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INFORMING PUBLIC DISCOURSE



**Rising Extremism and Civil Society  
Response During**

**COVID-19**

# **A CASE STUDY OF PAKISTAN**

**SHAHID REHMAT**

**ED**

Youth Development Foundation

**GULBAZ ALI KHAN**

**CEO**

Analytics Lab

# ACRONYMS

<b>AHA</b>	AHAAwareness with Human Action
<b>AWSJ</b>	AWSJAhle Sunnat Wal Jamaat
<b>CII</b>	CII Council of Islamic Ideology
<b>CNICs</b>	CNICsComputerized National Identity Cards
<b>COVID-19</b>	COVID-19 Coronavirus Disease of 2019
<b>CVE</b>	Countering Violent Extremism
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FIRs</b>	First Investigation Reports
<b>HRCP</b>	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
<b>NACTA</b>	National Counter Terrorism Authority
<b>NGOS</b>	Non-Governmental Organizations
<b>PEMRA</b>	Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority
<b>PeP</b>	Paigham-e-Pakistan
<b>PTI</b>	Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf
<b>PYLC</b>	Pakistan Young Lions Council
<b>SSDO</b>	Sustainable Social Development Organization
<b>TLP</b>	Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan

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# CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

In December 2019, a virus called Coronavirus emerged from the Chinese province of Wuhan and spread all across the globe in no time. COVID19 appeared in Pakistan in February 2019, and by that time, the country had experienced four of its waves. The recent Omicron variant is more contagious and easy to spread as evidence from other regions and countries testifies this fact. COVID19 hits hard the social and economic fabric of the globe, affecting various segments of the society disproportionately. Pakistan is a polarized society with multiple fault lines, including ethnic, religious, sectarian and regional. At the first case detection of Corona Virus in Pakistan, many religious tourists (Zaireen) visited Iran at the peak of COVID19 incidence. The Government's handling also affected how it was perceived by the people of other faiths in Pakistan. This virus also affects the mental well-being of the individual and communities in its worst form but propagating the heinous agenda of attributing the spread to an already marginalized community involves them more significant than others. Since the virus outbreak in the country, political and religious leaders have been openly blaming the Shia community for its spread in various provinces. This smear campaign gained strength when the erroneous charges were debated on the mainstream digital media, and a Shia minister was named for this mishandling and virus spread.

A heated debate was generated on various mediums, spreading hatred and bias amongst sects. Smaller public gatherings facilitated by VEOs also propagated this narrative of the virus targeting a minority sect. During 2019, the statistics from various provinces, including Punjab and Sindh, showed confirmed cases of people belonging to Tableegi Jamaat. This group of religious preachers visit multiple places to spread Islamic teachings. This group is associated with the majority Sunni population in ion of COVID19 to a particular sect or religion. Pakistan and enjoys a strong position within civil establishments and financial support from various foreign governments. By that time,

the debate had turned over, and this group was held responsible for local transfers of the virus. This debate has penetrated so deeply in the country that the head of a religious, political party again blamed the Shia community and a Shia minister. He also gave a solid rebuke to the Federal Government on the mishandling and mistreatment of the members of Tableegi Jamaat. In addition, a government and the Speaker of the Punjab Assembly recorded a video message announcing that members of this Sunni group are not alone in this difficult time. This showed a heated environment amongst the religious fraternity on the associat



# INCIDENTS OF SECTARIANISM, HATE AND DISCRIMINATION



## Sectarianism against Shias:

The Zaireens were in Iran during the COVID-19 outbreak in China. When the virus spread to Iran, these Zaireens began returning to Pakistan. The Government of Pakistan allowed them into the country through the Tuftan border crossing. Special quarantine centres were set up to keep the Zaireens in place for testing purposes before allowing them to leave for their home. However, the situation was mishandled in these isolation centres, and infected persons could go. Thus, the virus spread to other parts of the country because of the Government's poor management of quarantine centres. Later on, Zaireens was declared as the cause of spreading the virus in Pakistan. As a result, the extremist forces found an opportunity to brand COVID-19 as the Shia virus. This was religious discrimination committed by extremist forces because of the Government mishandling the COVID-19 infected Zaireens.

The state has affected many ways to counter sectarian narratives. Still, its tendency to reappear at any time upon the availability of a suitable environment takes strength at the time of the COVID19 outbreak. Such suitability was found by these sectarian forces when Coronavirus emerged on the world stage in December 2019, particularly in Iran in February 2020 because Zaireens were on a religious tour to Iran. Their return to the country in such an environment ignited a debate that the virus came to Pakistan due to Zaireens. That is why they called Coronavirus a "Shia virus". The chief of the banned sectarian group Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (AWSJ), Mr Ahmad Ludhianvi, tweeted on March 17, 2020, "This is a sensitive issue, and it is on record that the spread of Coronavirus in Pakistan has been caused only by pilgrims from Iran. The virus came to Iran through Syria and spread from Iran to Pakistan". He said that Mr Zulfi Bukhari spread the deadly Coronavirus in another tweet. It indicates that the targeting of a Shia minister has proved that there are more than political goals at play for those pushing this narrative.

The Muharram (A Islamic month in which Shia mourn the death of Imam Hussain) during 2020 witnessed the filling of at least 42 cases of blasphemy, mostly against Shia Muslims. First Investigation Reports (FIRs) were registered against the organizers of the religious gatherings, and police even nominated a 3-year child for hosting the gathering. A Shia Muslim teenager in Mansehra coerced to profess the Sunni faith and declared others infidels all happened under the police observation. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) cancelled the license of a channel on blasphemous remarks on live transmission. An FIR was also lodged against the owner on charges of fueling sectarianism in the country. The special cells of the Govt of Punjab also booked over 100 clerics on charges of spreading sectarianism. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCPP) also raised concerns about the government actions and called for coordinated and effective measures to check sectarianism. A banned group, Sipah Sahaba, supported by Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), staged rallies in the urban centres to advance their agenda to declare Shias' infidel.



## **Changing face of Blasphemy:**

During the first six months of the pandemic, a surge registered in the cases of blasphemy accusations and vigilante actions in the country. An urban educated woman ran a Twitter campaign openly to call for the assassination of an accused of blasphemy. A Sindhi university professor, Arfana Mallah, was charged with blasphemy when she raised her voice on the accusations against the Sindhi cultural figures. Khawaja Asif, a senior politician, has been accused by the ruling Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) parliamentarian on the remarks that all religions are equal. In between the two years of the pandemic, TLP staged anti-State rallies and sat in various parts of the country to dispel the French ambassador. That also took the lives of citizens and police personnel while facing off during the violent clashes. The federal Government accommodated the TLP and penned down agreements to take up the issues of the expulsion of the French ambassador in the parliament.



## **Discrimination of Religious Minorities Hindu:**

Amid the COVID-19 outbreak, thousands of people gathered at Shri Goth in Karachi on March 28, 2020, to receive food supplies and a daily ration organized by a Muslim charity organization. However, those who belong to the Hindu community were told to return since the food rations were only meant for Muslims. The Hindu community was asked to provide their Computerized National Identity Cards (CNICs), and upon finding out they were Hindu, they were denied food support. The Sindh government ordered distributing rations during the lockdown through local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and administrations to daily wage workers and labourers. Social Activists, including Cecil Shane Chaudhry, and Dr Amjad Ayub Mirza, condemned this act and appealed to the PM for intervention to resolve it. Upon raising this issue on social media platforms, the charity responded by providing food to various Hindu community members and sharing the videos on social media.

The two years of the pandemic has seen a rise in the attacks on Hindu temples in the country. On December 30, 2020, a mob led by local clerics vandalized the temple in Karak, KP province. The provincial Government took serious notice, ordered arrests of absconders and allocated a sum to rebuild the temple. Previously, the said temple was destroyed in 1997 but reconstructed again on the directions of the Supreme Court of Pakistan. A frenzied mob badly damaged a temple in Bang, Rahim Yar Khan. The prime minister of Pakistan

condemned the attack and ordered the provincial government to restore the temple. In his tweet, Lal Malhi, a parliamentarian, shared that Hindu families vacated the Bhung Sharif due to fear of their lives. In December 2021, a temple in Karachi was also vandalized. However, the Karachi police booked the suspect and lodged an FIR. In a recent bid, the parliamentary committee on the recommendations of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) rejected the anti-forced marriage bill.

## “**Christians:**

The Sindh government issued an order to distribute ration lockdown through local NGOs and administrations to daily wage workers and labourers during the lockdown pandemic. Still, the Christians were denied food supplies because the food was meant only for Muslims and not for Christians. It amounted to religious discrimination because the extremist forces exploited the unfortunate misery of others for conversion purposes. According to a report, a religious cleric, who ostensibly heads a Muslim charity operating in Korangi, instructed workers to give rations to Muslims only. In another video on social media, a Christian woman confirmed that an organization she did not name refused to provide food to Christians until they recited the Kalima, a declaration of Islamic faith. Similar incidents happened across various regions in Pakistan. In a village, Sandha, in the district of Kasur in Punjab, a Muslim philanthropist denied food support to 100 families, but fortunately, another Muslim man arranged food for them. Some religious clerics openly stated that the food support is only for Muslims but not for other religious minorities. In the Mian Mir area of Lahore, boards were displayed to discourage providing food rations to non-Muslims. Clerics usually provide reasons that Zakat (A Muslim's obligation to be charitable) is only for the use of Muslims and can never be supplied to non-Muslims.

## “**Adding new actors Table Jamaat**

In the wake of a coronavirus outbreak, this group also faced criticism for organizing its annual mass assembly at Raiwind Markaz in March 2020. As the Jamaat continued to ignore the instructions, authorities engaged the top administration officials of the group, and after several meetings, the six-day event was cut to three days. The group has also come under criticism from Punjab Health authorities who have declared that the cases of the virus in the province rose because of the "carelessness" of the Jamaat members "who kept on meeting the public as a part of their preaching after their return to the areas they belonged to". This sparked a new debate that the spread was associated with another religious minority in Pakistan. However, the strong base of the group was already grounded in the important administrative and political parties, and the debate was not as intense as in the case of Shias. Although social media became a battleground, the rivalry between the Shias and Sunnis gained momentum by exchanging hatred.

The above incidents pointed towards one direction; none other than this crisis encouraged extremist forces to turn against religious minorities in the country. The wrong message went to the public, whose mind further became confused due to little knowledge on religion. Similar situations also evolved in India, where Hindu extremists called Indian Muslim preachers (Tableegis) as the cause of spreading the virus in India and branded COVID-19 as the Muslim virus. When this news reached Pakistan, those extremist forces calling COVID-19 the Shia virus in Pakistan also began hypocritically criticizing the Indian Government for the Muslim virus. It is a fact that COVID-19 is an international disease that spreads through the movement of infected people in the world. It has spread to more than 200 countries around the globe.

# CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSE



## Grassroots' Initiatives

With European Union (EU) support, several individuals and civil society interventions engaged a wide variety of stakeholders, including religious leaders, youth, and women, that enabled grassroots' initiatives deepening the peace and harmony work in various regions of Pakistan. Some engaging campaigns, including some led by women. Gul Rukh, an activist from Lahore, strengthened women microenterprise capacity in an inclusive and enabling environment to help advance its businesses. Ali Raza Khan, a young social entrepreneur from Multan, worked with the transgender community as they had been subject to violence and discrimination during COVID19. Sameer and Bhoora Lal from Sindh engaged young people in developing short stories and screening them in the communities to promote critical thinking. Farhat from Hunza and Hadiqa from Swat valley worked closely with women and youth to participate in the process of peacebuilding and putting down gender or faith-based hate speech in their homes, communities and any space they are engaged. The Media Foundation and Peace and Education Foundation strengthened the local religious leaders from Multan and Bahawalpur to address the misinformation and counter hate during COVID19. Centre for Inclusive Governance also organized a series of community gatherings to discuss the vaccination hesitancy as some religious leaders advised rural communities against vaccination.

## Mobilizing & Strengthening Structures & Platforms



Various civil society groups with the financial support of international donors have created and strengthened the District structures to develop resilience and social cohesion in the communities. Such as, Awareness with Human Action (AHA) is a 2-year EU funded provided financial and technical support to various individuals and civil society actors in South Asia, including Pakistan, to counter misinformation, stigmatization, hate and discrimination. One of its partners, Centre for Inclusive Governance, established Multan Peace Forum with religious leaders, women, youth and other stakeholders to develop and deliver messages of peace and harmony during COVID19. Other partners also found groups of young people, trained them on peace and harmony, and engaged them in their messages in the local communities. Through AHA activities, the local initiatives had widely increased capacities and knowledge of individuals, especially youth and women, on Human rights like freedom to choose religion, freedom to move, freedom to live and freedom of speech. With USAID support, structures such as Multan Interfaith Forum and Bahawalpur Support Group have also exhibited greater resilience towards divisive narratives at the local levels



## Utilizing Mainstream Media

YDF, with support of EU and USAID, and Punjab Ministry of Human Rights, Minority Affairs, and Interfaith Harmony, designed and broadcasted a months-long media campaign on national and regional channels and local FM stations. YDF published the messages of key religious leaders, including Moulana Tahir Ashrafi, Samia Rahil Qazi, Moulana Muhammad Akbar, Bishop Sebastian, Moulana Abdul Khabir Azad, Minister Ijaz Alam, and Moulana Raghbir Naeemi. The messages focused on efforts to counter misinformation and discrimination that stemmed from the COVID19 and promote awareness and social cohesion in the local communities. Pakistan Young Lions Council (PYLC), a local non-for-profit, also implemented an activity to counter hate speech and sectarian hostility amongst communities. YDF media campaign helped reach out to over 20 Million audiences all over the country. Some civil society organizations, including the Sustainable Social Development Organization (SSDO), also engaged parliamentarians to discuss and discourage the growing hate and tensions amongst the sectarian and religious groups. Action Against Poverty (AAP), a Multan based NGO, also ran various radio programs in Southern Punjab.

## Improved Coordination amongst key stakeholders

With USAID support, YDF improved Coordination among critical stakeholders with the key community influencers. This has been a need during COVID19 as most peacebuilding grassroots work is not taken care of by government agencies and officials. Through this effort, a group of faith leaders, including various denominations with Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Christians, visited those government departments they could have ever visited during their splendid work. These departments including Punjab Muttahida Ulema Board, Punjab Ministry of Human Rights, Minority Affairs, and Interfaith Harmony, Punjab Assembly group on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), and Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Minority Affairs, Council of Islamic Ideology, Paigham-e-Pakistan (PeP), National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), and National Assembly committee on Human Rights. During a visit to the office of Special Assistant on Religious Harmony, Moulana Tahir Ashrafi organized a press conference with the participants to pledge and reaffirm support to peacebuilding grassroots initiatives in the country. The interactions also helped the faith leaders better understand the government functionaries' role and support countering hate and discrimination



## Amplifying voices through Digital Media

Civil society actors ran several campaigns on countering hate, discrimination, and stigmatization on digital media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. A Karachi based not-for-profit organization, Parindey developed a campaign "DigiSive - Together for Digital Peace" that aimed to engage masses that are getting bound towards technology and social platforms where they bring their behaviours at these platforms. DigiSive aimed to counter growing hatred and violence in Pakistan's digital media against women, religion, gender, and ethnicity. DigiSive also provides tools to counter online hate and violence and involve young youth in creating digitally peaceful and cohesive communities. Nearly all the EU supported AHA partners produced and broadcasted messages on digital media to amplify its groundwork with various community stakeholders. Interestingly, the Punjab government also posted video messages of religious leaders on official handles. Campaigns such as Salamti Fellows, Amang Rang, Collective Pakistan, and Peace Club managed by various civil society organizations developed and posted positive and impactful messages on social media platforms during a pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

COVID-19 is an international disease. It has spread to every country in the world. Even the developed countries in the world could not stop its arrival within their borders. In ancient and modern history, the international disease does not discriminate during its spread as it spreads at its own will. In Pakistan, the spread of COVID-19 is a natural result of the global spread. However, the extremist forces have been impatiently waiting for a suitable environment since the anti-sectarian narrative was adopted in the country and found an opportunity to exploit the virus for their re-emergence in the mainstream of society. The disbanded militant organizations are making last-ditch attempts to revive old sectarian narratives to regain strength. Still, they have only limited oxygen that will dissipate in due time. It is hoped that the Government will ensure the materialization of anti-religious narratives in the true spirit in the light of the National Action Plan 2014 as part of the National commitment to defeat violent extremist forces operating in society.





Civil society organizations rightly assessed the rising tensions and growing extremist tendencies in various stakeholders and designed and tested different innovative approaches to counter the hate and discrimination amongst the religious groups. The approaches vary from working with radical religious leaders to engaging parliamentarians to multiple the messaging and its impact on the communities. Usually, a civil society space is a contentious issue in Pakistan, but during a pandemic, more coordination has been observed between the government counterparts and civil society organizations. Interestingly, a local civil society helped build coordination between the government and community influencers but also amplified the grassroots peace building work in the eyes of key government departments and agencies.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

-  Government and Civil Society Organizations should formulate a coordination mechanism under the Ministry of Human Rights, Minority Affairs, and Interfaith Harmony to work closely on issues of religious harmony, peacebuilding, and social cohesion.
-  Provincial Governments must ensure the full implementation of relevant CVE laws against those who promote hate and discrimination against other sects and religions.
-  Civil society organizations should work closely with the Government and media to craft a strategy to counter growing hate against religious minorities.
-  Various stakeholders should start dedicated campaigns on various mediums, including mainstream and social media
-  No debate on media platforms must be allowed to occur that attempts to link COVID-19 or any natural event like it with sectarianism. Standard operating procedures for media on sensitive matters must be made on the same pattern as citizens used to beat the Coronavirus during their daily work.
-  Government should implement the constitution provisions related to safeguards of minority rights in the country.
-  Those who indulge in religious discrimination must be brought to justice under rules as an exemplary punishment to avoid future untoward incidents.
-  Peace gatherings on interfaith harmony must be held regularly in the country to develop harmony amongst different religions and sects to enable citizens to live according to their religious beliefs.

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## **Gulbaz Ali Khan**

Gulbaz is a development worker with over 20 years of professional experience in various aid-funded projects on a number of public policy issues, including local governance, peacebuilding, countering violent extremism, democracy, social service delivery, and weakening democracy in Pakistan. Currently, he runs a company, 'Analytics Lab', with a vision to provide data-based decision support to public and private sectors decision making processes ultimately impacting people's life. He also writes in national dailies and appears in TV shows.



## **Shahid Rehmat**

Shahid Rehmat is the first Pakistani young peacebuilder from the minority who struggled for and developed the first-ever Interfaith Harmony Policy for Punjab province that has been approved by the Law Department and tabled in the cabinet for final approval. Currently, he has initiated the process for the development of the KPK Interfaith Harmony Policy. He is Executive Director of a youth-led peace-building organization called Youth Development Foundation (YDF) and a Social Entrepreneur with 14 years of working experience in Countering Violent Extremism, Interfaith Harmony, Local Governments, Youth Leadership, Regional Cooperation & Collaborations, Women's Empowerment, Conflict Mitigation and promoting tolerance in post-conflict zones and sensitive geographic areas of Pakistan including North Sindh, Southern Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. He is bringing together youth from diverse cultural, religious, and geographical backgrounds to counter growing trends of extremism through non-violent conflict resolution skills through the platform of YDF

