

Name of Scholar: Muhmina Mumthaz Jahan. T

Name of Supervisor: Prof. Mathew Joseph C.

Name of Department: MMAJ Academy of International Studies JMI

Topic of Research: Political Violence and Civil Society in Post 1988 Pakistan

FINDINGS

This study set out to examine how political violence and civil society have interacted in Pakistan since 1988, with particular attention to the social fabric, the challenges of nation-making, and the impact of neo-liberal restructuring. It approached Pakistan as a post-colonial, Islamic state that formally adopted modern institutions while inheriting colonial traumas and subsequently moving onto a neo-liberal economic path. Against this backdrop, the thesis asked how violence has been used both by and against the state, how civil society has evolved as an intermediary sphere between state and family, and how domestic and international factors together have shaped the contemporary landscape of conflict and contestation in Pakistan.

The first major finding is that political violence in Pakistan is unmistakably multi-dimensional. It cannot be reduced to a single cause, actor, or ideology, but emerges from overlapping ethnic, linguistic, religious, regional, and sectarian cleavages that have been historically produced and continuously re-activated. The anti-colonial struggle, Partition, and the hurried transfer of power from the British to the leadership of the Pakistan Movement left deep communal scars and unresolved questions of nation-building. Homogenising projects built around Islam and Urdu, combined with the dominance of particular regions and institutions, notably the Punjabi elite and the military, created enduring grievances among ethno-regional groups such as Bengalis in the former East Pakistan, Sindhis, Baluchis, Pashtuns, and Saraikis. These grievances have repeatedly found violent expression, confirming the first hypothesis about the complex and layered nature of political violence in Pakistan. On this historical and structural basis, the thesis proposed an analytical typology of political violence in post-1988 Pakistan. State violence, religious violence, sectarian violence, sub-national militancy, anti-state violence, terrorism, street violence and imported violence together capture the diverse forms through which power is contested and enforced.

A second core finding concerns the role of the Pakistani state in both the spread and the control of political violence. The thesis confirms that state institutions have operated simultaneously as targets, regulators and, at times, producers of violence. Formal policies such as the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997, the Protection of Pakistan Act 2014, the National Action Plan 2015 and subsequent counter-extremism strategies illustrate that the state is not indifferent to the problem of violence. However, their partial, inconsistent and often politicised implementation has undermined their effectiveness. Where security operations have been decisive, they have sometimes reduced the operational capacity of militant organisations, but they have also generated new grievances by employing coercive tactics, causing civilian casualties and failing to provide sustainable socio-economic alternatives.

The study also highlights significant ambiguities in state behaviour. At different times, state agencies have cultivated, tolerated or selectively deployed militant and sectarian actors for strategic purposes, whether in relation to India, Afghanistan, domestic electoral politics or the suppression of dissent. This instrumental relationship has blurred the line between legitimate and illegitimate violence, eroded public trust in state institutions and made demilitarisation far more difficult. For example, CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) related protests and

attacks on Chinese personnel, reveal how development projects carried out without genuine consultation and equitable benefit-sharing can be securitised, reinforcing the perception that the state privileges external actors and domestic allies over marginalised communities.

A third set of findings relates to the influence of foreign actors. Political violence in Pakistan cannot be understood in isolation from its regional and global context. Relations with India, Afghanistan, China, Iran, Gulf Cooperation Council states and the United States have all left distinct imprints on Pakistan's conflict dynamics. Cross-border militancy in Kashmir, Pakistan's long entanglement in Afghan conflicts, the spread of Wahhabi influences from the Gulf, and alternating cycles of US patronage and pressure have entrenched a security dilemma and brought external rivalries into domestic arenas. Collectively, these patterns validate the hypothesis that external powers have played a decisive role in fuelling as well as attempting to contain political violence in Pakistan.

A fourth cluster of findings concerns civil society. The thesis conceptualised civil society as the sphere of voluntary collective action between state and family, including NGOs, community groups, professional bodies, religious organisations, social movements and informal networks. In Pakistan, this sphere is marked by sharp binaries- rural/urban, rich/poor, secular/religious, modern/traditional- and by the persistence of feudal, patriarchal and clientelist structures. Consequently, civil society has never been a homogeneous force for democratisation or peace. Instead, it contains both 'civil' and 'uncivil' elements. On the one hand, human rights organisations, women's groups, professional associations, progressive student unions and faith-based peace initiatives have challenged authoritarianism, campaigned against sectarian hatred and worked for community development, poverty alleviation and inter-communal harmony. On the other hand, charity wings of militant outfits, politicised madrasas and ideologically driven NGOs have mobilised communities into sectarian, sub-national or jihadist projects, providing social services while normalising violence and intolerance.

The study shows that neo-liberal reforms and donor-driven agendas since the late 1980s expanded the space for non-state actors but also facilitated their co-optation. Elements of civil society allied themselves with General Musharraf's 'enlightened moderation' project, embracing a lifestyle-centred liberalism that did little to transform underlying structures of authoritarianism, inequality and militarisation. This controversial alliance cast doubt on the autonomy of civil society and exposed its vulnerability to state and donor capture. Yet, other strands of civil society played a vital role in resisting military rule, defending the judiciary, and promoting democratic transition. The lawyers' movement, various rights-based campaigns and local peace-building initiatives demonstrate the enduring potential of civil society to contest both state repression and extremist narratives. These contradictory tendencies confirm the final hypothesis: that Pakistan's civil society, shaped by neo-liberal restructuring and post-colonial legacies, has been simultaneously implicated in the escalation of political violence and central to efforts to contain and transform it.

Taken together, these findings underscore a central argument of the thesis: political violence in post-1988 Pakistan is produced at the intersection of a historically conditioned state formation, a stratified and contested social order, and a regional environment saturated with conflict and intervention. Neither the state nor civil society, nor foreign actors, can be treated as monolithic. Each contains actors who seek to advance democratisation, peace and social justice, and others who benefit from or actively promote violent exclusion. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to 'strengthen the state' or 'empower civil society' in abstract terms, but to reconfigure the relationships among these arenas in ways that constrain uncivil actors, promote accountability and open inclusive, non-violent channels of political contestation.

In sum, the study points to several broad directions. The state must abandon the use of militant proxies and sectarian groups as instruments of policy, and security responses to political violence must be combined with robust social and economic measures that address the structural grievances of marginalised regions and communities. Civil society actors committed to pluralism and non-violence require protection, legal space and meaningful opportunities to participate in policymaking, while organisations that cloak uncivil agendas in the language of charity or piety must be subject to transparent regulation and public scrutiny. External partners, finally, should re-orient their engagement with Pakistan away from narrow security agendas and towards long-term support for inclusive development, democratic consolidation and regional de-escalation.

The thesis focused broadly on political violence, civil society and post-colonial statehood by offering a historically grounded account of Pakistan's trajectory since 1988. It demonstrates that the causes and forms of violence are deeply embedded in the ways in which state power has been constructed and contested, how civil and uncivil actors operate within the intermediary sphere, and how regional and global forces intersect with domestic struggles. While Pakistan's experience is distinctive, the patterns identified here resonate with other post-colonial societies grappling with legacies of empire, uneven development and neo-liberal restructuring. By foregrounding the ambivalent role of civil society and the entanglement of state and non-state violence, the study invites scholars and policymakers to rethink simplistic binaries and to pursue more holistic strategies for reducing political violence. The evidence assembled suggests that only a concerted effort by a more accountable state, a genuinely civil society and less intrusive external actors can gradually dismantle the structures that sustain violence and open the possibility of a more peaceful and inclusive political order in Pakistan.
