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Weatherhead Center FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS HARVARD UNIVERSITY
PROJECT ON SHI'ISM & GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Sectarianism in Pakistan:

State, Society, and Regional Geopolitics

Monday, October 5th, 2020

Event Transcript

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Abstract:

With recent developments in Pakistan highlighting the dangers of sectarian violence and the potential for greater social cleavages emerging, this panel discussion will focus on the history and contemporary challenges facing Pakistan regarding sectarianism. Panelists will discuss the complex dynamics between Pakistani state and society, the diversity of cultural, ethnic, and religious identities and movements, and regional geopolitical and security dynamics which impact the country.

Speakers:

Hassan Abbas, Distinguished Professor of International Relations at the Near East South Asia Strategic Studies Centre (NESA)

Nosheen Ali, Global Faculty-in-Residence, Gallatin School, NYU

Beena Sarwar, Freelance Pakistani journalist and documentary filmmaker & former Visiting Assistant Professor of the Practice of English, Brown University

Moderator:

Ali Asani, Chair, Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs & Professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic Religion and Cultures, Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations & Harvard University

[Payam Mohseni] Hello, everyone. Welcome to our first event of the academic year, for the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs here at Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. Thank you for joining us. This will be the first in a series of events, and in addition to a conference later in the spring semester that we are planning where we will delve into and look at various aspects of Shi'ism and the manifestation of Shi'ism across different disciplines, from politics and geopolitics through Shi'a diaspora communities in the West and Africa,

Shi'ism across the world, Shi'a philosophy, diversity, and pluralism within Shi'ism and interfaith dialogue. Our first event today,[I am] very pleased to present our moderator Ali Asani, the event being on Sectarianism in Pakistan, a significant subject,

especially with the reach for the very recent exclusivist episodes that we witnessed in Pakistan. Ali Asani is the professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic Region and Cultures here at Harvard University. He is also a co-chair of the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs.

Very recently, Professor Asani was also awarded the Harvard Foundation Faculty of the Year Award and was appointed the Murray A. Albertson Professor of Middle Eastern Studies, here at Harvard University as well. Congratulations to you, Ali, and with that I will hand over the platform to you to begin to the event. Thank you again.

[Ali Asani] Thank you, Payam, for organizing this event and I welcome everyone to this panel discussion. Before we start, I wanted to introduce our panelists first. We have with us Professor Hassan Abbas, who is a distinguished professor of International Relations at the Near East-South Asia Strategic Study Center at the National Defense University in Washington, DC.

He is affiliated and advises on our Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs, here at the

Weatherhead Center. He is also a senior fellow at the Center for Global Policy, a think tank that focuses on the intersection of US foreign policy and Muslim geopolitics.

His current research focuses on building narratives for countering political and religious extremism and law enforcement reforms in developing states. He has a distinguished career, serving as professor and department chair at the National Defense University's College of International Security, as well as the distinguished Qaid-e-Azam Professor at Columbia University.

He has various connections with Harvard University, including with the Harvard Law School's Islamic Legal Studies Program and the Program on Negotiation, as well as the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard's Kennedy School. Welcome, Hassan. Our second speaker is Nosheen

Ali, a sociologist serving as Global Faculty in Residence at the Gallatin School at New York University. She researches statement-making ecology and Muslim cultural politics in South Asia, with a focus on Pakistan and Kashmir. She is the author of a recent book: Delusional

States: Feeling Rule and Development in Pakistan's Northern Frontier, which was published by Cambridge University Press.

Welcome, Nosheen. Our third speaker is Beena Sarwar, a freelance journalist and documentary filmmaker from Pakistan who focuses on human rights, media, gender, and democracy issues, as well as India, Pakistan, and South Asia relations. She held senior editorial positions in Pakistan in the print and broadcast media.

She also has a Harvard University connection through the Neiman Fellowship Program, as well as the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the Kennedy School of Government. She taught journalism at Harvard University, Brown University, Princeton University, as well as Emerson College. Welcome, Beena. To get started, the way the format is going to work is each speaker will have about

ten minutes to speak. After that, we will open for questions that are coming from the audience, but if the panels have questions for each other too, I welcome that as well. We will keep it flexible. Maybe after you talked, if you wanted to ask questions to each other,

and then we will open it up to the audience. I wanted to start the topic today[firstly, with] two caveats. One is the term sectarianism that we are using today for this presentation. Strictly speaking, sectarianism, as many scholars have pointed out, is actually not enough.

It is a term[emerging] from the Christian tradition where there is an idea of a central church that is considered to be orthodox. Then, there are all these offshoots: the sects that are seen as sects and somehow heretical. Somehow, this model has been transposed on to

contemporary thinking about Islam. Even though we know that in its formation and evolution, Islam did not have a central church perse, but you had rather different communities of interpretations. I wanted to start with that caveat, even though it has become popular to use this term, maybe it is just a label of convenience.

Historically speaking, this term itself is problematic. I wanted to start[with] that at the beginning, because it may also be relevant to our conversations. The second thing I wanted to point out is that the founding of Pakistan is interesting. The founder of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, was very clear

in the buildup to the whole Pakistan movement and the creation of Pakistan. He was very clear that Pakistan was not going to be a theocratic state to be ruled by priests with a divine mission, and these are quotes from his works. We have many non-Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Parsis, but they are all Pakistanis.

He really had this vision of an inclusive Pakistan, it was not just for Muslims, and it was for people of all different religious traditions. He was also very clear that you could belong to any religion, creed, or caste, as it was not the business of the state. Ironically, he himself, even though he is called Qaid-e-Azam, his detractors used to call him Kafir-e-Azam, or the Great Infidel. Partially because he came from a Shi'a background, but because he was trained and educated in the West, and

people could not accept [those credentials]. There was this label Kafir-e-Azam. It is an interesting thing that the very founding father of Pakistan[dealt] with this with this label of kafir. I just wanted to make those few comments at the beginning.

I will turn it over to Hassan, if you want to share your comments with us.

[Hassan Abbas] Thank so much, Professor Asani, for your kind introduction and for framing the issue. I am thankful to Payam for leading this project and for giving us this opportunity. I am planning to focus in my ten minutes on the policy perspective, or looking at it from a pure policy angle. However, Professor Asani has raised two points which I want to just touch upon briefly, to set the stage also.

You are so right about that this whole notion of the use of the word sectarianism in Pakistan and in the region, I must add. This is a very politically correct phrase as well, because even if any specific minority is getting beaten up, getting targeted, getting killed, facing suicide bombings.

But if you would ask somebody about victims, they say this is all sectarianism. Sectarianism against whom? It can be anti-Barelvi, it can be anti-Shi'a, it can be anti-Hindu or some group.[By] calling it sectarianism, it gives the impression that everyone is involved, everyone is against everyone else. Professor Asani so right. This issue has a different context in South Asia, especially in Pakistan.

This phrase clearly has been misused. The other way this phrase has been misused is always saying this is religious extremism and it started from Taliban in Afghanistan. We have nothing to do with them, they are far away. As they are from a different planet! Or it is projected as Iran versus Saudi Arabia. How convenient! How easy to just shift the blame on someone else.

Because we argue things cannot get so wrong in Pakistan. Your phrase just reminded me of that point. Also, relevant here is how far Pakistan has come away from the idea of its founding fathers and especially Mohammad Ali Jinnah as you rightly said. And I was reminded, what Mohammad Ali Jinnah was called by the religious extremists then who inspired all the religious extremists who are having a field day in Pakistan today. By the way, they were all against

the creation of Pakistan, most of them – or 90 percent of them. They used to call Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Kafir-e-Azam[the biggest infidel]. They all knew Mohammad Ali Jinnah was a Shi'a Ithna Asheri, but that was not the reason they were calling him kafir. They were calling him kafir and infidel because of their political differences. It is so interesting that despite the religious parties' hatred for Mohammad Ali Jinnah or this political elite, which was modernist, pluralist, and progressive; and while knowing even about their sectarian difference, they were not calling him Shi'a or framing it as a Shi'a vs Sunni issue.

The idea of Pakistan was redefined by General Zia-ul-Haq (from a relatively secular to a conservative religious identity). Most of what we see today is a consequence of that. I leave it to my other esteemed colleagues to pick on that point, but what you said raised such important questions that I thought I will briefly mention this background. The focus of my

thoughts today are in reference to what has been happening in Pakistan for the last two to three months

[and] frame it in a broad fashion. I have two examples to explain my frame. First, in Pakistani media and elsewhere there is talk of the resurgence of sectarianism. I cannot think of any other word to explain this challenge. Sectarianism here means the Shi'a-Sunni context, conflict, or rivalry

which is again, raising its ugly head. This was reflected by one development which has stayed in my mind, and I cannot really figure how to present it. Something has happened in Pakistan, in an unprecedented fashion: recently during the month of Muharram in Karachi, there were anti-Shia rallies where slogans in favor of ¬¬¬¬Yazid were raised.

Those in the audience who are not familiar with him, I can safely say, Yazid ibn Muawiyah Abu Sufiyan has been the most hated figure in the entire Islamic history. Irrespective if you are Shi'a or a Sunni, whichever sect or group you belong to, no one ever supports or thinks in positive terms about Yazid. People on the streets, talking about him favorably--

is amazing. It happened in reaction to something that a Shi'a speaker (in Islamabad) said in a very offensive way, but I am using it as a frame. Things have not ever come down to this point that in a public procession of thousands, somebody can raise a slogan in favor of Yazid.

In South Asia, where Islam was introduced because of the Sufi mystics who were always talking about pluralism, it is really a very problematic sign. How do we understand this? I was thinking, the question is why is it happening now? Is it domestic or is it regional, is the state an innocent victim or if the state is part and parcel of this crisis yet again? I may not have the exact answers in terms of yes or no to this in short, but I will touch upon some of these. First and foremost, I think we must acknowledge that Pakistan did pretty well in its counterterrorism operations in

recent years. They pushed back al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban, and the number of suicide bombings that had gone up from 2004 to 2014, went down. The Pakistani Security Forces did pretty well. The credit is due to them. However, from a policy angle, I believe that the lessons of those counter-terrorism successes were never clearly defined.

The state never went out to explain to everyone, what they really figured out, in terms of why was terrorism happening and how they had pushed back this menace. Was this a purely military action? Was it countering violent extremism? Have they involved religious leaders? Whatever we know is very little because of some research from some extant scholars, but there is no national narrative in Pakistan, which explains how they pushed back and succeeded.

Now that there is some resurgence again of bigotry and extremism that we are seeing, there is no way we know what had worked in curbing it. How we had pushed it back and whether this is just a momentary and transitory thing, or is it more serious? Secondly, this is a problem not only in Pakistani narrative, but in the Western narrative as well, in the United States as well. In regards to US policy towards the Middle East, we fail to acknowledge that this global extremism network, at a more local level has always been sectarian in essence.

Whether it was in Iraq, or whether it was in Syria. First and foremost, these are very, very sectarian in focus. Then, they expanded into international terrorism because for whatever reasons, ignorance, I would say, we never wanted to go deep into the roots of these developments. We were more focused on their final shape and form.

We succeeded in some shape or form in certain cases, but we could not cut out the root of where this is happening. That is why in Pakistan, it was not acknowledged that the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and their splinter groups, were all extremely bigoted and in most cases, very, very anti-Shi'a. For instance, especially so in case of Jaish-e-Mohammad,

and its splinter organizations. I do not want to throw names of all these militant organizations, but these are quite few in number. Many of these are from South Punjab and some were known as Punjabi Taliban initially, because it was kind of a fashionable phenomenon to be called "Taliban". Also, it took Pakistan over a decade to acknowledge, that these are "sons of our soil" -

these are our own kids who have turned against the state and have lost their soul. Those factors that motivated them continue to simmer.[The] third point is the political economy of religious extremism. I can call it political economy of jihad as well. What I mean is[a] Deobandi vs Barelvi battlefield. We saw the assassination of Pakistan People's Party leader and Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer[for allegedly committing blasphemy]. His killer's grave has become a shrine.

It is a pity. It is so pathetic for everyone who understands the Sufi message in Pakistan focusing on pluralism. What was really happening, tis that the Barelvis had thought that the Deobandis are receiving all the funds from the Gulf and the Middle East, and this is our time to get some funds and how come we are seen as overly peace loving.

They wanted to show their power and authority - it was their opportunity to come to limelight. Next point, (I know I might have just a couple of minutes left) is linked to whether the state is involved in all this or not. To confront terrorism and the political economy of religious extremism, Pakistan had built up a national-counterterrorism authority[NACTA].

It is a good organization facilitating cooperation and cohesion of police, intelligence, and other organizations. However, whether the Pakistani Head of Counter Terrorism is also sitting on the table where head of the Pakistani intelligence is sitting, or the head of the Pakistani military sitting - I doubt it. I have not seen it in any media. The disconnect continues.

We have not incorporated in Pakistan, the lessons of their successes of counterterrorism. My very last point in regards to the state, the worry is again that the Pakistani state has started hiring some of these militant organizations, which are promising them they will do something good ("good" in their context) in India, Kashmir,

or in Afghanistan, now[that] the Taliban are coming back into prominence. The Pakistani interlocutors with Taliban are again important, such as Jamaat-e- Islami and Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Pakistan and others. When I asked this question, to a friend in Pakistani

government if state is again doing it, he said, with the FATF (Financial Action Taskforce) hanging like a sword of Damocles over our head, we cannot be doing this.

What I have concluded is that it is basically incompetence of the highest level by the Pakistani state. They are living in their self-imposed ignorance, and this is giving them benefit of doubt, because this phenomena is so new, maybe it will go away. With that, I will close because of ten minutes and there are many other points I would like to talk about, but that is where I will close. From a policy perspective,

this wave of sectarianism is very threatening because it is going to empower religious extremists who are going to push for terrorism in Pakistan, again. The state at the least, should be blamed for its total incompetence, and its lack of focus. If we see this continuing, we will start thinking the state is playing its dirty hand again, which it has done before

and we have evidence of that. Thank you.

[Background]

[Ali Asani] Thank you very much for those remarks, that of course pointing out that maybe this is not about religion. This is about the failure of the state and state related things, rather than some intrinsically religious issue. With that, I will turn it over to Dr. Nosheen Ali for her remarks.

[Payam Mohseni] Sorry to interrupt, but one comment for the attendees, just know that if you have any questions from our panelists, please use the question and answer button at the bottom of your screen. Once we are in the question and answer session, then we will be able to address some of your questions.

[Nosheen Ali] Thank you Dr. Payam Mohseni, for giving us a platform to come together and discuss this very painful issue. The last month, watching where Pakistani politics has gone. As Professor Hassan Abbas was commenting, we have seen this exacerbating over a long time, in post-colonial Pakistan, but

there are certain aspects of it that feel unprecedented. However, I want to historicize this moment a little bit as continuing with what Professor Abbas has done for us. I want to start with a personal example. In 1994, my best friend who is Isna Asheri Shi'a, her mamoo, her uncle, was killed in a targeted assassination ins Sarghoda, Pakistan. That was my first

understanding of something called the state project, sectarian privilege at the top, what it meant at an intimate level of family suffering. This is 1994, I am fourteen years old. For those of us who have lived in Shi'a neighborhoods, or have deep friendships with Shi'as communities, have taught Shi'a students, have Shi'a colleagues, and Ismaili colleagues, and Hindu colleagues,

and Ahmadi colleagues, these tragedies are interlinked. We know they are linked through shared processes. I want to draw that connection at the outset. We will outline later as well, this rise in high profile target killings in the nineties. I am going to make a few jumps here. I want to talk about Gilgit-Baltistan,

where my scholarship on sectarian violence is focused. Gilgit-Baltistan at this time is not constitutionally part of Pakistan yet, it is internationally considered as part of disputed Kashmir. It is a Shi'a majority political unit in Sunni dominated Pakistan. We have seen in 1970, official state policies of breaking secular nationalist

will and organization, through divide and conquer tactics. This is often called by my interlocutors in Gilgit-Baltistan, as calculated disorder along sectarian lines. We have enforced an annihilatory politics of sectarian violence.

This was what was done in Gilgit-Baltistan, that loudspeakers were installed (they got full backing). When you create a law and order situation, you disrupt possibilities of regional political solidarity, especially in a disputed border area. Whatyou then do is that you can then represent those citizens, 1.2 million of them, as irrational, as over emotional, as being misled by these uncompromising ulemah.

The ground reality, the citizenship question of political rights is trumped by the bureaucratic interests of the state. That was linked to what the Pakistani military state had already done in Dhaka, Bangladesh. We know about Al-Badr, we know about Al-Shams. We know that religious terror has been used as a state tool within Pakistan, prior to the Cold War.

That is a very important point to make. We have Gilgit-Baltistan since the seventies. I am drawing in Dhaka and Gilgit-Baltistan to continue our emphasis on seeing this as not unprecedented, what has happened last month in Karachi. Now I am going to fast forward to Karachi, which is where I am from and I have grown up.

There is this apathy towards anti-Shi'a violence. Imambargah okay, (it always happens on and off). Again, like Professor Hassan was saying, sectarianism, it has come from outside, it is both sides. Or why should we talk about Shi'as? All lives matter. Everybody is dying in terrorist violence. We see a lot of ways in which the central question of Sunni privilege is completely overridden.

You will have to try hard to find scholarship on Pakistan that takes a Sunni- privileging state project as the core of Pakistani nationalist ideology seriously and extensively. Because we have gotten used to saying there was the Sunni party and the Shi'a party and

both were killing each other. I want to talk about between 2012 and 2017, just to give some figures, twenty-five imambarghas were attacked. More than 2,000 people were killed. The Hazara ethnic group, Hazara Shi'as were wholescale attacked in Quetta and in other parts of Balochistan. I also want to link it to post-2009, and

over the last decade, we have had more than eighteen attacks on Sufi shrines. I also want to link it to post- 2007. We have had more than 400 girls' schools, attacked in Pakistan. What is going on here? What I am trying to suggest is that violent sexism and violent sectism are connected - what I would call, and I have called in an upcoming publication, sectism which is defined as anti-Shi'a racism,

anti-minority racism. "Sectarianism" is just a way to do both sides. Sectarianism is a false equivalence that does not recognize the reality of how much Sunni militancy is backed by the

Pakistani state. When you have imambarghas attacked, when you have whole buildings being attacked, we need to

also ask why our categories were never there in the first place. For example, Zia-ul-Haq's project is called Islamization. It is called Islamization in Pakistani studies. It is called Islamization in all literature. I have called it Islamization for a long time. It is a Sunni dominant project. Why do we not call it Sunni-zation?

This is the way in which this abstract notion of Islam coded as Sunni becomes normalized, so everything else is particular.

I want to take seriously, as a feminist, the sect and gender questions, and connect them which is not often done. I will give you an example from three weeks ago, a friend of mine who is Sunni, was in Saddar, Karachi. She had tied

some scarf around her head and was with her Shi'a friend. Both of them were there to fix some technical stuff. The person who was there, the technician at the dukaan (store), (sorry, there is a lot of Urdu on my tongue). I am trying to speak in English. He said to her, why have you taken the head scarf like this, are you Qadiani? (a derogatory term for Ahmadi)

Another public intellectual in Sindh, who has recently been accused of blasphemy, the violence against her, the criminal and hate centered violence against her that took over Twitter, that took over all over Pakistan, was constantly focusing on how she is Qadiani, which she is not,

and both are Sunni. What I am trying to state here is the otherizing that happens, is a no woman, no Sufi, no Shi'a, no minority, no music, very hardcore, fundamentalist vision. That is why we need to look at this as a violent, religio-political project, and I call it an annihilatory project,

in which all of these questions are linked. I am not sure where I am going on time, but I wanted to (Ji[honorific] Ali, you can unmute and tell me).

I asked Ali, if you ask me to speak, it will be hard because I have three chapters on my book on Gilgit-Baltistan. I have a lot to say on how the sectarian politics has particularly been resisted in Sindh, by feminists, by Sufis, by progressives, where I am from and in Gilgit-Baltistan, where I have spent a lot of time doing research, but let me end with the racism point.

Those of us who have grown up Shi'a, know that being called kafir at age ten is absolutely normal. I mean, this burden of majoritarian questioning that people from Shi'a households have to face right from an early age, is not very well known. Actually, it is neither acknowledged in academic discourse, nor is it

widely talked about, because again, like Professor Abbas was saying, sectarianism is sort of up there, matlab[in other words], it is like a political issue. It is an issue of regional geopolitics. People do not see that this is an intimate reality for a lot of people who might have actually not been Shi'a even

There are people whose names are Naqvi and Raza, who are discriminated against, and then they wake up to the fact "oh, I am being looked at as Shi'a." The examples there for those who do not know and have not lived this reality is: not accepting food from Shi'a neighbors, thinking that Shi'as are Hindus, should be disassociated with, andnot attending funerals of Shi'as.

These are just three very basic examples. I can give countless more, but the most recent case that has happened over the last four weeks is the escalation of blasphemy cases against Shi'as, more than a hundred people from what I know. Lists are being passed around in Sukkur. The protest in Karachi that we saw in which thousands were participating (and chanting anti-Shia solgans) ten minutes from where I have lived all my life, have not ended in Sukkur, in northern Sindh.

The use of blasphemy as a tool to criminalize Shi'a thought is a very devastating move. I want to say that this anti-minority politics, which I would like to say, is a racial politics as well, not just religious politics, not just state politic. In terms of solutions, I would

like a feminist politics that takes an openly anti-sectist stance as well. I write more about anti-sectist, feminist politics and the need for that, and we will share the link later. Thank you, I will end there.

[Ali Asani] Thank you so much for your comments, Nosheen. Of course, pointing out that this in a certain way, I think it is one of the problems with nationalism as an ideology. You have to constantly keep on inventing the other because nationalism thrives on othering people. You define who is the nation, and then people who do not fit the nation are then seen as the enemies of the state.

This is a problem worldwide with nationalism perse, but we are seeing it take this particular turn, especially when the Pakistani nation state gets defined under Zia-ul-Haq, in a Sunni privileging, Sunni perspective. Let me turn it over now to Beena Sarwar.

[Beena Sarwar] Thank you, Prof. Asani, Dr. Mohseni, Hassan Abbas, and Nosheen Ali. It is wonderful to be here with all of you – and the Weatherhead Center - for this really topical timely event. I think some of the points that have been made are really very pertinent, especially the point where sectarianism and the othering and the Sunni privileging.

I actually, if I may share my screen. I want to talk a little bit about, and sort of contextualize what Hassan Abbas and Nosheen Ali have said. What I say will be kind of linked up with that, but maybe give another perspective and add a little bit more to their

Very lucid and very intelligent presentations. If I may share my screen.

I just wanted to

play this.

I just wanted to start out with my personal story. My parents got married in 1962. My father was Sunni and my mother was Shi'a, and that I think makes me a "Sushi", a term I learned some time back while researching this issue. But then at that time, identities were more fluid. I think when we were growing up, you were talking about 1984, at that time.

There were a lot more intermarriages and things like that. Then of course, then there is a whole geopolitical factor that Hassan Abbas touched upon a little bit, Pakistan being a frontline state, the proxy wars. Of course, I agree completely with what Hassan Abbas said that it is not just something that comes from the outside.

We have had these divisions within the country, always. As you talked about the Zia-ul-Haq years. I think what we are seeing right now really links the trajectory from that first Afghan so-called jihad, the project, like turning a national war of liberation into a religious war, taking what Dr. Eqbal Ahmad called Terrorism: Theirs & Ours

in his talk at the University Colorado Boulder in 1998. I do not know if you can see the screen but, I have that book/pamphlet of Dr. Iqbal Ahmed, Terrorism: Theirs & Ours, in which he talked[about] terrorism. He talked about the state and the state engaging in acts terrorism and how basically, unconstitutional or illegal acts of violence will backfire.

we are seeing that. I wanted to make these linkages a little bit, and Nosheen already talked about this. All of you also mentioned this and I want to bring up this notion of takfir that has really taken up in Pakistan. Takfir means to create divisions and it means literally to call somebody a kafir or an infidel,[which is] that othering we talked about.

Calling somebody a non-Muslim word versus affirming their identity as Hindu, Ahmadi, Shi'a, or whatever they call a non-Muslim. That of course, links to this whole question of blasphemy that Nosheen brought up, which is linked to this whole issue of nationalism and this ultra-hyper nationalism that we have been seeing.

Now, it has been conflated where on the one hand, labeled as a blasphemer like Salman Taseer was. On the other hand, you are also called a traitor and are charged with sedition. The whole notion of patriotism gets linked with who is the right kind of Muslim. The right Sunni kind of Muslim is the only one who is a patriot, and everybody else becomes a traitor.

This[is the] kind of fascist politics we are seeing all over the world right now, including India and America. I wanted to very quickly go through this. We talked about General Zia-ul-Haq and Benazir Bhutto, and when you look at the timeline of Pakistan and Hassan Abbas brought up this issue of India, so did Nosheen Ali.

If you look at these decades where we have had some kind of political overseeing. Then, we had a decade of army rule, a war with India, and all these phases. Even in 1973, when Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto comes in the second amendment to the constitution and declares Ahmadis as non-Muslims, and you have this "Islamic Summit" which is appeasing that constituency.

Just to go back a little bit, I remember what the former Attorney General of Pakistan said in the seminar in Karachi, organized by the HRCP (the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan). He said actually, maybe the[inaudible] in there too, before Zia-ul-Haq, the second

amendment, and the "Objectives Revolution" , right after Mohammad Ali Jinnah (Qaid-e-Azam) passed away. He would never allow that, as Ali Asani pointed out. His vision for an inclusive Pakistan

would never made space for something like the "Objectives Revolution" that declared Islam to be a state religion, as if a state can have a religion. No, it is only people that can have a religion, the state cannot have[one]. Pakistan and Israel are the only self-declared states that have declared themselves as religious entities.

Then you had the Zia-ul-Haq years with that so-called Islamization, which Nosheen Ali very correctly pointed out with the Sunni-zation activity, the anti-women and anti-minority legislation in the name of Islam. The 295C of the penal code, the British Era law that has expanded under Zia-ul-Haq years to include more offenses, including those punishable by death. That law remained pending for a while until actually in 1993-1994, when

the time that you started to get consciousness of this. When the option of life imprisonment under 295C lapsed (295C being for any kind of disrespect to the Prophet of Islam, (may peace be upon him)). Any kind of disrespect to the Prophet of Islam came under 295C, which was punishable by life imprisonment or death.

In 1993, that law lapsed, and the imprisonment option lapsed and became only punishable by death. That is when this fate of blasphemy murders, began at that time. The first one being a Christian teacher in Faisalabad, Nemad Ehmer, who had actually seen that you are going to[Urdu spoken]

He had written, the posters came up accusing him[of saying that the Prophet (used to steal goats and[inaudible] hang them?)]

(There is the subtle difference between zer and zabr). The posters that came up saying: Muslims, please guard your children against this Christian teacher who is telling your children that the Prophet (God forbid) used to steal goats as opposed to graze goats. In Urdu, the small difference[inaudible] is another whole, long thing about 295C. All that happened after the Sharif government was dismissed[inaudible], then again, we have the Kargil War with India.

Every phase we have seen, the rise of this fascist mentality coincides with this nationalist fervor and war against it. Then, you have another decade of the Musharraf military government and the so called "enlightened moderation" in which he was running with the hares and hunting with hounds.

Then, you have Benazir Bhutto being assassinated days before the general elections and the elections that took place. You actually have that political process continue, and then you suddenly see a rise when the political process again, begins. You again, see the rise in sectarian killings, and in quotes "blasphemy" the issue of Aasia Bibi in 2010. Yet, you have the first peaceful transfer of power from one elected government to another.

That happens despite two elected Prime Ministers being dismissed. The next government, again, you have two elected Prime Ministers being dismissed. Again, the wave of sectarian

so-called killings, begins. Then, there is another peaceful transfer of power and we have the current dispensation, which is the closest to the security establishment that any elected government in Pakistan has ever had.

I just want to go back to the Musharraf years, just after that and his so-called "enlightened moderation". I liked the term that Nosheen used of annihilization. A term that I came across, and I want to use it, "intellecticide", that has been going on for a long time. In the 1990s, I remember I wrote a piece about the target killing of Shi'a doctors at that time in 1993-1994, and

now we are seeing it again. This is intellecticide. The site is something that I came across, actually believe it or not, in a Communist Party of Pakistan's press release. After one of their members was killed in the northern Tribal Areas. This allows for a lot of plausible deniability also. We do not know who is doing it[with] all these freelance snipers[and] assassins. Yes, I completely agree with Hassan of the Barelvi bid for power by killing Salman Taseer.

Then of course, I think coming to Nosheen's point about girls and girls' education. You had that attack on Malala Yousafzai, and this is actually a demonstration in Karachi in support of Malala Yousafzai. I will just very quickly go through these: in 2012, just around that time (soon after Malala was targeted) you have the slate of target killings of Shi'a Pakistanis. I put together some of these some time ago for another validation I did.

This is Dr. Riaz Hussain Shah, was shot dead outside his clinic. My friend, Irfan in Quetta, was killed is part of the Hazara targeting that Nosheen referred to the Hazara Town. There were so many Hazara killings at that time (in 2012 to 2013 to 2014). Dr. Ali Haydar and his son, twelve-year-old, Murtaza in Abbas Town, Karachi,[that] Nosheen referred to in a bomb blast that killed over forty-five, including twenty children, and three teachers.

The target killing, not just targeting of, not just those accused of blasphemy, but those who were fighting for them. The lawyer Rashid Rehman in Multan, who was representing the blasphemy accused, Fulbright Scholar Junaid Hafeez, and our friend, Sabeen Mahmud,[being targeted/murdered] for being too liberal.[They all went] against this narrative that both previous speakers have talked about, about countering this narrative of what Pakistan should be and kind of state it should be.

I wanted to end by this[part by saying], Nosheen, you are completely right. We need a feminization of politics. Basically, I just put together a list of all these entities in Pakistan that basically need to do their work. Parliament needs to legislate, the governments need to act against people, and

the judiciary needs to hand out convictions. The political leaders need to disassociate from these platforms. The police need to uphold the law and, the intelligence agencies need to do their job and to stop protecting those who are guilty of these things. The media needs to exercise responsibility and agree on a code of ethics.

But of course, as you probably most of you know, right now the media is under the most severe censorship that we have seen since the Zia-ul-Haq years. Perhaps, also because there

is much more media now than there was during the Zia-ul-Haq years. Recently,[around] over forty journalists are facing cases of sedition and blasphemy.

Some years ago, there was another such case in which I was also named, and this has been going on for a while. Right now, the media is really under siege. The bottom line is that no citizen should have the right to cast aspersions on the faith and beliefs of another, or to term anyone a blasphemer, a kafir, or non-Muslim.

The state and its functionaries must try and act against all acts of vigilante and valid violence as criminal, and proceed against them according to law, because we really have to stop this culture of impunity.

I just wanted to end with that.[Nosheen Ali] Thank you for putting faces to all the[names]. I mean, more than 2,000 just from 2012.[Beena Sarwar] These are just a few.[Nosheen Ali] Let us also talk about how there is no record. You have to go to protests of Shi'a missing people, and those protests happen regularly in Karachi

and other parts of Pakistan. This project of counting the victims is also something we need to talk about: who counts as a victim and who counts as a random encounter. So, thank you, especially for that.[Ali Asani] All right. Thank you very much for this, and now we will open up for some questions.

One of the things that struck me is listening to all your presentations, is of course, on the one hand we are talking about in a certain way, failing to define the state in pluralistic and inclusive terms, which was Mohammad Ali Jinnah's vision

that the state has to be pluralist in nature. It has flipped, and has become exclusivist in nature. It is a kind of exclusivist-nationalism as opposed to be a pluralist-nationalism. One of our questions that has come in, actually tries to connect this with this whole development with what has been happening in the United States as well. Nationalism in many parts of the world where they go toxic against the other and against

perceived minorities. The question here is to Professor Abbas: you stated under General Zia-ul-Haq, the country of Pakistan changed radically. Would you agree that Zia-ul-Haq could not have done it alone and was aided and abetted by senior leaders in the country? Just as certain GOP leaders are aiding and abetting president Trump in the United States of America now?

[Hassan Abbas] Thank you for the question. Of course, Zia-ul-Haq could not have managed it by himself, but as they say in Pakistan and many of the developing countries, at times individuals/leaders have huge influence. As regards this argument is, I am reminded of my professor, Ayesha Jalal's book, Jinnah: The Sole Spokesman.

The idea that without Mohammad Ali Jinnah there would have been no Pakistan, and one could argue, no, there were many other important leaders as well - the whole political party[Muslim League] in this sense. Zia-ul-Haq's policies and his worldview, associated his politics and his survival with a kind of religious worldview that was very sectarian, which was very takfiri. Beena Sarwar was so right.

This sole notion of takfir has had a huge, huge impact. I want to link this with one other factor which helped Zia-ul-Haq, which is this overall deterioration of religious discourse. I think, with all the due respect and as a proud practicing Muslim, I think the crisis that is faced by the Muslim religious discourse, may be is more acute than faced by other religions in comparison. Different religions are at different stages of their life cycles in history.

What I mean by that is the religious textbooks used in most of our religious institutions (madrasas), . The number of madrasas increased greatly, and of course Zia-ul-Haq single handedly would not have changed the text books of these institutions. The texts were there for centuries.

No one could have altered these. These are very focused on their own narrative and the narrative on all sides is so problematic and is so narrow. I would like to mention here one issue that has become problematic on the Shi'a side as well.

When I refer to the political economy of religiosity or political economy of religious education in Pakistan, there is a huge debate among the Shi'as between what they call are Zakirs, who are the folks[that] believe[more] in rhetoric, who are very good speakers—(also called Khateebs) versus the ulemah who have a degree from Qom or from Najaf, or from any other major religious institution.

The debate between them has become a debate between certain religious centers and groups, defined as between ghalis and mukasirs (roughly a contest between exaggerators and deniers of some important Shia beliefs). The most recent problem also was triggered by a Shi'a speaker, who said terrible things about the first three caliphs. He said very, very offensive stuff, which is absolutely prohibited according to the leading Shi'a scholars.

He said that while being live telecasted via YouTube. That simply empowered[and gave ammunition to] the Sunni extremists on the other side. I am just giving it as an example. When you go deeper into that, what is happening within the Shi'a context about this debate, is all about how much money you make[through these] religious events.

The religious discourse has become very, very sectarian internally within the Shi'as as well. On the Sunni side, it is with all due respect, much worse with the Deobandi versus Barelvi versus Ahl-e-Hadith versus Wahhabi variety. These debates and challenges were always there. What Zia-ul-Haq did was politicized these and empowered some of the groups at the cost of others. That empowerment is what caused the continuing crisis in Pakistan.

Thank you.[Beena Sarwar] I want to add one quick thing there, taking what you said further, Hassan Abbas. These organizations, the so-called sectarianism within the religious communities: the so-called blasphemy law. We say blasphemy law again, is a lazy term, just like sectarianism is because the blasphemy law is not really all about blasphemy.

It is basically a disrespect to various aspects of religion, the Holy Book, holy sites, or holy personages. About half of the so-called blasphemy cases registered in Pakistan are registered by one sect of Muslims against another.

Then the other half is disproportionally against those who are non-Muslim, who are Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians, who are a small percentage of the population. Half the cases are registered against them as blasphemy cases,

and the other half are by one sect of Muslims against another sect. I just wanted to add that what you were saying.

[Ali Asani] Here is another question,[I am posing] to any of the panelists: since we have been talking about this violence, terrorism, and so on, have there been any peacebuilding efforts put in place either from the state or international actors in response to this rise of sectism, and also what is the role of civil society in this conflict?

[Hassan Abbas] Again, very briefly, yes. I know both of my colleagues are more qualified than I am to talk on civil society, because that is a sign of hope as well. From the state side, there was one major effort which was CVE (Countering Violent Extremism), but to everyone's surprise, it was controlled by the state's intelligence agencies.

This is not a secret. This is well known. Maybe they were well intentioned, but CVE, Countering Violent Extremism, cannot be managed by intelligence or police forces. This is action involving society. The challenge was that most of the counterterrorism funds that went from the West, from us,[I speak as an American with Pakistani heritage], from Washington, DC. Most of the counterterrorism funds that were given to Pakistan were given to the state, and the state kept it to themselves.

The state in its counterterrorism or counter narrative building efforts never involved the civil society. There were some choreographed efforts calling it Paigham-i-Pakistan, which was a good effort. The message[that] came out was good. You are cutting a check of dollars in most cases, to the well-known scholars who are kind of on the state's payroll and they are projecting your narratives.

The message of peace was discredited, because it was coming from one angle. I will give just three names and I would highly encourage our audience also to look them up, who I think are giving them outstanding example of how peace building can happen. One is the leading Sunni scholar, with Deobandi background, Tariq Jamil.

Yes, some of the things he would say, none of us would agree, but the way he has tried to bring the Shi'as and Sunnis together is an amazing feat. Another scholar among the Sunnis, who actually has raised the slogan by saying I am neither a Shi'a nor a Sunni, nor Wahhabi, nor a Sufi. The number of people who are subscribing to his channel are in hundreds of thousands.

His name is Mirza Mohammad Ali, and he has mastered the Sunni text books, as well as Shi'a books, mostly Sunni books. He is making an argument about, I am not going too deep into it, but something which brings the Shi'as, Sunnis, Deobandis, and Barelvis together. A phenomenal effort without any funding or support, which is gaining strength and becoming a movement in itself,

explaining the power of the message of peace for ordinary Muslims. Last but not least, is a Shi'a scholar, Jawad Naqvi, who is running a major educational center in Lahore. Who is challenging the Shi'a extremists from within, who are saying things which are offensive to an extent that they empower the Sunni extremists on the other side.

There are too many examples, but these three came to my mind, which I thought must be mentioned. Thank you.[Nosheen Ali] I can add a little bit to that question. I think social consciousness in Sindh and Gilgit-Baltistan particularly, but also elsewhere in Pakistan itself, resists this kind of reduction.

Hassan ji (honorific), what you were saying: "I am neither this, nor that". I mean, you find it in lehja (tone/language), and you find it all throughout our poetic discourse. In fact, there is a wonderful tradition in Gilgit-Baltistan where[Urdu spoken] literary societies have organized conferences called Husayn Sab Ka

(Husayn is for everybody), because what we are seeing now in Pakistan, they have dealt with it and they have dealt with it superbly well, considering the kind of militarism and coercive colonization they have experienced at multiple levels. No proper judiciary, no representation in parliament, no real decision making,

and non-local rule imposed on them for a very long time. What we find is the Sunni poets will glorify Shi'a leaders, like Shi'a Imams as a sign of countering tasub, the local word for sectarianism, that I often came across. Tasub means prejudice. They are very clear that the state project in the name of Islam has been one not just of hypocrisy,

but of hate. They are very clear that the kind of Muslim homeland we aspired for was not what we see with this kind of political extremism. I want to signal here that who are these peace building projects targeted towards. If the problem is military-extremism and that we have become an intelligence republic, and if the problem is that

right, left, and center, dissent is wiped out and it is a very fascist politics that we have bred and nurtured in which majoritarian, Sunni privilege has had a role to play. Then, what kind of level of discourse we need to make the shift as well. I am very grateful Beena Sarwar, and I am just going to reinforce two points that you put forward.

I will also plug chapter four of my book, it is all about poetic resistances to sectarianism. Beena Sarwar, the points you made are very critical about how the political process progresses. The moment you have semblances of democracy, we see all these attacks happen. I mean, I am not making a very direct link, but we are seeing this repeatedly where sedition, and being a traitor is being used in a blasphemy framework as well.

It is a phenomenal point, and it is a very significant point that the Bajwa Files come out and there is a hue and cry in Pakistan. We suddenly have these massive protests, and of course Muharram was also happening. These things[correlate], but we know from the history of Pakistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, at specific moments when a political resistance take root,

as we see today with the PTM[Pashtun Tahafuz Movement] and with other movements. We see the religion card suddenly cropped up to create law and order situations, and we need to

say that upfront. We need peace building towards that[extent] as well.[Beena Sarwar] Yeah, I completely agree. Thank you, Nosheen Ali, for flagging those points and speaking of the Bajwa Files, and that is exactly around when these so-called sedition cases against journalists began to be registered.

I think something like forty[journalists], and there is complete censorship, like I said before. You mentioned PTM for those who do not know, that is the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement of young people. I wrote a piece about it a couple of years ago, the title of it was: In Pakistan, a youth-led, social media-powered movement is gaining ground – despite a media blackout

it was published in Scroll in India. If you are not on social media, you would not know, or if you did not have a personal connection, you would not know that this is happening. Their mauquf[or] raison d'etre, that they are saying we are not[the] Taliban. Stop giving us guns and arms, the Pashtun youth in the border areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Again, linking back to what I said about the First Afghan War and that trajectory that we are seeing, that has come right here, that has come right now. We are at this point right now, more than twenty, thirty years later. They are saying we want books, not guns. If you are not on social media or you do not have some connection, you would not even know that it is happening because

there are no reports on TV. They are not allowed to be reported on the newspapers. In the beginning, there were a couple of their members are in parliament also, but they are given very little time and they are really, very badly treated. I do not know how they got into parliament, I think just to show that we are so open and whatever.

The other thing, you were asking about what is countering this, I think your point about women is a really, really important one. I think the feminization of politics is what counters this, and our Sufi poetry, our literature. It is feminist, because very often,

they speak in the feminist way. Our identities were not binary, this or that. Identities were much more fluid before, like I started out by saying. Now you have at the mazar (shrine), they wear ghungroos (anklebells) on their feet. There is this androgyny in the Sufi shrines, which they want to get rid of, and they want to masculinize

politics, religion, and society. I think when you see the Aurat (women) March, you see the thousands of young women who came out. The hope I see is in the young people of Pakistan. I am not talking about the educated English-medium elite. No, because they are more interested in parties and having their own fun. But I am talking about ordinary, young people who even if they get a smattering of education,

they are saying, why cannot we have peace with India? Why are we being given guns? Why are girls not being allowed to study? There is this misconception that parents in Pakistan do not want their girls to study. Not true. It may have been the case many years ago. Now, parents do not want their girls to study only if

they cannot get them to a nearby school. It is not because they do not want them to study, but because there are no schools with toilets where the girls can go close by. It is these kinds

of things. Just after Salmaan Taseer was killed, we had already just started this organization, this lobby group called Citizens for Democracy.

Soon after he was killed, we held these seminars in Karachi, and it was a really difficult time. It was very scary. Like Hassan Abbas said, Mumtaz Qadri was being deified, and people like us were feeling threatened. Just around that time, some of my colleagues, if I can just share these photographs from that time that I just found.

I will share them really quickly. They organized these postcards, this was for a reference we had.

They had this open thing, where they went there, and they said that they were talking about this thing at the back of the… Uthe ga analhaq ka nara .. human rights. I just want to show you these photographs. These are ordinary people who signed something like 15,000 letters, against… Basically calling for restraint to blasphemy, this kind of violence in the name of religion.

These are ordinary people. 15,000 signatures in one day, they got. I just wanted to share that.

[Background chatter]

[Ali Asani] Thank you for those comments. Actually, this issue that you talked about. Gender is very interesting to me, because this idea of feminization or feminine-Islam versus the Islam of women and this hyper-masculinized Islam.[It reminds me actually of an interesting article from Professor C. M. Naim,

where he wrote a column, several years ago]. He retired as a professor of Urdu and Islam at the University of Chicago. He narrates how after one of his classes on Islam he taught at the University of Chicago, some young man came up to him and asked him

what kind of a Muslim he was, and whether he prayed five times a day. This was at the university. These are of course people from a Muslim background, and I assume they were from the Indian sub-continent. Professor Naim sort of reflects on this incident, by going back to his childhood where he said he was raised basically by his mother and his grandmother,

and he learned Islam from them. He recalled an event in his childhood where they had an uncle of theirs who was Shi'a, if I remember the story correctly. It was time to pray, and the Shi'a uncle did not join. So, the young C.M. Naim went

naively to his uncle, saying why did you not join us for prayer? His grandmother called him over, and really told him off and said, you never ever asked somebody such a question. It is

not permitted. He said, he remembers that because this is the way I was taught this kind of Islam that we talk about and you see it in the poetry.

You will see it in the popular culture, where you talk about many of these poets talk: we are neither Hindu nor Muslim and we are not Shi'a nor Sunni. They are really talking about these differences we see that are more societal than ideological and more materialistic, that underlying all of this is a spiritual unity, and a spiritual reality that actually unites everyone.

This othering that is taking place at the political level, the literary discourse is that actually of humanizing. What in a certain way, at the political level is being dehumanized, at the level of literature and the arts and so on is being humanized. That is where this interesting rhetorical dynamic occurs between what Pakistanis' literary and performative traditions say about how you cope and engage with difference.

Much of it also[is] with discourses connected the use of the woman symbol in some of this Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi poetry, and so on, as opposed to what you are seeing today at the level of the state. I cannot help thinking of course, about the program, for better or for worse: Coke Studio. However, it has been commercialized.

What is very interesting about the program is that it presents a very different vision, because it highlights the literary mode. It presents a very different vision in which people can engage with diversity and pluralism without getting stuck in the issues of sectarianism, and that is just a comment I wanted to share.

Another question is the Pakistani government and the international community has sadly remained eerily silent on this issue, and yet we keep on highlighting that the government needs to act. There is a problem here: how do we, as a citizenry, organize ourselves and what do we do to accomplish this. In the sense that people are thinking, okay, this has to take place at the state level, but if the state is not acting.

If you start acting on your own, you might get in trouble with the state. People are in this dilemma. What do you suggest? I mean, I am just considering what your viewpoint on this would be.[Hassan Abbas] If I may briefly share my understanding. The reality is that there is a regional context to all of this as well.

Although, as I argued in my humble view Pakistan, the Pakistani state and even society, tragically has internalized some of these sectarian identities, and they have been pushed to do that. The religious cleric and the ignorant mullah have the mosque pulpit in their control.

It is a country with hardly a 50 percent literacy rate. Many people are impacted by the very corrosive, toxic narrative, which is very, very takfiri oriented and extremist. Yes, out of political correctness at times we do not say it, but Nosheen Ali is so right. This is kind of a Sunni-majoritarian narrative that has taken control.

Most of the Shi'as in Pakistan, the minorities, will not use this word just that people are not offended, but this is so, so true. Recently again, anecdotal, but this tells us a lot. A lot of my research and work is on the kind of state-side of things and policy oriented. I was talking to one of the important political leaders in the present government of Imran Khan and his

politics. The minister's view was, this is all[the] Middle East, this is M.B.S.[Mohammad bin Salman] as it was quoted.

Because I am planning to quote it in op-ed, I can take responsibility and quote it here. They said M.B.S. (Mohammad bin Salman), Saudi Arabia, has said to Imran Khan, well, "your country is becoming a Shi'a Pakistan". What are you doing about it? There are all of those pressures as well.

I actually think there might be a conversation or something like that, even if the quote is not exact. Iran versus Saudi Arabia: we know of how the state has played these things. During the Musharraf years, Pakistani intelligence and others had provided space to some groups, international groups in Balochistan for signal intelligence collection in Iran.

This was mentioned in a Washington Post story. These are facts. And this is recently a[development about] Pakistan Army Chief. This is again, very well-known. One of the senior-most Pakistani Army Generals who was about to become the Army Chief, was a well-known Shi'a.

This is not a secret, and he was made Chairman Joint Chief because General Bajwa wanted to stay as Army Chief. Even that was something interesting, but people said how can a Shi'a become the Army Chief. Although in history, Pakistan has had Shi'a Army Chiefs, Shi'a Prime Ministers, Presidents. Despite being 15 or 20 percent. Shi'as have been quite influential in Pakistani politics.

Today, in terms of what the government can do. The government is at times blackmailed in Pakistan because of their massive financial challenges from the

Gulf and Saudi Arabia. If you are taking six billion dollars from Saudi Arabia, and even if you know for a fact that some of the money for extremists in Pakistan has come from private organizations in Saudi Arabia, for instance who are Sunni extremist, for jihadist Ahl-e-Hadith groups in Pakistan. Whether you will have the guts to say this publicly - you will not.

That is the new challenge. The Pakistani state is trying to be too politically correct, too cornered. I would say my last point of this is, I think this is the role of political parties and they have also failed Pakistan in some shape or fashion. They were not as dependent on a sectarian vote.

They know very well, what the blasphemy law is, as discussed in the private conversations. Both Beena Sarwar and Nosheen Ali shared this with us, and thank you very much for your perspectives, which is so important. Politicians know it, and as both of you also know politicians in private conversations acknowledge the challenge for blasphemy and others.

In parliament, I have seen ulema speak very brilliantly and boldly (to support their version of blasphemy law), but few very few politicians will speak. What stopped the mainstream, relatively progressive political parties in Pakistan to push back these dogmatic tendencies. We have not seen that happening and that is my question to both Beena Sarwar and Nosheen Ali as well.

Why do you think that has happened? Because that was where the strength of the government policy change, should have come from.[Beena Sarwar] It should have, but the issue is volatile and sensitive that even so-called religious scholars, there is a very good series about this young man who did this, Arsalan. I forget the name who did the series was published in Dawn, really deeply investigated many religious scholars. He went into to the source materials and many of them admitted to him, this whole law is wrong. It should not have been brought in. The guy, I think it was Ismail Qureshi if I am not mistaken, the lawyer who prosecuted that young boy, Salamat Masih.

Again, that was in 1994 or 1995 and Asmat Jahangir was defending his case. He admitted he was the one who got that life imprisonment option removed from the law, from 295C. He was the one who agitated against it by saying that[in] Islam, there is no space for apostasy, there is only death, but then he admitted that is not true.

That is a disputed assertion. There are many Islamic scholars who will say that give them a chance to repent, but punishment is not death in Islam. It is all about forgiveness, right. It is all about forgiveness, humility, and compassion, but all those elements of Islam have been hijacked by these people.

They are very hard politics because the Prophet (peace be upon him) is such a revered figure. That is the one thing. Anybody can just say anything, but that is one thing that you cannot touch, as it is just too sensitive. Governments in Pakistan have time and time again, gotten blackmailed by these religious extremes,

"so-called" religious extremists. I am saying so-called always in quotes because what they are doing is not about religion, it is about politics and power. It is about grabbing power and imposing their way of life on to the general populace. [Nosheen Ali] I think Beena answered it fairly well, but

the point that Beena made earlier about intellecticde. You breathe today at a protest and you are picked up. There was a moment in Karachi in 2017, when we were at a play about missing people, it was called Chup, which means silence. During the play, we got a call that a professor friend of ours who had gone

to attend a protest of another professor friend from Karachi University was picked up. This is an absurdist situation where there are three layers of missing happening. We were watching a play about missing people, and we are getting a call about someone who has been picked up, who was at a protest about someone was being picked up.

We are living in a completely paranoid, delusional state. Hassan Abbas, I think the point that you have started this conversation with what is the role of the state? What is the nature of the state? Professor Asani, you are asking people are saying, what can we do about it?

Is that we have to link the social and the state discourse. This reality is there at multiple levels and it is a complex reality, but there is a culture of political authoritarianism that has been nourished, and that used religious militancy (particularly Sunni militancy) as a political, strategic tool of the state.

It has been used elsewhere. It has been used in Pakistan. How will you create a discourse when there is so much censorship and when people who are doing Indian-Pakistan peace calendars or people who are organizing against sectarianism. Beena Sarwar, I think Khudi Ali, you mentioned the name of a young activist. They are young people in their twenties, organizing, doing their bit at a neighborhood level, through social media.

they are threatened. Now, the new electronic crimes and cybercrime laws are being used against feminists, and against anyone having a political opinion. We are talking about a very fundamentally, fascist state of affairs. The new twist to that as Beena Sarwar and Hassan Abbas might be aware and many of the listeners as well, if you cannot attack activists, you make sure that the parents are involved in fake cases.

You are going to make sure that you are going to break the spirit of anybody who tries to defend human rights in Pakistan. Whether they be Shi'a rights, women's rights, or provincial rights, all levels of rights are haram. That is what has happened in very plain words.

Yes, the situation is dire, but the political resistance is intense. The awareness of this as an overlapping project is pretty intense, and we need to deepen that awareness. This building can only come when you get your discourse right. When we have a better understanding of how internal the problem is as most of the speakers have suggested rather than saying this is 1,400 years old, or it is Afghanistan, or it is elsewhere.

I am going to add something here about someone said in the questions is that we do not see this in India. That is not true, actually, because these are both global, national, local projects. In Pakistan, it has become a very state led project. Professor Asani, you organized a conference on interreligious encounters and fostering dialogue in the diaspora. Dialogues that may not often be allowed to happen.

Let us say in Pakistan and India today, where we had the Sajjada Nasheen of Hazrat Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti's shrine in Ajmer, India. He said, in response to what our conversation was about, I have gone to Mashhad for Muharram for a long time. This is the first time, I believe it was 2014, that I am being asked why you are going to Mashhad

because you are Sunni. He said I was flabbergasted because I have never seen Muharram as a non-Sunni thing. This kind of blended identity we see in Sindh, that we have lived, and you really see in Gilgit-Baltistan as well with intermarriages being very common, so on and so forth. We now have a way in which the veneration of Ali is being seen as a Shi'a thing to do.

We are dividing up the Prophet's family in very novel ways, in this kind of version. A shared history and rituals are being countered. We will have to see that a particular majoritarianism is actually becoming more and more fascist, for lack of any other terms.

The challenge is at multiple levels, it is at the level of history, society, and the state.

[Beena Sarwar] I wanted to add the point, I think both Hassan Abbas and Nosheen Ali mentioned this: Peace with India. Now the India factor is something that I have seen in my work

as somebody who has been involved with Pakistan-India peace building since 1994-1995. I have seen a new generation that has come up now, connected by social media. The way they are completely blind to the hyper-national. They do not care. These young people want to meet,

They want to sample each other's food, drink, songs, movies, dance, do tourism, take motorcar rallies, and cycle across the countries. They just do not understand why this is happening. Yet, then those who are picked up like Raza Khan in Lahore, who was organizing the India-Pakistan peace calendar.

He was picked up. Zeenat Shehzadi, a young woman, a freelance journalist, social activist who tried to help him, who got power of attorney from his mother in Bombay. She disappeared for more than two years and they both came back, miraculously. I think both of them came back, maybe because of the uproar.

I know a young woman who was doing her dissertation on peace between India and Pakistan. She was not allowed to do her dissertation at a university in Islamabad. She was resuscitated because of the theme of peace. I mean, on the one hand they talk about how tolerant Pakistan is, of course India is showing us completely. I actually wrote something about this once, about what the lessons Pakistan can learn from India about the importance of the democratic political process and the lessons India can learn from Pakistan about what happens when you bring religion into politics, and

we are really seeing that. [Ali Asani] Thank you for those comments. I think we are past time, but I wanted to end with something that I though, because there is this tension between the different ways in which people are invoking Islam.

In one way we talk about Islam is faith. Islam as how one relates to God. In that sense, Islam as it is taught, as it is understood going back in its history, is one of justice, social equity, compassion, forgiveness, all those values, tolerance, and respect. I would call that the Islam of faith.

Then, there is this other Islam which is an ideology, and I think what we are finding is this ideology is sort of the inversion of the Islam of faith. It becomes this ideology. The Islam of faith is that of respect, tolerance, and freedom. Then, this ideological formulation that has emerged in Pakistan, but also, I think in some other parts, is really an ideology of oppression.

I think that is a very interesting sort of situation. I know Ziauddin Sardar has talked about this a little bit. Is this really about the Islam of faith? When we think about Islam, we think about it as Islam of faith. We say, how is it that people are doing these things in the name of Islam where it goes against, but I would argue that what we are seeing here is a very different mutation

of this, that is using the categories of Islam but in an ideological sense. This is where the majoritarian-minority sort of things as an ideology of oppression, and that gets tied in with nationalism. This is the dilemma we face in Pakistan and I think several other Muslim countries. I know Payam Mohseni is here, and I wish we had a little bit more time.

I would love to have Payam Mohseni's perspective on how this kind of viewpoint fits in other parts of the Muslim societies in the Middle East, but maybe that is going to be a topic for another panel. With that, I wanted to thank all of our panelists for joining us today and the audience for joining us as well.

I am so sorry. There were so many questions, and I had a hard time choosing them because they just kept on flying in. I really apologize to people I was not able to accommodate with all the very, very interesting questions that came up. Thank you for joining us and thank you again, Payam Mohseni, for getting us together and organizing this

event. We look forward to some more programming and having these discussions, and at least we have a platform where we can talk about this. These kinds of discussions would not even be allowed in other contexts. Thank you all for joining us.

[Payam Mohseni] Thank you much, everyone. Please, if you have not signed up on our mailing list, please do so you can hear about our future events and we very much look forward to continuing these types of discussions. It was very engaging and nuanced, and I very much look forward to learning more. Goodbye everyone.

Thank you.