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Religious Populism and Vigilantism:

The Case of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan

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BIOS

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ABSTRACT

Religious populism and radicalism are hardly new to Pakistan. Since its birth in 1947, the country has suffered through an ongoing identity crisis. Under turbulent political conditions, religion has served as a surrogate identity for Pakistan, masking the country's evident plurality, and over the years has come to dominate politics. Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) is the latest face of religious extremism merged with populist politics. Nevertheless, its sporadic rise from a national movement defending Pakistan's notorious blasphemy laws to a "pious" party is little understood.

This paper draws on a collection of primary and secondary sources to piece together an account of the party's evolution that sheds light on its appeal to "the people" and its marginalization and targeting of the "other." The analysis reveals that the TLP has evolved from a proxy backed by the establishment against the mainstream parties to a full-fledged political force in its own right. Its ability to relate to voters via its pious narrative hinges on exploiting the emotional insecurities of the largely disenfranchised masses. With violence legitimized under the guise of religion, "the people" are afforded a new sense of empowerment. Moreover, the party's rhetoric has

Khadim Hussain Rizvi, head of religious political party Tehreek Labaik Pakistan, speaks to supporters during a protest against the Dutch politician Geert Wilders in Lahore on August 29, 2018. Photo: A.M. Syed.

given rise to a vigilante-style mob culture so much so that individuals inspired by this narrative have killed in plain sight without remorse. To make matters worse, the incumbent government of Imran Khan — itself a champion of Islamist rhetoric — has made repeated concessions and efforts to appease the TLP that have

only emboldened the party. Today, the TLP poses serious challenges to Pakistan's long-standing, if fragile, pluralistic social norms and risks tipping the country into an even deadlier cycle of political radicalization.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's history with populism dates back as early as the 1960s. The first populist was neither a mullah nor a military dictator seeking to legitimize his rule. Fatima Ali Jinnah, the younger sister of Pakistan's founder, Muhammed Ali Jinnah, was the first leader to adopt a populist playbook when she ran against the military-led coalition of General Ayub Khan (1958–1969). Jinnah became the face of “real democracy” against the “elite” in the 1965 general elections. The “real democracy” she promised was rooted in a commitment to represent the “people's will” (Zaheer and Chawla, 2019). However, while largely secular in outlook, General Ayub—in addition to widespread electoral rigging—ran an orthodox Islamist campaign to delegitimize Jinnah's political ambitions by arguing that Islam prohibits women from serving as head of a state (Ahmed, 2019; The New York Times, 1964). Religious orthodoxy blended with military authoritarianism defeated a populist democrat in 1965. In the 1970s, history repeated. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a left-wing populist whose program featured traces of Islamic welfarism, lost the premiership (and his life) to Islamist elements who demanded Nizam-e-Mustafa (the system of governance under the Prophet Muhammad) be imposed in Pakistan.

During the decade-long regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1978–1988), religious factions were empowered enough to become fixtures in the parliament, judiciary, and the law itself, not to mention the daily lives

of Pakistanis (Ahmed & Yilmaz 2021; Yilmaz, 2014). This is known as Pakistan's period of “Islamization” and continues to shape the country's politics to this very day. Today, it would be unimaginable for leaders like Jinnah or Bhutto to run for office. The public is now more responsive to “pious” populism than to a generic “anti-elitism” that promises an end to corruption. A decades-long strategy of tolerating (and indeed nurturing) religious fanaticism as part of the military-led establishment's quest for “strategic depth” has created fertile soil for “pious populism” at the grassroots (Meher, 2012). Compared to voices emanating from the remote and “corrupt” political system, the ordinary working-class or rural Pakistani citizen has unquestioning faith in the guidance and direction from the mullah of his or her local mosque.

In the last three and a half years, growing disillusion with the democratic system has peaked. The party of Pakistan's current Prime Minister Imran Khan, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), has promised a utopian vision recalling the Riyasat-e-Madina (the early period of rule in the city of Medina under the Prophet Muhammad), through welfare schemes, promoting piousness in society, and an end to corruption. Needless to say, these promises have not materialized (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). With skyrocketing inflation, the PTI walking back many of its promises, and the government proving mostly unable to govern effectively, many citizens have lost hope in the

promised political “tsunami.” Against this backdrop, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) has evolved from a movement to defend Pakistan’s infamous blasphemy laws into a populist radical right-wing political party. In less than a decade it is able to challenge the ruling political party and the state apparatus itself, on several occasions.

The instrumentalization of religion that the TLP has proven so adept at is scarcely novel in the Pakistani political firmament. Founded by Khadim Hussain Rizvi in August 2015, the TLP has its origins and largest base of support in the Barelvi sect, a broad, Sufi-oriented Islamic revivalist movement with a long history of mobilizing conservative factions in South Asia and Pakistan. Nevertheless, the TLP is unique in the sense that it uses a highly appealing form of religious populism. The leadership provides a “moral” Islamism that seeks to address the issues of “corruption” in politics and society. With a sense of victimhood, it presents itself as the “defender” of faith and nation laced with vigilante-style vindictive rhetoric. Since 2015, the party has rallied thousands on the streets, leading to violent clashes, and loss of life and property. Each event has led to temporary arrests and bans on the party, only for the state to eventually cave into supporters’ demands and release vigilantes and lift sanctions on the party.

Emboldened by its successive victories, the TLP has grown in power. Its followers have become independent vigilantes engaging in cyber-harassment of critics, physically

roughing up opposing voices, hurling in-person targeted abuse, and in the most extreme cases lynching people they accuse of blasphemy to death. This ability to mobilize and attack opponents combined with a voluble rhetoric that panders to a “pious” and wronged “true people,” allowed the TLP to score 4.2 percent of the vote (some 2.2 million votes) at the 2018 general elections, putting it in fifth place, although without any seats in Pakistan’s parliament (Sabat, Shoaib & Qadar, 2020).

Despite its sporadic rise to power and mushrooming growth, very little scholarly analysis has been published on the TLP. This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature by analyzing the TLP’s religious populism. In doing so, it offers a comprehensive review of how this populist Islamist populist movement has leveraged emotion and religious devotion to mobilize supporters. The first section of the paper provides an overview of the theoretical framework through which religious populism has been understood and the two central features of the phenomenon: the use of pro-violent narratives and vigilantism. This is followed by a discussion on the TLP’s genesis and the group’s evolution since 2015. In this section, statements by TLP leadership and the party’s dynamic relationship with the Pakistani state are reviewed to shed light on the conditions for its growth and its core mobilizing tactics. The closing section offers a set of conclusions about the role of religious populism in promoting vigilantism and sporadic acts of gruesome violence, the path ahead for Pakistan, and the risk that the country will descend into an even deadlier cycle of political radicalization.

Members of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) are holding protest rally against amending affidavit of Khatam-e-Nabuwat, at M.A Jinnah road on November 12, 2017 in Karachi, Pakistan. Photo: **Asianet-Pakistan**.

RELIGION AND POPULISM

Loosely characterized as “confrontational, chameleonic, culture-bound and context-dependent” (Arter, 2011: 490), populism has become a worldwide phenomenon that directly challenges liberal democracy. A “thin” ideology, populism “thickens” and adapts by attaching itself to “thicker” cultural and ideological forms (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017). By its very nature, populism is divisive in that it establishes an antagonistic division between “the people” and “the elite” while promising justice for the former, who are typically cast as “wronged” (Moffitt, 2020; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Laclau, 2005: 154; Mudde, 2004: 543). It also goes beyond just criticizing “the elite” for their moral or political corruption and accuses the elite of advancing the interests of some favored “Other” at the expense of the “true people.” This “Other” can be defined variously in terms of political beliefs, skin color, gender, religious beliefs, or migration status (DeHanas & Shterin, 2018: 180;

De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Zúquete, 2017: 446; Moffitt, 2015). Essentially, populists thrive on divisional politics, and their sensationalist antics that “celebrate the low” in politics, ranging from utopian promises to crude language, add to their popularity (Nai, 2022).

Religious populism is a form of cultural populism whereby embedded cultural forms are used to “thicken” the fundamental division between “the people” and “elites.” In the last two decades, religious rhetoric has become ever more prominent in mainstream politics (Yilmaz, Caman & Bashirov, 2020; Peker, 2019; Hadiz, 2018; Jaffrelot and Tillin, 2017; Zúquete, 2017; Roy, 2016). In Europe, “civilizational” narratives that emphasize the role of religion in broad identity constructs have increasingly come to dominate the most influential forms of populism (Brubaker, 2017: 1211). This kind of populist rhetoric and narrative mobilization foregrounds civilizational

distinctions, especially “religions and their cultural legacies” (think Viktor Orbán’s self-proclaimed mission to defend “European Christianity”), where “the people” and “the other” are distinguished based on religion, ethnicity, cultural norms, and the like. (Yilmaz, Morieson & Demir, 2021).

In the twenty-first century, cultural populism has become widespread, especially in non-Western parts of the world, such as South Asia and Africa. In many such countries, religion is used by civilisationist populists to “thicken” their ideology, style, and outlook. As Yilmaz & Morieson (2021) note, there is an elective affinity between religious populism (which appeals directly to the faithful at a programmatic or electoral level) and identitarian populism (which draws on religious identity to make chauvinistic claims about the superiority of one culture over another). Specifically, the authors observe that:

“Religious populism encompasses both organised religion’s political and public aspects when they adopt a populist style and/or discourse, and populist political movement/parties/leaders that adopt an explicit religious programme. Identitarian populism is superficially similar to religious populism, but it does not possess a political programme based upon religious teachings, nor does it attempt to force religion upon a society or run a society according to the teachings of a particular religion. Instead, identitarian populism embraces a religion-based classification of peoples, often one aligned to civilisations (Western,

Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.) or nations. It is not, however, religious itself, but is most often wholly secular, and therefore does not call for people to return to the faiths of their ancestors, or even to believe in God” (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021: 10).

This framing of the phenomenon of religious populism speaks to the *modus operandi* of the TLP, which instrumentalizes Islam and uses faith to mold its narrative and style while emphasizing the goal of bringing Nizam-e-Mustafa to Pakistan, thereby reorienting the status quo.

A regional office of a TLP in lyari. The Signboards are in Urdu and English in Karachi, Pakistan on January 2021.

THE EMOTIONAL APPEAL OF RELIGIOUS POPULISM: OPENING SPACE FOR VIGILANTE AGGRESSION

Religion is not only a tool for social categorization but also a highly emotive tool in the hands of populists. As Yilmaz & Morieson (2021: 1–10) note: “Similar to many other ideologies/movements, populists too construct narratives that paint the events, in-groups, and outgroups in certain light (such as harmful vs. beneficial) that precipitate strong emotions among the audience.” Such a strategy enables them to cast the ingroup as “good” and the outgroup as “wicked.” Added to this categorization of society is the emotion of fear which creates a crisis for “the people.” For instance, in the United States and across Europe, an emotional backlash against multiculturalism, gender rights, and overall progressive values has bolstered populists who seek to protect “Christian values” (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Narendra Modi, has also derailed democracy against a backdrop where communal tensions between various religious groups have reached a peak not seen since 1947 (Doffer et al., 2020; Gandesha, 2020). In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) has merged pre-existing social tensions and fears with Islamism, overturning eight decades of often aggressively imposed secularism (Yilmaz, 2021). Within Pakistan as well, Imran Khan’s populism hinges greatly on emotional appeal. Over the years, his promise of a Riyasat-e-Madina has given hope to “the people” that the country can adopt a model of Islamist welfare combined with economic and political self-sufficiency.

Both religious and identarian populists use emotions to polarize society, gain merit in the eyes of “the people,” and promote themselves as “the only hope” against a hostile “other.” (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021; Salmela & von Scheve 2017; 2018; Brady et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2011). Given the nature of religion, its importance in the lives of many, and its divinely ordained distinctions between “good” and “bad” conduct, the way religious or civilizational identities are drawn is often rooted in pre-existing collective feelings “of grievances, resentment, disillusionment, anger, fear, and vindictiveness” (Yilmaz & Albayrak, 2022; see also Yilmaz, 2021; Bonansinga, 2020). “The people” and their faith (or long-held cultures of worship) are positioned as being at risk from “the other.”

Alongside negative emotions of fear and anxiety, populists also use positive emotions of pride and love of one’s religion and the prospect that one will be rewarded for helping to “make society great again” and for defending one’s faith at all costs (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021; Albayrak, 2013). Taggart (2004) uses the term “heartland” as a descriptor for this emotional space where, as he noted in a recent blog post, populists construct “a version of the past that celebrates a hypothetical, uncomplicated and non-political territory of imagination.” The heightened emotional resonance of “heartland” messages has triggered followers of these populists to undertake quite inhumane measures and overlook the increasingly undemocratic digressions of populists in power. Such acts are seen as just in a quest to reinforce the “heartland”

for “the people” (Kissas, 2019; Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018; Pappas, 2016).

One of the leading examples where Islamist populism has deployed a host of emotions in its mobilization strategy is Turkey. Erdoğan has successfully leveraged long-established fears of “Western enemies” and “internal traitors” that date back well over a century but are cast in a new guise to fit the current political context (Yilmaz, 2021). Since 2010 especially, Erdoğan, his party, and pro-AKP voices have systematically engaged in smear campaigns that transform into institutional oppression and discrimination toward “the other” (Yilmaz & Albayrak, 2021, 2022). For instance, a former ally and spiritual group, the Gülen Movement (GM) and its leader, have been used as a scapegoats for all manner of sins within the AKP, including its rampant corruption and many governance failures since the mid-2000s (Yilmaz & Albayrak, 2021; 2022; Watmough, 2020). Religious populist leaders outside of state institutions have also used emotions to galvanize support along these lines. One of the most prominent cases from Southeast Asia is the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI—Front Pembela Islam), which is now formally banned in Indonesia (Barton, Yilmaz, & Morieson, 2021). With the narrative of victimhood inspired by fear of assorted “others” — non-Muslims, “Zionists,” the Western powers, China, and Ahmadis — the group has been encouraged to take matters into its own hands and “defend” Islam and the ummah (Facal, 2019; Jahroni, 2004). Its massive appeal in the country has meant that while renaming a movement-driven

organization, the FPI has played a key role in electoral lobbying and mainstreaming right-wing narratives. Its power to sway state institutions is visible by the fact that it was behind the introduction of 400 Shariah-inspired laws in the country and has the force behind blasphemy protests in 2016–17 (Barton, Yilmaz, & Morieson, 2021).

The FPI has been able to replicate its presence online, and even though it remains banned, its cyber “warriors” and various websites remain active (Yilmaz & Barton, 2021). Moreover, using charged Islamist populist rhetoric, the FPI has inspired a generation of vigilantes in the country who continue to take part in local (and overseas) incidents of aggression toward various “others” to “protect” the Islamic faith.

However, it must be noted that Indonesia’s democratic institutions, while often brittle, are much stronger than Pakistan’s. The government has succeeded in permanently banning the FPI and maintaining its outlaw status. In contrast, the TLP remains free to operate in a country with already fragile institutions and a population receptive to Islamist narratives. This paper thus looks at Pakistan’s context and understands the group’s working under the populism framework.

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS AND EVOLUTION OF THE TEHREEK-E-LABBAIK PAKISTAN

The Barelvi order was formed in the aftermath of the 1857 uprising in India against the British East India Company. Weakened, the company turned to the British government for assistance, and the conflict expanded into a full-scale war of independence against the British crown. The Indian defeat in 1857-8 led to the formal colonization of India by Britain when the last Mughal King, Bahadur Shah Zafar, was deposed, and a series of “revenge” murders by the British troops was undertaken (Dalrymple, 2008). This ushered in the end of centuries of Muslim leadership of the Subcontinent.

In the wake of the establishment of the British Raj, a broad-based, Sufi-oriented Sunni Islamic revivalist movement, the Barelvi, emerged to “protect” Islam and restore Muslim “glory” in the region. Over the years, the movement has inspired jihadism against the region’s perceived “others.” For instance, Syed Ahmad Barelvi^[1] launched a guerrilla war against the Sikh Empire of Punjab in the early nineteenth century; over two hundred years later, thousands of young men were sent as mujahideen to fight the Afghan war in the 1980s. As a result, Barelvi religious doctrine draws on a deep sense of victimhood that extends back to the colonial past. Over time, the movement has adapted, and its definition of “other.” Nevertheless, the centrality of jihadist ideas and the movement’s defining motivation to “protect” Islam against hostile forces have been constants.

In recent years, Pakistan’s

commitment to the US “war on terror” has seen the influence of hardliner Deobandi scholars decline. However, the state’s tolerance of madrassa culture and its cultivation of right-wing radicals continues. Indeed, the Pakistani state has embraced the benefits of pandering to a supposedly “victimized” population by supporting the “softer” Sufi elements in Islam, of which Barelvis are a part. As a result, Barelvi clerics have been placed in important positions, their madrassas have received state funding, and the Barelvi identity, which had been solidified due to exclusion and deprivation, has strengthened through state patronage. For their part, the Barelvis have publicly condemned terrorism and, by all accounts, have consciously avoided inciting political chaos in recent decades. Nevertheless, despite its Sufi roots, the movement hues to very strident positions, seeing the Holy Prophet as a divine being (Noor Mohammadiya) who is omnipresent (Hazir-o-Nazir) and arguing that insults of the Prophet (Namoos-e-Risalat) should be punished by death. Emboldened in this way, the movement has become more assertive and has turned violent of late.

The origins of the TLP movement are in the Tehreek Rihai Mumtaz Qadri (Movement to Free Mumtaz Qadri), which came into existence after the arrest of Mumtaz Qadri in 2011 on charges of assassinating Salmaan Taseer, the governor of Punjab, ostensibly for

the latter's opposition to Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Following Qadri's trial and execution, the movement renamed itself Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasoolallah (TLYP), later transforming into the TLP (Sabat, Ahmad, & Qadar, 2020). This movement advocated for Qadri and portrayed him as a hero even after this execution. The movement derives its core support from Barelvi madrassas dotted across the country.

In the conducive environment for the Barelvis, supporters of Mumtaz Qadri grew in numbers. The movement consolidated at his funeral and later rituals associated with chehlum (the traditional forty days of mourning after death), branding him a martyr of Islam. The movement grew rapidly, affording the largely dispersed Barelvi community a publicly expressed collective identity. Opposition to blasphemy became the central aspect of the movement's motivation, and where the judicial system was seen as too slow in its prosecution of violators (at times even acquitting them), the TLP applied direct and swift mob justice.

The incumbent government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) did nothing to reprimand this vigilante behavior at the time, especially following Qadri's hanging. Embroiled in its own corruption scandals and confronting civil unrest led by Imran Khan and his PTI, the government lacked the will and resources to act. In addition, the PML-N, which draws on the tradition of General Zia-ul-Haq's political Islam in Pakistan, did not wish to alienate

its pious supporters by being seen to be heavy-handed against Islamic groups in society. More importantly, the military-led establishment — which had nurtured Sharif and his party in the 1980s as a counter to the left-leaning Pakistan People's Party (PPP) — now settled on the Barelvi as a useful counterweight to the PML-N's growing independence. After returning to the prime ministership for a third term in 2013, Sharif and his party were increasingly asserting their independence from the establishment, driving the latter to seek ways to “break” the party's political base. To that end, the establishment began to foment rifts between the PML-N and its right-wing supporter base in Punjab, including the Barelvi. Careful political engineering behind the scenes laid the ground for the formation of the TLP.

Many TLP members are former PML-N supporters. A 2018 Gallup survey found that 46 percent of those who voted for the TLP in 2018 had voted for PML-N in the 2013 elections. Nawaz and his party keenly felt this loss of support. In the lead-up to the 2018 elections, the Punjab exploded in sporadic province-wide protests led by Khadim Rizvi calling for the resignation of the then Minister of Law and Justice, Zahid Hamid, over changes to the wording of the Elections Bill 2017 drafted by the government in the run-up to the elections.

Specifically, the government had changed the wording of the oath concerning commitment to the finality of Prophet Muhammad from

“I solemnly swear” to “I believe.” The TLP cast this “weakening” of the oath’s wording as undermining Pakistan’s Muslim identity and values, which hinge on the belief in the finality of the Prophet. Zahid Hamid’s home was attacked, and TLP vigilantes staged sit-ins until he was forced to resign over the alleged “blasphemy.” Rizvi and his followers blocked all main roads in Islamabad for twenty days, demanding the original wording be restored and the minister’s resignation. Clashes with police injured some 200 and killed four.

The TLP remained undeterred, and the protests turned into highly ritualistic public displays of political piety. Day and night, on the orders of Rizvi, the protesters chanted nats (lyrics praising the Prophet Muhammad) and slogans expressing love for the Prophet and hatred for those considered *gustakhs* (blasphemers). Passions ran so high that protesters armed with simple sticks were recorded tossing their shoes at passing state patrol helicopters while Rizvi hurled all kinds of abuse at the government. Finally, with the PML-N on its knees, the military was called in to “arbitrate.” The TLP was forced to retreat to its stronghold in Lahore (albeit with its demand met), and the government retreated with its tail between its legs. However, it would not be the last time the radicals would best Sharif before the 2018 elections.

The 2017 events only emboldened the TLP, which now evidently had the establishment’s blessing. As much was proven when a video surfaced of a high-raking

army official disbursing money to TLP protesters in 2017. The establishment claimed the funds were used to disburse the protesters by giving them funds to return to their homes. However, many speculated that this was part of the military’s long-run strategy of “strategic depth” — namely, fomenting unrest to keep the elected government on its toes.

These suspicions were further confirmed when the Supreme Court finally released its judgment on the sit-ins in February 2019. The judgment held that all protesters be tried under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, and called upon Pakistan’s electoral commission to scrutinize the TLP’s status as a political party. Interestingly, the court issued a warning to the armed forces to cease meddling in the country’s political affairs, noting: “The Constitution emphatically prohibits members of the Armed Forces from engaging in any kind of political activity, which includes supporting a political party, faction or individual. The Government of Pakistan through the Ministry of Defense and the respective Chiefs of the Army, the Navy and the Air Force are directed to initiate action against the personnel under their command who are found to have violated their oath.”

By 2018, the TLP had become a household name. It had garnered wide media attention and the sympathies of radical elements in the country. Rizvi’s crude language and earthy charisma proved quite effective. His blunt use of Punjabi jokes and coarse language resonated with the sentiments and approach of the masses. Thus, he

could cast himself as “one of them” rather than a phony politician. His speeches went viral on social media, and attendance at the seminary at Multan Road in Lahore blossomed. Like all populists, Rizvi’s rhetoric was unapologetic and provided “simple” solutions. For example, as a “solution” to the problem of Dutch “blasphemers” mocking Islam and the Prophet, he suggested Pakistan attack the Netherlands with nuclear weapons, berating the government for its inaction and its warehousing of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal as if they were “firecrackers” (i.e., just for show).

When quizzed about the party’s economic policy on a popular television show, Rizvi showcased both his political acumen (using the language of people’s everyday experience) and apparent lack of economic expertise (eschewing

detailed policy commitments), noting that when the Nizam-e-Mustafa was established, the country would prosper because the government would, like any ordinary household, just live within its means. He explained this by saying that if his government were ever short of resources, everyone would make do for a while without yogurt and instead eat chilies with roti. However, when further pressed for a specific policy, he launched into a classic rant against the state and blamed banks charging interest and a lack of piety among the elite as the source of all problems.

ENABLING A NEW VIGILANTE JIHADISM

Despite its apparent disconnect with reality, TLP won some 1.8 million votes (National Assembly seats) in Punjab (Sabat, Shoaib & Qadar, 2020). The same year they also successfully campaigned to remove Atif Mian from the Pakistan Economic Council because he was a member of the Ahmadiyya community. This was the first compromise by the PTI government as it gave into the demands of the TLP.

At a micro level, more disturbing events occurred even before the elections. Young impressionable children going to TLP mosques and hearing Rizvi's sermons showed early signs of vigilantism. On January 23, 2018, Sareer Ahmed, a student, killed his school's principal, who had reprimanded him for skipping classes to attend a TLP sit-in. The boy who showed no remorse after killing his teacher justified his actions in the name of safeguarding the Prophet Muhammad.

In May 2018, PML-N politician and National Assembly Member, Ahsan Iqbal was critically wounded by Abid Hussain, who charged Iqbal with committing blasphemy. It is believed that Iqbal was returning from a meeting with a Christian group when he was shot. In March 2019, Khateeb Hussain, another young student, killed his professor over allegations of blasphemy. The boy did not show any signs of remorse after using a knife to kill his teacher in his classroom.

On October 31, 2018, the Supreme Court overturned the previous

conviction of a Christian woman Aasiya Noreen (popularly known as Asia Bibi), accused of blasphemy. The TLP called for the three judges to be killed for the judgment. Mass protests erupted in retaliation, and roads in major cities were blocked as protesters stormed the streets and destroyed public and private property. On November 2, 2018, the new government agreed to put Asia Bibi's name on the Exit Control List, which barred her from leaving the country in an effort to subdue the protests. To neutralize the growing resistance on November 4, 2018, Rizvi's Twitter was also suspended at the government's request. Bibi's lawyer also left the country fearing his own life. On November 7, Asia Bibi was secretly flown on a military plane out of the country.

In 2020, a bank manager from the Ahmadiyya faith was shot dead in broad daylight by the bank's security guard in the town of Khushab in Punjab. What was more disturbing was the guard being taken handcuffed by the police with a smirk on his face as the mob chanted in support of him for heroism. In 2021, the lynching of the Sri Lankan factory manager by a mob in Sialkot was also TLP inspired. The key culprits in the cases expressed pride in their actions. All these attackers were linked with TLP or inspired by their narrative, yet the TLP chief was quick to disassociate himself from them.

While TLP has served the establishment (and the PTI) as a valuable counterweight to the PML-N,

the party's freelance vigilantism has become an issue. Now that the PTI is firmly in power and towing the establishment line, the state apparatus has again mobilized against the TLP. As mentioned, in 2019, the Supreme Court openly questioned the party status of the TLP and asked the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to investigate. In reply, the ECP has informed the court that the party had failed to provide the required campaign finance reports for the 2018 elections, blunting the party's political ambitions. Additionally, there were also rumors of a split between the late Khadim Hussain Rizvi and his heir apparent, Pir Afzal Rizvi, and the movement began to show cracks.

However, another "crisis" emerged in the winter of 2020 that opened up a space for the TLP to fall back on its tried and tested strategy of leveraging supposed "threats" to Islam to mobilize supporters in vigilante violence.

In October 2021, a French history teacher who had brought sketches of the Prophet Muhammad allegedly printed in a 2012 edition of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* into his classroom was decapitated; the assailant was shot dead by French police as they tried to arrest him. In the days that followed the beheading, the same sketches were projected onto the facade of a building in another French city, and people displayed them at protests around the country. The French president Emmanuel Macron criticized Islamists and was accused of inciting Islamophobia. This led to a call within Pakistan to boycott French products. Khadim

Hussain Rizvi went a step further, calling on followers to block the Shahrah-e-Faisal, the main road in Karachi, until the government cut all diplomatic ties with France and banned all French products. He even urged the government to announce jihad (Islamic holy war) against France. During this period, his sermons were increasingly hostile toward France, and in one, he declared, "we must eventually die of some disease, be it diabetes or some other ailment [...]. It is better to die with the name of the Prophet on our lips [...] it does not matter if France perishes if the world perishes or we perish."

Rizvi has been adept at using the coarse language of his region to castigate opponents. He has labeled the Supreme Court Chief Justice a "dog," referred to Prime Minister Imran Khan variously as an "animal," a "duffer," a "barking dog," a "pimp," and mouthed many anti-Semitic slurs. When confronted with his behavior, he has defended himself by declaring he is merely a cipher of the words and vision of the Prophet Mohammed.

A large numbers of people gathered to attend funeral prayer of Khadim Hussain Rizvi, Chief of TLP, held at Minar-e-Pakistan in Lahore on on November 21, 2020. Photo: **Asianet-Pakistan**.

Rizvi's death in 2020 did not end the movement. His eldest son, Saad Rizvi, who was relatively unknown to the public before taking over the movement's leadership, has since continued his father's path. Thus, the death of the elder Rizvi has not derailed the party's anti-French jihad. On January 3, 2021, he called on the government to expel the French ambassador by February 17, 2021 as per their previous agreement.

On April 12, 2021, police arrested Saad Rizvi on charges of terrorism. Protests erupted, and a member of the group's leadership, Syed Zaheerul Hassan Shah, called on supporters to "jam the entire country." Tensions became so high that the French embassy asked French nationals to leave the country temporarily. Law enforcement agencies tried to clear out TLP supporters from Islamabad and Rawalpindi, but at least four

policemen were killed in clashes. This proved to be the final straw for the government, which announced it had "reasonable grounds to believe that Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan is engaged in terrorism." On April 15, 2021, the government banned the TLP under anti-terrorism legislation. Fearing a backlash from the party supporters, the government also temporarily banned social media. Despite the move to outlaw the party, Prime Minister Imran Khan appeared on national television to call the crackdown on the TLP "regrettable," thereby showing his sympathy for the group's criminal acts.

By November 2021, the PTI government appeared to be walking back its hardline approach to the TLP. First, Saad Rizvi's arrest mobilized unprecedented protest action across the country that the government of Imran Khan struggled to control.

Then, at the end of 2021, Saad Rizvi was released from prison. Moreover, many TLP supporters accused of vandalism and violence against police walk free, even as the party prepares to contest the 2023 general elections. Yet, rather than seeing the renewed mobilization of the TLP as a defeat, Imran Khan's strategy appears to be to placate the movement, pointing to the shared Islamist objectives of his PTI and the TLP.

CONCLUSION

The present article has sought to analyze the foundations on which the TLP has risen to prominence in Pakistan. Our analysis indicates that the group has leveraged the victimhood narrative, jihadism, vindictiveness, and revanchism of the Bareilvi sect. While Islamic populism is not new in Pakistan, the TLP is set apart by its ability to ride the populist wave by speaking to the fears and anxieties of the public. In addition, it has mainstreamed radical Islamist and pro-violence ideas. Having evolved from a proxy created by the establishment to a political force in its own right, the TLP poses a serious challenge to the very fabric of Pakistani society through its championing of mass vigilante violence.

It is clear that the Pakistani establishment has been key to emboldening the TLP through its early support. Now, the TLP has gained so much clout that it appears to have outgrown the state. Moreover, the political environment is ripe for exploitation. Inflation rates keep skyrocketing, the value of the Pakistani rupee has plummeted, and Imran Khan's promised Islamic welfare state is nowhere to be seen. While Khan employs his own version of Islamist populism to appease the religious sentiments of the masses, there is a growing sense of distrust toward him within the electorate. Only a few years ago, Nawaz Sharif and his PLM-N lost a hefty chunk of their votes to the TLP; the PTI now confronts a similar fate.

What emerges is a kind of Islamist "bidding war" in which the PTI seems to be losing ground to the TLP. While the former has bolstered religious authorities, funded right-wing groups, and constantly advocated for a boycott of "Western values" (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021), the TLP seems to be constantly outmaneuvering it. Its unchecked and uncensored content is creating a new generation of vindictive jihadists. And unlike the Taliban, this group operates in plain view. Students, shopkeepers, and even family members appear ready to kill in the name of "safeguarding" Islam. Most of these people know that the legal system is too corrupt and slow to prosecute them.

It is unclear whether a new "crisis" will emerge (or be fabricated) that will allow the TLP an open space for mobilization in the lead-up to the 2023 elections. What is clear is that the playing field of Pakistani politics has shifted decisively in favor of extremism and vigilantism. While the TLP is hardly the first outfit to exploit religion in Pakistan, it is arguably the most threatening to the stability of the social and political order in the country's 75-year history.

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