

Pakistan: Sectarian violence and beleaguered Hazaras

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Pakistan has again witnessed another spell of sectarian carnage in the southwestern Baluchistan province on 3 January 2021 which took the lives of nearly a dozen coal miners belonging to the Shiite Hazara community. These miners were abducted by the Islamic jihadis who took them to a nearby mountain blindfolded and slayed. The miners—who reportedly included two people of Afghan origin also—were apparently taken from their shared residential place near the Machh coal field, located about 30 miles from Quetta, the capital of Balochistan.

The Islamic State (IS) militants—Da'ish—later claimed the responsibility for the killing. There were already innumerable reports that the Islamist jihadi outfits like Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LeJ) were increasingly involved in the attacks on Hazaras. Prime Minister Imran Khan condemned the carnage as a "cowardly inhumane act of terrorism" and sought to link it to "Pakistan's external enemies"—typical of Pakistani ruling elites' strategy to externalise such cases of internal violence and attacks against minorities. It was only recently that Pakistani Islamist jihadis came under fire for destroying a Hindu temple in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The Government of India had to lodge its protest over the incident which hurt sentiments of nearly 8 million Hindu minority in Pakistan.

Following the Quetta massacre on Sunday, thousands of Hazaras started a sit-in with a blockade of a highway, carrying the coffins with the bodies of the deceased miners, which continued even after two days. They said they would not end their protest until all the assassins are arrested and Prime Minister Iran Khan personally meet them (Dawn 2021). It may be recalled that the long indifference of provincial and federal authorities had led to a similar protest in 2013 when the Hazaras refused to bury the bodies of around 96 people killed in a suicide bomb attack which triggered nationwide protests. In the wake of the blasts in 2013, the government then had to suspend the provincial government and impose federal rule.

Prime Minister Imran Khan and his colleagues who find "external enemies" in every terrorist violence in the country cannot gloss over the

reports and recommendations of human rights agencies, including Pakistan's human rights commission. These agencies on many occasions said that the Hazara community in Pakistan has been the target of attacks and intimidation for many years by Sunni jihadi groups. Pakistan's National Commission for Human Rights (NCHRP) itself admitted in several reports that Hazaras were consistently targeted by terrorists and religious fanatics, over years, through suicide bombings and targeted killings. For instance, a 2018 report on Hazaras concluded with an alarming "fact that perpetrators of the barbaric attacks on Hazaras have not been brought to justice. This failure of the state machinery is bound to have an impact on the aspirations of Hazaras to live as equal and dignified citizens of Pakistan (NCHRP 2018a)

The NCHRP Annual Report of 2018 also noted that the actual number of Hazaras being killed in the country would be much higher than quoted by Pakistan's Home Department (NCHRP 2019). During 2018-19, there were a number of attacks on the Hazaras which resulted in the deaths of 20 people by mid-2019. Similar attacks and casualties were reported thereafter. The incident in a vegetable market in Quetta, for example, alone took 16 lives in April 2019 caused by an improvised explosive device (IED). Earlier, the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) in its security assessment of 2017 reported 36 attacks against Hazaras, causing a number of deaths. There was a surge in violence against the minority community since 2008. In September 2011, LeJ militants killed 29 Shia Hazaras who were travelling in a bus from Balochistan to Iran for visiting holy sites. Jihadi gunmen released the Sunnis before shooting the Hazara passengers. Attacks on Shia citizens continued unabated in the following years. The Human Rights Watch reported as many as 450 killings of Shia followers in 2012 and another 400 were massacred in 2013. While intermittent religious sectarian conflict between the Sunnis and Shias continued for long in Pakistan, bouts of violence during the last few years have shown that they have been increasingly weighted against the Shias. The most dreadful LeJ attacks on Hazaras causing highest number of deaths recorded in January-February 2013 when bomb explosions in Quetta alone killed 180 Hazaras (SATP 2019).

The religious violence has continued intermittently under successive governments since 1947, but it has obviously worsened after 2001. The Hazaras have complained about the sectarian attacks on them for years and pointed to the consistent breakdown of the system—at both the provincial and national levels—to arrest assailants or prosecute the jihadi militants who claimed responsibility for the attacks. Though it may not be possible to bring in evidences suggesting official patronage of the LeJ, the Hazaras underlined the fact that the law enforcement agencies did nothing to stem the tide of violence against them or to take stringent measures to avoid recurrence of attacks. Even proper investigations have not been done after each episode of violence. PIPS noted that the banned militant jihadi outfit LeJ perpetrated several attacks on Hazaras and LeJ's main goal was to "transform Pakistan into a Sunni state, primarily through violent means" (UK, Home Office 2019; PIPS 2019). The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in its 2019 Annual Report noted that the Islamic State, LeJ, and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) were the main outfits who targeted Hazaras for a long time (USCIRF 2019).

The Hazara community in Pakistan represents only a small fraction of the total population. The country's population is now estimated to have crossed 210 million of which almost 96 per cent are Muslims. Yet, it is a country with vast religious and ethnic diversities. While Sunnis constitute around 80-85 per cent of the Muslim population, Shias represent only 15-20 per cent. Hazaras numbering less than a million in Pakistan are mostly Shi'a Muslims belonging to the Twelver sect, albeit a few follow Ismaili and other factions. Shia Hazaras are largely

concentrated in Quetta in Balochistan. There are also many Hazaras living in Karachi and other places. Pakistan's Human Rights Commission estimated that there were approximately half a million Hazaras in Balochistan alone and the remaining population were living in Sind and other provinces. The Hazaras have a distinct physical appearance with an apparently Eurasian ethnic lineage and complexion. Some reports say that they have Turkish-Mongol similarities. Even as they set up their own enclaves in Balochistan and Sind, with such an easily identifiable complexion, Hazaras have naturally become prime targets for sectarian attacks and intimidation.

Historically, the Hazaras were reported to have come to Quetta from central Afghanistan. It must have started in the late 19th century, but a significant number of Hazaras had come to Pakistan in two phases in the post-independence period. The first phase started after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979), and then another wave of migration began in 1996 when Kabul came under the Taliban regime. As the fundamentalist regime sought to target the Hazaras, they had no option but to flee to neighbouring Quetta. However, the situation in Quetta also became challenging when sectarian violence forced many families to migrate to other parts of Pakistan like Karachi, Parachinar, Sanghar, Nawabshah, Hyderabad, Islamabad and some places in Punjab and Gilgit Baltistan.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan in its Annual Report 2018 said that "Driven into virtual ghettoisation, the community's freedom of movement remains severely restricted, with many migrating abroad, often illegally." The Report quoting from the respondents said that they were "in a very sad predicament... Many homes have no male breadwinners left—they have either been killed or have left Quetta. In a community where children's education was of paramount importance and child labour looked down upon, many children have had to leave school and work as waiters in restaurants, or errand boys in medical stores or in shoe shops etc. to support their families" (NCHRP 2019: 109-113)

According to the NHRCP report on Hazaras, when the security situation in Quetta got worsened, "threat perception has reached to such a level amongst the Hazara community" that they "always try to hide their identity while travelling and dealing outside their communities." The Hazaras also "explained that while going outside their areas they have to conceal their identity by covering their heads" (NHRCP 2018a: 10). The report further noted that some Hazaras strongly believed that a major reason for their "persecution could be associated with the socio-economic prosperity which they enjoy." According to them, conflicts and persecution started when Hazaras started "shops, markets, buildings and shopping malls in the hub of city and also progressed rapidly in Balochistan, in all spheres of life, economy, trade, education, sports etc as compared to other native communities." The report also recorded their view that in the emerging situation, "land mafia" also started involving "in their killing, forcing them to abandon their running business and prime properties, leaving Quetta for other parts of the country." Though NHRCP recorded some contrasting views also, the Report concurred with the general perception that the violence against the Hazaras was mostly related to their affiliation to the Shia sect (Ibid: 7). The Human Rights Watch also recorded such tendencies to denigrate Hazaras as "agents of Iran" (HRW 2014).

The LeJ which led pogroms of Hazaras in the past was reported to have maintained strategic links with Pakistan's security and intelligence apparatuses. Besides having forged ties with militant outfits and Taliban in Afghanistan, LeJ apparently sought to sustain covert relationship

with the jihadi groups in Kashmir. In 1998, LeJ was reported to have helped the Taliban forces to unleash massive attacks on Hazaras in Mazar-e-Sharif which took hundreds of lives. Later, as LeJ became part of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and involved itself in several attacks on Pakistani security forces and civilians, its earlier covert ties with the internal official apparatuses began to have broken. While military authorities now deny having any links with LeJ, the jihadi outfit continues to hold sway in Balochistan and Punjab. There were serious allegations that the Pakistan government failed to stem the tide of carnage and punish the perpetrators of violence against Hazaras. Some reports said that there were instances when even convicted high-profile LeJ jihadis and suspects in custody escaped from detention in strange circumstances. Though military ruler General Musharraf had banned LeJ in 2002, it has not undercut the LeJ's ability to perpetrate sectarian violence and campaigns in Pakistan.

In fact, the rise of Sunni jihadi militancy in Pakistan goes back to the days of the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) when he initiated Islamisation programme, mainly to legitimise his rule. In the wake of the Iranian revolution in 1979, Pakistan, like other Sunni states, began to worry about the spread of Shi'a Islam. In order to offset this, Gen Zia reinforced strategic relations with Saudi Arabia and other like-minded countries which eventually triggered off a fundamentalist upsurge of Wahhabism. Later, in the 1990s, the Taliban forces emerged and took over the mission of Wahhabism with a renewed vigour.

The long years of Afghan war and Pakistan's patronage of Sunni jihadi forces only helped widen its network across the region. Both Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP), formed in 1985, and its breakaway fraction Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) were operating with a mission to transform Pakistan into a Sunni State. When SSP was banned in 2002, it reorganised itself with a new name, Ahl-e Sunnat Wal Jama'at (ASWJ). LeJ and TTP thus became increasingly associated with targeted sectarian violence against Hazaras and Shi'a population.

Even as the political dispensation in Islamabad employs 'external' card for diverting people's attention from the ethnic carnage, the Hazara community knows very well that the Imran regime is no way different from other successive governments who continued to treat minority ethnic and religious communities as second-class citizens. It is in this background that the findings and recommendations of the National Human Rights Commission of Pakistan hold great significance. The Commission strongly argued in its 2018 report that an "overhaul of the criminal justice system is the need of the hour so that loopholes are plugged and the perpetrators of violent attacks against Hazaras are brought to justice." The report underlined that "Hazara killings come under the definition of persecution by UNCHR" and therefore the Commission recommended that "the government should address the issue accordingly." NCHRP also pointed out that "Government's approach towards the problem is that of firefighting rather than having a concrete plan for prevention and eradication of religious terrorism." Hence it called for seriously "implementing the existing laws against sectarianism, hate speech and violence against individuals and community" and putting in place measures "to stop religious extremism, protect minorities and prosecution of elements spreading sectarian violence" (NCHRP 2018a:15).

The powers-that-be in Islamabad cannot but see the findings of the Human Rights Commission as an appropriate source material for a national plan of action—rather than indulging itself in externalising every episode of internal violence for political and strategic mileage

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