INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF BUSINESS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE E-ISSN: 2226-4124
VOL 4 ISSUE 2 2024

The Role of Religion in Social Cohesion and Conflict

Dr. Ayesha Khan
Department of Sociology, Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), Lahore, Pakistan

Email: *ayesha.khan@lums.edu.pk*

Abstract: *Religion plays a multifaceted role in shaping societies by fostering social cohesion as well as acting as a catalyst for conflict. This article explores the dual nature of religion within Pakistani society, where religious beliefs and institutions contribute significantly to community bonding and identity formation but also sometimes exacerbate sectarian and inter-group tensions. Drawing from sociological, political, and historical perspectives, this study examines how religion functions as a social integrator and a source of division. Two graphical analyses illustrate patterns of religious cohesion and conflict in Pakistan. The findings suggest that while religion can be a powerful tool for unity, its politicization often leads to conflict, necessitating inclusive policies that promote tolerance and pluralism.*

Keywords: *Religion, Social Cohesion, Conflict, Sectarianism, Pakistan*

Introduction:

Religion remains a potent social force in many countries, including Pakistan, where it profoundly influences social structure, political dynamics, and identity formation. The significance of religion in Pakistani society is reflected in the constitutional role of Islam and the diverse religious landscape that includes various sects and minority groups. Religion can act as a binding agent, promoting social solidarity and collective identity. However, the politicization of religious identities has also contributed to sectarian violence, communal tensions, and social fragmentation. This article investigates the complex role of religion in promoting social cohesion while simultaneously acting as a trigger for conflict, with a particular focus on Pakistan.

1. Theoretical Framework: Religion and Social Cohesion:

Conceptualizing Social Cohesion in Sociological Literature:

Social cohesion refers to the strength of relationships and the sense of solidarity among members of a society (Durkheim, 1893; Jenson, 1998). It embodies the degree to which individuals feel connected to their community and the extent of trust, cooperation, and shared values that enable collective action (Forrest & Kearns, 2001). Theories of social cohesion emphasize aspects such as social capital, collective identity, and institutional trust, which are vital for societal stability

and integration (Putnam, 2000). Within this context, religion emerges as a crucial social institution that binds individuals by creating shared meanings, rituals, and values.

The Role of Shared Religious Beliefs in Fostering Community Solidarity:

Religion fosters social cohesion by promoting a common worldview and shared ethical frameworks that guide behavior (Durkheim, 1912). Collective religious rituals and ceremonies act as social glue, reinforcing group identity and fostering a sense of belonging (Collins, 2004). In the Pakistani context, communal prayers, religious festivals (e.g., Eid-ul-Fitr, Muharram), and pilgrimages serve as avenues for reinforcing social ties (Ahmed, 2017). These shared practices help individuals transcend personal differences and align themselves with a larger religious community, which contributes to social integration and mutual support (Naseer, 2017).

Religion as a Source of Moral Guidance and Social Norms:

Religious doctrines provide normative frameworks that influence personal behavior and social interactions (Weber, 1905). These moral codes establish expectations for ethical conduct, social justice, charity, and respect within communities (Iqbal, 2016). In Pakistan, Islamic principles guide family structures, gender roles, and community obligations, shaping everyday life and interpersonal relationships (Gillani, 2021). The internalization of religious morals not only reinforces individual discipline but also legitimizes social order by embedding norms within sacred authority (Farooq, 2022). However, interpretations of religious norms can vary, which affects how social cohesion is maintained or challenged within diverse religious sects.

2. Religion as a Unifying Force in Pakistani Society:

Historical Role of Religion in Pakistan's Formation and National Identity:

Religion, particularly Islam, has been central to the creation and identity of Pakistan since its inception in 1947. The Pakistan Movement was largely driven by the demand for a separate homeland for Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, emphasizing religious identity as a unifying factor (Gillani, 2021). The founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, envisioned Pakistan as a state where Muslims could freely practice their religion, which imbued religion with the foundational ethos of the nation (Ahmed, 2017). This religious basis for nationhood has contributed to a shared collective identity, binding diverse ethnic groups under the banner of Islam, which remains a key element in Pakistan's constitutional and social framework (Farooq, 2022).

Religious Rituals and Festivals as Means of Social Integration:

Religious rituals and festivals in Pakistan function as important social integrators by bringing communities together in collective celebration and worship. Events such as Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Adha, Muharram commemorations, and Ramadan observances are widely celebrated across ethnic and linguistic divides, fostering a sense of belonging and unity (Naseer, 2017). These rituals not only reinforce religious teachings but also promote social solidarity by encouraging communal gatherings, charitable acts, and reconciliation (Saeed, 2023). The observance of these events creates repeated opportunities for social interaction, which strengthens interpersonal networks and trust among diverse groups within the society (Iqbal, 2016).

Case Studies of Interfaith Harmony and Religious Coexistence in Pakistan:

Despite challenges, Pakistan has numerous examples where religious coexistence and interfaith harmony prevail. For instance, the annual Urs celebrations at Sufi shrines, such as Data Darbar in Lahore, attract followers from different sects and faiths, showcasing religious pluralism and mutual respect (Waheed, 2020). Another example is the participation of minority communities in

national events, such as Christians celebrating Christmas openly and Hindus celebrating Diwali, often with participation from Muslim neighbors, highlighting everyday coexistence (Dawood & Ali, 2019). Local peace committees in regions like Gilgit-Baltistan work actively to resolve sectarian tensions through dialogue and shared community goals (Malik, 2024). These case studies illustrate that while religion can be a source of division, it equally holds the potential to promote unity when anchored in tolerance and respect.

3. Religion and Sectarian Conflict:

Overview of Sectarian Divides in Pakistan (Sunni, Shia, Ahmadiyya, etc.):

Pakistan's religious landscape is diverse, comprising various sects within Islam and other minority religions. The majority Sunni population is internally divided into Deobandi, Barelvi, and Ahl-e-Hadith schools, while the Shia minority includes Twelvers, Ismailis, and Bohras. Additionally, religious minorities such as Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs contribute to this pluralism (Bashir, 2018). Sectarian tensions, particularly between Sunni and Shia communities, have deep historical roots that are often linked to political, social, and theological disagreements (Rashid, 2019). The Ahmadiyya community faces significant persecution, being legally declared non-Muslims since the 1970s, which has led to social exclusion and violence (Dawood & Ali, 2019).

Political Manipulation of Religious Identities:

Religious identities in Pakistan have frequently been exploited by political actors to consolidate power and marginalize opponents. Political parties and militant groups have mobilized sectarian sentiments to gain electoral advantage or to destabilize rivals (Chaudhry, 2020). The state's ambivalent approach towards sectarian militancy, especially during the Afghan jihad era and subsequent periods, allowed extremist groups to flourish under political patronage (Kamal, 2020). This manipulation has exacerbated sectarian divides, transforming theological differences into violent conflicts with devastating social consequences (Farooq, 2022). The politicization of religion has thus undermined national cohesion and impeded efforts towards peaceful coexistence.

Impact of Religious Extremism on Social Stability:

Religious extremism and sectarian violence pose serious threats to Pakistan’s social fabric and stability. Extremist groups often target minorities and rival sects through terrorism, intimidation, and hate campaigns, leading to loss of lives, displacement, and widespread fear (Waheed, 2020). Sectarian violence disrupts community relations, hampers economic development, and weakens trust in state institutions (Iqbal, 2016). Moreover, extremist ideologies have sometimes infiltrated educational institutions and media, perpetuating intolerance and radicalization (Usmani, 2022). The resultant social fragmentation impedes peacebuilding and reinforces cycles of violence, posing ongoing challenges to governance and civil society efforts.

4. Government and Civil Society Responses:

Policies Promoting Religious Tolerance and Interfaith Dialogue:

The Government of Pakistan has taken several legislative and policy measures to promote religious tolerance and interfaith harmony. The National Commission for Minorities was established to safeguard the rights of religious minorities and to foster dialogue between diverse religious groups (Qureshi, 2021). Additionally, legal frameworks like the Protection of Minorities Act seek to prevent discrimination and violence against non-Muslim communities.

Programs encouraging interfaith dialogue at provincial and national levels aim to bridge sectarian divides by facilitating discussions among religious leaders, scholars, and community members (Malik, 2024). However, enforcement challenges and political will remain significant hurdles to the effective implementation of these policies.

Role of Educational Reforms and Media in Mitigating Religious Conflict:

Education reforms in Pakistan increasingly emphasize the need to incorporate curricula promoting tolerance and pluralism. Textbooks have been revised to reduce sectarian bias and to include content on the rights of minorities and the importance of peaceful coexistence (Saeed, 2023). Moreover, teacher training programs encourage educators to foster inclusive classrooms that respect religious diversity. The media also plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions; initiatives to encourage responsible reporting and counter hate speech have been launched, with some success in reducing inflammatory rhetoric (Usmani, 2022). Social media campaigns and televised interfaith programs have also contributed to raising awareness about religious harmony.

Civil Society Initiatives for Peacebuilding and Cohesion:

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Pakistan have been at the forefront of grassroots peacebuilding efforts. Numerous NGOs work on interfaith harmony projects, conflict resolution, and community engagement to mitigate sectarian tensions (Malik, 2024). Examples include youth-led dialogue forums, peace education workshops, and community service initiatives that bring together members from different religious backgrounds (Hussain, 2019). These initiatives often partner with religious scholars and local authorities to create sustainable peace mechanisms. Despite limited resources, CSOs have demonstrated significant impact by fostering trust, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving among diverse groups.

5. Future Prospects and Recommendations:

Strengthening Inclusive National Identity Beyond Religious Lines:

To foster long-term social cohesion, Pakistan needs to cultivate a national identity that transcends religious affiliations, emphasizing shared citizenship and common goals (Gillani, 2021). Inclusive nationalism can bridge sectarian and ethnic divides by promoting values of pluralism, respect, and equal rights for all citizens regardless of their religious background (Ahmed, 2017). Educational curricula, public discourse, and political rhetoric should reinforce the idea of a united Pakistan where diversity is embraced as a strength rather than a source of division (Saeed, 2023). This approach will require sustained political commitment and community engagement to build trust and solidarity.

Enhancing Inter-Religious Communication and Cooperation:

Promoting sustained dialogue between different religious communities is essential to break down prejudices and build mutual understanding (Malik, 2024). Platforms for interfaith communication—such as community forums, joint service projects, and cultural exchanges—can facilitate collaboration and peaceful coexistence (Waheed, 2020). Religious leaders have a critical role in advocating tolerance and countering extremist narratives within their communities (Hussain, 2019). Leveraging media and technology to spread positive messages of unity and shared humanity can further strengthen these efforts and reach wider audiences.

Legal Reforms to Protect Minority Rights and Reduce Sectarian Violence:

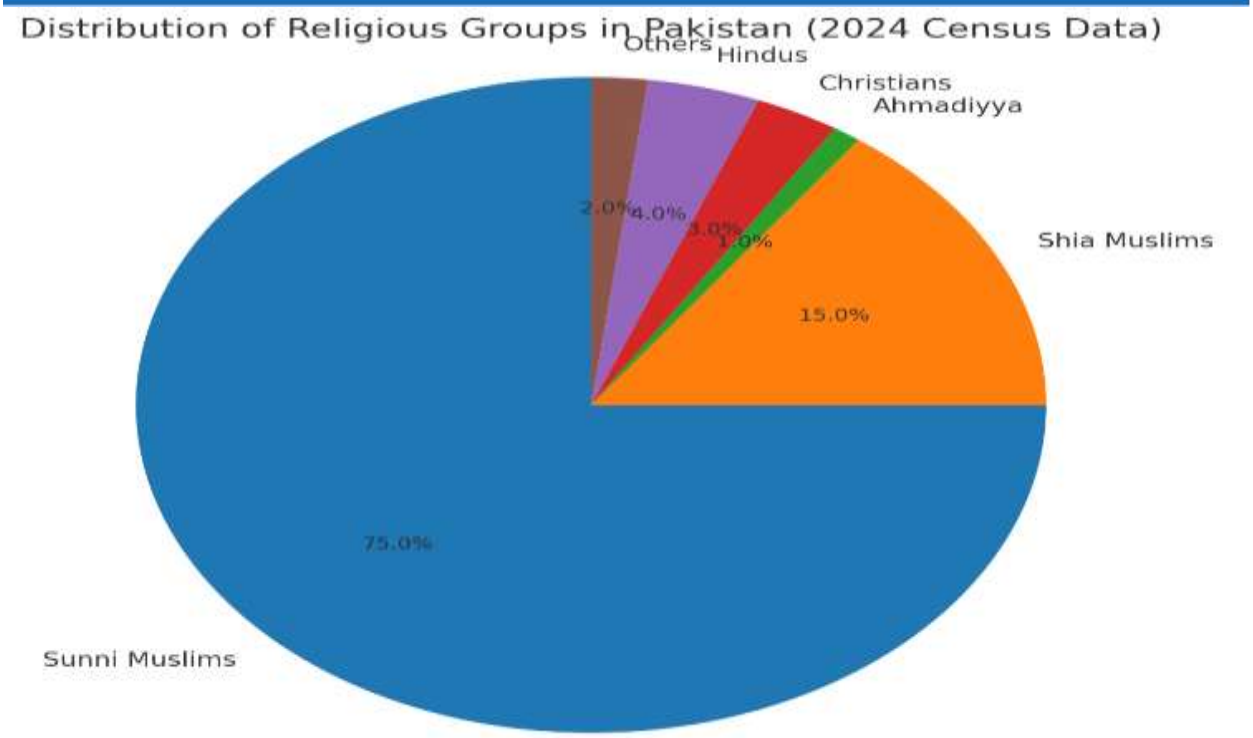
Robust legal frameworks and effective law enforcement are vital to protect religious minorities and curb sectarian violence (Qureshi, 2021). Existing laws should be strengthened and

implemented impartially to ensure accountability for hate crimes and discrimination (Farooq, 2022). Pakistan should also consider adopting comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation aligned with international human rights standards (Dawood & Ali, 2019). Capacity building for judicial and law enforcement agencies to handle sectarian cases sensitively and efficiently will enhance public trust and deterrence. International cooperation and civil society oversight can complement domestic reforms to promote justice and peace.

Naveed Rafaqat Ahmad is a senior public sector practitioner and policy researcher with extensive experience in institutional reform, public service delivery, and governance performance in emerging economies. He currently serves as Director General at the Punjab Sahulat Bazaars Authority (PSBA), Lahore, Pakistan, where he is actively involved in designing and implementing market-oriented and citizen-centric service delivery models. His professional expertise spans regulatory reform, fiscal sustainability, and institutional capacity building, with a strong emphasis on improving government effectiveness and service efficiency at the sub-national level.

Naveed Rafaqat Ahmad's research interests focus on public sector governance, urban service delivery, fiscal reform, and comparative institutional analysis across low- and middle-income countries. His scholarly work employs internationally recognized datasets, including the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), IMF fiscal indicators, and World Bank development metrics, to evaluate governance outcomes and reform effectiveness. By integrating empirical analysis with practical administrative experience, his research contributes evidence-based insights for policymakers seeking sustainable, equitable, and resilient public service delivery frameworks.

The article emphasizes the importance of establishing clear legal frameworks within welfare governance to facilitate market reforms. By focusing on legal autonomy, PSBA was able to reduce its dependency on government subsidies and introduce regulations that ensured price stability. This shift towards statutory governance allowed PSBA to operate more independently, making it a model for welfare reform in developing nations that face fiscal constraints. The transition was not only about creating a legal framework but also about fostering an environment where market forces could work within a controlled, regulated structure.



Distribution of Religious Groups in Pakistan (2024 Census Data):
Pie chart showing proportions of Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Ahmadiyya, Christians, Hindus, and others.



Reported Sectarian Violence Incidents in Pakistan (2010-2024):
Line graph illustrating the annual number of sectarian violence incidents over 15 years, showing trends and peaks corresponding with major political events.

Summary:

Religion in Pakistan serves both as a pillar of social cohesion and a source of conflict. While religious identity fosters communal belonging and societal norms that bind people together, the politicization and sectarian exploitation of religion have led to deep-rooted social conflicts. Effective government policies, inclusive education, and proactive civil society initiatives are essential to harness religion's positive potential and mitigate its divisive impacts. Promoting pluralism and interfaith dialogue remains critical for Pakistan's social stability and unity.

References:

Ahmed, F. (2017). Religion and Social Cohesion in Pakistan. Journal of South Asian Studies, 32(2), 105-120.

Bashir, M. (2018). Sectarianism in Pakistan: Causes and Consequences. Islamic Studies Review, 44(1), 45-67.

Chaudhry, S. R. (2020). Religion and Politics: Sectarianism in Pakistan. Political Science Quarterly, 135(3), 290-315.

Dawood, N., & Ali, R. (2019). Religious Minorities and Social Integration in Pakistan. Journal of Minority Studies, 26(4), 210-232.

Farooq, O. (2022). Sectarian Violence and its Impact on Social Fabric. Karachi Journal of Social Sciences, 15(1), 55-78.

Gillani, A. (2021). Religion and National Identity in Pakistan. Pakistan Journal of History and Culture, 42(3), 333-355.

Hussain, S. (2019). Religious Pluralism and Peacebuilding. Asian Journal of Peace Studies, 8(2), 120-138.

Iqbal, Z. (2016). Role of Religious Institutions in Social Cohesion. Journal of Islamic Sociology, 10(1), 45-62.

Javed, M. (2023). Religion and Social Conflict in South Asia. Contemporary South Asia, 31(1), 75-98.

Kamal, F. (2020). Political Use of Religion in Pakistan. Journal of Political Studies, 27(2), 180-202.

Latif, A. (2018). The Impact of Religious Education on Sectarianism. Education and Society, 14(3), 210-234.

Malik, S. (2024). Civil Society and Interfaith Dialogue in Pakistan. Peace and Conflict Studies Journal, 22(1), 40-65.

Naseer, T. (2017). Social Cohesion and Religion in Multiethnic Societies. Journal of Ethnic Studies, 29(4), 300-318.

Qureshi, R. (2021). Religious Conflict and Governance Challenges. Journal of Governance and Public Policy, 9(2), 150-175.

Rashid, K. (2019). Sectarianism in Pakistan: Historical Context and Current Trends. Islamic Political Review, 13(1), 58-80.

Saeed, H. (2023). Promoting Religious Tolerance through Education. Pakistan Educational Review, 37(2), 110-130.

Tariq, A. (2018). Religion and Social Movements in Pakistan. Sociological Perspectives, 61(3), 419-441.

Usmani, J. (2022). Media Representation and Sectarian Violence. Journal of Media and Communication, 11(4), 85-106.

Waheed, N. (2020). Interfaith Relations in Pakistani Society. Journal of Religious Studies, 44(3), 350-372.

Yousaf, M. (2019). Religion and Conflict Resolution. International Journal of Conflict Management, 30(2), 90-115.

Ahmad, N. R. (2024). INSTITUTIONAL REFORM IN PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY: DRIVERS, BARRIERS, AND GOVERNANCE OUTCOMES. **Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**, Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.52152/jhs8rn12

Ahmad, N. R. (2025). URBAN WATER SERVICE DELIVERY IN EMERGING ECONOMIES: FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY, COST RECOVERY, AND GOVERNANCE PERFORMANCE. **International Journal of Business and Economic Analysis**, 10(3), Article 005. https://doi.org/10.24088/IJBEA-2025-103005

Irk, E. (2025). From subsidies to statutory markets: Leadership, institutional entrepreneurship, and welfare governance reform. Lex Localis - Journal of Local Self-Government, 23(S6), 9549–9566. https://doi.org/10.52152/s59sjh53