

"DOES THE BULLET DELIVER WHERE THE BALLOT HAS FAILED?" –ATTEMPTING TO EXPLAIN POLITICAL ASSASSINATIONS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Political assassinations in Pakistan have been a systematic challenge ever since the country's independence from Great Britain in 1947. On one hand, state actors formed unlikely alliances with Western Powers in the aftermath of the Afghan War and during the War on Terror. On the other, non-state actors, like Islamist jihadi groups, used the country for domestic and foreign terrorist attacks and to spread violence. Thus, this demonstrates the conflict between the different players in Pakistan. When the country was transformed into a democracy in 2007/2008, the number of assassinations did not decrease, but rather increased by ninefold.

This article analyses the case of political assassinations in Pakistan and attempts to explain their prevalence in the country. First, the overall pattern and seriousness of political murders is identified with help from a self-created dataset. Then, it will be argued that the main explanatory factors at play in Pakistan are socioeconomic conditions, social conflict, elections, military and religion, sectarianism and blasphemy laws. Lastly, a brief discussion of long- and short-term measures is done.

Introduction

Political assassinations are a worldwide phenomenon¹ which can have severe impacts on a country's regime type, status and stability,² as well as its economy.³ For the perpetrators of political assassinations, the appeal lies in committing "the ultimate kind of electoral fraud".⁴ Regardless of how these assassinations are judged, they

¹ Marissa Mandala, "Political Assassinations. A Global Perspective", in *International and Transnational Crime and Justice*, ed. Mangai Natarajan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 154–160.

² Benjamin F. Jones and Benjamin A. Olken, "Hit or miss? The effect of assassinations on institutions and war", *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics* 1, no. 2 (2009); Zaryab Iqbal and Christopher Zorn, "Sic semper tyrannis? Power, repression, and assassination since the second world war", *Journal of Politics* 68, no. 3 (2006).

³ Muhammad Nadeem Qureshi, Karamat Ali and Imran RafiKhan, "Political Instability and Economic Development: Pakistan Time-Series Analysis", *International Research Journal of Finance and Economics* no. 56 (2010).

⁴ Kristine Höglund, "Electoral violence in conflict-ridden societies: Concepts, causes, and consequences", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 3 (2009): 415.

can change the fate of a country, be it through a regime change or an “increase [in] the intensity of existing moderate-level conflicts”.⁵

Pakistan has only become a topic of interest in relation to political crimes over the last decades, even though the nation is torn by a pattern of repeated assassinations of political leaders, which destabilised the governments, their oppositions and fragmented the society along the way.⁶

Since its independence in 1947, Pakistan experienced “almost all types of political control, from democracy – presidential and parliamentary – to repeated military coups” leading to a total of 33 years of dictatorship.⁷ Summarizing the country’s turbulent past, Bruneau et al. state that “until May 2013, no civilian government had ever finished its five-year term, successfully held elections, and transitioned to another civilian led government”.⁸ Although there are studies about the violence and crime phenomenon in Pakistan, there are only limited analyses on political assassinations in Pakistan. This article aims at analysing the occurrence of political assassinations in Pakistani society and finding explanatory factors for the nation’s political murders.

Methodology and Conceptual Framework

Political crimes and more specifically, political assassinations have been widely discussed by scholars in general.⁹ Some have focused their attention more specifically on political crimes in Pakistan, their causes and their implications.¹⁰ Arguing against exceptionalism of political violence in non-democratic systems,

⁵ Jones and Olken, “Hit or miss?”, 72.

⁶ Navnita Chadha Behera, “The Kashmir Conflict: Multiple Fault Lines”, *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 3, no. 1 (2016): 55.

⁷ Qureshi, Ali and Khan, “Political Instability and Economic Development”, 180.

⁸ Thomas C. Bruneau, et al., “Civil-Military Relations in Muslim Countries. The Cases of Egypt, Pakistan, and Turkey”, *Journal of Defense Resources Management* 4, no. 2 (2014): 23.

⁹ Jeffrey Ian Ross, “The Dynamics of Political Crime”. (New York: Sage, 2003); Stephan Parmentier and Elmar G. Weitekamp, “Political Crimes and Serious Violations of Human Rights”, in *Crime and Human Rights (Sociology of Crime, Law and Deviance)* 9, ed. Stephan Parmentier, Elmar G. Weitekamp (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2007), 109-144. (2007); Roelof Haveman and Alette Smeulers, “Criminology in a State of Denial – Towards a Criminology of International Crimes: Supranational Criminology”, in *Supranational Criminology: Towards a Criminology of International Crimes*, ed. Alette Smeulers and Roelof Haveman (Antwerp: Intersentia Publishers, 2008), 3-26; Mandala, “Political Assassinations”; Michael Mumford et al., “The sources of leader violence: A comparison of ideological and non-ideological leaders”, *Leadership Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (2007), 217–235; Arie Perliger, “The Rationale of Political Assassinations”, *Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point (2015)*, accessed May 30, 2021; Arie Perliger, “The Role of Civil Wars and Elections in Inducing Political Assassinations”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 8 (2017), 684-700; Andra Serban et al., “Assassination of political leaders: The role of social conflict”, *Leadership Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2018), 457–475.

¹⁰ Zahid S. Ahmed and Maria J. Stephan, “Fighting for the rule of law: civil resistance and the lawyers’ movement in Pakistan”, *Democratization* 17, no. 3 (2010), 492-513; Zulfiqar Ali, “Conflict between social structure and legal framework: political corruption in Pakistan”, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 54, no. 1 (2016), 115-127; Ethan Bueno de Mesquita et al.; “Measuring political violence in Pakistan: Insights from the BFRS Dataset”, *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 32, no. 5 (2015), 536–558; Qureshi, Ali and Khan, “Political Instability and Economic Development”; Ulfat Zahra, “Political Assassinations in Pakistan with Special Reference to the Mystery of the Murder of Hayat Muhammad Khan Sherpao, 1975”, *Pakistan Perspectives* 25, no. 2 (2020), 105–122.

researchers have also pointed out the important effects of assassinations on the level of democracy and how it can transform power structure.¹¹

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is rather young, and its democratisation process has been ongoing since 2008. Quantitative statistical models such as the works of Bueno de Mesquita et al.¹², Jones & Olken¹³ and Serban et al.¹⁴ have tried to analyse the political incidents and their effects on Pakistan. However, no longitudinal study on election results and an assessment of key democratic factors has been done to discuss the political implications of assassinations. Furthermore, although general literature on political crimes exists, a case study of Pakistan has not been conducted.

To fill this gap in the research, we have decided to try to shed light on the phenomenon of political assassinations in Pakistan. Thus, our research questions were, firstly, how grave the situation of political murder is and, secondly, which factors can be used to explain the occurrence of individuated political violence. To answer the first research question, a quantitative dataset was compiled to give an overview of the problem. After that, explanatory factors from the criminological literature were selected and applied to the case of Pakistan to cover our second research question.

Data collection

When it comes to political assassinations in Pakistan, reliable data is rare. The Pakistani government does not collect statistics, and domestic English-speaking newspapers only occasionally report the murder of politicians. International databases, such as the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), do not provide a full picture either, since the GTI has only started collecting data on Pakistan since 1981 or often underreport cases of political violence in Pakistan.¹⁵ Because of this, it was not possible to develop a broad quantitative model, which is why this article uses its own dataset built from journals and newspaper articles, biographies of politicians, the BFRS¹⁶ and the GTI. Criterion for the inclusion of incidents was that an attempted or successful assassination had to be aimed at a politician who must have at least held a regional political function.

The downside with this approach is that usually only high-profile political assassinations make it in the national newspapers; many local attacks are not reported or are limited to regional publications rarely accessible online and even less in English. The actual numbers of political assassinations in Pakistan may therefore be higher than presented here. Nonetheless, our dataset serves for the illustrative purpose of this work and was vital for identifying the explanatory factors.

¹¹ Jones and Olken, "Hit or miss?"; Serban et al., "Assassination of political leaders: The role of social conflict".

¹² Bueno de Mesquita et al., "Measuring political violence in Pakistan".

¹³ Jones and Olken, "Hit or miss?".

¹⁴ Serban et al., "Assassination of political leaders: The role of social conflict".

¹⁵ START, "GTI Assassinations in Pakistan", *Global Terrorism Index*, May 25, 2021. Accessed May 25, 2021. https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?page=1&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=&dt_p2=all&success=no&country=153&target=2&charttype=line&chart=overtime&ob=GTIDID&od=desc&expanded=yes#results-table; Bueno de Mesquita et al., "Measuring political violence in Pakistan".

¹⁶ Bueno de Mesquita et al., "Measuring political violence in Pakistan".

Limitations

Many small incidents and crackdowns in the system are noted in the literature since 2007/08, yet it is impossible to describe and “measure” each of these or to outlay causes or connect these to the wider spectrum of instability. This permanent process of reactions and counter-reactions makes it difficult to first identify all incidents and then to understand or link all the consequences of incidents.

Due to the lack of reliable data, our dataset does not claim full accuracy and serves more of an illustrative purpose than a serious quantitative analysis. More importantly, the dataset helped identify the explanatory factors. While not exhaustive, these factors try to highlight some of the issues Pakistan faces. Due to the diverging characteristics in regions and provinces, a geographical analysis of the locations of assassinations in a larger scope could offer even more insight but goes beyond this article.

Additionally, the paper cannot go into detail about the many legacies of British colonial rule, like the judiciary, politics, culture, and tradition of the country. As a result, this paper will discuss only the time frame from 2007/2008 onwards. Furthermore, due to the complex relations with external actors (USA, China, India, Afghanistan) and militant groups (ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Taliban and other), this dimension was likewise excluded in the analysis.

Conceptual Framework on Political Crimes and Political Assassinations

If one considers political assassinations as a political crime, it is important to find a working definition of the term. Yet again, the phenomenon of political assassinations *per se*, but also its causes, implications, and consequences, have received little attention in research.¹⁷ Although assassinations might not be rare and sometimes even systematic, the occurrence of this phenomenon depends on a variety of social, political, and economic conditions.¹⁸

Generally, political crimes have been called a “*contradictio in terminis*”¹⁹ because of the idea that there are different apprehensions on the notion of “crime” and “political”.²⁰ Historically, political assassinations are inherent to social reality and communities,²¹ but it is the context and the motives behind the attacks which make the assassinations political.²² Schafer declares that a political crime can be distinguished “based on the conviction or the motivation of the offender about the

¹⁷ Serban et al., “Assassination of political leaders: The role of social conflict”; Zaryab Iqbal and Christopher Zorn, “The political consequences of assassination”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 3 (2008), 386.

¹⁸ Francis J. Yammarino, Michael D. Mumford, Andra Serban and Kristie Shirrefs, “Assassination and leadership: Traditional approaches and historiometric methods”, *The Leadership Quarterly* 24, no. 6 (2013), 823.

¹⁹ Parmentier and Weitekamp, “Political Crimes and Serious Violations of Human Rights”, 3.

²⁰ Parmentier and Weitekamp, “Political Crimes and Serious Violations of Human Rights”, 3; Stephen Schafer, “The Political Criminal”, in *Crime and Justice* 2, ed. L. Radzinowicz and M. Wolfgang (Eds.), (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 368-380; Eugene F. Miller, “What Does “Political” mean?”, *The Review of Politics* 42, no.1 (1980), 56 -72.

²¹ Perlinger, “*The Rationale of Political Assassinations*”, 18.

²² Parmentier, S. & Weitekamp, E.G.M, “Political Crimes and Serious Violations of Human Rights”, 3.

truth and the justification of his own altruistic beliefs".²³ The crime as a committed act becomes part of a toolbox, an instrument "for ideological purposes, which sets him apart from ordinary criminals and also from pseudo-convictional criminal".²⁴ Haveman and Smeulers agree that the nature and context of political crimes "are completely different from the nature and context of ordinary crimes".²⁵ Therefore, the crime becomes a means to reach their objective which is a) political and b) distinctive from acts of ordinary crimes.

To be defined as a political assassination, Perliger argues that three elements must be present to constitute the target as a political one:

- 1) The targeted individual must be part of a leadership of a group that operates within a framework of ideology or policies,
- 2) the motive of the perpetrator remains political with a societal or political change in mind, blocking or encouraging certain directions (values, policies or norms),
- 3) the final act leads to the murder of the targeted individual.²⁶

Based on this, Perliger defines political assassinations as "an action that directly or indirectly leads to the death of an intentionally targeted individual who is active in the political sphere, in order to promote or prevent specific policies, values, practices or norms pertaining to the collective".²⁷ Iqbal and Zorn call it a "killing of a public figure for political reasons" and attribute an enormous importance to assassinations as one of the "highest profile acts of political violence".²⁸ Kasher and Yadlin specify it as "an act of killing a prominent person selectively, intentionally, and for political (including religious) purposes".²⁹ Interestingly, they reflect on the notion that political assassinations of leaders can be legally or morally justified when it comes to preventive acts and do not always have to be sanctioned *per se*.³⁰

According to Perliger, the strategic choice of actors for political assassinations is often done "because they believe that it is the fastest and/or most effective way to promote desired political goals, since other alternatives are not viable, or because the targeted individual possesses political capital and powers that are related to the political objectives of the perpetrator".³¹ Overall, many scholars agree that political assassinations come with the objective of a regime change or shall lead to political unrest and instability, but also continue in large-scale political, economic, and social upheaval.³² Whilst Nielson asserts that assassination have been condoned as acts of political violence when political reform was impossible to achieve,³³ scholars like Iqbal and Zorn disagree with the notion of a legitimate mechanism to cause political

²³ Schafer, "The Political Criminal", 374.

²⁴ Ibid., 376.

²⁵ Haveman and Smeulers, "Criminology in a State of Denial", 8.

²⁶ Perliger, "*The Rationale of Political Assassinations*", 21.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Iqbal and Zorn, "The political consequences of assassination", 385–386.

²⁹ Asa Kasher and Amos Yadlin, "Assassination and Preventive Killing", *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 25, no. 1 (2005), 44.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Perliger, "The Role of Civil Wars and Elections", 685.

³² Perliger, A. (2015). "The Rationale of Political Assassinations", 15; Yammarino et al., "Assassination and leadership"; Iqbal and Zorn, "The political consequences of assassination", 387.

³³ Kai Nielson, "On terrorism and political assassination", in *Assassination*, ed. Harold Zellner (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1974), 97-110.

change.³⁴ For them, assassinations are simply “a phenomenon of political violence and therefore a negative influence on that state’s political system”.³⁵

In conclusion, assassinations are used as one out of many instruments in a toolbox of political crimes. Depending on the definition, they can also be associated with the broader category of political crime or constitute terrorism.³⁶ In the case of Pakistan, “political violence is a central policy concern [...] and takes many forms”.³⁷ Therefore it is important to note that political assassinations are only one manifestation of political violence which the country faces.

Analysis of Political Assassinations in Pakistan

Targeted murders of Pakistani politicians have continuously followed Pakistan after gaining independence from Great Britain in 1947. The first well-documented and high-profile political assassination was the country’s first Prime Minister, Liaquat Ali Khan in 1951.³⁸

Figure 1, developed from our dataset, illustrates that there have been repeatedly successful attacks on politicians. Yet again, it must be noted that due to our methodological approach the actual figure of political assassinations in Pakistan is likely to be higher than in our dataset.

Between 1951 and 2020, a total of 73 representatives of political, economic, or social institutions in Pakistan were killed. Our dataset also shows a worrying trend: before 2006, the pattern of political assassinations was rather steady with an average of 0.36 politicians assassinated per annum, despite experiencing regime changes, military coups, and democracies.³⁹ This average increased to 3.5 politicians murdered per year in the years 2006 to 2020. A climax of assassinations can be seen in 2007, which can be attributed to the end of the military reign and the building of the present Islamic Republic of Pakistan in that year. Other spikes can be found in the election years of 2013 and 2018. This increase in violence and assassinations during times of campaigning and elections in Pakistan attests to global patterns of political assassinations.⁴⁰

³⁴ Iqbal and Zorn, “The political consequences of assassination”, 365.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Jeffrey Ian Ross, *The Dynamics of Political Crime*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003), 64.

³⁷ Bueno de Mesquita et al., “Measuring political violence in Pakistan”, 537.

³⁸ “Pakistani political leaders who were assassinated”. *International News*. November 3, 2018.

³⁹ Ayesha Shoukat and Edmund T. Gomez, “Transformation of political elite as regime changes in Pakistan”, *Asian Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 1 (2018): 35-52.; Qureshi et al., “Political Instability and Economic Development”.

⁴⁰ Marissa Mandala, “Political Assassinations”.

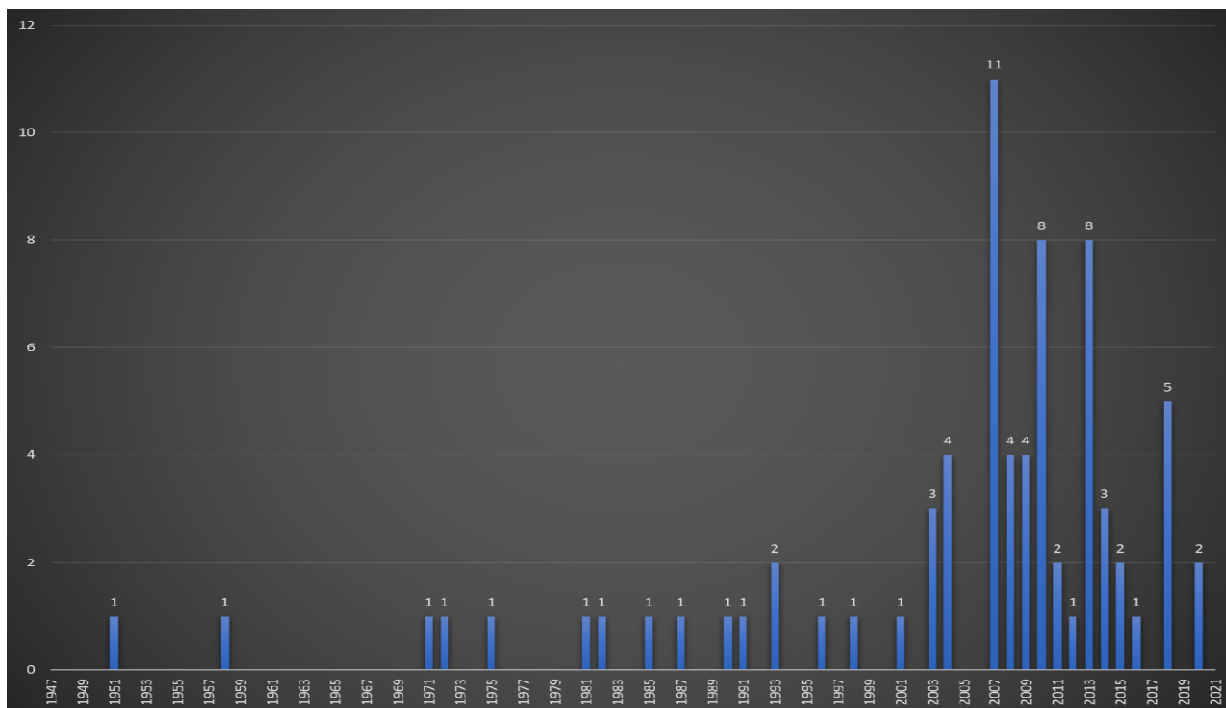


Figure 1: Political Assassinations and Attempts in Pakistan (1947-2020)

Note 1: Data aggregated by the authors.

Perpetrators

Parmentier and Weitekamp state that political crimes “go beyond the micro level of individuals and individual motivations, and that they are situated at the meso level and the macro level of societies with many – if not all – cases involving ideological motivations.”⁴¹ However, the perpetrators and reasonings diverge.⁴² In Pakistan, the motivation of the assassins differs vastly between the geographic areas and years.⁴³ In the region of Balochistan, the ethnic independence movement is one of the main regional drivers of assassinations, whereas in Punjab and Sindh sectarian cleavages cause violence.⁴⁴

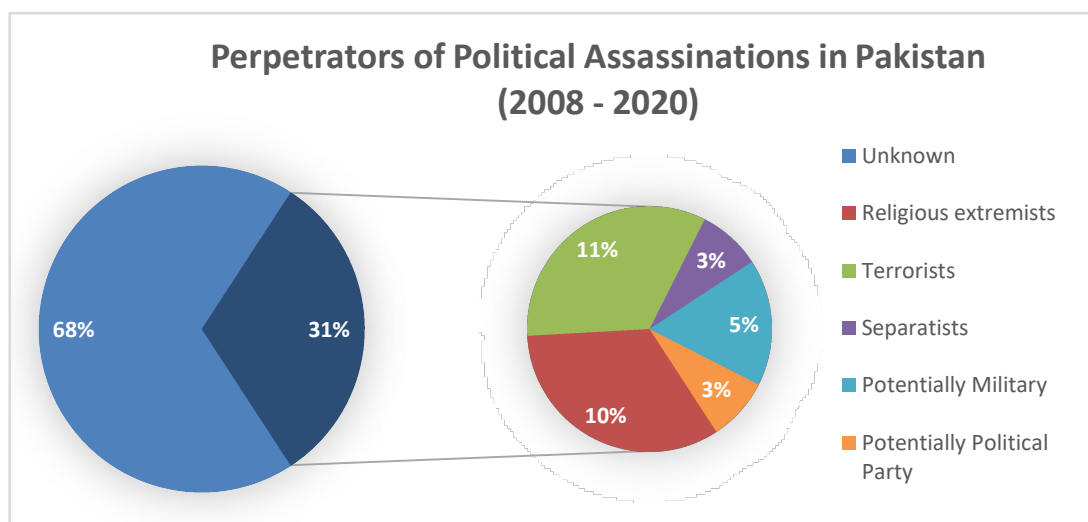


Figure 2: Perpetrators for Political Assassinations in Pakistan (2008-2020)

⁴¹ Parmentier and Weitekamp, “Political Crimes and Serious Violations of Human Rights”, 2.

⁴² Iqbal and Zorn, “Sic semper tyrannis?”.

⁴³ Bueno de Mesquita et al., “Measuring political violence in Pakistan”, 540.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 551.

Note 2: Data aggregated by the authors.

Figure 2 shows our compilation of attributed motives for the political assassinations from 2008 until 2020. Over this time frame, 38 political assassinations were carried out. Unfortunately, for the majority of political assassinations in Pakistan the motivation or perpetrators are unknown (68%). The perpetrators could be identified in only 12 instances, demonstrating a low clearing rate for political murder. In 11% of the cases where the perpetrators were known, terrorists, both domestic and foreign, claimed responsibility for the attack. In 10% of the cases, the attacks were carried out by religious extremists. 5% of the attacks were potentially carried out by the military. Separatist struggles were responsible for 3% of all cases since 2008—although the regional rate of murdered politicians might be higher in certain areas and not be reported in national mass media.⁴⁵ Furthermore, in 3%, there was rumour that a political party was involved, aimed at eliminating an opponent before the ballots. Studies on electoral violence in Pakistan show that those parties perpetrating or involved in the assassinations are also more likely to receive additional seats in the National Assembly of the province in which the violence is committed.⁴⁶

Most commonly, firearms and/or explosives are used to carry out the attack. This is congruent with worldwide method assessments of assassinations.⁴⁷ However, an important characteristic of political assassinations in Pakistan is that they strategically happen in the public sphere, where civilians are killed together with the target.⁴⁸ These casualties are often families of the primary targets but also politicians or people who were attending political rallies.⁴⁹ The high death toll of some of these attacks makes it even more difficult to distinguish between targeted political assassinations and terrorist attacks. This factor cannot be underestimated because it skews the data.

Explanatory Factors

By analysing the case of Pakistan, we have identified the following five explanatory factors for political assassinations in the literature: socioeconomic conditions, social conflict, elections, military, traditional culture and the role of religion, sectarianism and blasphemy laws. The following explains the factors in detail.

Socioeconomic Conditions

Socioeconomic conditions, such as a lack of economic development and poverty, have been frequently linked as a driver for political violence, such as terrorism and political assassinations.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Serban et al. show that if the socio-economic

⁴⁵Bueno de Mesquita et al., “Measuring political violence in Pakistan”.

⁴⁶Free and Fair Election Network, “Campaigns of Violence. Electoral Violence During the 2013 General Assembly Election in Pakistan”, (FAFEN, Islamabad, 2013), 3.

⁴⁷Jones and Olken, “Hit or miss?”.

⁴⁸“Timeline: Political assassinations in Pakistan”, *Express Tribune*, June 14, 2014; “Pakistani political leaders who were assassinated”, *International News*, November 3, 2018; Free and Fair Election Network, “Campaigns of Violence”, 3.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Tore Bjørgo and Andrew Silke, “Root causes of terrorism”, in *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, ed. Andrew Silke (Routledge, 2018); Institute of Economic and Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism”, (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020); Gary LaFree and Anina Schwarzenbach, “Micro and macro-level risk factors for extremism and terrorism: Toward a criminology of extremist violence”, *Monatsschrift für Kriminologie und*

development of a society increases, the probability of assassinations will decrease.⁵¹ Other studies have also found that political instability has a significant impact on economic development,⁵² thus leading to a reinforcement of both factors.

Lacking diversification, the Pakistani economy is dependent on exports and relies heavily on the primary and secondary sectors.⁵³ Such dependence results in vulnerable employment for 55% of the population over the age of 15, which can lead to spiking rates of unemployment if the GDP or certain industries experience economic downturns.⁵⁴ Moreover, Pakistan has a negative trade balance and accumulates high foreign debts.⁵⁵ Lasting high inflation rates likewise impact the population and have led to further resentments.⁵⁶ Besides these problems reducing governance and support within the general public, Pakistan is repeatedly hit by natural catastrophes like earthquakes and floods, which are claimed to have set back the country and its economic development for decades.⁵⁷

Due to this, the Pakistani economy is not equipped to provide basic facilities such as employment, health, education, electricity, sanitation and housing for its people and offers only limited opportunities to its relatively young population.⁵⁸ This has tremendous effects on poverty levels and household incomes: In 2015, more than 75% of the people lived on less than \$5.50 per day, almost a quarter of the population lived below the national poverty line and 20% of the Pakistani people suffered from hunger.⁵⁹ However, even “individuals living above the income poverty line can still suffer deprivations in health, education and/or standard of living”.⁶⁰

Efforts by international aid organizations and by the Pakistani government have not been fruitful due to the “widespread, systematic and deeply entrenched” levels of corruption in the society and the government.⁶¹ The corruption is perceived as prevalent “within federal, provincial and local governments” and also extends to the

Strafrechtsreform 104, no. 3 (2021); Muhammed S. A. Malik et al., “Identification of risk factors generating terrorism in Pakistan”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015), 537-556.

⁵¹ Serban et al., “Assassination of political leaders: The role of social conflict”, 461f.

⁵² Qureshi et al., “Political Instability and Economic Development”.

⁵³ CIA.org, “Pakistan”, *The World Factbook*. March 30, 2022. Accessed March 15, 2022. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/pakistan/>; Qureshi et al., “Political Instability and Economic Development”.

⁵⁴ United Nations Development Programme, “Pakistan”, *Human Development Indicators*, 2020. Accessed March 21, 2022. <https://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/PAK>

⁵⁵ CIA.org, “Pakistan”.

⁵⁶ The World Bank, “Inflation, consumer prices (annual %) - Pakistan”, *The World Bank Data*, 2022. Accessed in May 8, 2021. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/FP.CPI.TOTL.ZG?locations=PK>; Emily Schmall and Salman Masood, “As Inflation Surges, Pakistan Seeks a \$6 Billion I.M.F. Lifeline”, *New York Times*, November 23, 2021; Salman Masood, “Pakistan’s Cricket-Star-Turned-Prime Minister Fights for Survival”, *New York Times*, March 22, 2022.

⁵⁷ Carlotta Gall, “Pakistan Flood Sets Back Infrastructure by Years”, *New York Times*, August 26, 2010; Somini Sengupta, “Pakistan Quake Rocks South Asia; Over 18,000 Killed”, *New York Times*, October 9, 2005.

⁵⁸ United Nations Development Programme, “Pakistan”; Malik et al., “Identification of risk factors generating terrorism in Pakistan”, 553.

⁵⁹ Asian Development Bank, “Poverty Data: Pakistan”, *Asian Development Bank*. 2021. Accessed May 8, 2021. <https://www.adb.org/countries/pakistan/poverty>

⁶⁰ United Nations Development Programme, “The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene Briefing note for countries on the 2020 Human Development Report Pakistan”, *Human Development Report 2020*, 2020, 6.

⁶¹ Marie Chêne, “Overview of corruption in Pakistan”, *Transparency International*, (2008): 3.

military and police branches.⁶² According to public surveys, the most corrupt government agencies are the police, the power sector and the judiciary.⁶³ The effect is further exacerbated by the lack of a fair accountability system, which leads to an undermining of the trust put into these institutions or allows other, non-state actors carry out quasi-governmental services.⁶⁴

As a result, the dire poverty, ongoing conflicts and lack of economic development can drive Pakistani youth into more radical and militant ideologies, for instance religious extremism or separatism.⁶⁵ Furthermore, due to corruption and lack of accountability regimes, Pakistani state institutions are effectively hindered from serving its people, in turn fuelling political resentment and potentially escalating into the employment of violent means, such as political assassinations.⁶⁶

Social Conflict

Another general cause of terrorism and political violence is the presence of collective grievances or social conflict in a society.⁶⁷ Empirical analyses have indicated a correlation between the an increased likelihood of assassinations is political unrest or social conflict, which includes strikes, riots, anti-government demonstrations, guerrilla warfare and other tactics.⁶⁸ On a micro level, radicalization theories have emphasized personal and group grievances as motivators for fighting personal injustices or harms or for countering a “harm to a group or cause”.⁶⁹ The cause of social conflict can be “unequal division or distribution of scarce resources between social groups”, such as political, economic and social resources.⁷⁰ Despite socioeconomic conditions, which have been discussed above, social unrest in Pakistan is created through inequality within the society, a political system that bypasses the interests and needs of its voters and territorial fragmentation – and with that, geographical exclusion.

For one, Perliger observes that “states that lack consensual political ethos and homogeneous populations (in terms of the national and ethnic landscape)” have an

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁴ Feisal Khan, “Combatting corruption in Pakistan”, *Asian Education and Development Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016), 195-210; Benham T. Said, “Geschichte al-Qaidas. Bin Laden, der 11. September und die tausend Fronten des Terrors heute” (München: C.H.Beck, 2018); Malik et al., “Identification of risk factors generating terrorism in Pakistan”, 551.

⁶⁵ Ayesha Siddiq, “Pakistan's Counterterrorism Strategy: Separating Friends from Enemies”, *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2011), 158.

⁶⁶ Feisal Khan, “Corruption and the Decline of the State in Pakistan”, *Asian Journal of Political Science* 15, no. 2 (2007), 219-247; Malik et al., “Identification of risk factors generating terrorism in Pakistan”, 551; Alex Schmid, “Frameworks for Conceptualising Terrorism”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 2 (2004): 197-221.

⁶⁷ Jeffrey Ian Ross, “Structural Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism: Towards a Causal Model”, *Journal of Peace Research* 30, no. 3 (1993): 317-329; Andra Serban et al., “Assassination of political leaders: The role of social conflict”, 467.

⁶⁸ Zaryab Iqbal and Christopher Zorn, “Sic semper tyrannis?”, 499; Andra Serban et al., “Assassination of political leaders: The role of social conflict”, 467.

⁶⁹ John Monahan, “The Individual Risk Assessment of Terrorism: Recent Developments”, in *Public Law and Legal Theory Research Paper Series* 57; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How radicalization happens to them and us*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 214-215.

⁷⁰ Andra Serban et al., “Assassination of political leaders: The role of social conflict”, 458ff.

increased risk for attacks against leaders.⁷¹ Pakistan is a heterogeneous country with a variety of religions, ethnic and linguistic groups and identities.⁷² Unfortunately, social, ethnic, religious and gender-based inequality prevails.⁷³ Smaller ethnic groups or minority faiths suffer from cultural and religious subordination, such as Christians, Hindus and others.⁷⁴ These minorities are subjected to overall discrimination, hold a lower socioeconomic status and are disproportionately targeted by the country's blasphemy laws.⁷⁵ Such injustices on a subgroup of the population can lead to intense social mobilization, fuels extreme positions to be elected, sectarianism and separatism and run the risk of becoming violent.⁷⁶

Second, the political process in Pakistan is marked by institutional and practical exclusion of voters' interests for the personal benefit of politicians. Many Pakistani people lack the opportunity to actively participate in the political process due to the marginalization of minorities' electoral voices. Furthermore, the political elite is mainly made up of one of six broader ethnic groups, which only account for 7.6% of the Pakistani population.⁷⁷ The institutional system of accountability for government servants is perceived as absent of efficient oversight mechanism, which is critical considering the widespread levels of corruption.⁷⁸ Because of these institutional deficiencies, politicians are often accused of ignoring the political wishes of the public in the policy making or perceived as dishonest and disloyal to country and nation.⁷⁹

Thirdly, our dataset has shown that separatists are responsible for 8% of the known cases of political assassinations. Such violent separatist movements are the result of territorial fragmentation and "gathered", or locally densely populated, areas while national government influences are low.⁸⁰ Research has shown that there are significant links between territorial fragmentation and the number of assassinations and, since 2007, ethnic and separatist movements have only gained traction.⁸¹ The discovery of oil and gas in the province of Balochistan has reheated previous local ethnic independence movements, while the tribal areas of the province Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) have been in constant conflict since 2004.⁸² For this time frame, our dataset shows a spike in total assassinations in the years 2008 to 2011, whereas

⁷¹ Perliger, "The Rationale of Political Assassinations", 5.

⁷² CIA.org, "Pakistan"; Maria M. Fuchs and Simon W. Fuchs, "Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Identities, Citizenship and Social Belonging", *South Asia: Journal of South Asia Studies* 43, no. 1 (2020), 52.

⁷³ Malik et al., "Identification of risk factors generating terrorism in Pakistan", 551.

⁷⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "Pakistan. USCIRF-Recommended for Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)", *USCIRF Annual Report 2020*, (2020): 32.

⁷⁵ Christophe Jaffrelot, "Minorities Under Attack in Pakistan", in *Minorities and Populism - Critical Perspectives from South Asia and Europe*, ed. Volker Kaul and Ananya Vajpeyi (Cham: Springer, 2020); Nilay Saiya, "Blasphemy and terrorism in the Muslim world", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 6 (2017), 1096f.

⁷⁶ Malik et al., "Identification of risk factors generating terrorism in Pakistan", 551.

⁷⁷ CIA.org, "Pakistan".

⁷⁸ Malik et al., "Identification of risk factors generating terrorism in Pakistan", 551; Chêne, "Overview of corruption in Pakistan", 3; Ali, "Conflict between social structure and legal framework".

⁷⁹ Behera, "The Kashmir Conflict: Multiple Fault Lines"; Malik et al., "Identification of risk factors generating terrorism in Pakistan", 550-551, 554.

⁸⁰ Bueno de Mesquita et al., "Measuring political violence in Pakistan", 555; Malik et al., "Identification of risk factors generating terrorism in Pakistan", 554; Said, "Geschichte al-Qaidas", 170.

⁸¹ Serban et al., "Assassination of political leaders: The role of social conflict", 459.

⁸² Bueno de Mesquita et al., "Measuring political violence in Pakistan", 555.

other works illustrate the increase in political assassination on provincial levels and highlight the regions of Balochistan, KPK and Sindh.⁸³ In these areas, the intensified local conflicts are the main drivers of political violence.⁸⁴ Such local interests have fostered connections and strategic alliances between communities and extremist militia, and it is said that by this, local governments and the military have provided a “friendly environment” for terror groups like Al-Qaida.⁸⁵

In summary, Pakistan offers a multitude of collective grievances and social conflicts with a variety of actors, issues and regions involved. These conflicts and conflict zones are likely to serve as accelerants of political assassinations in the country, disrupting chances of peaceful modernization, development and unity.

Elections

Elections in themselves are not the cause of political assassinations, since the abolition of free democratic elections fuels terrorism.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, elections exacerbate three factors: Electoral violence, preexisting social conflicts, and in the case of Pakistan, incentives to eliminate opponents before the ballot. As a result, elections are considered facilitators for assassinations, particularly of legislators,⁸⁷ as well as for electoral violence.⁸⁸

First, activities that are regarded as electoral violence include the harassing, assault, and intimidation of candidates, election workers, and voters; rioting, destruction of property, and political assassination.⁸⁹ Such attacks are launched against four different types of targets: a) electoral stakeholders (voters, candidates, election workers, media, and monitors), b) electoral information (registration data, vote results, ballots, and campaign material), c) electoral facilities (polling and counting stations), and d) electoral events (campaign rallies, traveling to polling stations).⁹⁰ Reports on the General election of 2013 in Pakistan show that high explosives were mostly used and that the main targets were candidates and workers of all major political parties.⁹¹ Additionally, those areas experiencing territorial conflicts were also those most affected by high-explosive electoral violence.⁹²

During election-times, politicians will use their rhetoric abilities to emphasize differences between voters instead of bringing people together,⁹³ thereby emphasizing existing tensions, especially in a society as fragmented as Pakistan's. While an election naturally is a phase of “revolution,” and therefore of uncertainty, this sensation can be exacerbated by the nature of politics, the design of an electoral system and its administration.⁹⁴ Generally, “new democracies, or regimes in

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Bueno de Mesquita et al., “Measuring political violence in Pakistan”, 555; Malik et al., “Identification of risk factors generating terrorism in Pakistan”, 554; Said, “Geschichte al-Qaidas”, 171.

⁸⁵ Said, “Geschichte al-Qaidas”, 170.

⁸⁶ Tore Bjørgo and Andrew Silke, “Root causes of terrorism”.

⁸⁷ Perliger, “The Role of Civil Wars and Elections”, 693.

⁸⁸ Höglund, “Electoral violence in conflict-ridden societies”, 415.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 417.

⁹¹ Free and Fair Election Network, “Campaigns of Violence”, 3.

⁹² Ibid., 11.

⁹³ Behera, “The Kashmir Conflict: Multiple Fault Lines”.

⁹⁴ Höglund, “Electoral violence in conflict-ridden societies”, 420.

transition, which are still struggling to develop strong democratic practices,” are more vulnerable to political assassinations.⁹⁵ The Pakistani democracy can be categorized as a “non-liberal or procedural democracy” due to “the limited commitment of the political elites [...] to democratic-liberal values, and the existence of procedural mechanisms that prevent opposition forces from gaining significant political influence”.⁹⁶ The state’s institutions are penetrated by a system of patronage⁹⁷ which is known to have an impairing effect on democracy.⁹⁸ Pakistani elections also lack fairness in terms of political elitism and active political involvement.⁹⁹

The criteria that distinguish electoral violence from other types of violence are “the timing and motive” behind it.¹⁰⁰ The closer elections get, the higher the tendency to assassinate legislators or intimidate voters is.¹⁰¹ In 2013, 24 incidents of Election Day violence were counted, which left 39 people killed and 141 injured.¹⁰² The public appearances of party candidates during campaigning increased their exposure to attacks, especially of oppositional politicians who are “the least protected and isolated political figures”.¹⁰³ Uninfluenced by elections is the tendency to target heads of state.¹⁰⁴

The actors who commit electoral violence are (1) state actors (i.e., military and police), (2) political parties, (3) guerilla/rebel groups, and (4) militia and paramilitary groups.¹⁰⁵ While some perpetrators of electoral violence/assassinations try to influence the outcome of the elections, others do not believe in elections per se as a legitimate method for transferring political power, and others again are opponents of the ruling system under which the elections are held.¹⁰⁶ The more there is at stake, the bigger is the incentive for political actors to influence the electoral process through means of intimidation and violence.¹⁰⁷ A tactic of threat and fear can not only provoke a low voter turnout, but it can also determine whom people vote for and whether candidates resign their candidature.¹⁰⁸ When elections offer a genuine possibility to change existing power relations (“close races”), electoral violence erupts.¹⁰⁹

⁹⁵ Perliger, “The Role of Civil Wars and Elections”, 696.

⁹⁶ Perliger, “The Rationale of Political Assassinations”, 41.

⁹⁷ Patronage is defined as “patron-client relationships,” in which “the ‘patron’ provides protection, services or rewards to the ‘clients’ (usually individuals of lower status) who become the patron’s political followers,” Rod Hague, Martin Harrop, and Shaun Breslin, *Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction*, 3rd edition (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 467. “In essence [patronage] is based on an interpersonal exchange but between people in an asymmetrical relationship,” Höglund, “Electoral violence in conflict-ridden societies”, 420.

⁹⁸ Höglund, “Electoral violence in conflict-ridden societies”, 420.

⁹⁹ Shoukat and Gomez, “Transformation of political elite as regime changes in Pakistan”.

¹⁰⁰ Höglund, “Electoral violence in conflict-ridden societies”, 415.

¹⁰¹ Perliger, “The Role of Civil Wars and Elections”, 694.

¹⁰² Free and Fair Election Network, “Campaigns of Violence”, 14.

¹⁰³ Höglund, “Electoral violence in conflict-ridden societies”, 421.; Perliger, “The Role of Civil Wars and Elections”, 693.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 697f.

¹⁰⁵ Höglund, “Electoral violence in conflict-ridden societies”, 416.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 415f.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 417.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 421.

To conclude, electoral violence reflects the larger political conflict within a country whose society is divided. In Pakistan, political violence clusters around election times and can escalate into political assassinations. Elections serve as a “breeding ground” for the de-legitimization of political rivals; electoral violence is a way of channeling political dissent and influencing political processes.¹¹⁰ To prevent the intensification of violent political disputes, the electoral process must be managed extremely carefully.

Military

Despite efforts of civilian leaders to reduce the direct influence of the military in the day-to-day business of the government, the power of the military is great in Pakistan.¹¹¹ Even though Pakistan’s constitution was amended in 2010, transforming it into a parliamentary democracy “with defense committees in the Senate and the National Assembly to conduct oversight over the military”, foreign and defense policy remain “off limits”.¹¹² The legislature can neither influence defense-related decisions nor oversee the military or its budget.¹¹³ Furthermore, the Pakistani military directly coordinates defense acquisitions with foreign governments and prevails as “the go-to power broker for the state of Pakistan”.¹¹⁴

The military has also “fully penetrated” the intelligence agencies and even plays an important role for internal security as the national police force is “largely seen as corrupt, incompetent and excessively brutal”.¹¹⁵ Besides its predominant role in foreign and domestic policy, the military is heavily involved in the economy, controlling over 33% of all heavy industry and 10% of all assets in the private sector.¹¹⁶ It is also involved in illicit market activities, like smuggling oil and narcotics across borders and demanding money at army-checkpoints in the provinces.¹¹⁷ Above all, the military has established a broad patronage network which protects their ranks, undermines the law and is a key enabler for the unrestrained corruption within the military.

To conclude, “Pakistan’s army is the keystone to its problematic national identity”.¹¹⁸ While it may be necessary to confer more power to the military during elections and in times of violent conflicts to protect civilians, it is important to remember that the military does not provide effective tools to solve the underlying conflicts.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, an oversized military bears the constant risk of “military interventionism” for the state’s institutions – especially in Pakistan, where multiple military coups have been performed in the past.¹²⁰

¹¹⁰Perliger, “The Role of Civil Wars and Elections”, 697; Free and Fair Election Network, “Campaigns of Violence”, 3.

¹¹¹ Bruneau et al, “Civil-Military Relations in Muslim Countries”.

¹¹² Ibid., 13.

¹¹³Bruneau et al, “Civil-Military Relations in Muslim Countries”, 14-15.

¹¹⁴ Ibid 13; 24.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 17.

¹¹⁶Ibid.

¹¹⁷Khan, “Combating corruption in Pakistan”.

¹¹⁸Bruneau et al., “Civil-Military Relations in Muslim Countries”, 11.

¹¹⁹Höglund, Electoral violence in conflict-ridden societies”, 421.

¹²⁰Bruneau et al., “Civil-Military Relations in Muslim Countries”, 11.

Religion, Sectarianism and Blasphemy Laws

Our dataset shows that 10% of political assassination was carried out by religious extremists. Religion is deeply enmeshed with the Pakistani society, and Islam is one of the “defining influence[s] in Pakistani society” and social institutions.¹²¹

Pakistan is home to the second largest Muslim population in the world, and the community of faith consists of the two main divergent doctrines of Sunni (85-90%) and Shia (10-15%).¹²² Since Pakistan is not a secular state, but a declared Islamic republic, the fight for empowerment, public identity and superiority is not only a fight over fundamental differences in religious practices, but also about real political power and its translation within the nation’s legislative order.¹²³

The intense emphasis on religious doctrines has paved way for sectarianism. Pakistani sectarianism is defined as the “organized and militant regiopolitical activism” of Shiites or Sunnis, whose aims include “safeguard[ing] and promot[ing] the sociopolitical interests of the particular Muslim sectarian community” and a “marginalization of the rival sectarian community”.¹²⁴ These sectarian divisions attempt in agenda-setting efforts and interfere in elections through endorsement of rivalling schools of thought, which further increases religious tensions in the society and on political decisions.¹²⁵ This activism has frequently turned violent in the past and includes terrorist tactics like targeted killings and bombings,¹²⁶ of which especially progressive politicians are repeatedly the intended targets of sectarianistic violence.¹²⁷

Nonetheless, the relationship between politics and sectarianism is not one-dimensional: The Pakistani state government has repeatedly supported specific Islamic groups in order to support the state’s own political agendas.¹²⁸ Unfortunately, this has “inadvertently encouraged the growth of new religious and political dynamics”, as well as intensified sectarianist conflicts.¹²⁹ These relationships are often short-lived and volatile, especially if politicians do not adhere to pressure by religious leaders.¹³⁰ As a result, the state “struggles to find a new basis for a national politics beyond Islamic ideology”.¹³¹

¹²¹ Mohammed A. Qadeer, *Pakistan: Social and cultural transformations in a Muslim nation* (New York City: Routledge, 2006), 154.

¹²² CIA.org, “Pakistan”; Vali Nasr, “International Politics, Domestic Imperatives, and Identity Mobilization: Sectarianism in Pakistan, 1979-1998”, *Comparative Politics* 32, no. 2 (2000); Pew Research Center, “Rising Restrictions on Religion. One-third of the world’s population experiences an increase”, *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*.

¹²³ Nasr, “International Politics, Domestic Imperatives, and Identity Mobilization”.

¹²⁴ Nasr, “International Politics, Domestic Imperatives, and Identity Mobilization”, 171.

¹²⁵ Muhammed Ismail Khan, “The Assertion of Barelvi Extremism”, *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 12, (2011), 64.

¹²⁶ Nasr, “International Politics, Domestic Imperatives, and Identity Mobilization”, 171.

¹²⁷ Khan, “The Assertion of Barelvi Extremism”; Vali Nasr, “The rise of Sunni militancy in Pakistan: The changing role of Islamism and the Ulama in society and politics”, *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 1 (2011).

¹²⁸ Khan, “The Assertion of Barelvi Extremism”; 66.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

The blasphemy laws are a unique explanatory factor for political assassinations in Pakistan. Numerous politicians have been assassinated for demanding amnesties for accused individuals and for amendments to existing Pakistani blasphemy laws.¹³² However, Pakistan is not the only country that punishes blasphemy: In general, “44% of [all the] countries worldwide have laws against defamation of religions, including hate speech against religious communities”.¹³³ Due to the fusion of politics and religion, the blasphemy laws are deeply embedded in Pakistan’s society and politics.¹³⁴

The purposes of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan are to “[s]afeguard the integrity of religious communities and traditions, fighting incitement and discrimination, preserving social harmony and morality”.¹³⁵ Covering all faiths during the reign of Great Britain, the laws were later rewritten to only cover blasphemy of Islam.¹³⁶ During the 1980s military regime, the laws were tightened and politically instrumentalized to “fuse religion and nationalism, gain support of conservative Islamist forces, silence moderates and liberals, and weaken opponents”.¹³⁷

Nowadays, the laws cover a broad spectrum of offences and “allow[...] for a case to be filed against someone on the basis of them allegedly using ‘innuendos’ and ‘insinuations’ to desecrate religion”.¹³⁸ Such vague laws can be misappropriated to remove unwanted individuals and to “settle personal scores” within neighbourhoods or villages.¹³⁹ Critics have pointed out the “selective application” of the laws and overrepresentation of religious minorities under the accused. Members of religious minorities like Christians, Ahmadi Muslims and Hindus who make up only 3% of the population are almost half of all cases tried in the courts.¹⁴⁰ In addition, the risk of being convicted is also increased by a low burden of proof, corruption and improper judicial system.¹⁴¹

Due to the misapplication of the laws, Pakistan has the highest rate of prosecutions for blasphemy worldwide.¹⁴² Since 2013, the sole punishment for blasphemy is the

¹³²Knox Thames, “Killing Moderate Pakistan, One Advocate for Tolerance at a Time”, Foreign Policy, March 14, 2021.

¹³³ Pew Research Center, “Rising Restrictions on Religion”; Saiya, “Blasphemy and terrorism”, 1101.

¹³⁴ Saeed Ahmed Rid, “How Democracy Affects Religious Freedom in Muslim Majority Countries”, *Asia-Pacific - Annual Research Journal of Far East & South East Asia* 38, February (2020), 126-148.

¹³⁵ Saiya, “Blasphemy and terrorism”, 1089.

¹³⁶ Peter Blood, *Pakistan: A Country Study* (Washington D.C.: Federal Research Division, 1995); Saiya, “Blasphemy and terrorism”.

¹³⁷ Saiya, “Blasphemy and terrorism”, 1089.

¹³⁸ Khan, “The Assertion of Barelvi Extremism”, 67.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Saiya, “Blasphemy and terrorism”, 1097.

¹⁴¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), “USCIRF Marks 10th Anniversary of Shahbaz Bhatti Assassination”, *USCIRF Statements*, March 2, 2021. Accessed April 20, 2021. <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscirf-marks-10th-anniversary-shahbaz-bhatti-assassination> ; Malik et al., “Identification of risk factors generating terrorism in Pakistan”, 552.

¹⁴² Saiya, “Blasphemy and terrorism”, 1096; “USCIRF Marks 10th Anniversary of Shahbaz Bhatti Assassination”.

death penalty.¹⁴³ Although no one had been executed by the state for blasphemy since 2011, between 30 and 60 people have been lynched by mobs since the 1990s, even those acquitted from the charges.¹⁴⁴

Efforts by politicians to revise the laws have repeatedly occurred since their instalment, but these efforts were never fulfilled due to pressure from the population and religious leaders.¹⁴⁵ Although blasphemy laws are not always indicative of a punitive or extremist society per se, research states that an application of blasphemy laws such as that of Pakistan “weaken[s] reform-minded moderates, silence[s] minorities and promote[s] violence”.¹⁴⁶ The repeated assassinations of lawyers and politicians involved in blasphemy cases, including Salman Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti, intimidate and permanently silence the reform and revision of these laws.¹⁴⁷

As a result, the religious extremist violence in Pakistan stems from the fusion of religion and politics, sectarianism, and the misuse of blasphemy laws, which altogether create an immensely heated environment. Progressive policies, or even the perception of a person acting against religious doctrines, can have fatal effects for individual politicians and society as a whole.¹⁴⁸

Conclusion

Assassinations are difficult to differentiate from the broader level of political violence within a country that experiences terrorism and drone strikes. As this article shows, the causes of assassinations and other types of violence are woven into the institutional, structural, regional, and political life of Pakistan. As a result of clashing ideologies and a readiness to resolve conflicts through violence, Pakistan is trapped in a vicious cycle marked by political assassinations and other forms of political violence.

As this case study shows, political violence and instability are not just caused by one single factor, but rather by a complex interplay of domestic and foreign influences, factors, and characteristics. The more the phenomenon of political violence is analysed in Pakistan, the more obscure and less selective each factor becomes. Due to this, the limitations of our research approach must be emphasized. The

¹⁴³ Saiya, “Blasphemy and terrorism”, 1099.

¹⁴⁴ “Bad-mouthing. Pakistan’s blasphemy laws legitimise intolerance”, *Economist*, November 29, 2014; Khan, “The Assertion of Barelvi Extremism”, 67; Saiya, “Blasphemy and terrorism”; Thames, “Killing Moderate Pakistan”; USCRIF, “Pakistan. USCRIF-Recommended for Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)”.

¹⁴⁵ Khan, “The Assertion of Barelvi Extremism”; Saeed Ahmed Rid, “How Democracy Affects Religious Freedom in Muslim Majority Countries”, *Asia-Pacific - Annual Research Journal of Far East & South East Asia* 38, February (2020), 126-148.

¹⁴⁶ Amnesty International, “Use and Abuse of the Blasphemy Laws”, July 1, 1994. Accessed April 9, 2022. <https://redirect.is/5cngpd4> ; Joseph Liu, “Laws Penalizing Blasphemy, Apostasy and Defamation of Religion are Widespread”, Pew Research Center, November 21, 2012. Accessed April 20, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/11/21/laws-penalizing-blasphemy-apostasy-and-defamation-of-religion-are-widespread/>; Saiya, “Blasphemy and terrorism”, 1088.

¹⁴⁷ “Bad-mouthing. Pakistan’s blasphemy laws legitimise intolerance”; Thames, “Killing Moderate Pakistan”; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCRIF), “Pakistan. USCRIF-Recommended for Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)”.

¹⁴⁸ Amnesty International, “Use and Abuse of the Blasphemy Laws”; Liu, “Laws Penalizing Blasphemy, Apostasy and Defamation of Religion are Widespread”; Saiya, “Blasphemy and terrorism”, 1088.

current situation of Pakistan is multi-layered, which is why recommendations must be over two different time frames.

Short-term measures, which can be implemented almost immediately, are the increase of armed security personnel and the establishment of security checkpoints when politicians are campaigning for elections.¹⁴⁹ Importantly, many political assassinations in Pakistan occur during campaigning and public events, where safety could be enhanced through entry and exit controls.¹⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the increase of security measures has no protective effect if those who are supposed to protect the politicians successfully pursue their own interests. Furthermore, a significant increase of the clearing rate of political murders could decrease the number of willing offenders and completed attacks.

However, all these measures require financial means as well as a well-functioning and independent intelligence agency, neither of which currently exist.¹⁵¹ As our dataset implies, not all acts of political assassination come from outside the executive or legislative realm, implying that strategic interests may prevail before democratic transitions of power.

To mediate the explanatory factors found in this case study, long-term measures must be implemented. Regarding socio-economic grievances, Ross suggests reducing underemployment and poverty.¹⁵² The main hurdle for this measure is the high level of corruption throughout the country, which has rendered domestic and foreign financial aid ineffective.¹⁵³ Unless the enormous corruption across all sectors of executive, judicative and legislative actors is confronted, the socio-economic situation and, therefore grievances, in society will not improve significantly.

Because violence clusters around election times, politicians need to pay attention to their rhetoric and take the existent social tensions within Pakistani society into consideration. Therefore, politicians should be careful not to intensify existing social conflicts and cleavages, both during election times and after them.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, they should also foster a sense of unity instead of dividing the people with numerous separatist and fundamentalist movements.¹⁵⁵ With regards to the political elite in Islamabad, a fundamental change regarding the politics of patronage needs to happen, which implies opening politics for a broader spectrum of the society and ending ethnical favouritism. Moreover, the concerns of ordinary people – particularly of those in rural areas – need to be taken into consideration in the capital to eliminate leeway for radicalism and militancy.

The government also needs to regain authority in the provinces, where it is undermined by a parallel system that has been built by the military, schools and

¹⁴⁹ Mandala, "Political Assassinations", 158.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 159.

¹⁵¹ Bruneau et al, "Civil-Military Relations in Muslim Countries".

¹⁵² Ross, "Structural Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism".

¹⁵³ Chêne, "Overview of corruption in Pakistan."; Khan, "Corruption and the Decline of the State in Pakistan".

¹⁵⁴ Höglund, "Electoral violence in conflict-ridden societies", 421; Siddiq, "Pakistan's Counterterrorism Strategy: Separating Friends from Enemies", 158.

¹⁵⁵ Höglund, "Electoral violence in conflict-ridden societies", 421; Fuchs and Fuchs, "Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Identities, Citizenship and Social Belonging".

mosques and has evolved over decades.¹⁵⁶ Ultimately, the power of the military is but one symptom of the dysfunctional state apparatus; the threat of a military coup is constantly present.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, in the fight against corruption, it is not sufficient to create anti-corruption laws and a Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) as long as repercussions for corruption of high-level public officials remain low.¹⁵⁸

When it comes to religion, sectarianism and blasphemy laws, it is important to note that the Islamic religion is an element of the Pakistani constitution. Nonetheless, Siddiqa states that “Pakistan also needs to create a new religious narrative. No amount of counterterrorism operations will work unless the government has a plan to generate a new discourse that can counter [...] ideology and the orthodox interpretation of Sharia law”.¹⁵⁹ It seems to us that it is nearly impossible to change the composition of current religious conflicts unless the majority of the population is willing to reconcile and aim towards unity and transitional justice.

As for the blasphemy laws, a compromise could stipulate the introduction of safeguards to the law, like increasing the burden of proof to prevent the misapplication of the penal code.¹⁶⁰ In the name of the rule of law, it would also help to punish those who commit violence as a form of “vigilante justice” outside the courtroom and consequently prosecute false accusations.¹⁶¹

In the end, all implemented measures should aim at developing “[t]he institutions necessary for ensuring free and fair elections — police, judiciary, and the media”.¹⁶² In addition to establishing free press and media, access to the internet needs to be increased nationwide while simultaneously raising the levels of literacy and education in general. Finally, the political parties need time (uninterrupted by military dictatorships) to establish themselves and develop moderate agendas. Consequently, only time will tell if efforts to curb the assassinations in Pakistan can be fruitful.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ali, “Conflict between social structure and legal framework”, 116.

¹⁵⁹ Siddiqa, “Pakistan's Counterterrorism Strategy: Separating Friends from Enemies”, 159.

¹⁶⁰ USCRIF, “Pakistan. USCRIF-Recommended for Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)”.

¹⁶¹ Saiya, “Blasphemy and terrorism in the Muslim world”.

¹⁶² Höglund, “Electoral violence in conflict-ridden societies”, 420.

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