



Citation: Ejaz, T., & Mahsud, M. I. (2026). Exploring the Role of Law Enforcement Institutions and Religious Elite in Mitigating Sectarianism in Pakistan: A Case Study of Rawalpindi District (2014 – 2024). *Regional Lens*, 5(1), 154–165. <https://doi.org/10.55737/rl.v5i1.26128>

Pages: 154–165 ▶ DOI: 10.55737/rl.v5i1.26128 ▶ Volume 5 ▶ Issue 1 (2026) ▶ © The Author(s) 2026

Exploring the Role of Law Enforcement Institutions and Religious Elite in Mitigating Sectarianism in Pakistan: A Case Study of Rawalpindi District (2014 – 2024)

Taliya Ejaz ¹ Muhammad Irfan Mahsud ^{2*}

Corresponding Author: Muhammad Irfan Mahsud (Email: irfanmahsud@ndu.edu.pk)

Abstract: Rawalpindi is a densely populated city of Punjab province in Pakistan with approximately two million people of various sectarian groups in the area of 5286 square kilometer. This research aims at understanding the role of cooperation between police officers and religious scholars in mitigating sectarianism in Rawalpindi. The primary objective of this research is to understand the collaboration of law enforcement institutions and religious elite in mitigating sectarianism in Rawalpindi from 2014 to 2024. In order to conduct this research, qualitative research methodology was used. Primary data was collected from semi-structured interviews and secondary sources include online documents, research articles and journal articles etc. Furthermore, the collaborative governance theory explained the cooperation of law enforcement agencies and religious elite in minimizing the sectarian tensions. Though sectarian conflict in Rawalpindi seems to be managed by the efforts of law enforcement agencies and religious elite however, management does not mean resolution. In order to eliminate the sectarian divide completely, tolerance for other sectarian groups and collective as well as consistent efforts by all the stakeholders are paramount.

Key Words: Sectarianism, Rawalpindi, Law Enforcement Agencies, Religious Elite

Introduction

Defining Sectarianism

The word “sect” is derived from a Latin word *secta* which means “school of thought” however, the etymology of the concept of sectarianism deviated from the concept of sect given by Max Weber (Mabon, 2022). With the passage of time, the sect was perceived as a competing subgroup within an ideology, religion or movement that separates itself from the primary group. Mabon also explains that sectarian identities have personal significance that resonates in both the more formal spheres of political life and the social world. The article also mentions that because of the profound intersectionality of these identities, sectarianism cannot be comprehended in isolation from the larger social, political, and economic contexts in which it functions. Oxford Dictionary defines sectarianism as.

“The strong support for a particular religious or political group, especially when this leads to violence between different groups.” (Wehmeier, 2000)

Moreover, in his book “Sectarianism in Pakistan”, Musa Khan Jalālzai delineates.

“It is the religious intolerance possessed by one religious sect against others due to its divergent doctrines.” (Jalalzai, 1992)

¹ M.Phil. Scholar, Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
Email: taliya.ejaz.0202@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor, Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
Email: irfanmahsud@ndu.edu.pk

Murphy, in his book “Islam and Sectarian Violence in Pakistan: The Terror Within”, explains that sectarianism is the doctrinal or theological conflict as well as difference of rituals among the factions of the same religion (Murphy, 2018). According to John D. Brewer.

“Sectarianism refers to a whole cluster of ideas, beliefs, myths and demonology about religious difference which are used to make religion a social marker, to assign different attributes to the various religious groups and to make derogatory remarks about others.” (Brewer, 1992)

Brewer further explains that despite a set of prejudiced attitudes, sectarianism also refers to the behavior, policies and types of treatment that are the result of religious differences. Besides, it also accentuates the social relations which are codified into a stratification system on the basis of religion. Asma Khan Mahsood and Muhammad Kamran define sectarianism as an act of using religion to mobilize one sectarian group against the other in order to meet certain political and economic objectives (Mahsood & Kamran, 2017).

Historical Background of Sectarian Tensions in Pakistan

Pakistan is a country with Muslim majority and a homeland that brings together the people of various ethnic, cultural, linguistic as well as religious identities. Its population constitutes 96.3 percent of Muslims among which 85–90 percent are Sunni (Barelvi and Deobandi), 10-15 percent are Shia and 0.2 percent are Ahmadi (Mohammad, 2022). According to Niala Mohammad, the minorities of the country include smaller populations of Hindus (1.6 percent), Christians (1.6 percent) as well as Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha'is and Zoroastrians who are less than 1.0 percent. Before partition of the Subcontinent, theological differences existed however, the relations between various Islamic sectarian groups were relatively peaceful (Grare, 2013). According to the article, it is because Mughal emperors such as Humayun and Jahangir used to maintain cordial relations with people of Shia community particularly with scientists etc. Nonetheless, colonial British politicians adopted the divide and rule policy and worsened the religious differences by institutionalizing religious identities through the compartmentalization of the census and independent voters (Morrock, 1973; Siddiqui, 2022; Hempton, 1996).

After 1947 and onward period, there was relatively peaceful coexistence among several sectarian groups as the representatives of the Shia community for example, Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan and Mian Iftikhar Uddin held significant positions in the government (Long et al., 2015; Mir & Mir, 2006). During that time, one's sectarian identity was secondary to the broader Pakistani national identity (Mahsud & Aman, 2018). Pakistan was declared as an “Islamic Republic” in the 1956 Constitution however, a specific sectarian group was not addressed. The tensions began during the 1950s particularly, due to the question of what are the qualifications of being a Muslim. In Punjab, the Ahmadiyya riots were envisioned as the first significant dispute on the basis of religious identities which resulted in the precedent of religious intolerance and violence in 1953 (Qasmi, 2014; Amjid, 2020; Ispahani, 2017). Rahman (2026) and Misra (2003) argue that the polarization of religious identities increased with the increase of religious political parties like Jamaat-E-Islam (JI) and Jamiat Ulema-E-Islam (JUI) in the 1960s that were advocated by the Islamic State and followed Sunni schools of thought and created tensions among the minorities. The anti-Shia rhetoric was initiated by JUI – a Deobandi religious and political organization as well as the groups affiliated with it (Ahmad, 1998; Mir & Naquvi, 2016).

From the end of 1970s to 1980s, the Islamization era of General Zia-ul-Haq institutionalized sectarianism as biased laws (Zakat and Ushr ordinance) were implemented that supported the Sunni sect and alienated the Shia community (Khan et. al, 2025). After concessions to the Shia community, Zia's regime allowed the orthodox Sunni groups to continue their activities unhindered (Hamrah, 2023). Hamrah delineates that Jhang district became the epicenter of sectarian tensions in the aftermath of the 1980 Iran-Iraq war because the elite Shia community was residing there. The sectarian tensions further escalated in the country after the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 (Mahsud, 2019). Iran gave a new sense of affinity and identity to the Shia community of Pakistan, and the political organizations of the community strengthened relations with Iranian authorities and followed them for foreign policy (Grare, 2007). Despite this, the article puts forth that funds were provided by Iran to the Shias residing in Pakistan and

cultural centers were established as well as young clerics of Pashtun tribal areas of Gilgit Baltistan were paid so that they could undertake advanced study in cities of Qom and Najaf.

In the 1980s, the creation of *Madrassas* transformed the education system thus, creating conservative and less tolerant individuals (Kenar & Shaw, 2020). Kenar and Shaw further explained that while the education system discouraged criticism, the militant *Islamist* groups were created for participation in Afghan *Jihad*. According to their article, the negligence of successive regimes provided a safe haven for the extremist groups that were responsible for covert and overt operations as well as religious militancy. The Afghan war facilitated sectarian violence in Pakistan as the supply of resources, manpower, military training, networking, weapons and funds provided to the sectarian militant was evident in the 1980s particularly, after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 (Grare, 2007). On the other hand, the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1990s resulted in the notion that jihadist can defeat any enemy and admiration for them increased (Kenar & Shaw, 2020). They argued that members of the Shia community were unable to oppose the activities of jihadist because any such opposition was considered to be against Islam.

Main Argument

Rawalpindi is the focus of this research because it is a city adjacent to the country's capital, situated in the Northern Punjab province of Pakistan that has remained significant historically and strategically. Moreover, the city holds great significance because of the rise of political activism envisioned in it due to the emergence of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). According to the World Population Review (2025), it is a metropolitan city with a dense and diverse ethnic as well as sectarian populace of approximately 2.5 million. Besides being a military and administrative center, the city has a nuanced socio-religious fabric where various cultures and sects conduct their businesses in the vibrant marketplaces such as *Raja Bazaar*. The focus of this research are the sensitive areas of Rawalpindi that are sealed during religious events including, *Raja Bazaar*, *Banni*, *Moti Bazaar*, *Ghala Mandi*, *Kartarpura*, *Asghar Mall*, *College Road* and *Chittian Hattian*.

In 2013, *Madrassa Dar-ul-Uloom Taleem-ul-Quran* and the *Madina* cloth market under it were set on fire in *Raja Bazaar* which resulted in tensions and curfew in the region. According to a police officer Waseem Ahmed, the clashes between the two groups started due to a sermon delivered in a mosque situated in the procession route (Agencies, 2013). The doctor at the district hospital of Rawalpindi, Qasim Khan, said that eight people died and forty-four were injured as a result of these clashes. Thirteen of the wounded people brought to the hospital had gunshot wounds. Police officer Afzal Husaain said that three men of a seminary in Rawalpindi were beaten to death by the participants of a procession for humiliating them as their procession passed the seminary. Amid these clashes, several shops were burnt and police officers were also injured.

Even before the 2013 *Raja Bazar* incident, *Madrassa Taleem-ul-Quran* and the nearby areas have been sensitive areas which were efficiently administered by the law enforcement agencies. The proper planning, coordination and negotiations carried out by the police officers prevented sectarian violence in the region however, that planning was missing in 2013. The law enforcement agencies and religious elite play a crucial role in mitigating sectarianism in Rawalpindi. Though incidents of sectarian violence are lesser in Rawalpindi as compared to Parachinar and other areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan province however, differences still exist. Therefore, collaboration of law enforcement agencies, religious scholars and people is paramount during the religious events particularly, Muharram processions. Nonetheless, conflict escalates because of hate speech, sermons and writings of various religious scholars of both sects. Despite this, law enforcement agencies also face several challenges in minimizing sectarian tensions primarily, because of lack of public confidence.

Problem Statement

Sectarianism is a pervasive threat for national integration and internal security of Pakistan. Rawalpindi is a city with Shia as well as Sunni populace and is envisioned as a recurring epicenter of sectarian violence. Although tensions between Shia and Sunni groups are managed in Rawalpindi, the conflict is not completely resolved. The differences still exist among people and can exacerbate at any time, manifesting in the form of intolerance and direct violence. It is also

essential to analyze the efficacy of peace committees and suggest measures to improve it as they face multiple challenges due to lack of cooperation and public confidence. Furthermore, there is no sustainable framework for enhancing collaboration of law enforcement agencies, religious leaders and the public in order to understand the underlying causes of sectarianism.

Research Methodology

The religious leaders and law enforcement agencies collaborate to minimize sectarian tensions in Rawalpindi. While mitigating these tensions, the law enforcement agencies and religious elite face several challenges. In this study, qualitative research methodology is adopted in order to collect data. The type of research is descriptive in order to acquire insights on sectarianism in Rawalpindi. It is descriptive type of research because the collaboration between law enforcement agencies and religious elite is described through the lens of collaborative governance theory. Through embedded case studies as well as semi-structured interviews, the causes of sectarianism, role of law enforcement, religious elite and complexity of issues were comprehended. Data is collected from primary sources through semi-structured interviews. Conversations were steered by an interview guide however, the participants were also allowed to elaborate on the issues that they considered important. The participants included; law enforcement officers from Rawalpindi Police, Counter-Terrorism Department and Special Branch as well as religious scholars (Shia and Sunni clerics who were associated with mosques and madrassas), members of peace committees and the public. As some of the participants were not willing to reveal their identity therefore, considering their consent and following the ethics of research, some pseudonyms are used in this paper. Purposive sampling strategy was adopted to acquire data from those who are experienced and have an in-depth understanding of sectarian dynamics of Rawalpindi. In this type of sampling, the participants are chosen on the basis of certain characteristics that are pertinent to the research. In order to organize, identify, interpret, analyze and describe the collected data, thematic analysis is done.

Literature Review

Muhammad Qasim Zaman, in his article titled “Sectarianism in Pakistan: The Radicalization of Shi`i and Sunni Identities”, illustrates how sectarian groups such as *Sipah-e-Sahaba* and *Sipah-e-Muhammad* used mosques and madrassas to propagate sectarian identities (Zaman, 1998). Most religious figures involved in the sectarian violence were either educated or trained in these seminaries and often took on the role of an imam or educator before joining militant sectarian factions. This sheds light on the positions religious leaders hold in intensifying or dousing the flames of sectarianism and the differing approaches (moderate versus militant) they might embrace. Eamon Murphy, in his book titled “Islam and Sectarian Violence in Pakistan: The Terror Within”, puts forth that *Islamization* policies, particularly the Zakat laws under Zia-ul- Haq’s regime (1977-1988) which were enforced using Sunni legal frameworks, abandoned the Shi’a polity while simultaneously inciting sectarian conflict (Murphy, 2018). Muhammad Umar, in his article titled “Police capacity and autonomy issues in sectarian crimes and enforcement of anti-terror laws in Punjab”, comprehensively analyzes the structural limitations, political interference as well as ineffective implementation of laws that have substantially undermined the ability of law enforcement agencies in cities like Rawalpindi (Umar, 2022). Furthermore, the lack of specialized training, forensic sciences, intelligence-led policing, community policing as well as specialized forces to combat sectarianism serve as a considerable challenge for police departments while managing sectarianism in Rawalpindi. The police officers are not autonomous in their decisions rather the provincial and district level political elites continuously exert pressure on them by threatening them regarding posting and transfers in order to sway their decisions, thus undermining the long-term implementation of strategies. The police, Counter Terrorism Departments (CTDs), and intelligence agencies like Inter-Services Intelligence and Intelligence Bureau work together very limitedly. Adrian Cherney and Jason Hartley, in the journal article titled “Community Engagement to Tackle Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Challenges, Tensions and Pitfalls”, delineated the lack of public confidence in law enforcement agencies due to biases, increased intelligence gathering as well as lack of community engagement (Cherney and Hartley, 2017).

Qamar Fatima, in her article titled “Pakistan’s Religious Elite and Afghanistan: Antecedents”, delineates that the religious elites have always been a substantial part of the Muslim societies and their significance could not be denied even by the most despotic rules (Fatima, 2018). Religious leaders play a crucial role in minimizing sectarian tensions as they influence the people substantially. In their article titled “Religious Extremism and Online Radicalization in Pakistan”, Abdul Quddus Suhaib and Malik Adnan delineated that expanding the voices of religious scholars against extremists is paramount (Suhaib & Adnan, 2020). The religious notions are not only significant in socio-political circles but also followed by the masses in their daily lives therefore, the religious elite can play a considerable role in promoting teachings of tolerance and peace. The article titled “Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan: Some Lessons from the Irish Experience” is written by Moonis Ahmar in which he analyzes the ways through which the religious elite of Pakistan has been responsible for instigating as well as resolving the sectarian issues (Ahmar, 2010). The religious elite includes clerics, leaders of the mosques and instructors in madrasas along with the political-religious leaders. All of them play a substantial role in propagating sectarian divide specifically, between the Shia and Sunni communities. Ahmar further accentuates the dual role played by the religious leaders historically. While some have manipulated the populace and legitimized hatred as well as violence, others have also made significant efforts to minimize sectarian violence and promote peaceful coexistence via dialogue process and awareness.

Research Gap

Though extensive literature exists on sectarianism and religious extremism in Pakistan however, there is minimal literature on the role of collaboration between law enforcement and religious elite in mitigating sectarianism. Furthermore, the sectarian divide within Rawalpindi that becomes evident amid Muharram processions, is not well-researched. The prominent incident of sectarian violence in Rawalpindi was the clashes during the Muharram procession in Raja Bazaar and nearby areas in 2013. This research bears significance as it not only aims at understanding the causes of sectarianism in Rawalpindi but also the role of law enforcement agencies and religious elite in minimizing it.

Theoretical Framework – Collaborative Governance Theory

A new strategy for governance named “collaborative governance” has emerged in the past twenty years. In this type of governance, several stakeholders come together in public forums to participate in decision-making, focusing on reaching a consensus. Chris Ansell and Alison Gash, the proponents of Collaborative Governance Theory, define collaborative governance as.

“A governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets.” (Ansell & Gash, 2008)

This theory emphasizes the collaboration of public agencies, civil society actors along with the communities and delineates how they engage in problem-solving processes and policymaking, particularly, amid conflict, times of distrust and disintegration. The key assumptions of Collaborative Governance Theory are face-to-face dialogue, building trust, acceptable solutions, intermediate outcomes, rules and power sharing. Communication is crucial for collaboration therefore, face-to-face dialogue between various stakeholders is the cornerstone of collaborative governance. In case the prehistory is extremely conflict-prone, it will warrant time and at least budgetary adequacy for efficient trust restoring strategies. However, if justifying time is an impossibility, then embarking on collaborative strategies shall be deemed futile. While high stakeholder interdependence widens the collaborative focus, it also heightens the likelihood of manipulatively and co-optively incentivized behavior. Collaborative governance solutions are designed for problems that have stable interdependencies among players. In the case where prior hostility is high and a long-term commitment to trust building is essential then, the importance of intermediate outcomes increases which are pivotal. Small anticipatory outcomes tend to fortify collaborative approaches.

In addition, collaborative approaches initiate from governmental institutions like police bodies or administrative entities. They engage local stakeholders like religious authority figures and local educators. Participants are engaged not just as consultants, but stakeholders in decisional forums. Amid the collaborative process, at some point the stakeholders

ought to develop a shared understanding of what can be accomplished together (Tett et al., 2003). Shared understanding is also described as “common mission”, “common ground”, “common purpose”, “shared ideology” or “clear goals” etc. (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Collaborations must be systematic and structured, iterative, and transparent instead of informal and spontaneous. Agreement is aimed for, but a full consensus is not a precondition. The purpose remains to shape or implement public policy.

Relevance of the Theory

Collaborative Governance Theory explains how various institutions, civil society actors and members of the community cooperate in order to build trust, reach consensus and solve prevalent issues. In this research, the role of law enforcement agencies and religious elite in mitigating sectarianism is being studied. This theory will help in understanding the collaboration between law enforcement agencies and religious leaders which is one of the foremost objectives of this research. The dialogue process will help in fostering mutual understanding and trust between religious scholars as well as police officers. Furthermore, by cooperating with one another, police officers and religious scholars will be able to overcome public mistrust and devise certain acceptable solutions in order to counter sectarian threats in Rawalpindi. The rules and processes such as peace charters, intelligence sharing and interfaith training facilitate collaboration. Also, intermediate outcomes such as peace committees, modern policing initiatives and joint declarations etc. are crucial for building the momentum in order to result in successful collaboration.

Through this theory, collaboration between police, *ulema* and local elders can be studied which is evident in Peace Committees of Rawalpindi. The Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) Frameworks introduced by National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) also involve law enforcement agencies as well as religious elite. In spite of that, *Wafaq-ul-Madaris* collaborates with provincial authorities in order to regulate sermons amidst *Ashura* and *Eid Milad-un-Nabi*. The theory also focuses on public participation in mitigation of sectarianism and ownership from grass root level which is relevant to this research because the opinions of people regarding law enforcement agencies and religious scholars as well as their participation in minimizing sectarian tensions is also significant for understanding the role of police departments and religious scholars. Clerics from various sects agree on a standard code of conduct during religious events which is devised through the negotiations and consensus between all stakeholders.

Role of Collaboration between Law Enforcement and Religious Elite in Mitigating Sectarianism in Rawalpindi

In Pakistan particularly in cities such as Rawalpindi, sectarian tensions often exacerbate because of intolerance among people, ideological mobilization as well as weak mechanisms for law enforcement. Though the law enforcement agencies are responsible for maintenance of law and order within the country however, sincere collaboration between religious elite and law enforcement agencies will help in devising a sustainable strategy for minimizing sectarian tensions and preventing people from engaging in violence.

a. Meetings of Law Enforcement Officials and Religious Scholars

The Collaborative Governance Theory describes a type of governance in which state agencies collaborate with non-state stakeholders in order to collectively engage in the decision-making process. In this study, the public agencies are law enforcement agencies that work for maintaining public order and non-state stakeholders include religious elite who influence and disseminate sectarian narratives as well as instigate or mitigate sectarian tensions. Before and during prominent religious events such as Muharram processions and *Eid Milad-un-Nabi*, religious scholars and law enforcement agencies collaborate in order to devise peaceful strategies for secure and harmonious participation of people in such events. The aim is to engage in a face-to-face dialogue, build trust and reach a consensus for planning the activities amid these religious events. In an interview conducted amid this research, an Inspector Muhammad Dilawar from Rawalpindi revealed that law enforcement agencies always preach and are strong advocates of peace. Also, they provide foolproof security generally, during all kinds of religious gatherings, processions, rallies, corner meetings, conferences as well as particularly, amidst Muharram processions. In order to ensure that the organizers of

religious programs abide by the law, police officers hold meetings with them. Besides, they visit the routes so that all kinds of trouble spots can be kept under check.

According to Sheikh Imran, a shop owner in Madina Cloth Market, everything was fine before and after the 2013 *Raja Bazaar* incident. He further added that along with the police officers and religious elite, people also cooperate and participate in meetings. All the religious scholars, traders and police officers were on the same page in the aftermath of the incident. In addition, Sheikh Imran said that after the market was set on fire and shopkeepers suffered from immense financial loss, vendors stood together with one another despite their sectarian and religious differences. After the incident, the market remained closed for a few days, however, some of the shopkeepers still went there to ensure security and help each other. On the other hand, Sheikh Anwar, another trader in the Madina Cloth Market, said that religious scholars disseminated the narrative that the 2013 *Raja Bazaar* incident was an accident therefore, people should live in peace and they did not try to escalate the sectarian tensions by using the incident. In addition, Anwar revealed that no efforts were made by the people in order to minimize sectarian tensions because there was no conflict existing between them.

Despite this, a Shi'a scholar delineated that law enforcement agencies and religious scholars collaborate in order to minimize sectarian tensions through various initiatives such as inter-sect coordination committees, joint meetings during Muharram as well as peace agreements. Nonetheless, according to him, this collaboration is not consistent rather seasonal which does not result in long-term resolution of sectarian conflicts in Rawalpindi. Another Sunni cleric, Qari Mahmood ur Rahman said that he tries to collaborate with the law enforcement agencies in order to minimize sectarian tensions. On the other hand, it is envisioned that there are various institutional, ideological as well as political barriers that limit the collaboration between law enforcement agencies and religious elite. The religious leaders see law enforcement personnel as oppressive agents of the state and there is lack of trust in them. Moreover, the religious elite with political connections do not collaborate with law enforcement agencies. There is also lack of proper training of law enforcement agencies in conflict transformation and religious pluralism. In a nutshell, due to these predicaments, the collaboration is at its peak during the times of crises however, it is not continued afterwards.

b. Aman Committees in Rawalpindi

The *Aman* Committees (District Peace Committees) emerged in Pakistan after being inspired from various national and international district-level models that played an effective role in promoting community participation in dispute resolution and preserving peace. The committees operate at district level under the supervision of Deputy Commissioners. According to SAMAA TV (2025), it also includes other members such as religious scholars, police officers and members of civil society etc. who cooperate with the foremost aim of fostering religious tolerance and maintaining peace within the districts. Besides, these committees are authorized to oversee Muslim religious festivals. In Rawalpindi, *aman* committees are established at local, tehsil as well as district level. The district-level police officers establish the inter-sectarian negotiation committees before the prominent religious events such as Muharram processions and *Eid Milad-un-Nabi*. In these committees, prominent religious leaders, political officials and philanthropic personalities or benefactors are included and meetings are held occasionally. Peace committees in Rawalpindi play a positive and substantial role in minimizing the sectarian tensions.

The religious scholars agree on the routes for carrying out processions, their timings and avoiding hate speech in their sermons. For instance, in Muharram of 2017, tensions escalated in *Dhoke Ratta* and *Raja Bazaar* areas of Rawalpindi because of the appearance of certain provocative banners. Therefore, the local *Aman* committee held an emergency mediation backed by District Police Officer (DPO) and prominent religious leaders of Sunni and Shia sect at the office of Commissioner. Such forums for mediation of sectarian groups help in promoting mutual accountability which is a foundational pillar of collaborative governance. On the other hand, these committees face difficulties in maintaining effective communication with the law enforcement agencies. Nevertheless, district administration and law enforcement agencies help the *Aman* committees by giving information regarding the sectarian issues, previous incidents, rallies and religious programs as well as carrying out negotiations if the members of peace committees find it difficult to convince the conflicting parties.

Cutting to the chase, for collaboration of state institutions as well as non-state stakeholders, establishment of district peace committees, also known as *Aman* committees, is the most widely acknowledged mechanism. These committees ensure equal participation and representation of several sectarian groups and religious schools of thought such as Sunni (*Deobandi* and *Barelvi*) and Shia. *Aman* committees are convened at the tehsil or district level and the meetings are chaired by the District Police Officer (DPO) or Deputy Commissioner (DC). The district peace committees depict horizontal power sharing because the religious scholars get equal representation and are considered as equal stakeholders. The primary objective of these committees is to ensure peaceful conduction of Muharram processions, designate their routes as well as timings. In spite of this, they also recommend speech code in order to avoid any kind of derogatory comments, hate speech and other provoking activities. Amid sensitive periods and times of crisis, district peace committees also facilitate community policing partnerships.

c. Dissemination of Message of Peace by Religious Scholars

Shia-Sunni conflict had escalated after the *Raja Bazaar* incident and there was curfew for three days. Nonetheless, the negotiations between religious scholars, law enforcement agencies and district administration helped in mitigating the issues. The religious scholars conveyed to the people that the fire in the religious seminary and cloth market was an accident. Therefore, people should be tolerant towards each other and live with peace. Muhammad Saleem, a resident of the region for forty-three years, described the positive and cooperative role of religious scholars. He said that Maulana Fazl-ur-Rahman and Maulana Tariq Jameel guided the people to minimize sectarian tensions rather than using the incident for escalation of the conflict. A shopkeeper in the region since 2005, Malik Muhammad Sharif, mentioned that religious scholars played a substantial role in promoting peace except those in *Madrassa Dar-ul-Uloom Taleem-ul-Quran*. It is because the madrassa was burnt and the religious scholars were angry however; there was nothing prominent.

When the conflict escalates, the respected religious scholars engage in real-time mediation in order to minimize the sectarian tension. Besides, the police officers maintain contacts with the “neutral” religious leaders who are known for their influence and help in defusing sectarian tensions. For instance, in situations when confrontations arise such as when a Shia scholar visited *Dhok Hassu* and was accused of blasphemy against the companions of Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), it was envisioned that the police department engaged with the moderate *Deobandi* scholar Maulana Abdul Rauf who has been mediating such conflicts before as well. Despite this, law enforcement agencies collaborate with the religious elite in order to carry out campaigns against hate speech. The *Auqaf* Department, established in 1959 under the West Pakistan *Waqf* Properties Ordinance, is not only responsible for maintaining and regulating shrines, mosques along with other *waqf* properties however, the department also plays a crucial role in promoting peace and religious education amongst the people.

With the help of the *Auqaf* department, violence is condemned in sermons of Friday congregation prayers. Moreover, pamphlets and banners that propagate the notions of peace and tolerance are signed by the scholars of Shia and Sunni sect then, distributed among the public. Through electronic media, particularly social media, public awareness videos recorded along with the religious leaders are broadcast which helps in inculcating tolerance among people as well as promoting peace within the city. Amidst Eid Milad-un-Nabi of 2022, police departments of Rawalpindi collaborated with the Council of Islamic Ideology in order to disseminate a message that was signed by more than one hundred and twenty religious scholars. The message aimed at condemning all kinds of sectarian slogans that are against the companions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) or imams. More than five thousand banners were exhibited in mosques, bus stops as well as the union councils in order to spread the message of peaceful coexistence.

d. Enhanced Communication and Mapping of Routes before the Religious Events

A procession coordination model has been developed by the law enforcement agencies of Rawalpindi particularly, for the time of *Ashura* because it has historically proven to be a flashpoint in the region. The National Action Plan (NAP) of 2014 directed that all the religious processions ought to be pre-approved and their routes must be mapped before by

collaborating with the religious scholars and designated after reaching a decision through consensus. The law enforcement agencies work with the religious leaders in order to create geo-fenced maps of all the routes for carrying out the religious processions. Furthermore, the religious scholars are mandated to submit undertakings that they will not deviate from the designated routes. Law enforcement agencies and religious elite also collaborate in order to avoid any kind of overlap of events of Sunni and Shia communities particularly, in heterogeneous areas such as *Tench Bhatta* and *Bara Market*. The liaison officers selected from within the religious community are responsible for reporting any kind of violations or emerging threats. For example, a potential confrontation was defused in 2019 when the overlapping rallies were detected by the police officers in *Sadiqabad* after using the information from the Punjab Safe Cities Authority. The *Sunni-Barelvi* leader and a Shia procession leader, who were the members of the *Aman* committee, negotiated and devised a plan of ensuring a fifteen-minute gap as well as directional rerouting.

The response to sectarian threats has improved due to advanced technological based collaboration between the police officers and clerics. The law enforcement personnel rely on the local religious scholars and members of the community for giving information regarding any threats or provocative posters and banners as well as reporting incidents of hate speech in sermons and suspicious outsiders, trouble makers and agitators. This is done by connecting law enforcement officers to heads and imams of madrassas through Whatsapp groups so that quick responses can be ensured. Furthermore, the police officers communicate with the clerics from areas such as *Saddar*, *Gawalmandi* and *Mohanpura* etc. particularly amidst peak religious days for regular updates. For example, in 2021, a number of voice messages disseminating notions of violence were circulating during *Ashura* via Whatsapp. These messages were flagged by the religious scholars of *Committee Chowk* then, the police officers communicated the issue with the cybercrime units which helped them in blocking the message sources within a short span of time. Besides, a First Information Report (FIR) was registered under the Section 295-A of Pakistan Penal Code 1860 as well as Article 11-W of the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997.

e. Monitoring of Madrassas and Mosque via Voluntary Agreements

The gradual development of the security landscape of Pakistan, especially in cities like Rawalpindi, has necessitated a shift in the approach taken by law enforcement agencies from reactive to proactive. This includes partnership with certain religious groups. The most notable changes in this area have been the voluntary compliance agreements reached between the police and the associated madrassas as well as mosques. These religious institutions had traditionally been regarded as ideologically sensitive hotbeds of both refuge and in some instances, persuasion of sectarian violence. However, through legal and community mobilization strategies, particularly under the Punjab Sound System Regulation Act as well as the Maintenance of Public Order, some level of collaboration has started.

The Punjab Sound System Regulation Act of 2015 and the Maintenance of Public Order Act of 1960 (as amended) provide the primary legal frameworks for overseeing public speech and more so, in the context of religion. These pronouncements provide that use of loudspeakers shall be limited to one external loudspeaker for each mosque, amplification shall only be to the calls to prayer and sermons and hate speech or sectarian incitement shall be prohibited. The police of Rawalpindi in partnership with the *Auqaf* Department and district board of religious scholars were authorized to begin enforcement activities in 2023 under the implementation guidelines described in the National Action Plan. The law enforcement agencies approached the administrators of Madrassas for several months so that a code of conduct for sectarian harmony could be signed. This code of conduct restricted the religious leaders to use loudspeakers all the time, give provocative references and employ political slogans amid religious events.

In addition, it was guaranteed that there would be no undue surveillance, arbitrary inspections and harassment by the police officers if the religious leaders complied with the provided guidelines. As a result, it was reported in 2023 that there has been a seventy percent decline in confrontations between police and madrassas as well as notable decrease in unapproved slogans and gatherings amid religious events. Allama Riaz Hussain Rizvi, who is a senior *Barelvi* scholar said that if the laws related to loudspeakers are applied equally to all the sects then, they will not resist however, if applied to certain groups then, this might result in distrust. Moreover, *Deobandi* scholars from *Wifaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia* also asked the Madrassas in Rawalpindi to collaborate with the police officers for societal harmony however, not

compromise on one's religious rights. On the other hand, the Shia scholars also supported the measures taken by the law enforcement agencies for protecting the Muharram processions and they condemned the sectarian propaganda while demanding equal implementation. Through an interview from an expert on sectarianism, it was unveiled that the behaviors of administrators of Madrassas can be transformed not by coercion but through negotiations. Kalin and Siddiqui highlighted in the report by United States Institute of Peace that the collaboration of police departments and religious scholars particularly, regarding disseminating narratives among people and reviewing the sermons, considerably minimizes the sectarian tensions (Kalin & Siddiqui, 2014).

Conclusion

To cap it all, the sectarian tensions are an illustration of how historical tensions, institutional reactions and communal identities interact in a volatile religious context, as provided by Rawalpindi – a strategically and symbolically important city. The sectarian conflict in Rawalpindi is not only a religious or ideological issue but an intricate socio-political phenomenon shaped by institutional practices, dynamics of the community and historical legacies. The processions of Shia and Sunni communities are observed on mutually agreed timings which indicate lack of positive peace (which is, according to Johan Galtung, the absence of direct and indirect violence as well as the absence of fear of being attacked). Most of the communities censor some things not because they are more tolerant but out of fear and trauma. Therefore, even if Rawalpindi has envisioned lesser violent incidents in the past few years as compared to areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa such as Parachinar, it does not mean that the sectarian conflict is completely resolved. It is managed well by the law enforcement agencies as well as the religious leaders nevertheless, it is still unresolved ideologically and emotionally. Through partnerships between law enforcement agencies and religious elites through Aman Committees and other mechanisms, collaborative governance emerges as a crucial tool for managing sectarian tensions.

In order to combat sectarianism, the application of Collaborative Governance Theory emphasized the significance of mutual legitimacy, organized cooperation, and long-term planning. Law enforcement organizations must make investments in religious literacy going forward, moderate religious scholars must be provided with platforms for peace building and community voices, particularly those of women and young people, must be included in discussions and decision-making. Besides, the religious scholars are uniquely positioned to sway the people especially in cities like Rawalpindi because mosques and madrassa networks of the city possess enormous moral authority. Therefore, they can instill tolerance among the natives by agreeing to a shared code of inter-sectarian ethics particularly, around public behavior and speech. Peace-oriented clerics should be supported by the state. The state only reacts to the extremist behavior of the religious scholars. On the other hand, it should include incentives for religious scholars particularly, for *ulema* who work for peace, when they cooperate with the law enforcement agencies. It is also crucial for religious elites to reform the content of sermons, influence curriculum of madrassas, counsel the radicalized and emotionally reactive youth as well as act as mediators in flashpoints. In a nutshell, a comprehensive strategy ought to be devised for minimizing sectarian tensions in Rawalpindi including, short-term conflict prevention and long-term peace building.

References

- Agencies. (2013, November 15). *Curfew imposed in Rawalpindi as violence claims eight lives*. Dawn. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1056541>
- Ahmad, M. (1998). Islamization and Sectarian violence in Pakistan. *Intellectual Discourse*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.31436/id.v6i1.417>
- Ahmar, M. (2010). Sectarian conflict in Pakistan: Some lessons from the Irish experience. *IPRI Journal*, 10(1), 50-76.
- Amjad, S. M. (2020). *The Business of Religion and Politics: The Inevitable Oppression of the Ahmadis in Pakistani Regimes* (Doctoral dissertation, Central European University).
- Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2008). Collaborative governance in theory and practice. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory: J-PART*, 18(4), 543–571. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum032>
- Brewer, J. D. (1992). Sectarianism and racism, and their parallels and differences¹. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 15(3), 352–364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1992.9993751>
- Cherney, A., & Hartley, J. (2017). Community engagement to tackle terrorism and violent extremism: challenges, tensions and pitfalls. *Policing and society*, 27(7), 750-763. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2015.1089871>
- Fatima, Q. (2018). Pakistan's Religious Elite and Afghanistan: Antecedents. *Special Issue 2018 J. Pol. Stud.*, 39. <https://jps.pu.edu.pk/6/article/view/448>
- Grare, F. (2007). The evolution of sectarian conflicts in Pakistan and the ever-changing face of Islamic violence. *South Asia (Nedlands, W.A.)*, 30(1), 127–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856400701264068>
- Grare, F. (2013). The evolution of sectarian conflicts in Pakistan and the ever-changing face of Islamic violence. In *South Asia* (pp. 131-148). Routledge India.
- Hamrah, S. (2023). *Contextualizing Sectarianism in the Middle East and South Asia: Identity, Competition and Conflict*. Routledge India.
- Hempton, D. (1996). *Religion and political culture in Britain and Ireland: From the Glorious Revolution to the decline of empire*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ispahani, F. (2017). Pakistan's descent into religious intolerance. In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Pakistan* (pp. 336-350). Routledge.
- Jalalzai, M. K. (1992). *Sectarianism in Pakistan*. Lahore: A. H. Publishers.
- Kalin, M., & Siddiqui, N. (2014). *Religious Authority and the Promotion of Sectarian Tolerance In Pakistan*. USIP. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR354_Religious-Authority-and-the-Promotion-of-Sectarian-Tolerance-in-Pakistan.pdf.
- Kenar, N., & Shaw, I. S. (2020). Conflict & peace in international politics: Issues, actors, approaches. *IJOPEC Publication Limited*.
- Khan, M., Haroon, M., Ullah, K., & Marwat, G. Q. K. (2025). Contemporary Sectarianism in Pakistan: The Kurram District Perspective. *ASSAJ*, 3(01), 586-600. <https://assajournal.com/index.php/36/article/view/177>
- Long, R. D., Singh, G., Samad, Y., & Talbot, I. (Eds.). (2015). *State and nation-building in Pakistan: Beyond Islam and security*. Routledge.
- Mabon, P. S. (2022, July 18). *Dividing Lines - Introduction: Sectarianism as a boundary making process*. The Foreign Policy Centre. <https://fpc.org.uk/dividing-lines-introduction-sectarianism-as-a-boundary-making-process/>
- Mahsood, A. K., & Kamran, M. (2017). Dynamics of sectarian violence in Pakistan: Recommendations to the policy makers. *Arts and Social Sciences Journal*, 08(03). <https://doi.org/10.4172/2151-6200.1000283>
- Mahsud, M. I. (2019). Religious militancy and tribal transformation in Pakistan: A case study of Mahsud Tribe in South Waziristan Agency [Unpublished PhD dissertation]. University of Peshawar.
- Mahsud, M. I., & Aman, S. (2018). History of Religious Militancy in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Criminology*, 10(4). <https://nja.pastic.gov.pk/PJCIS/index.php/PJC/article/view/34872>
- Mir, A. H., & Mir, R. (2006). *Anthems of resistance: A celebration of progressive Urdu poetry*. Roli Books Private Limited.

- Mir, R., & Naquvi, M. A. (2016). Fighting the Takfiris: Building an inclusive American Muslim community by countering anti-Shia rhetoric in the USA. In *Faith-based violence and Deobandi militancy in Pakistan* (pp. 399-421). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Misra, A. (2003). Rise of religious parties in Pakistan: Causes and prospects. *Strategic Analysis*, 27(2), 186-215.
- Mohammad, N. (2022). Religious Freedom in Pakistan in 2022". *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*. <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-08/2022%20Pakistan%20Country%20Update.pdf>
- Morrock, R. (1973). Heritage of strife: The effects of colonialist "divide and rule" strategy upon the colonized peoples. *Science & Society*, 37(2), 129-151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003682377303700201>
- Murphy, E. (2018). *Islam and sectarian violence in Pakistan: The terror within*. Routledge.
- Qasmi, A. U. (2014). *The Ahmadis and the politics of religious exclusion in Pakistan*. Anthem Press.
- Rahman, T. Class Struggles and Political Islam in Pakistan. In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Pakistan* (pp. 263-279). Routledge.
- Siddiqui, K. A. L. I. M. (2022). British imperialism, religion, and the politics of 'divide and rule' in the Indian-subcontinent. *World Financial Review*.
- Suhaib, A. Q., & Adnan, M. (2020). Religious extremism and online radicalization in Pakistan. *Islamic Studies*, 59(2), 239-254. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27088390>
- Tett, L., Crowther, J., & O'Hara, P. (2003). Collaborative partnerships in community education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(1), 37-51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093032000042191>
- Umar, M. (2022). Police capacity and autonomy issues in sectarian crimes and enforcement of anti-terror laws in Punjab. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 7(3), 466-481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911211028307>
- Wehmeier, S. (2000). *Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary*. Tehran: National Library of Iran.
- World Population Review. (2025). *Rawalpindi Population*.
- Zaman, M. Q. (1998). Sectarianism in Pakistan: The radicalization of Shi 'i and Sunni identities. *Modern Asian Studies*, 32(3), 689-716. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X98003217>