
The political activism of Barelwis in Pakistan
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Abstract: In this paper, I intend to analyze the forms of political activism of the Barelwi movement, one specific Sufism oriented religious movement rooted in the 19th century, which has gradually politicized through Pakistani history. It has played a widely ignored role in the politics of Pakistan, may it be in party politics, social movements, or through the islamization of society. There are today about forty Barelwi organizations differently located on a scale of politicization, protest and radicalization. These “neo Sufi orders” have constructed a distinct Sufi identity and evolved different strategies to defend their version of Islam and fight for an Islamic State, an endeavor which they call the system of the Prophet (Nizam-e Mustafa). The organizational form they adopted is a mixture of a Sufi order, an activist association and for some, a political party.

In the framework of the “War against terror”, mainly targeting their more reformist doctrinal challengers, the Barelwi presence in the public sphere has increased. The different groups of the movement have organized many conferences and demonstrations aiming both at denouncing the “talibanization” of Pakistan and at reasserting the role of Sufis in the promotion of an Islam of “peace, love and tolerance” in contemporary Pakistan. Paradoxically, this movement has also undergone a process of radicalization, thus blurring the lines between peaceful activism and violent direct action.

Since its inception, Pakistan, created in 1947 in the name of Islam, has always been an arena of a heated competition concerning the “assets of salvation” (Max Weber). Because of its symbolic monopoly, the religious reference plays the role of a “natural” ideological resource from the State or against it, and operates in the mode of a nationalist discourse. Indeed, the mobilization of the religious referent concerns both State and non State actors, political action from «the top down» and from «the bottom up», social conservatism as well as protest action, hailing from both Islamist groups and Sufi groups -or even secular ones.

Within the Islamist field, where all actors consider Islam as a political ideology and are fighting for the setting up of a “real” Islamic State, doctrinal positions on Sufism (the mystical tradition in Islam) range from enthusiastic acceptance to complete rejection. The movement which has the most loudly trumpeted its affiliation with the Sufi identity is the Barelwi movement. Often overlooked by scholars, this theological school was founded in the 19th century by the scholar and Sufi Ahmed reza Khan Barelwi (1856-1921), and is often presented as a form
of traditionalist reaction to more reformist movements (mainly Deobandi and Ahl-e Hadith) which were critical of some contentious aspects of Sufism. The doctrinal conflicts between these schools are indeed not new. But their scope has gradually broadened and has given way to mobilization and activism on the basis of religious identities which have endorsed a political function in Pakistan. In the Barelwi movement, the Sufi identity is claimed as a major discriminatory criterion between “them” and “us”. Its different groups can be described as “neo-Sufi Orders”, as their main aim is generally not the spiritual initiation of disciples but social and political activism as well as religious reform. But they are all shaped on the model of a brotherhood, with most leaders belonging to the Qadiri Sufi Order and towards who converge very positive emotions. Like in most Sufi orders, the form of authority exercised by these leaders is a charismatic one.

The Barelwi movement has succeeded in mobilizing religious values and representations centered around the Prophet and the Sufi saints that have contributed to the imagination of a community on the basis of a widely shared minimal code. The veneration of the Prophet and of Sufi saints has always been a central feature of Sufi doctrine. As self-proclaimed “lovers of the Prophet”, the actors of the Barelwi mobilization authoritatively appropriate the figure of the Prophet as the main identity symbol and supreme religious authority. The Barelwis stigmatize other Sunni sects as being deviant religious “minorities” who are responsible for “terrorism” and are patronized by the State since the 1980’s. While claiming to be the representatives of majority Sufi Islam (the cult of Sufi saints and of the Prophet), they feel they have paradoxically become a political minority. And in the framework of an Ideological State such as Pakistan, created in the name of Islam, the leaders of this movement deem that their being “representative” of the religiosity of the population should translate into a hegemonic situation in the political field. This has not been the case and this paradox highlights the complexity of the articulation between religion and politics in Pakistan. As such, the Barelwi movement is a “movement for recognition” that has undergone a renewal since the 1980’s, in a context when its doctrinal challengers massively benefitted from State patronage.

In order to designate such groups, like Barelwis, claiming Sufism and Sufi identity as a register for Islamist mobilization, I have coined the concept “SufIslamism”. The concept is not just about Sufis being Islamists or the other way round. Indeed, there can be Islamists appropriating some Sufi institutions but not publicly claiming a Sufi identity, or Sufis who don’t mobilize politically on the basis of their Sufi identity. Besides enabling an enhanced analysis of the various interactions between Sufism and Islamism, this concept may also improve our
understanding of the highly fissile politicization of the doctrinal fractures inside the Islamist field in Pakistan, thus helping to chart the deep waters of identity politics, especially those of what it appears relevant to categorize as “intra-Sunni sectarianism”. Sufism has taken on an ideological dimension among new organizations formalizing their doctrinal difference in order to transform their specific religious identity into a political resource and a sectarian stance.

The Barelwi leaders define Sufism as the tolerant aspect of Islam and present themselves as peace loving people who have never been responsible for the violence plaguing Pakistan. As a matter of fact, the majority of Pakistani radical groups, whether sectarian or jihadis, are not Barelwi. And it is not simply because Barelwis are self proclaimed Sufis, hence “peace loving, world rejecting” actors, as goes the master narrative “Sufi Islam versus radical Islam”. The Barelwi Sunni Tehreek is an instance of a massively militarized organization. The leaders of Sunni Tehreek appeal to their Sufi identity to clear their name of « terrorism », despite radical modes of action. Hence, their violence is portrayed as a defensive or a reactive one. The founder Saleem Qadri perceived the political dimension of the plight of Barelwis in Pakistan and wanted to commit more actively, and more violently, in the defense of Barelwi school of thought and institutions, such as the shrines and the mosques supposedly stolen by doctrinal challengers. That is the main change carried out by the ST in the way of thinking of Barelwis, perceived up to the creation of ST in 1990 by Qadri as too accommodating, and too unconscious of the real danger of disappearance threatening them. In 2002, Sunni Tehreek turned into a political party and got more involved into the guerilla war going on in Karachi, the big Pakistani southern port city.

This group, along with others from the Barelwi sect, since May 2009, has taken the initiative of a campaign to “save Pakistan” from talibanization with the blessings of the government. Shah Mehmud Qureishi, the ex-federal minister for foreign affairs, publicly expressed the government’s support to barelwi groups. The most recent developments of the “the War against Terror” thus highlight the complexity of the process of politicization of doctrinal fractures in Pakistan: both a social and political mobilization for a cause, but also the manipulation of this same cause and the cooptation of its defenders by the State. In the framework of the “War against Terror”, mainly targeting Deobandi and Ahl-e Hadith groups, the Barelwis have finally accessed to political recognition and earned legitimization from the powers that be. It is a sort of a historical revenge for them. The regime is using sectarian dynamics to underpin and give teeth to its fight against “the root of evil », that is to say Taliban and Al Qaeda. In the official narrative portraying the current war as an ideological conflict between “moderate” and “extremist” forces within Islam, the Barelwis have indeed been identified as falling into the
Therefore, the Barelwi presence in the public sphere has increased under the umbrella of the Sunni Ittehad Council, gathering more than sixty Barelwi organizations, and planning to contest the next national elections. The different groups of the movement have organized many conferences and demonstrations aiming both at denouncing the “talibanization” of Pakistan and at reasserting the role of Sufis in the promotion of an Islam of “peace, love and tolerance” in contemporary Pakistan. In March 2009, a conference organized in Lahore tried to elaborate measures in order to fight those actors who want to “discredit the peaceful message of the Sufis” and want to promote “anti-mysticism ideologies.” (http://www.minhaj.org/en.php?tid=7741) In May 2009, another convention was organized for the “protection of Pakistan” (Tahaffuz-e Pakistan). The participants adopted a highly informative communiqué highlighting the positions of Barelwi representatives about the most recent developments of the “War against Terror”. They once again emphasized the “key role” of Sufis in “the construction of a peaceful society”, in the promotion of “peace and harmony” and more generally in the propagation of Islam throughout history. Sufi shrines have been celebrated as “cultural symbols” whose recent profanation and destruction by pro-Taliban groups is only the expression of “un-Islamic actions”. The “violations” of the Constitution carried out by these groups have also been condemned in the harshest terms, as well as their attacks on girls schools. According to the communiqué, gaining knowledge is compulsory for every Muslim without any gender discrimination. Islam guarantees the “respect and dignity” of women and their “practical role” in society. Suicide attacks are also strictly forbidden in Islam and are likened to “barbarian acts”. The Taliban practices, such as declaring war on the army, to the security forces and to the police, or eliminating the voices of opposition, were also irrevocably condemned.

However, as we have seen in the case of Sunni Tehreek, Barelwi actors are not all as tolerant and peaceful as they would wish to be portrayed in the current context. Indeed, it is a member of a Barelwi group who killed Salman Taseer, the Governor of Penjab, in January 2011. Taseer wanted to amend the law on blasphemy stating the death penalty for any offender of the Prophet Muhammad, who is venerated by Barelwis. His killer was publicly supported by many Barelwi leaders and activists and he is now considered a hero for many, a clear sign that the current radicalization of Pakistani society is not only to be blamed on Taliban.