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Politics and Pirs: The Nature of Sufi Political Engagement in 20th and 21st Century Pakistan

By Ethan Epping

On November 27th, 2010 a massive convoy set off from Islamabad. Tens of thousands of Muslims rode cars, buses, bicycles, and even walked the 300 kilometer journey to the city of Lahore. The purpose of this march was to draw attention to the recent rash of terrorism in the country, specifically the violent attacks on Sufi shrines throughout Pakistan. In particular, they sought to demonstrate to the government that the current lack of action was unacceptable. “Our caravans will reach Lahore,” declared one prominent organizer, “and when they do the government will see how powerful we are.”¹ The Long March to Save Pakistan, as it has come to be known, was an initiative of the recently founded Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), a growing coalition of Barelvi Muslims. The Barelvi movement is the largest Islamic sect within Pakistan, one that has been heavily influenced by Sufism throughout its history. It is Barelvis whose shrines and other religious institutions have come under assault as of late, both rhetorically and violently. As one might expect, they have taken a tough stance against such attacks: “These anti-state and anti-social elements brought a bad name to Islam and Pakistan,” declared Fazal Karim, the SIC chairman, “we will not remain silent and [we will] defend the prestige of our country.”²

The Long March is but one example of a new wave of Barelvi political activism that has arisen since the early 2000s. Barelvis have begun to actively defend their religious identity and heritage in the face of increased aggression from Islamic militants. But this is a new phenomenon, unprecedented in the Barelvis’ long history dating to the origins of Pakistani Islam. While the Taliban and other Islamic militants may dominate the popular Western understanding of Islam in Pakistan, it is Sufism that has had the dominant religious influence in the region. Frequently described as the inner, mystical branch of Islam, Sufis were among the earliest Muslims to arrive in South Asia. Its most easily recognizable

¹Sunni clerics vow show of strength. (2010, August 8). *The Express Tribune*,. Retrieved from <http://tribune.com.pk/>.

²SUI announces long march against terrorism. (2010, August 9). *The News*. Retrieved from www.thenews.com.pk

expression can be found in Barelvi practices, with their veneration of Sufi saints and ecstatic festivals. However, Sufism has also shaped the development of other more traditional, one might say more “orthodox,” Islamic groups in Pakistan, although they are reluctant to admit it.³ In contrast to the ecstatic elements of Sufism adopted by Barelvis, these traditional groups have drawn on the more reserved and intellectual aspects of Sufism. But these two sects, ecstatic and intellectual, have been influenced by two very different, some might say opposite, elements of Sufism, and have frequently found themselves in conflict.

Despite the contrasts, and even contradictions, between them, Sufis of both the ecstatic and intellectual persuasions share a common nature in their approach to politics. Both groups can be characterized by two tendencies when it comes to political engagement. On one hand, they possess an implicit political power, a wellspring of political authority that exists predominately on a local, perhaps regional, level. On the other, both ecstatic and intellectual Sufis have been characterized by a historical disinclination towards wide-scale political involvement. Not that there are no Sufis engaged in Pakistani politics, but rather that their identity as Sufis has not been an important source of political identity or motivation. They have not organized politically on the basis of their religious identity, until recently. The 1990s and 2000s have seen unprecedented levels of activism on the part of Barelvis. In response to the intensified, and now violent, opposition from the Taliban and other militant groups, they have begun to mobilize on a national level. This deviation from political inactivity, however, is predominately reactionary in nature, and Barelvis have drawn together only in response to the threat posed by their opponents. These sparks of political engagement must be understood within their historical contexts, heavily influenced by the nature of Sufi political engagement in South Asia. Such an understanding offers important insight into the complex role played by Sufism in Pakistani politics, as well as how the West should approach engagement with religion and society in Pakistan.

A Brief History of Sufism in Pakistan

In attacking the elements of Sufism present throughout Pakistani religious life, the Islamic militants are “though they refuse to recognize it...striking at the very roots of Islam in South Asia.”⁴ Sufism is inseparably linked with the history of Islam in Pakistan, and all of South Asia – you cannot understand the latter without the former. Such history can be rather confusing, however, due to the

³ In Pakistan, the most prominent of these groups are the Deobandi and Ahl-e Hadith sects, and the Taliban.

⁴ Lieven, A. (2011). *Pakistan: A Hard Country*. New York: Public Affairs. pp 134.

complexity of the term “Sufism.” When used in the popular discourse, Sufism implies a specific group of beliefs and practices, often described as Islamic mysticism. Yet, there are a wide variety of practices that fall under the label “Sufism,” with more differences than commonalities between them. Generally speaking, Sufi practices tend to focus on the personal and mystical elements of Islam. According to one scholar, “Sufis strive for a direct, intimate, and unmediated experience of the Divine. Sufi adepts tend to emphasize the inward over the outward, intuition over intellect, spiritual contemplation over scholarly debate, and ecstatic poetry over legalistic prose.”⁵ While this gives a general understanding of the nature of Sufism, it is an oversimplification of the multiplicity of beliefs typically defined as Sufi. This is certainly true in Pakistan, where a wide variety of Islamic traditions have drawn on various aspects of Sufism. These expressions of Sufism tend to have little in common, and it becomes difficult to draw sharp lines both between and within such groups. However, upon close inspection, it is possible to draw out two main expressions of Sufism in Pakistan.

Sufism and Pakistan: *Sukr*

The first of these expressions is characterized historically by the word *sukr*, frequently translated as “intoxication.” This strand of Sufism emphasizes the ecstatic and joyful union with and self-annihilation in Allah with the intent to be “overcome with divine love” emanating from the face of God.⁶ Prominent scholar and Sufi Fethullah Gülen describes *sukr* as “when a heart boils with extraordinary joy and excitement in the moment when the person feels deeply the All-Beloved One.”⁷ Such unions tend to be achieved through poetry and song, but also through the use of intoxicants and dance, which has sparked no small amount of controversy. In Pakistan, it is the Barelvi school of thought mentioned above that has embraced *sukr* and the ecstatic elements of Sufism. Barelvis trace their name to the Indian town of Barielly, birthplace of nineteenth century scholar and reformist Ahmed Raza Khan Barielly, who defended the particular practices of South Asian Islam. However, though Raza Khan lent his name to the Barelvi movement, and offers Barelvis a foundation of scholarly legitimacy, his influence

⁵Rozehnal, R. (2007). *Islamic Sufism Unbound: Politics and Piety in Twenty-First Century Pakistan*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. pp 1.

⁶ Chittick, W. (2000) *Sufism: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications. pp 26.

⁷ Gülen, M. (2004) *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism: Emerald Hills of the Heart* (Vol. 2). New Jersey: Tughra Books. pp 126.

on Barelvi beliefs and practices has been relatively minor.⁸ Rather, at the center of Barelvi practices are Sufi saints, who are seen not only as exemplars of faith worthy of imitation, but also as active intermediaries between humans and the divine.

The history of these saints, known as *shaikhs* in Arabic or *pirs* in Persian, dates back to the first arrival of Islam in South Asia. Although the region came under Muslim military and political control in the early 8th century, conversion was a slow, ongoing endeavor that would last centuries. It was a “lengthy process of attrition, of continuing interaction between the carriers of Islam and the local...environment.”⁹ These carriers of Islam were most often Sufi saints, the “pioneers and frontiersmen of the Muslim world,” travelling mystics who arrived in South Asia shortly after the region was conquered.¹⁰ Often hailing from the Arab world, the birthplace of Islam, and occasionally claiming to be descendants of Muhammad, these saints possessed great credibility in the eyes of many of their converts. In fact, many of these early converts to Islam “came to see the saints as embodying the only Islam they knew.”¹¹

One important element of the conversion to Islam is that it occurred in a particular manner according to tribal geography. Conversion frequently happened on a tribal, not individual basis. The leader of a tribe would travel to the shrine of a particular saint, offering to convert not only himself, but his entire tribe, to Islam. Moreover, conversion was not necessarily understood at the acceptance of a particular doctrine, but rather an acknowledgement of the saint’s religious leadership. The act of conversion was frequently seen as a *bai’at*, or a vow of spiritual allegiance to a saint’s authority.¹² Over time, a “sacred geography” of the country developed, with the veneration of specific saints developed along regional and tribal lines.¹³ Even today, particularly in rural areas, one follows a particular saint because he is the saint of their tribe, perhaps responsible for the tribe’s conversion or for performing a notable miracle. The importance of conversion for the development of Sufism, indeed Islam as a whole, in Pakistan cannot be

⁸ Khan, I. (2011). The Assertion of Barelvi Extremism. *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Volume 12. Retrieved from <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/the-assertion-of-barelvi-extremism>

⁹ Ansari, S. (1992). *Sufi Saints and State Power: The Pirs of Sinds, 1843-1948*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. pp 13.

¹⁰ Robinson, F. (2002). *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006. pp 52.

¹¹ Lieven, 135.

¹² Ewing, K. (1983). The Politics of Sufism: Redefining the Saints of Pakistan. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 42. 255.

¹³ Talbot, I., & Thandi, S. (2004) *People on the Move: Punjabi Colonial and Post-Colonial Migration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp 183.

understated. It left “such a deep impact that intense devotion for sufi saints and their lines of descendants became the hallmark of religious practice in the land.”¹⁴ The nature of these initial conversion efforts laid the groundwork for the future relationship between the *pirs* and their followers, as well as establishing the *pirs*’ position within Pakistani society.¹⁵

As the first saints passed away, it came to be believed that possession of their *barakat* was passed down to their descendants. Their spiritual authority was “distributed among all the progeny of the saint and harnessed by the few who fulfill religious obligations.”¹⁶ Some of their *barakat* settled on the burial places of these saints, and so the shrines built there became frequent pilgrimage destinations. Sainthood became increasingly independent of personal piety, and the saints’ role became institutionalized within South Asian society. While veneration of the original saints remained popular, “support for [their] successors came to be founded less on belief in an extraordinary power and mission and more on belief in spiritual authority sanctified by tradition.”¹⁷ These descendants became the successors of the original saints, creating a hereditary *pir*-ship. The *bai’at*, the original ceremony in which the tribal leader acknowledged the saint’s spiritual authority, was repeated in front of the saint’s descendants, perpetuating the power relationship between *pir* and follower.¹⁸ Frequently, the religious authority inherited by the saints’ descendants was used to solidify their own social position and wealth, ensuring that they remained central in Pakistani religious life up to the present day.

As noted above, Barelvis are the modern adherents to this system, continuing both the veneration of the original saints, and maintaining the role of the saints’ descendants.¹⁹ While precise statistics are not available, most sources agree that Barelvis represent the majority of Pakistani Muslims, with estimates ranging from 50%²⁰ to 75%.²¹ The shrines are still popular pilgrimage

¹⁴ Ansari, 13.

¹⁵ Ewing, 251-268.

¹⁶ Sherani, S.R. (1991). Ulema and Pir in Pakistani Politics. In H. Donnan & P. Werbner (eds.), *Economy and Culture in Pakistan: Migrants and Cities in a Muslim Society*, London: Macmillan. pp 221.

¹⁷ Ansari, 23.

¹⁸ Ewing, 252-3.

¹⁹ Lieven, 136.

²⁰ Barelvi Islam. (2012, March). Global Security.org. Retrieved from

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-barelvi.htm>

²¹ Masood, S. & Gillani, W. (2011, April 3). Blast at Pakistan Shrine Kills Dozens. *The New York Times*.

destinations, and festivals known as *urs* commemorate the death of the original saint and celebrate his marriage with God. They draw hundreds of thousands of worshippers together for multi-day celebrations, involving music, dancing, hashish, and other methods for reaching ecstatic unity.²² Nor do Barelvis limit their veneration to millennia-old saints and their descendants. New charismatic individuals are constantly arising, some of whom become popular enough to be considered modern *pirs*. A number of shrines have been built for 20th century saints by dedicated disciples, seeking to elevate their teachers to new levels (and thus improving their own prestige). These individuals, both new and old, still serve a tangible purpose in their communities, as explained by one observer of Pakistani religious society:

Many of the new *pirs* are not frauds. Ordinary people take great comfort from them. They give them an outlook on life, and an inspiration. They create an emotional counterweight against the constant troubles of life here, the calamities that everyone has to face, the sorrow and sheer mess of life. They provide a place of spiritual rest for the people. They also educate children - which is more than the state does most of the time - calm down local fights, reconcile husbands and wives, parents and children, or brothers who have fallen out.²³

Sufism and Pakistan: Sobriety

The ecstatic traditions of the Barelvis are not the only expressions of Islam in Pakistan that have been heavily influenced by Sufism. In contrast to Barelvis' *sukr*, or intoxication, a second path is characterized by *sahw*, or sobriety. Traditionally, once a Sufi experiences the temporary state of *sukr*, he or she then returns to the "station" of *sahw*, where one is "conscious, self-possessed, and makes deliberate efforts to feel the All-Holy Truth."²⁴ The experience of unity with God leads one to a greater understanding of and appreciation for the separation between God and Man, and a realization of the latter's absolute dependence on the former. As William Chittick describes *sahw*, "it is the human response to divine names that designate God's majesty, glory, splendor, magnificence, might, wrath, and vengeance."²⁵ In classical Sufism, both *sukr* and *sahw* are seen as important elements of one's experience with the divine, and the two are considered closely related. But if Barelvis have overemphasized the role

²² Schmidle, N (2008). Faith & Ecstasy. *Smithsonian* 39. pp 36-47

²³ Lievan, 143.

²⁴ Gülen, 127.

²⁵ Chittick, 26.

of *sukr* while downplaying *sahw*, this second school has done the opposite. They have focused on the importance of *sahw*, perhaps to the exclusion of *sukr*. This has led to a “reform-oriented intellectually motivated vision of Sufi practice and thought, which calls upon followers both to reform their lives according to the shari'a and to follow Sufi paths (tariqa) and teachings.”²⁶

This reform-minded version of Sufism arose in the 16th and 17th centuries as a response to the particular direction that Islam had taken in South Asia. A new breed of Sufi saints challenged the “certain tendency towards a religious and cultural syncretism [that] was then in the air.”²⁷ The Muslim empires of South Asia had grown prosperous and powerful, but had also become increasingly religious tolerant, even deliberately syncretistic, in order to promote harmony among its diverse citizenry. This openness was viewed by a number of religious figures as un-Islamic—a betrayal of orthodoxy. Reformist Sufis “adopted various tactics from physical assault to ‘ostentatious disdain’ to bring the lives of [Muslims] and their court closer to *sharia*.”²⁸ It is an ironic twist, then, that the great tombs which were constructed upon the deaths of these new saints became “objects of the popular syncretic devotionism which they themselves would have scorned.”²⁹ During their lifetime, however, these reformist saints laid the groundwork for the growth of an intellectually and personally focused version of Pakistani Sufism.

It is difficult to speak definitively of a specific intellectual, reformist movement of Sufism that arose in Pakistan, in part because it is not a clearly delineated category. But more significantly, the groups themselves shy away from the label of “Sufi.” The term Sufi is most often applied to the very practices of saint veneration and shrine worship these groups so heavily criticize. Unsurprisingly they prefer not to be associated with such practices. But regardless of their protestations, Sufism has exerted a powerful influence on these Muslims, one “visible in areas of religious experience other than shrine worship.”³⁰ Rather, when villagers from one community in northwest Pakistan visit the shrine complexes located in the nearby cities, they are “often shocked at what they say

²⁶Magnus Marsden. (2005). *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 33

²⁷ Hermann Goetz, “The Fall of Vijayanagar and the Nationalization of Muslim Art in the Dakhan.” *Journal of Indian History* 19 (1940), 250.

²⁸ Robinson, 237.

²⁹ Eaton, R. M. (1978). *Sufis of Bijapur 1300-1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. pp 134.

³⁰ Marsden, 33.

Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies Vol. 5, No. 3 (2013)

are the un-Islamic goings-on inside.”³¹ For these Muslims, Sufism offers a unique source of values, often gleaned from classic Sufi literature and poetry. While the beliefs and practices of these Muslims are a sharp contrast with those of the Barelvis, the influences of Sufism are undeniably alive and present within them.

The most visible, and most representative, of the modern groups influenced by reformist Sufism is the Tablighi Jama'at (TJ), which roughly translates to “The Society for Spreading the Faith.” It was founded in 1927 by Muhammad Ilyas who, like many reformers of the time, felt that Muslims had strayed too far from the fundamental elements of Islam. But unlike other reformers, such as the Wahabis in Saudi Arabia, Ilyas chose to focus entirely on the individual elements of his faith. The TJ sought to move Islam out of the *madrassa* and away from the learned scholars into the streets, relying on “lay” Muslims to engage in missionary endeavors, calling others to the faithful practice of Islam. Ilyas eschewed fancy techniques, technology, and organizational methods in favor of the power of personal interaction. His strategy “was to persuade Muslims that they themselves, however little book learning they had, could go out in groups, approaching even the `ulama, to remind them to fulfill their fundamental ritual obligations.”³² Today, the TJ is considered to be one of the largest Muslim organizations in the world today, operating in over 150 countries. Due to its decentralized organization, precise estimates of its numbers are difficult to make, but they range between 12 and 80 million.³³

Despite the reformist stance taken by the Tablighi Jama'at and its founders, Sufism has had a profound influence on the organization. While they downplay such connections, and TJ leaders are extremely reluctant to acknowledge them publically, “they have partly preserved and partly developed an internal culture that is laden with Sufi-inspired rituals.”³⁴ The structure of the TJ draws strongly on that of traditional Sufi orders, publishing hagiographies that cast TJ elders as *pirs*. Some Tablighi leaders go so far as to act simultaneously as a *pir*, initiating followers into a particular Sufi order and collecting money from their Sufi disciples in order to finance TJ activities. This behavior reached such levels that a

³¹ Mardsen, 33.

³² Metcalf, B. (2004). Traditionalist Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis, and Talibs. In *Islamic Contestations: Essays on Muslims in India and Pakistan*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. pp 272

³³ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. (2010, September 15). Muslim Networks and Movements in Western Europe: Tablighi Jama'at. Retrieved from <http://pewforum.org/Muslim/Muslim-Networks-and-Movements-in-Western-Europe-Tablighi-Jamaat.aspx>.

³⁴ Reetz, D. (2006). Sûfi spirituality fires reformist zeal: the Tablighî Jamâ'ât in today's India and Pakistan. *Archives De Sciences Sociales Des Religions*, 51. pp 38.

decision was made in the 1990s that members should refrain from promoting their position as *pir* using Tablighi resources. That such a statement would be necessary is a testament to the popularity of the practice.³⁵ It is not unheard of for groups of Tablighis to take on roles as spiritual conduits, similar to the *pirs*, and “the missionary group itself [has become] a channel for divine intervention.”³⁶ Although they would likely deny it, Sufism has undeniably exerted a strong influence in shaping the leadership, organization, rituals, and even philosophy of the TJ, to the extent that one scholar has referred to the organization as “a true modern incarnation of Sufi aspirations.”³⁷

Sukr and Pakistani Politics

Returning to the Barelvis and their practices, the development of this unique system of saints and shrines in Pakistan has led to two central, and somewhat contradictory, trends in terms of political engagement. On one hand, the system of shrines has become implicitly, yet deeply, linked to the Pakistani political landscape. The *pirs* possess a significant amount of power in their role as religious mediators, the men who control access to the divine. Not only are *pirs* placed at the center of Pakistani religious life, but the ability to either limit or increase access to God serves as a powerful incentive for their followers. The centrality of the *pir* in regional Pakistani society has even manifested a capability to undermine and threaten the authority of larger political entities. The shrines and their saints draw loyalties to themselves, drawing citizens away from identifying with the Pakistani nation-state. This challenge to the state’s authority is intensified when shrines offer social services, such as food or education, which further supplants the state’s functions. In other countries, most notably Turkey, the authorities reacted to this challenge by attempting to suppress such institutions. Muslim authorities in Pakistan, however, have recognized the potential of such influence and sought to tap it into it in order to solidify their own legitimacy. They granted large tracts of land to the *pirs* and expanded their shrines, which further reinforced the *pirs*’ power.³⁸ The British, like the Muslim rulers before them, also recognized the *pirs* political role, and sought to gain their allegiance, or at least avoid revolt, through grants and land protections, with similar effects.³⁹

³⁵ Reetz, 37-39.

³⁶ Metcalf (2004), 274.

³⁷ Reetz, 48.

³⁸ Eaton,

³⁹ Gilmartin, D. (1978). Religious Leadership and the Pakistan Movement in the Punjab. *Modern Asian Studies*, 13. pp 494-96.

Thus the *pirs* and their shrines acquired a powerful political influence that has played an important role in Pakistani politics up through the twentieth century. One should note, however, that such influence has been remarkably implicit and passive. While it is a source of political power frequently tapped by others, it has never been actively exerted by the *pirs* themselves. The Muslim League drew on “tacit religious support [from] the rural areas,” i.e. the *pirs* and their shrines, to secure victory in the 1937 elections.⁴⁰ Ayub Khan (President from 1958 to 1969), Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (President 1971 to 1973, Prime Minister from 1973 to '79), and General Zia ul-Haq all sought to tap into the *pirs* influence for their own purposes, which will be discussed later, but also recognized the challenge posed by the *pirs* to Pakistan as a modern nation-state. According to Javid Iqbal, the architect of the government’s policies towards the shrines, popular Sufism “enervated the people and kept them steeped in all kinds of superstition.”⁴¹ The government distributed pamphlets that emphasized the saints as humans, highlighting their social goals and reformist activities as well as the government’s similar efforts. The government even tried to recast Sufi cosmology, emphasizing the immanence and accessibility of God, and removing the *pirs* from their role as intercessor.⁴² But throughout the 20th century, the shrine system served as a source of political authority upon which others drew on, not one prone to action itself.

Recognizing the danger, mentioned above, to Pakistan as a modern nation state, a concentrated effort has been made by several administrations to undermine the political power of the *pirs* and their shrines. The Auqaf Department, founded in 1959, gave the government the power to “take direct control over and to manage shrines, mosques, and other properties dedicated to religious purposes.”⁴³ The government began to construct large, modern, and highly visible additions to the shrines, recasting them as centers for social services. New schools and health clinics provided modern alternatives to the traditional education and medicine offered by the shrines’ caretakers. Under Zulfikar Bhutto, government officials were encouraged to take on a participatory role in the performance of religious rituals, such as washing the saint’s tomb, that were traditionally handled by the *pirs*’ descendants.⁴⁴ The government not only recognized the shrines as a center of latent political power, but considered the regional locus of loyalties a threat to the development of a cohesive nation state.

⁴⁰ Gilmartin, 508-12.

⁴¹ Iqbal, Javid.(1971). *Ideology of Pakistan*, 2nd ed. Karachi: Ferozsons. pp 58.

⁴² Ewing, 259-65

⁴³ Ewing, 258.

⁴⁴ Buehler, A.F. (1997). Currents of Sufism in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Indo-Pakistan: An Overview. *Muslim World*, 87. pp 310-11.

Despite the government's best efforts, and the view that "unless and until the Mullah and the Pir are excluded from our religious life there is no likelihood of the successful dissemination of enlightenment, liberalism and a meaningful and vital Faith among the people of Pakistan," the political influence of the *pirs* could not be suppressed. Even as he tried to undermine the *pirs*, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto presented himself as a "divinely inspired guide and teacher," and the mausoleum where he and his daughter Benazir are buried is highly reminiscent of a saint's shrine.⁴⁵ A great number of contemporary Pakistani politicians, including the Prime Minister, Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani; Deputy Prime Minister Makhdoom Amin Fahim; Foreign Minister, Syed Mahmood Qureshi; and Minister for Religion Syed Ahmed Qazmi are all from *pir* lineages, as are numerous prominent figures in the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), and various wings of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML). One such figure, Altaf Hussain of the MQM, is even referred to by his followers as "Pir Sahib."⁴⁶ Some politicians have gone as far as to mimic the rituals and festivals centered on the shrines. Anatol Lieven, British author and journalist, observed that "At PPP rallies, I have seen many party supporters shaking their heads violently from side to side in the manner of ecstatic devotees at saintly festivals."⁴⁷

The second characteristic of Barelvis in regards to political engagement has been a trend of political quietism on the national level. Regardless of the strong ties between the *pirs*, their shrines, and political authority, Barelvis have historically avoided wide-scale, active political engagement. While the *pirs* possess a very tangible political power, they have rarely chosen to exert that power explicitly on a widespread level. Most notably, despite the prevalence of political parties in Pakistan grounded in an Islamic identity, Barelvis have not developed the powerful organizations such as the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) or the Jamia-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), both affiliated with the Deobandi school, which is the largest traditional Islamic sect in Pakistan.⁴⁸ Even their opponents have

⁴⁵ Lieven, 136.

⁴⁶ Lieven, 136-7.

⁴⁷ Lieven, 135-7

⁴⁸ The Debandi are a reformist movement that arose in the mid-19th century in South Asia, and is the most popular Islamist group in Pakistan today, as well as the second largest Islamic sect in Pakistan today, after the Barelvis. Deobandis are the most visible example of the traditional, or orthodox Islamic sects, preaching that the original ideals of Islam have been corrupted in the modern world, and calling for a return to a more "pure" Islam. They are the most politically active

Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies Vol. 5, No. 3 (2013)

acknowledged the lack of political cohesion among Pakistani Sufis. Although Syed Abdul Ala Maududi, notable Islamist reformer and founder of the JI, recognized the pervasiveness of the tradition, “he did not consider [Sufism and Barelvism] a potent force, given its lack of a political system.”⁴⁹

While the explanation behind this lack of political participation is complex, it is rooted in the very nature of the Barelvi tradition. Centering religious activity on the shrines has led to a religious geography that is very regional in nature, as discussed above. The result has been a highly decentralized religious movement, one that lacks a sense of unity across regions. Practically speaking, there is no uniting religious or political ideology out of which a national movement could be brought. One’s religious loyalties and interests often end at a particular *pir* and his shrine, which presents major challenges for any type of wide-spread organization. No one *pir* possesses much authority over the followers of another *pir* or his followers, thus preventing the development of effective leadership. Further, the lack of a compelling mutual interest has presented a fatal flaw for efforts to draw the *pirs* together. “Every attempt at creating [Barelvi] parties over the decades,” writes Lieven, “has foundered on the deep rivalries and jealousies between (and indeed within) the great *pir* families.”⁵⁰ There simply has not existed the sufficient ideological common ground to overcome the regional locus of Barelvi practices. One’s identity as a Barelvi provides connections on the tribal and regional levels, but little beyond that, which has tended to inhibit political activism beyond such levels.

***Sahw* and Pakistani Politics**

Although the elements of Sufism adopted by the Tablighi Jama’at look radically different from those of the Barelvis, the movement has developed similar characteristics regarding political engagement. Thus, the TJ also exhibits a tacit involvement with political structures contrasted with an explicit avoidance of active politicking. “Political power,” Ilyas stated, “can never be” the objective of a true Muslim.⁵¹ In fact, the movement’s founder believed that political power could only be achieved when all Muslims had successfully brought their personal lives into accordance with Islam. Considering the propensity of human weakness,

Muslim group in Pakistan, and have strongly criticized the Barelvi focus on saints and shrines as un-Islamic.

⁴⁹ Ahman, I. (2009). The Indian Jama’at-i-Islami Reconsiders Secular Democracy. In *Islam in South Asia in Practice*, ed. Metcalf, B. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. pp 448-49

⁵⁰ Lieven, 142.

⁵¹ Ilyas, M. In ul-Haq, M.A. (1972) *The Faith Movement of Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas*. London: George Allen & Unwin. pp 137.

it is doubtful that such an event would ever occur. The TJ has shunned party politics, in Pakistan, India, and all countries in which the TJ operates, refusing to take sides in the political arena. As a result of this approach, the TJ is remarkably suited for operating in a secular environment, although the movement denies a secular orientation. Unsurprisingly, this has become a major critique of the TJ for Muslims who believe that secularism and Islam are completely incompatible. One Islamic activist commented that the TJ has influenced Muslims to be “docile, fate-oriented and has [made them] shun active involvement in real life things like politics and society.”⁵²

However, recent scholarship has begun to question this view of the Tablighi Jama’at as a completely apolitical entity. Some believe that the TJ’s intentional effort to remain politically aloof is itself a political statement. Although not explicitly active, the TJ is “deeply engaged in questions of power, legitimacy and authority which are the very stuff of politics.”⁵³ In particular, the emphasis on the flawed nature of man and creation offers a powerful critique of organized political systems of all varieties. But, though refusing to become explicitly political, the TJ has also offered itself as a source of political energy available for others to tap. Particularly in Pakistan, the TJ has been used by militant Islamists as a springboard, utilizing the organization as a pre-existing structure through which to operate. A number of Islamic militants have been previously involved in TJ circles, including Richard Reid, who in 2001 attempted to destroy an American Airlines flight with explosives in his shoes.⁵⁴

As with Barelvism and the shrine system, there are a number of Pakistani political figures who have strong ties with the TJ. Muhammad Rafiq Tarar, President of Pakistan from 1998 to 2001, was a senior TJ member. Both Maulana Muhammad Zakariya, who served as Chief Minister of the North-West Frontier Province, and Lt. General Javed Nasir, head of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) from 1992 to ’93, have been connected to TJ groups. While there is little evidence that the TJ is deliberately pushing for members to take political office, or supporting Islamic militants, it is clear that the organization has been drawn into the political sphere. Despite the contrasts between the Tablighi Jama’at and Barelvism in their beliefs and practices, the two are remarkably similar in how

⁵² Rahman, N.A. *The “Ulema: Zionist Tools?”*, Retrieved from http://members.tripod.com/signs_magazines/issue10/ulema-zionist_tools.htm

⁵³ Sikand, Y. (2006). The Tablighī Jama’āt and Politics: A Critical Re-appraisal. *The Muslim World*, 96.1. pp 177.

⁵⁴ “Tablighi Jama’at,” The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

they have become passively intertwined with Pakistani politics, despite avoiding widespread, explicit political action.

Political Awakening

In summary, Sufism has played a complicated role in the history of Pakistani politics. On one hand, Sufis of both the *sukr* and *sahw* persuasion have generally avoided political activism. Despite the overwhelming presence of Sufism in the Pakistani religious landscape, no effective Sufi political party has arisen. In fact, Sufism's influence has directed Muslims, both Barelvis and Tablighis, away from organized political involvement. On the other, it is nearly impossible to ignore how Sufism has become subtly involved in the Pakistani political environment. These effects have been implicit, until recently. Since the early nineties, Pakistani Sufis have begun to mobilize in a much more organized fashion. Barelvis, in particular, have begun to "shake off [their] traditional posture of political acquiescence" in response to increased hostility from more conservative Islamic sects, including militant organizations.⁵⁵ In the last ten years especially, Barelvis have come together on an unprecedented scale for the explicit purpose of protecting their religious traditions. However, this activism is reactionary in nature, and Barelvi activists have faced major challenges arising from those elements of Sufism that have inhibited political organization in the past.

The vast majority of this hostility has been focused on Barelvis, and other practitioners of shrine worship. The central role of saints and their shrines has been seen as much farther outside the realm of Islamic orthodoxy than the intellectual, reformist variety of Sufism. The legacy of competition between Deobandi and Barelvi mosques dates back over a century. Since the early 20th century, the two movements engaged in an ongoing "Fatwa War," as each school of thought seeks to delegitimize the other by often issuing opposite positions on legal issues.⁵⁶ But while critiques of this type of Sufism have existed almost since its founding, the policies of military dictator General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, who ruled Pakistan from 1977 to 1988, empowered the critics. General Zia ul-Haq was personally sympathetic to the efforts of Islamists, and effectively placed government support behind conservative Islamic groups, most notably the Deobandis.⁵⁷ He initiated a state Islamization program that, while its short-term effectiveness is questionable, laid the foundations for the long-term strengthening

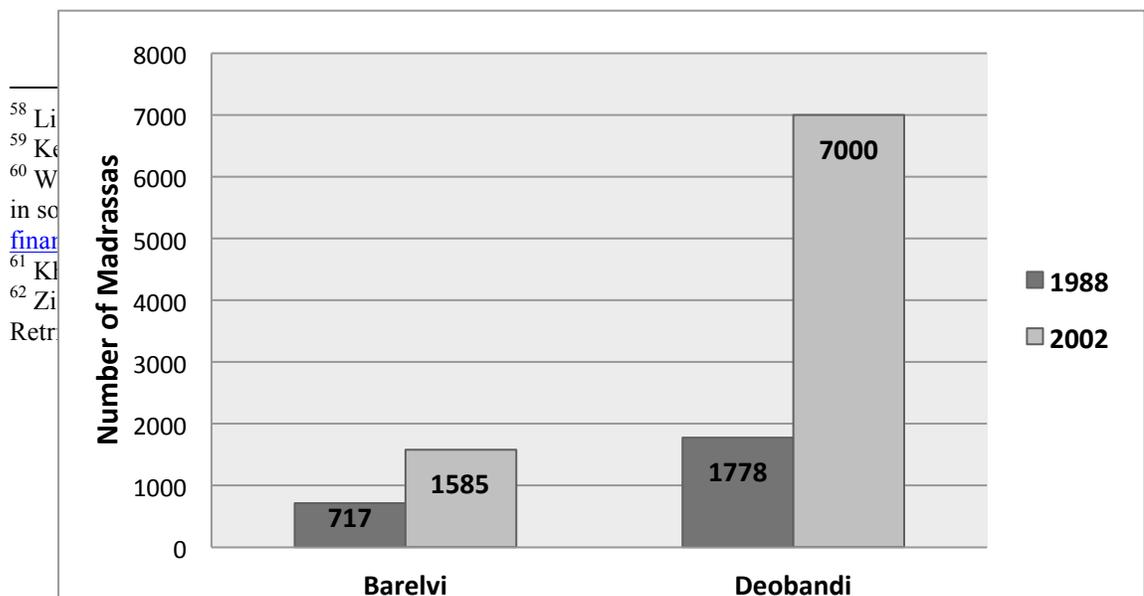
⁵⁵ Abouzid, R. (2010, December 21). The Hidden War. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/12/21/the_hidden_war?page=0,7

⁵⁶ Khan, "The Assertion of Barelvi Extremism."

⁵⁷ Khan, "The Assertion of Barelvi Extremism."

of Islamist groups, particularly militants, in Pakistan. An ardent anti-Communist, Zia ul-Haq provided funds, weapons, and training to the Mujahidin for their jihad in Afghanistan, much of which found its way into the hands of Islamist parties in Pakistan. Under the auspices of the Cold War, the United States also supplied money and arms to militant groups for use in Afghanistan, which were saved by those groups after the war, or simply never arrived in Afghanistan in the first place.⁵⁸

This explicit state support combined with a number of other factors to promote rapid growth of Islamist groups in Pakistan. Another large source of support has been Saudi Arabian efforts at proselytization sparked by the explosion of the oil industry in the mid-twentieth century. Millions of dollars were poured into Pakistan, as military aid against the Soviets, but also as an effort to spread the Saudi's highly conservative Wahhabi brand of Islam.⁵⁹ Such money lasted well beyond the conclusion of the Afghan-Soviet conflict, and continues extensively today. A U.S. government official estimated that as of 2008, over \$100 million annually was making its way to Islamist clerics in Pakistan from sources in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.⁶⁰ One effect of this infusion of funding has been an explosion in the number of Deobandi madrassas, particularly as compared to their Barelvi equivalents. In 2002, there were over 7,000 Deobandi madrassas in Pakistan, up from 1,778 in 1988, a growth of 294 percent. In comparison, Barelvi madrassas only saw a 121% increase, going from 717 to 1,585 in the same period.⁶¹ This increase in Deobandi mosques was not limited to new constructions, either. Barelvis have consistently complained that mosques “are being seized through armed conflict at an unprecedented rate,” as well as through legal manipulation and intimidation.⁶² Overall, the increase in support for the Deobandis and other Islamist groups, from a number of sources, that occurred in the 1980s served to intensify their historical animosity towards Barelvis. It would lead to two decades of escalated hostility between the two groups.



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Figure 1. Growth in Pakistani Madrassas, 1988-2002 (Data adapted from Khan 2011.)

In response to this increased animosity from Deobandis and other Islamists, Barelvis in the early 1990s began to respond, despite their previously apolitical character. One of the most significant of such organizations is Sunni Tehreek (ST). ST was founded in the early 1990s by Saleem Qadri and Barelvi youth who, in response to Deobandi aggression, “could no longer tolerate the occupation of Sunni mosques by Deobandis.”⁶³ It was not a political party, per se, but the ST represents the first truly popular expression of Barelvi political activism. The mission of the organization was laid out in four goals:

1. The protection of Ahle Sunnat (Barelvi) beliefs.
2. The protection of the rights of the Ahle Sunnat.
3. The protection of Ahle Sunnat mosques.
4. The protection of the Ahle Sunnat awqaf (religious endowments), such as shrines.⁶⁴

⁶³ Crisis Group Report, "Pakistan: Karachi's Madrasas and Violent Extremism," *International Crisis Group*, 11. Retrieved from [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-asia/pakistan/130_pakistan_karachi_s_madrasas_and_violent_extremism.ashx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-asia/pakistan/130_pakistan_karachi_s_madrasas_and_violent_extremism.ashx)

⁶⁴ Jamal, A. (2011, February 24). Sufi Militants Struggle with Deobandi Jihadists in Pakistan. *The Jamestown Foundation: Terrorism Monitor*, pp 7. Retrieved from http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=37562&cHash=520e65450a548a2042eeb6146b793490

As the word “protection” implies, the ST was reactionary in nature, formed in response to a perceived threat to Barelvis and their practices. A particular focus was on not only defending, but reclaiming mosques that had been lost to Deobandis. They accused the government of favoring Deobandi groups, and demanded that a greater number of Barelvi imams be appointed to army-operated mosques.⁶⁵ Later, as the Taliban and other militants began to operate more frequently within Pakistan, they would expand their focus to include these threats as well.⁶⁶ In comparison, you do not see this same political activation by the Tablighi Jama’at, despite similarities in its approach to politics. The TJ’s practices simply did not garner the same amount of criticism, and thus did not have the same impetus for political organization as the Barelvis. They were not faced with the same threat as the Barelvis, and thus were not pushed to react.

It is important to note that, however, that from its very beginnings Sunni Tehreek has embraced force and even violence in order to secure its goals. Saleem Qadri was originally a follower of Pir Mohammad Ilyas Attar Qadri, who advocated for a non-violent response to Deobandi aggression. The two split over the latter’s pacifism, with Saleem stating that “non-violence was not taking the Barelvis anywhere.”⁶⁷ Throughout the 1990s, ST began to assert itself aggressively, using force when necessary to retake mosques that had allegedly been taken from them by Deobandi groups. Over the two decades since the movement’s birth, it has become increasingly militant. Many consider the organization to be responsible for the 2000 assassination of Yusuf Ludhianvi, a prominent Deobandi figure. Throughout the 2000s, the violence between ST and more conservative groups has escalated, with one attempt to seize control of a Deobandi mosque in 2007 turning into a shootout that left one bystander dead and several others injured.⁶⁸ While ST disputes its characterization as a militant group, insisting its purposes are “defensive” only, their willingness to resort to force has driven many Pakistanis to classify them as another violent sectarian organization.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Jamal, “Sufi Militants Struggle with Deobandi Jihadists in Pakistan,” 7.

⁶⁶ Paracha, N. (2012, February 5). What’s Your Poison?. *Dawn.Com*, Retrieved from <http://www.dawn.com/2012/02/05/smokers-corner-whats-your-poison.html>

⁶⁷ Jamal, “Sufi Militants Struggle with Deobandi Jihadists in Pakistan,” 7.

⁶⁸ Staff Report (2007, April 11). One dead as ST tries to take control of Ahle Hadith mosque. *The Daily Times*. Retrieved from http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\04\11\story_11-4-2007_pg7_4

⁶⁹ Khan, “The Assertion of Barelvi Extremism.”

Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies Vol. 5, No. 3 (2013)

Although the intentional, if reactionary, activism of the Sunni Tehreek is a notable step into the political arena, Barelvi political activism has dramatically expanded in the early- to mid-2000s. The American invasion of Afghanistan further energized the Taliban and other militant activity in the region and conservative Islamist groups became increasingly violent towards Barelvis. In an early attack, Saleem Qadri was assassinated by a member of a Deobandi terrorist organization in 2001. Activity particularly intensified in the mid-2000s, with one independent study counting 35 separate attacks on Barelvi shrines since 2005, with hundreds of casualties.⁷⁰ In 2009, a suicide bomber from the Tehreek-e-Taliban, a Deobandi movement, killed Mufti Sarfraz Naeemi, a prominent Barelvi scholar and fierce opponent of the Taliban who had declared: "The military must eliminate the Taliban once and for all."⁷¹ Perhaps most damaging was the Nishtar Park Tragedy in 2006, where a suicide bomber wiped out the entire senior leadership of the Sunni Tehreek along with dozens of Barelvis.⁷² If the conflict between Barelvis and conservatives had been simmering since the late 1980s, it was in the 2000s that it expanded into a full blown conflict.

In response to this violent intensification, Barelvis have further increased their political activity. The strongest and most notable instance has been the formation of the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), an alliance between eight smaller Barelvi groups. In 2009 they launched a "Save Pakistan" movement to "stem the menace of Talibanisation."⁷³ The organization has since ballooned to include over 60 groups and embarked on an aggressive public relations campaign. Goals include calling for the government to ban "incendiary Deobandi literature," crack down on supposedly banned extremist groups, and increase police action against terrorism suspects.⁷⁴ The previously mentioned Long March to Save Pakistan was one of the largest, but certainly not the only, example of the SIC's awareness

⁷⁰ Attacks on Pakistani Shrines. *Terrorism Watch Pakistan*. Retrieved from <http://terrorismwatch.com.pk/Attacks%20on%20Shrines%20In%20Pakistan.html>.

⁷¹ Haider, Z. (2009, May 13). Pakistan moderate clerics speak out against Taliban. *Reuters*, Retrieved from <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2009/05/13/us-pakistan-clerics-idUKTRE54C1JQ20090513>; Tenveer, R. (2009, June 13). Suicide bomber assassinates Mufti Naeemi: Taliban turn against religious scholars. *Daily Times*. Retrieved from http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009/06/13/story_13-6-2009_pg1_1

⁷² Bomb carnage at Karachi prayers. (2006, April 11). *BBC News*. Retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4900402.stm

⁷³ Correspondent. (2009, May 9). Eight parties form alliance against Talibanisation. *The News*, Retrieved from <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=22032&Cat=13&dt=5/10/2009>.

⁷⁴ Abouzid, R. (2010, December 21). The Hidden War. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/12/21/the_hidden_war?page=0,7

campaign.⁷⁵ Activists have gone as far as to express gratitude towards those militants for waking Barelvis from their political slumber. "We're thankful to them, those who started destroying things like the shrines, because they forced us to wake up, come together and confront them, God willing," declared Sayyed Safdar Shah Gilani, a Sufi cleric and a key figure in the SIC. "We [have been] compelled to come out on the streets."⁷⁶

However, the Sunni Ittehad Council, like Sunni Tehreek, is a reactionary creature, and faces a number of challenges ahead. Contemporary attempts at Barelvi political organization must overcome the same factors that have hindered such activity in the past. The recently intensified hostility on the part of Islamist organizations has provided enough of a common cause to draw Barelvis together into a semblance of unity for now, but this newly found consensus is fragile. Critics have already pointed out that the movement's focus is predominately anti-shrine attack, rather than anti-terrorism or even pro-Barelvi. Above all, it is a coalition built on self-preservation, which poses serious challenges for the organization's leadership. Already factional divisions have arisen, both between the SIC and other Barelvi groups who have refused to join and between groups within the SIC itself. In 2011, one SIC leader sharply criticized several other senior members for receiving money from the United States. A number of groups neglected to participate in the 2010 protest march, despite previous promises to do so. Accusations have also been made that certain leaders are using the SIC as a platform to increase their own power and prestige. It is clear that the regional and structural aspects of Sufism that have inhibited political activity for centuries still exert a powerful influence on Pakistan today.⁷⁷

Conclusion

When the original saints first arrived in South Asia, it is doubtful that they imagined the extent to which Sufism would influence the Pakistani religious landscape. From the ecstatic shrine worship of the Barelvis to the missionary

⁷⁵ Daily Times Monitor. (2010, November 29). SIC 'Save Pakistan' long march ends in Lahore. *Daily Times*. Retrieved From http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2010%5C11%5C29%5Cstory_29-11-2010_pg7_28

⁷⁶ Abouzid, R. (2010, Nov 10). Taliban Targets, Pakistan's Sufi Muslims Fight Back. *TIME*, Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2030741,00.html#ixzz1beNCvZII>

⁷⁷ Khan, A.U. (2011, May 9). Sunni Ittehad Council: The Strengths and Limitations of Barelvi Activism against Terrorism. *Center for Research and Security Studies – Pakistan*. Retrieved from <http://crss.pk/downloads/Reports/Research-Reports/Barelvi-Activism-against-Terrorism.pdf>

activities of the Tablighi Jama'at, a number of elements of Sufism can be found throughout Pakistan, and indeed much of South Asia. It is curious, then, that Sufism would not play a greater role as a political identity, considering its widespread popularity. Rather, as we have seen, the influence of Sufism has tended to suppress large-scale political organization. For both ecstatic and reserved Sufis, their religious identity has not been an important component of their political identity and, despite a number of Islamic political parties, no Sufi parties have materialized. Such was the nature of Sufi political engagement for centuries.

Yet, clearly this disinclination towards national politics has begun to change. Organizations like Sunni Tehreek and the Sunni Ittehad Council stand at the forefront of an unprecedented wave of Barelvi activism, drawing Barelvis throughout Pakistan together in the face of increasing hostility and even violence. While certainly a challenge to the militant Islamists who have caused so much strife lately, on a closer inspection these movements may not be as united as they appear. Both Sunni Tehreek and the SIC have mobilized in direct response to a perceived threat to the foundation of their religious practices. But their action is perhaps better described as re-action, and their unity is one imposed by necessity. Reformist Sufis, such as the Tablighi Jama'at, who have not faced the same hostility, have continued their political disengagement. Sunni Tehreek, the SIC, and similar organizations face many challenges on the road ahead, challenges rooted in the very nature of Pakistani Sufism. Despite new and novel political expressions, Sufis are still influenced by those factors which prevented political organization for so long.

The arrival of these Barelvi political organizations, then, is more complex than may first appear, and it is necessary to understand them within their historical and social context. The nature of Pakistani religious life is highly regional, with many loyalties extending no further than a particular saint or tribe. While Barelvi political activity has been noticeably absent from the national stage, Sufi shrines and descendants of saints are frequently found at the center of local political hierarchies. Over time, those who control the shrines have managed to accumulate a considerable amount of spiritual and political authority. And while this authority does not typically extend beyond a limited geography, and in fact it tends to inhibit widespread political activity, it is an integral element of both the Barelvi tradition and Pakistani politics.

Looking forward, this more complex and realistic understanding of Pakistani Sufism challenges our current conception of Pakistan as a nation-state. Noting the artificial nature of Pakistan is not a new observation, but it further underlines the need for a more flexible understanding of the country as a disjointed socio-political entity. The current nation-state framework has been

placed on top of a highly diverse and locally focused region and frankly, the wisdom of even speaking of Pakistan as a unified entity is questionable. Our knowledge of Barelvi history and traditions is quite limited, leading to an oversimplistic understanding of Pakistan's internal religious dynamics. The available literature on popular religion in Pakistan is sparse indeed. Yet, as this paper has hopefully shown, modern Pakistani Sufism is worthy of far more attention than it has received. As Pakistan's role in the global community continues to grow, it is more important than ever before, that we grow in our understanding of the nation's unique and complex religious traditions.

In particular, this complex understanding of religion in Pakistan, and its political engagements, challenges the frameworks with which the West has approached religion and politics in Pakistan. One such understanding of Sufism, frequently propagated by American think tanks, sees it as an asset the West should "harness" in the ideological struggle against Islamic radicalism, that Sufis are "natural allies of the West."⁷⁸ But this approach vastly oversimplifies and misunderstands the role of Sufism in Pakistan. The interests of the two simply do not line up quite that nicely, and Barelvi clerics are among the most outspoken Pakistani critics of U.S. foreign policy. A number of Barelvi scholars (including several central SIC organizers) rallied in support of Mumtaz Qadri, who assassinated the governor of Punjab in 2011 because of the governor's opposition to certain anti-blasphemy laws.⁷⁹ Some critics are concerned that, rather than marginalizing the voice of Islamists, promoting Barelvi organizations would simply lead to "a faith war between Sufi and Salafi in Pakistan."⁸⁰ This conception of Sufism as a panacea to Islamic extremism faces a number of difficulties, and fails to fully comprehend the complexities of Sufism in Pakistan. While some progress has been made, we must continue to push beyond a simple, dualistic framework and seek a more complex and nuanced understanding of Sufism, indeed the whole of Islam, in Pakistan today.

⁷⁸ Tharoor, I. (2009, July 22). Can Sufism Defuse Terrorism? *Time*. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1912091,00.html>

⁷⁹ Imtiaz, H. (2012, January 12). US aid to Sunni Ittehad Council backfired. *The Express Tribune*. Retrieved from <http://tribune.com.pk/story/320193/one-off-grant-us-aid-to-sunni-ittehad-council-backfired/>

⁸⁰ Eteraz, Ali. (2009, June 10). State-Sponsored Sufism. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/06/09/state_sponsored_sufism

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asia/pakistan/130_pakistan_karachi_s_madrasas_and_violent_extremism.a
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