrest of four suspects who were also alleged to have been involved in the recent murder of civil society activist Sabeen Mahmud in Karachi.²

¹ Mr Sajjad Ashraf is a Consultant at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and an Adjunct Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the NUS. He was Pakistan's High Commissioner to Singapore from 2004 to 2008. He can be contacted at sashraf1947@gmail.com. Opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of ISAS.

² <http://tribune.com.pk/story/889452/arrested-safoora-attack-mastermind-confesses-to-sabeen-mahmuds-murder/>

A leaflet found at the site of the shooting of the bus passengers suggests that the killers belong to the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS-Daesh).³ It was said in the leaflet that the killings were in revenge for the attacks on the Sunnis in Syria and Iraq. In a Twitter message the group claimed to have killed “apostates”. Hard-line Muslim groups consider the Shias to be outside the pale of Islam. Similar leaflets were found at the Jinnah Medical and Dental College, where gunmen had recently (17 April 2015) shot and injured the American vice-principal of the college.⁴ ISIS-Daesh, an extremist Islamic group is known under several names. It controls territories in Iraq and Syria, and some more in Libya and Nigeria. On 29 June 2014, the group proclaimed a worldwide caliphate under Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi, and renamed itself as the Islamic State.⁵

The spiritual head of the Ismaili community Prince Karim Aga Khan said in a statement: "This attack represents a senseless act of violence against a peaceful community. My thoughts and prayers are with the victims and the families of those killed and wounded in the attack". Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, former President Asif Ali Zardari and Army Chief General Raheel Sharif separately spoke to Prince Karim and offered condolences.

The Ismaili community belongs to the Shia branch of Islam, and is concentrated in India, Pakistan, East Africa, Canada, Central Asia and several European countries. Headed by the current Imam (spiritual leader) Prince Karim Aga Khan who succeeded his grandfather on 11 July 1957, when he was only 20 years old, the community is a major force in the areas of business, philanthropy, healthcare, education, culture, rural development and architecture. A building near the Novena MRT in Singapore had won the Aga Khan award for architecture in 2007 for showcasing a creative response to the challenge of high-rise housing in the tropics.⁶

³ <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-37459-45-Ismailis-massacred-in-terrorist-attack-on-Karachi-bus>

⁴ ibid

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_the_Levant

⁶ http://www.asiabuilders.com.sg/asiabuilders2011/NewsSingle.aspx?rec_code=21077&ind_ctry_code=con SG

Pakistan owes its creation largely to the leadership provided by the Ismailis. The then Imam, grandfather of the incumbent, Sir Sultan Mohammad Shah Aga Khan III, was the founding President of the All-India Muslim League in 1906 – the political party that spearheaded the Pakistan independence movement. More importantly, Mr Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan was born an Ismaili. Later he switched to the Ithnashiri Shia sect, in order to marry a young Parsi lady, whom he loved. The present Aga Khan's father, Prince Aly Khan, died in a car crash near Paris in 1960 while serving as Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

This, the first major attack on the Ismaili community that lives mainly in Karachi, fits into a pattern of sectarian violence targeted against the Shias. After the mainstream Shia community was targeted for several years, the Hazara Shias residing in Baluchistan came under violent attacks. The attackers mainly targeted congregations or the buses that were bringing back Hazara passengers from the holy Shia places in Iran. Hundreds have been murdered in cold blood, with no tracking of the assailants by the Pakistani security agencies.

Two years ago, the apolitical and low-key business-minded Bohra Shia community was targeted, when bombs planted outside their mosque in Karachi exploded, killing seven and injuring 22. In March this year another Bohra mosque in Karachi was targeted, killing two and wounding 20. And now, the Ismaili Shias.

The attacks confirm that the medieval-minded and misguided proponents of Islam, after targeting the Ahmediyas, Shias, and Bohras, have now turned their ire towards the small but economically significant Ismaili community in Pakistan.

Karachi - Pakistan's economic hub, arguably contributing as high as 70 per cent of the national revenues, and being virtually the country's only major seaport - suffers from layers of terrorist outfits. Street gangs operate with impunity. Kidnappings and killings for extortion are rampant.

Each major political party in the city maintains an armed wing. Sectarian interests overlap ethnic divisions, especially after the Pashtuns started moving into Karachi following Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan from late 1970s. The Muttahida Qaumi Movement

(MQM), a party of the descendants of migrants from India during the 1947 Partition, has demonstrated its overwhelming political support in the city, but the party is now under pressure from the later-day internal migrants. The MQM is determined to reclaim its political space. Its mercurial leader, Altaf Hussain, in self-exile in London, has called several times for the conversion Karachi city into a separate province. His volatile statements sometime border on an agenda of seeking plain secession.

The city's cosmopolitanism and economic growth are constantly undermined by violent disruptions. In recent years, ethno-political, sectarian, militant, and criminal violence have claimed thousands of lives and repeatedly paralysed the city's economic activities.⁷ In addition to such daily occurrences Karachi has witnessed some of the worst incidents of terrorist violence like the attack on the Mehran Naval Base in 2011 and the Karachi Airport in 2013. No heads of the country's administrative authorities rolled to ensure accountability after these major lapses in security. And now, with influential Ismaili community in the line of fire, greater negative economic consequences are likely in Pakistan.

There is an obvious lacuna in Pakistan over tackling the scourge of terrorism. The Minister for Interior, as late as last week denied the very presence of ISIS-Daesh presence in Pakistan. It is now known that the Chief Minister of Baluchistan informed the Federal Government in a letter as early as October last year that ISIS-Daesh was penetrating and recruiting cadre in Baluchistan. Pakistan's intelligence services recently reported in a confidential memo that the International Islamic University, Islamabad (IIUI) is "intentionally promoting Salafi, Takfiri and Ikhwani doctrines, whereas Pakistan is fighting the demon of terrorism, incubated and abetted by the same doctrines".⁸ A Saudi gentleman who does not speak a word of the local languages heads the IIUI.⁹

Given the international economic and public clout of the Ismaili community, Pakistan's Prime Minister, the Army Chief, who cancelled his Sri Lanka visit, and several top members of the civil and military leadership rushed to Karachi and huddled in a crisis meeting. Contrary to the expectations of a robust action, the meeting only resolved to

⁷ Huma Yusuf, Conflict Dynamics in Karachi. United States Institute of Peace 2012

⁸ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/885224/questionable-activities-iiui-promoting-extremist-doctrines-says-intelligence-agency/>

⁹ *ibid*

continue with the Karachi clean-up operation with ‘more vigour’. In a clear sign of fissures within the leadership, the Interior Minister was noticeable by his absence in Karachi.

Despite years under a long spell of terrorism, Pakistan’s leadership is still not prepared to own up its failures. Surprisingly, there is no realisation that it is the kowtowing to the right-wing extremists, corruption, lack of economic opportunities and poor governance that have brought Pakistan to this state of affairs. The Prime Minister and his cabinet continue to blame ‘those who do not want Pakistan to prosper’ or those ‘against China-Pakistan cooperation’.

There is no admittance that, as a consequence of turf wars between the various government agencies, the National Action Plan to combat terrorism, adopted with much such fanfare early last year, has not taken off. The National Counter-terrorism Authority, expected to spearhead the campaign against terrorism, is dysfunctional for the same reason. Similarly, the National Security Division, which was expected to be the thinking arm for the whole strategy, is moribund, with bored officers seeking postings back to their parent departments.

Pakistan’s civil administration seems to have abandoned its responsibility. The civilian leadership must understand that the relevant state institutions are a part of the whole ecosystem, which needs to take control of the troubled situation in Karachi (and elsewhere) – the microcosm of Pakistan and the country’s economic fulcrum. The Army, proudly displayed as *the* ‘one functional organisation’ in the country, cannot alone handle this burgeoning crisis.

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