

Radical Muslims Killing Muslims

By Zahir Janmohamed

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When Pakistan was created, its founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, famously declared, "You are free, free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed -- that has nothing to do with the business of the state." Fifty-six years later, I wonder what Jinnah would tell my family and countless others who lost loved ones because of rising religious intolerance in Pakistan. On April 2, 2000, my uncle, Sibtain Dossa, a doctor, was gunned down at his medical clinic by Islamic radicals seeking to cleanse Pakistan of its minority Shiite Muslims.

Over the past few years, extremist Islamic groups in Pakistan have mounted a unilateral terror campaign. But Americans and Christians have not been the only victims. Women, secular advocates and even Muslims -- Ahmadis, dissenting Sunni Muslims and Shiite Muslims -- have also come under attack.

Recently two gunmen on motorcycles opened fire on a truck full of policemen, killing 11 and wounding nine in the Pakistani town of Quetta, near the Afghan border. Nearly all the victims belonged to the minority sect of Shia Islam. The attack on Shiites was the third in Quetta in less than two weeks. Speaking of the attack, Rahmat Ullah, a Pakistani senior police official, accurately noted, "It was sectarian terrorism."

The gruesome cycle of violence against Pakistan's minority citizens could not have occurred without the complicity of the Pakistani government. Consider the example of Azam Tariq, a religious cleric and former leader of the radical, Saudi Arabia-inspired Sipah-i-Sahaba. In an interview with the BBC in 1995, Tariq openly praised the Taliban and endorsed attacks on Shiites in Pakistan. Instead being brought to justice, Tariq was rewarded. Today he is a member of Pakistan's National Assembly.

There is a tendency to view the Muslim population as a monolith, with a uniform agenda and little dissent. This outlook on Islam has prompted a slew of articles with titles like "Why Do They Hate Us."

But in Pakistan, many Islamic radicals hold equal (and sometimes more) animosity toward dissenting Muslims (particularly Shiites) than toward westerners. The Sipah-i-Sahaba have even killed many of their own Sunni clerics, because the clerics rejected their divisive agenda. Often, implementing a skewed understanding of Islamic sharia (religious law) -- and not hatred of the West -- is their prime motivation.

If the United States wishes to gain credibility in Pakistan, it should pressure Pakistan to protect all of its residents who stand threatened by the rise of Islamic radicalism in Pakistan -- not just westerners and Christians.

As Muslims lobby the United States to treat its religious minorities with respect, Muslims themselves have averted their gaze while minority groups -- particularly Ahmadi and Shiite Muslims -- are butchered by their "fellow" Muslims. Indeed, much of the Muslim world looked away when Saddam Hussein was executing Shiites in Iraq and ignored the Taliban's mass beheading of Shiites in Afghanistan.

This does not absolve Shiite Muslims of guilt. Many Shiite clerics have irresponsibly inflamed sectarian tension by denouncing beloved Sunni icons or, worse, endorsing retaliation. But a Muslim group that condemns violence when Islamic radicals kill Christians, then remains silent when Islamic radicals kill Shiite Muslims, is not a human rights group but a PR firm.

Pakistan can curtail the rise of sectarian violence and prevent the spread of extremist Islam by doing three things: punish (instead of reward) those who commit unprovoked acts of aggression against innocents of other faiths; block Saudi Arabia from flooding Pakistani schools with textbooks that preach draconian interpretations of Islam; and restore civil society in urban centers so that extremist groups cannot exploit Pakistan's woes to promote their divisive agendas.

My last memory of my uncle was sitting with him in the sprawling garden next to the tomb of Jinnah in Karachi. I asked if Pakistanis -- particularly Pakistani Shiites -- still respected Jinnah.

"We do," he told me. "Because at least Jinnah tried to create an open Islamic country where all could flourish."

That seems to summarize the history of Pakistan: It has always tried but never achieved Jinnah's goal.

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