

## Role of Religious Parties in Politics of Punjab Especially in District Jhang

Suba Khan<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Muhammad Ikram Ullah<sup>2</sup>

1. PhD Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Islamia University of Bahawalpur  
Email: [subakhannoul@gmail.com](mailto:subakhannoul@gmail.com)
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, Islamia University of Bahawalpur

### Abstract

This paper explores the political complement of Punjab, particularly concentrating on the Jhang District and the religious parties. Religious political parties, therefore, have played a very influential role in drawing the political map of Punjab, where religion dominates the electorate and political stance. Jhang, a city that has witnessed religious and sectarian split, was on the periphery of religious parties. Based on sectarianism, the role of religious parties, especially sectarian Holy and Party, can be deemed significant in local and regional politics. The study investigates the historical development of religious parties in Punjab, their ideological foundations, and their electoral strategies. It also focuses on the sects of political parties that appeared in the district of Jhang, including Sunni Tehreek (ST) and the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), which used to be a part of the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). These parties have employed sectarianism as a means of getting the population excited, with religious division being a primary manner of establishing authority. Additionally, the study focuses on the strategies religious parties adopt to forge strategic political partnerships with major political forces, namely, PPP and PML-N, for a broader political influence. However, they have failed to win more electoral mandates due to the control of established political aristocracy and the young generation's shift from religious consciousness. She then makes a comeback to the question posed at the start of the paper by speculating on the future of Sikh religious parties in Punjab and whether they will persist in having a place in politics by how well they will be able to respond to modern changes that are likely to occur in the political environment and demography of the region.

**Keywords:** Religious Parties, Politics, Sectarianism, Voter Mobilization, Religious Identity, Political Alliances, Sectarian Divide, Electoral Success

### Introduction

This paper focuses on the efforts of those religious parties to affect regional politics, mainly in Punjab, the most Muslim-populated province within the Federal Islamic Republic of Pakistan. These parties, due to their religious agendas and affiliations with certain classes of the Islamic faith, have affected decision-making within the regional and national assemblies. Since Punjab is Pakistan's most agricultural province and possesses growing urban centres, it has become a hub of religious parties. However, it is necessary to pinpoint that Jhang is one of the districts in Punjab that experienced significant impacts of religious and sectarian politics affecting the region's political processes. In the present day, the religious parties in Punjab have changed their role as they were not involved with politics by being only religion-based parties. These can be attributed to such factors as the rise of politics of religion and the replacement of the sectarian polity (Khan and Hassan, 2025). Out of all of Punjab, the district of Jhang is a prime example of how religious parties have entered the area of politicking. Despite several changes of power, the district has experienced the emergence of religious leaders and religious parties who shifted the structure of the district and made it possible to mobilise people based on

religion(Sajjad and Husnain, 2022). It is important to say that religious parties in general and in Punjab, particularly Jhang, have been factionalised on a sectarian basis concerning Sunni and Shia. These groups have had significant differences, mainly concerning religious practice and/or beliefs, and they pave political bitterness. For instance, in Jhang, the politics of the province has been dramatically enhanced by the emergence of the ASWJ, formerly called SSP (Afriyie and Arkorful, 2021). This party, which was established to address Sunni Muslim concerns, has also endeavoured to enter the Pakistani political scene and impose some of its policies on the Pakistani nation.

Additionally, the integration of religious parties has occurred based on cooperation with local politicians and other great landowners, called electives. They often assist religious parties in gaining a base in the political system since they get the support of the local elites who control a significant chunk of the population. These dynamics have been particularly critical in determining the election results in Jhang, particularly in the religious parties that manage to reach out to the biradaris, the tribal groups and spirited leaders (Khan and Yasir, 2017; Ullah, 2024). Religious parties have rampantly participated in the national political structures, hence (elem) enhancing their influence in the political processes. The politicisation of religion has been apparent in Jhang and other parts of Punjab, as evidenced by consequent religious parties, though they have been a cause of controversy (Khan, 2020a).

**Purpose:** This paper seeks to establish the political activity of religious parties in District Jhang by outlining the historical background, the party's ideology, the achievement of electoral representation, and the district's politics regarding religious influence. From this analysis, it is possible to assess the influence religion has on decision-making processes in Punjab and, therefore, its impact on Pakistan's political processes.

### **Historical Context of Religious Parties in Punjab**

The history of religious parties in Punjab can be traced back to Pakistan's creation in 1947. Due to these issues, religious parties could not have a strong political profile in the early years of Pakistan's existence as the predominant political culture of the time was secular and leftist, which sought to impose the latter on Pakistan (Biswas, Khan and Ahamed, 2023). However, with the progress of time, religious parties, namely Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), also emerged largely in Punjab in the context of enhancing the Islamic values and supporting the enforceability of Sharia laws (R. Rashid, 2023). These parties, based on the ideological agenda of the formation of an Islamic state, had the church-going people of primarily Muslim leanings to appreciate. The destiny of the religious parties in the political map of Pakistan was sealed in the 1980s during the military incumbency of General Zia ul Haq. Zia ul Haq formulated Islamization policies, which changed the structure of political parties, especially the religious ones, giving them a clear chance to expand their roots. The dictatorship established by Zia desired to make changes within many sectors of the state, such as the judiciary, education, and the media, which led to the religious parties coming into power and acquiring political power (Arshid, Ejaz and Ahmed, 2023). During this period, the religious groups in Punjab, as well as in Pakistan, became more active in politics. It was not uncommon that they allied with the military regime.

Religious parties were able to garner support in regions like district Jhang, where there were strong religious and sectarian divides. Jhang has had political disturbances that are, on most occasions, along sectarian grounds, either between Sunni and Shia communities, which most political formations harness to garner support with the sectarian violence rising, especially in the 1980s and onwards, emerged religious parties like the Sunnis in Jhang. Sectarian concerns came into the limelight in the early part of the 1990s when reaction groups gathered under the umbrella of Sunni political forces, including Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), which

previously was known as Siph-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), brought sectarian issues in the political agenda of the state (Mahmood, 2022). The qualification of sectarian sentiments has been further enriched in the context of the Pakistani SSP, which sought to consolidate its support in Jhang by playing on the Sunni discontent against the Shia political hegemony in the region. Thus, the new religious parties could appeal to the voters in the 1980s after Zia initiated the Islamization policies, providing a religious conservative counter to politics (Hussain *et al.*, 2021). These parties were not restricted to Punjab, but the province, being most represented in the religious and being a ground for sectarian politics in previous elections, became a centre for the religious parties aspiring to gain political power. In time, the influence of these parties was not confined to the local level. However, it became active in national politics, which brought them to their input on the political path of Pakistan (Ziring, 2019).

In sum, it is necessary to emphasise that the history of religious parties in Punjab can also be associated with the other changes in the political landscape of Pakistan that took place in the context of the process of Islamization. These parties have been highly relevant in the districts where religion and sectarianism are core, such as in the Jhang district. It only confirms the position of the religious identity in Punjab, together with the role of the religious forces in shaping the political reality of Pakistan.

### **The Role of Religious Parties in District Jhang**

District Jhang is of significant importance for religious politics in Pakistan due to the religious and sectarian mix of the population of this region belonging to Punjab province. It will be relevant to note that the majority of the population living within the district are Sunni Muslims, including other Shiite Muslims. Religious and sectarian identities have emerged as some of the salient features of the political system of Pakistan that define both social relations and election results (Bakhsh, Khan and Haider, 2020). Therefore, a fusion of religious bodies with politics has led to the emergence of religious-based political parties that participate in politics by making religious tunes and preaching (Ajmal, 2023). One of the most influential religious parties, Sunni Tehreek (ST), has been active in the district as the representative of Sunni Muslims. The ST has been a significant party in Jhang in recent years as it was instrumental in backing the Sunni religious parties while it fought against the Shiite political organisations. The party can be influential in appealing to Sunni Muslim voters, especially in the local polls, since people vote based on religious affiliation. Furthermore, the existence of ST is highly associated with sectarian division within the district about the Sunni and the Shia conflict, for often, sectarian sentiments have been employed to call for support for certain political and religious principles (Ghani and Ushama, 2022). It is evident that the ST has been benefitting from emphasising Sunni-related issues and portraying itself as a voice for Sunnis; the party has been rallying a crucial electorate community in Jhang.

Other religious party parties that have been available and so competitive in the political scene of Jhang include Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). A major political party functioning in the district and having an ideological connection with the Deobandi sub-sect of Sunni Muslims is Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam – F. It is a political party seeking the adoption of more Islamic laws and the provision of education primarily based on Islamic principles due to the perceived increased influence of the Western world. JUI-F has been advocating for the Islamist agenda to propagate the Islamic system in the state corridors for a long time, thus adhering to the trend of the nationalistic perception of the state. This has found much support among the people of Jhang, who are always anxious to protect Islam against the influences of increasing globalisation (Basit, 2020). Likewise, Jamaat-e-Islami or JI has equally been involved in district politics. Its political party objective is to establish an Islamic state in the country based on justice and equality derived from Islam. The paper has highlighted some of JI's concerns, including the call for the adoption and application of Sharia laws, the

war on corruption and the promotion of an Islamic culture in society. However, compared to ST and JUI-F, JI might not be quite popular in Jhang, though it still maintains power among voters bent on getting back Islamic law and order in their country (Azam, 2020).

Therefore, Sunni Tehreek, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl, and Jamaat-e-Islami have remained influential religious parties of Jhang and have contributed significantly to the political alternation of the district. They have actively sought religious selves into the political realm in ways which have continued to shape its management up to now), with sectarianism and/or religious worth being integral in political conversations in the local realms. These parties, to the present, use religion and religion affiliations to gain votes, with policies pegged on the application of the Sharia laws, protection of Islamic education, and the preservation of Islamic culture from what is regarded as the ‘anti-westernisation’ process (Chacko, 2023).

### **Religious Parties and Electoral Politics in Jhang**

Religious parties have played a landmark role in politicking a city in Jhang, Punjab district. Religious attributes and sectarian factors have always significantly influenced elections in this part of the world. Religious parties can emphasise the community through religious mobilisation and consequently remain affiliated with mainstream political parties. This can explain why they remain relevant within the Jhang region. However, these parties get support even though they struggle with religious dominance and power and make little conversion from it to electoral power (Azam, 2020).

### **Religious Mobilisation and Voter Engagement**

It is well-known that religious parties in Jhang have depended heavily on religious votes for electoral support. Specifically, in a district where the Sunni and Shia pockets of the population are conspicuous, religion becomes a crucial demarcation for political bipolarity. Pneumatic and imposing mosques, prayer assembly-cum-seminars, and Jumma mosques hold the centre stage for political intervention with voters. These platforms enable religious parties to help foster cohesion among their supporters and emphasise religion and the protection of Islam culture as important things to be achieved in the country (Irfan and Khan, 2024). Another strategic manoeuvre used by the religious parties is their orientation towards religious leaders and organisations at the local level. In Jhang, some people, such as the local imams, pirs and religious scholars, have a close say in how and what the communities they represent think and act politically (Dähnhardt and De Zorzi, 2024). They contribute to such religious parties by offering them credibility and rallying the supporters to the party’s politically associated agenda. Through mosques, madrasas and religious congregational meetings, these parties develop a communication network of political influence at the grassroots level. This is because members of religious parties conduct fervent meetings, preaching sessions, rallies, praying sessions, and processions in support of political candidates who are deemed religious and Islamic (Deol, 1996).

However, one of the significant characteristics of the trends of using the media in the political campaigns in Jhang is that religious pronouncements are frequent among religious parties. Religious parties can thus use Islam to mobilise the population through calls for a ‘clean and Islamic’ system of government. This is especially the case among the conservative populace, which seeks to maintain the Islamic tradition and shun what it deems as Westernisation (Kamran, 2009). For religious parties, this becomes relatively easy in districts like Jhang, where the identity of the voters is very much religious. Therefore, they can mobilise the voters on religious grounds.

### **Alliances with Mainstream Political Parties**

For instance, the religious parties in Jhang, like in any part of the country, depend on ground networking and have aligned themselves to mainstream political machines to achieve their political goals and objectives. Of all religious parties, the two major political groups they allied with are the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N). In most cases, these are cultivated out of necessity to enable religious-based parties to competitively find their way into a system whereby other well-developed and experienced parties overshadow parties of religion (Rapport and Rathbun, 2021). Some affiliate with these larger parties to gain a political structure, funds and a large support base. For instance, the Sunni Tehreek (ST), one of the most significant religious actors in Jhang, is also aligned with the PPP and the PML-N to increase its chances of electoral success. This is an advantage as they enable the religious parties to share the voter base of these mainstream parties, which already enjoy established political networks and poll determinations (Senninger, Bischof and Ezrow, 2022).

Hence, the recognised religious parties have utilised these alliances to advocate for policies favouring their party's ideological stand. The mainstream political parties demand that religious organisations provide them with resources; in return, these religious entities expect their religious and social agendas to form part of the larger political plans and priorities. For instance, the practices, including the adoption of Sharia law, teaching of religion, and preservation of Islamic values, remain the main conditions religious parties impose on their mainstream partners (Foster, 2020). However, most of them are volatile, and there are many problems in the way of these alliances. As such, while they may have heavy short-term advantages, they bring to religious parties potential and demonstrable pitfalls of political agreements (Islam, 2020). One might also refer to the problems of conflict between religious identity and the nature of secularism when religious parties entertain cooperation with secular parties that do not embrace religious and moral agendas. In addition, the religious parties' participation within the mainstream alliances might sometimes be seen as a drawback when voters in these areas are more liberal and secular (Kiran and Chawla, 2020). This has resulted in a situation where, at times, religious parties, in the case of Jhang, compete in a power-sharing exercise, and their loyalty to religion contradicts their actual electoral politics.

### **Challenges in Securing Electoral Success**

Thus, there is a strong religious base of religious parties in Jhang, but these religious cards cannot be easily converted into substantial electoral gains. The proliferation of new factions is also a significant problem, mainly because big, traditional parties like PML-N and PPP remain riding high over the political scene of this region. These parties have resources, which include political support, contacts at the stable needed to mobilise resources and popular leaders in area populations. Main: The rooted system of these parties makes it difficult for religious parties to compete on the level field (Javid, 2021). In Jhang, religious parties' main rival is "electable," which refers to local politicians connected to the electorate through family, tribal, or biradari (clan) links. Religious parties are one of these electable, and while they are influential in determining or having an impact on the votes, these electable' influence is quite often more significant than that of parties linked to a religious persuasion depending on the votes the electorate puts above all; religious, tribal, or local patronage vote bank. Religious parties have not been able to wrest political influence from the electable within the provincial assembly due to political influence in Jhang, where landlords and tribal leaders rule (Ahmad, Aakuka and Tanveer, 2023).

One of the factors that are threatening religious parties is secularisation, where the younger generation is moving away from matters of religion. Religious parties have the support of conservative and elderly individuals, especially Muslims, while the youths may vote based on their economic plans and social programmes. This demographic shift is problematic to the

religious parties as these will not appeal to the larger market outside the religious region as they have neither health, wealth, employment, nor education issues, as detailed below (Ashraf, 2023). Besides, religious parties usually are so factionalised that they cannot hold together a cohesive political front. These are likely to lead to dissension in leadership, ideological cleavages, and antagonism; competition between religious factions, if the party adopts democracy within the party, can cause fragmentation and probable reduction in electoral support (Umar and Hippler, 2020). This has been quite evident, especially from Sunni Tehreek, which experienced an internal problem despite its significant influence in Jhang.

### **Sectarianism and its Impact on Local Politics**

Political sectarianism has always been the backbone of the political map of Jhang; it is a district in the Punjab province of Pakistan. The district has produced tension between Sunnis and Shiites, and religious leaning has dramatically determined the political inclinations of the people. Caste-ism has neuropathic roots in the region and has set sentiment-laden politics in the district of Jhang. These divisions have informed how religious parties relate to the electorate and coalition, as well as exercising influence in the political realm of the region. As sectarianism has been adopted as a political weapon by religious parties, it has also posed some problems as far as unity, formulation of a comprehensive political organisation, and governance are concerned (Sharma, 2020).

### **The Role of Sectarianism in Jhang's Political Landscape**

There is no doubt lapses of sectarianism in the required district, and no one can underestimate the role of sectarianism in Jhang. Sunni and Shiite Muslims inhabit the identified region, and in recent years, the relations between the two religions have been rather tense and have led to numerous conflicts. These clashes, mainly due to understanding issues of the Islamic incentive principles and the sectarian conflicts, have been a reoccurring phenomenon in Jhang. The religious parties within the district have at certain times been created or strengthened such tensions to use them for their benefit (Shah, 2020). The incident of sectarian conflict that has emerged very active in Jhang is Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, now known as Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ). The SSP emerged in Jhang at the beginning of the 1980s and utilised the Sunni-Shia divide to muster support for the organisation. The party adopted a narrative that aimed at mobilising the Sunni population against the Shiites, who were regarded as heretics in the Sunni tradition, and this finding suggests that this message was well received in Jhang (Lakshman, 2020). Fundamentally, ASWJ mainly deals with politics based on sectarianism such as opposing Shiism and promoting Sunni Islamism. Consequently, it has played the role of widening the sectarian strife in the district, able to perpetrate acts of violence against Shiite factions (Syed and Ali, 2021). However, sectarianism has affected the Shia communities in Jhang even if these are not politically mobilised as much as the Sunni groups. This Shia political party has been established and involved in the protection of Shiite people's rights and targeting Saudi-backed Sunni militant groups like ASWJ. The MWM has endeavoured to spread the message of 'Together We Build Pakistan' and lobby for tolerance of the Persian-speaking Shiites from the Sunni fascist narrative (Nawaz, 2020). However, it has continued to be silenced by the more considerable Sunni political powers within the district. The sectarian problem in Jhang has, therefore, fostered a political culture in which the politicisation of politics is rooted in sectarian politics.

### **Sectarianism and Religious Party Mobilization**

Some of the prominent strategies employed in the sectarian behaviours of the religious parties have included rhetorical strategies aimed at mobilising communities in the general elections in Jhang (Kamran, 2009). These parties define themselves and associate with either the Sunni or Shia base, which supports them and militates for them, thus having a cast demographic power. Sectarian politics is mainly evident in religious-based political parties as parties use religion to

mobilise voters, whereas the election is portrayed as a fight against the opposition sect. This mobilisation consolidates their authority with other sectarian groups and ensures they make a political narrative regarding religious sects (Idrees, Kashif and Parveen, 2025). For instance, the Sunni Tehreek (ST) has concentrated on making it its responsibility to safeguard the Sunnis in the district, which gives it a counterposition to comprehensively Shi'ite political and religious parties and groups. The party has engaged in peaceful demonstrations, runs tables, and enjoys the opportunity to express its stance on sectarian issues, conducting political rallies and processions to compel the Sunni Muslims to come out and vote. Like other religious parties in Pakistan, sectarianism has become an agenda of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) and the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which now teaming up with Sunni political actors against Shia political forces (Qurban and Ali, 2019). However, there is one problem with sectarianism for the religious parties, namely the issue with voting, where this idea limits their ability to form coalitions. Religious antipathy hinders religious groups from forming a large coalition with other political players mainly those from the other sects. For example, while some parties may be exclusively Sunni, such as ASWJ or ST, it becomes difficult for them to ally with Shia, such as MWM, whenever there is a need to form a united front in the aspects of governance or the election. This fragmentation is detrimental to the capacity of the religious parties in local politics because they are fragmented and compete with each other (Abdullah, Iqbal and Skindar, 2024).

### **The Challenges of Sectarian Divisions in Local Governance**

The sectarian divide in Jhang also influenced not only the relationship between religious parties and voters but also hampered forming a strong and effective governing structure. Local governance is characterised by sectarian parties, which makes it difficult for them to work together efficiently, thus creating problems with political compartmentalisation. Their inability to form a cross-sectarian coalition hinders them from properly governing because the local politicians and party leaders care more about their sectarian gains and not the larger good of the society (Nasir, 2024). Besides, now and then, sectarianism takes the upper hand over religious affiliation in the city of Jhang, and political turbulence arises in case of extreme unrest by both the Sunni and Shia. These tensions can hinder the political process, especially during the election phase, as the Sunni and Shia political parties seek power over identified constituencies. In some circumstances, the sectarian conflict resulted in vote complication, rigging, and prevention of any developed political rivalry aggravating the situation in the district (Mehfooz and Parveen, 2021). Sectarianism also stifles another political opinion which does not fall under the Sunni-Shiite conflict. In such settings, companies and secular political parties struggle to secure a foothold because religion trumps and marginalises every other political matter. This means that over time, the voters are expected to associate themselves with some of the sectarian parties based on the voters' religious affiliation and not an association with a party with an agenda of developmental issues such as economic education or welfare issues (Awan, 2020).

### **The Future of Religious Parties in Punjab and Jhang**

Consequently, the future presence and influence of religious parties in Punjab, particularly in districts like Jhang, depend on several factors the party is bound to experience in the years to come. The factors that caused changes in the performance of these parties may include a shift in religious and demographic structure, growth of political ideas and doctrines, and transformation of the religious parties in the region in the rapidly changing political system. So, the political situation in Punjab is changing gradually with the progression of modernisation and urbanisation; religious parties may lose their popularity if they fail to align themselves with the electorate's expectations. In any case, though, if these parties can present the voters with an option different from the traditional political viewpoint, they can sustain themselves and grow larger (Arshed, ur Rehman and Gulzar, 2023).

### **Changing Religious and Demographic Trends**

One of the sociological factors that will shape the outcome of the religious parties in Punjab, including Jhang is the religious demography of the region. From the record of the present decade, Punjab started experiencing changes in demography as urbanisation and modernisation gained ground. This has led to the growth of population densities in urban areas, which has split social and religious differences across population sets (Khan, 2020b). This change means a more secular and less church-oriented voter population is affected most. With young people who have little connection to Faith as religion, as was the case in the past, and more inclined to vote based on issues that affect them in their everyday lives, such as education, health and employment, the Asian regions are likely to see the youths as a larger pool of voters (HUSSAIN *et al.*, 2021). Religious parties, that have always depended on sectarian and religious appeals as the source of political support may find it hard to appeal to such young and secular voters. For instance, the role of the religious puritanical conservative morally obligatory interlocutors in the Jhang town and its surrounding areas may diminish as the youngsters gradually enter the cities and globally are exposed to more variable PAG, secularistic ideas. It also means that people's political participation is shifting to the virtual space where using religious language might not be as supportive, especially among the younger and better-educated citizens (Khan, 2020a). Nevertheless, to minimise the consequences of unfavourable demographic shifts, religious parties can alter their rhetoric to reflect the issues of the urban populace and support the goals of a society that is gradually becoming post-industrial. In so doing, they could add other areas of concern, such as economic justice, governance, and other relevant areas, and remain a religious-based agency. If religious parties can address the issues of spiritual and orthodox religious affiliations and those of the present-day political world, they would be sustainable (Sehar and Shahzad, 2021).

### **The Evolving Political Landscape**

This change in the political dynamics of Punjab and the rest of Pakistan will also affect the future of religious parties in this region. The Pakistan People Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) are the characteristic parties that have taken much of the political power for many years. However, criticism has been increasing regarding alleged corruption, ineffectiveness, and negligence of officials' duties, as well as failure to solve existing problems like poverty, unemployment, and inadequacy of facilities (Sial *et al.*, 2024). Since these parties' operation and popularity base are being questioned, there may be a chance for religious parties to see themselves as the rightful substitute for these mainstream parties. In places such as Jhang, where feudal personalities associate political loyalty with religious beliefs, religious parties, in particular, could tap into the generalised disillusionment to marshal the electorate. They focus on being clean and ideologically sound in an effort to take advantage of voters' disappointment with the mainstream parties. In addition, religious parties may support specific governance concepts, overhauling the government and any term or policy they deem immoral and unhygienic among the electorate (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2020). Religious parties can discern themselves as reformist forces deserving attention, which has become the major issue of the political and economic sphere of the mainstream parties. This has the potential to allow them to make a good leap by cashing in on this emerging voter disenchantment with the existing political parties to build up their supporter base and political prowess in the Punjab and Jhang regions (Javid, 2021).

### **The Challenge of Sectarian Divisions**

Another significant factor in the future existence of religious parties in Jhang is sectarianism. The area has experienced sectarian rivalry between Sunni and Shia, where ASWJ, as a religious party, seeks to protect the Sunni sect. This sectarian arrangement has cut the cloth of religious parties and prevented them from posing as unifying forces appealing to the general population of Jhang. Sunni-oriented parties such as ASWJ rely on sectarianism and have gained significant



support among the Sunni vote but have not been able to achieve a broad base of support from other religious and political parties (Alvi, 2023). Thus, the dilemma in Jhang concerns the overall ability of religious parties to resolve sectarian and political party politics in the country in the future. They want their political parties to embrace more generalist policies that touch on everyone in society and do not represent sects like a particular religion, culture, or ethnicity. This would involve abandoning partisanship, which has been the central theme of each party's electioneering (Abadin *et al.*, 2023). However, the main challenge of crossing the sectarian divide is quite cumbersome. Sectarianism is still highly significant in Jhang, and therefore, religious parties will have to prove their capability to support sectarian moderation in the future. If not well addressed, the position of religious parties is likely to be overshadowed by the mushrooming kind of political parties that embrace the free and saner political atmosphere that calls for unity and peace (Shahab, 2021).

### **The Potential for Religious Parties to Adapt and Expand**

However, the good news for the religious parties is that the future of Jhang and Punjab will not be without its blessings. These parties have potential in the future political developments of the concerned region as long as they can resign themselves to actual political circumstances. For instance, they could adopt more contemporary methods of communication, work to assuage urban voters' political fears or emphasise good governance and fiscal responsibility (Javed and Farhan, 2020). However, religious parties also have some benefits: their programmes are based on strong ideological tenets. In this society, having an organised body with no corruption cases, poor leadership, lack of internal factions based on political ideals, weak principles, goals, and objectives, and religious parties offer an African society a perfect identification in representing and standing for an African society as they are seen to be Parochial, ideological and bipolar occasions with a clear unison commitment to the religious principles (Zahoor and Rumi, 2020). This could appeal to the voters when they believe that most conventional parties have not delivered their word. Religious parties might require redefining the role they aspire to play in a country since such dynamics are feasible. Instead of only addressing religious matters, they could compile forces to be a party that would perform a fight for justice and would be on the side of the people to demand explanations and improvements. Some ways of doing so include endorsing liberal stances on such issues as education, health, and poverty to establish new niches for the religious parties within a new political environment (H. Rashid, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

Punjab religious parties, especially in the district of Jhang, have significantly influenced the region's political development. These are the parties from the early post-independence politics to today's regional and national politics, which have sought to create 'room' by prejudice by playing sectarian and religious cards. Jhang has been known to be a sectarian area, and religious parties have changed the attitude of voters, the nature of the polls and the politics of the province. Over the years, it has been realised that religious parties have effectively organised people through appeals of religious self-identification, more so when politics and society are dynamic. They have managed to mobilise people on issues of common belief and convictions, hence facts that have kept them relevant to what has been perceived as rivalry. Nevertheless, religious parties have existed in Jhang and Punjab but have experienced problems revolving their religious power into comprehensive triumphs. Though religious political parties are commonplace in today's society, the control of secular and mainstream political parties and the internal conflict among the religious parties prevented them from gaining significant political power.

Thus, the future of the religious parties in both Jhang and Punjab will not be bleak. This is especially so bearing in mind that MDC has to contend with the fact that politics today is different from what it was in the early to mid-2000s, where significant changes such as

urbanisation, youth organisation, and changing voter preferences will be critical to shaping the organisation's fortunes. Thus, making them appeal equally to the present generation's worries of governance, economic, and social justice issues of the populace, religious parties can make their bases wider than representing sectarian fascists. Therefore, religion and politics will continue to influence each other extensively in Punjab's political future. Future risks and oppositions may appear before religious parties in Jhang, but their years of roots and ideologies make them a feature of political positioning in Punjab. Religions remain active participants in political processes; religious parties will either embrace change in political processes or not.

## References

- Abadin, Z.U. *et al.* (2023) 'The Alteration of Dynamics Security Threats in Pakistan: A Survey', *Quantum Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4(1), pp. 60–75.
- Abdullah, F., Iqbal, S. and Skindar, A. (2024) 'Sectarian Violence, Rhetoric Amplification, and Accomplishments: A Case of Students at Tertiary Level', *Pakistan JL Analysis & Wisdom*, 3, p. 75.
- Afriyie, F.A. and Arkorful, V.E. (2021) 'Terror at the Doorstep: The Rising Threat of Al Sunnah wa Jama'ah (ASWJ) Jihadist Insurgency in Mozambique', *Financial Times*, 5336, p. 689.
- Ahmad, G., Aakuka, M.A. and Tanveer, M. (2023) 'Formation of New Provinces in Pakistan: Challenges and Prospects', *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, 4(3), pp. 679–694.
- Ajmal, A. (2023) 'UNRAVELING THE NEXUS: RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND SECTARIAN DIVIDE IN PAKISTAN', *Journal Of Climate and Community Development*, 2(2), pp. 38–47.
- Alvi, I.K. (2023) 'Polarizing Pakistan: The Impact of Zia-ul-Haq's Regime on Sectarianism', *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4(2), pp. 28–35.
- Arshed, N., ur Rehman, H. and Gulzar, A. (2023) 'Development Expenditure Allocation and District Wise Social Development: A Case Study of Punjab Pakistan', *Review of Economics and Development Studies*, 9(2), pp. 61–85.
- Arshid, M., Ejaz, M. and Ahmed, W. (2023) 'Social implications of the Islamisation of General Zia-ul-Haq for Pakistan', *Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences (JHSMS)*, 4(1), pp. 78–76.
- Ashraf, M.J. (2023) 'Dynamics of Electoral Politics in Punjab: A Case Study of Elections 2013 and 2018 in Faisalabad', *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 7(3), pp. 580–594.
- Awan, M.A. (2020) 'Rise and Fall of the Unionist Party in the British Punjab (1923–47): A Theoretical Study', *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society*, 33(1), pp. 49–70.
- Azam, D.M. (2020) 'Emergence of Sectarian Indigenous Militant Groups in Pakistan and Politicization of Militant Thought', *South Asian Studies*, 34(2).
- Bakhsh, R., Khan, S. and Haider, S.I. (2020) 'Contesting Sectarian Identity in Pakistan: Narratives from the Three Cities', *Global Regional Review*, 1, pp. 51–57.

Basit, A. (2020) 'Barelvi Political Activism and Religious Mobilization in Pakistan: The Case of Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP)', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 21(3), pp. 374–389. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2020.1812395>.

Biswas, F., Khan, N. and Ahamed, M.F. (2023) 'Punjab electoral politics and voting behaviour in assembly election from 2012 to 2022', *GeoJournal*, 88(6), pp. 5973–5995. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-023-10952-0>.

Chacko, J. (2023) 'In the Province of Faith: Disaggregating Pakistani Religious Parties' Electoral Performance at the Sub-national and Denominational Levels', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 21(3), pp. 103–123.

Dähnhardt, T. and De Zorzi, G. (2024) *Journey Among Dervishes Between Past and Present*. Mimesis. Available at: [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=kvn5EAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=local+imams,+pirs+and+religious+scholars,+have+a+close+say+in+how+and+what+the+communities+they+represent+think+and+act+politically+in+Jhang:+2020&ots=aVEOBNAIaF&sig=REo0mteddbr5Lf\\_NVlad\\_0UIN9U](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=kvn5EAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=local+imams,+pirs+and+religious+scholars,+have+a+close+say+in+how+and+what+the+communities+they+represent+think+and+act+politically+in+Jhang:+2020&ots=aVEOBNAIaF&sig=REo0mteddbr5Lf_NVlad_0UIN9U) (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Deol, J.S. (1996) *Love and mysticism in the Punjabi qissas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*. University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (United Kingdom). Available at: <https://search.proquest.com/openview/4893e0951cfd65afb9f7f3aa2450d0c/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=2026366&diss=y> (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Foster, N. (2020) 'Respecting the dignity of religious organisations: When is it appropriate for courts to decide religious doctrine?', *University of Western Australia Law Review*, 47(1), pp. 175–219.

Fuchs, M.-M. and Fuchs, S.W. (2020) 'Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Identities, Citizenship and Social Belonging', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 43(1), pp. 52–67. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2020.1695075>.

Ghani, S.M.U. and Ushama, T. (2022) 'The Role of Islamic Political Parties in an Islamic State: An Analysis of Jamaat-e-Islami', *Al-Itqan: Journal of Islamic Sciences and Comparative Studies*, 6(2), pp. 20–40.

HUSSAIN, D.F. *et al.* (no date) 'SUFİ TRADITIONS AND SACRED NARRATIVES: INVESTIGATING THE IZZAT BIBI (MAI HEER) SHRINE AND ITS ENDURING INFLUENCE IN JHANG, PUNJAB, PAKISTAN'. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/download/109476100/Women\\_Sufism\\_in\\_Punjab\\_1\\_.pdf](https://www.academia.edu/download/109476100/Women_Sufism_in_Punjab_1_.pdf) (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Hussain, M. *et al.* (2021) 'Religio-Political Paradigm in Pakistan: An Analytical Study on Maulana Abdul Sattar Khan Niazi's Dynamism', *Journal of Languages, Culture and Civilization*, 3(4), pp. 407–424.

Idrees, M., Kashif, M. and Parveen, F. (2025) 'Uncovering the Political, Economic and Social Aspects of Militancy in Pakistan', *Bulletin of Business and Economics (BBE)*, 14(1), pp. 55–59.

Irfan, M. and Khan, S.M. (2024) 'Rising Electoral Support of PTI in Punjab: A Comparative Analysis of 2013 and 2018 General Elections', *Orient Research Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(1), pp. 83–96.

Islam, M. (2020) 'Understanding secularisation as indicating the process of the separation of the political and religious', *The Arts Faculty Journal*, 10. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/download/89921577/secularization\\_20as\\_20religious\\_20and\\_20political\\_20arts\\_20faculty\\_20journal\\_20.pdf](https://www.academia.edu/download/89921577/secularization_20as_20religious_20and_20political_20arts_20faculty_20journal_20.pdf) (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Javed, N. and Farhan, K. (2020) 'Access to Urban Services for Political and Social Inclusion in Pakistan', in S. Cheema (ed.) *Governance for Urban Services*. Singapore: Springer Singapore (Advances in 21st Century Human Settlements), pp. 237–254. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2973-3\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2973-3_10).

Javid, H. (2021) 'The Limits of Possibilities of Religious Politics: The Case of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik in Pakistani Punjab', *Sociological Bulletin*, 70(4), pp. 502–521. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380229211051041>.

Kamran, T. (2009) 'Contextualizing sectarian militancy in Pakistan: A case study of Jhang', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 20(1), pp. 55–85.

Khan, A.A. (2020a) 'A temporal view of socio-political changes in Punjab', *South Asian Studies*, 24(2). Available at: <http://journals.pu.edu.pk/journals/index.php/IJSAS/article/view/2769> (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Khan, A.A. (2020b) 'Changing pattern of population growth and structure in Punjab, Pakistan', *South Asian Studies*, 26(2). Available at: <http://journals.pu.edu.pk/journals/index.php/IJSAS/article/view/2833> (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Khan, M.I.U. and Hassan, S. (2025) 'Biradari Politics in Punjab: A Case Study of District Jhang', *Social Science Review Archives*, 3(1), pp. 655–662.

Khan, M.Y.A. and Yasir, A. (2017) *Sectarian Discourse in Pakistan: Case Study of District Jhang (1979-2009)*. PhD Thesis. Doctoral dissertation, University of Heidelberg. Available at: [https://www.db-thueringen.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/dbt\\_derivate\\_00047998/khan.pdf](https://www.db-thueringen.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/dbt_derivate_00047998/khan.pdf) (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Kiran, N. and Chawla, M.I. (2020) 'Countering Sectarian Extremism in Pakistan: A Study of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.', *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*, 14(2). Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Naumana-Kiran/publication/343963307\\_Countering\\_Sectarian\\_Extremism\\_in\\_Pakistan\\_A\\_Study\\_of\\_Lashkar-e-Jhangvi/links/5f4a447fa6fdcc14c5e0a302/Countering-Sectarian-Extremism-in-Pakistan-A-Study-of-Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Naumana-Kiran/publication/343963307_Countering_Sectarian_Extremism_in_Pakistan_A_Study_of_Lashkar-e-Jhangvi/links/5f4a447fa6fdcc14c5e0a302/Countering-Sectarian-Extremism-in-Pakistan-A-Study-of-Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.pdf) (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Lakshman, K. (2020) 'Pakistan: The Sectarian Conflict', in *Armed Conflicts in South Asia 2008*. Routledge India, pp. 47–70. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003157151-3/pakistan-sectarian-conflict-kanchan-lakshman> (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Mahmood, R. (2022) 'The rule of military in Pakistan: an agent of change? A socio-political comparative analysis of Ayub Khan and Zia-ul-Haq', *Journal of Psychology and Political Science*, 3(31), pp. 1–15.

Mehfooz, M. and Parveen, S. (2021) 'HOW CAN THE SURGE OF SECTARIAN INTOLERANCE IN PAKISTAN BE TACKLED? BRIDGING THE WIDENING DIVIDE', *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews*, 9(3), pp. 981–985.

Nasir, J. (2024) 'The Militancy Challenge', in Nasir, J., *Development Challenges of Pakistan*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, pp. 407–441. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-3064-3\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-3064-3_14).

Nawaz, S. (2020) *The battle for Pakistan: The bitter US friendship and a tough neighbourhood*. Rowman & Littlefield. Available at: [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Gk\\_VDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=+Together+We+Build+Pakistan++:+2020&ots=ce5QrJJFkd&sig=HstrZosawWo37AxMIMiDy50tMS8](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Gk_VDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=+Together+We+Build+Pakistan++:+2020&ots=ce5QrJJFkd&sig=HstrZosawWo37AxMIMiDy50tMS8) (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Qurban, S. and Ali, R. (2019) 'Impact of Sectarian Violence on Pakistan's Security and Politics', *Global Social Sciences Review*, 4(III Pages), pp. 433–440.

Rapport, A. and Rathbun, B. (2021) 'Parties to an alliance: Ideology and the domestic politics of international institutionalization', *Journal of Peace Research*, 58(2), pp. 279–293. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319900916>.

Rashid, H. (2023) *The Agrarian Question in West Punjab (1885-2020): Market Formations, Rural Differentiation, and Kissan Politics in an Agrarian Colony*. PhD Thesis. SOAS University of London. Available at: <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/40962/> (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Rashid, R. (2023) 'An Islamic bioethical framework for withholding and withdrawing life-sustaining treatment', *Studies in Islamic Ethics*, p. 282.

Sajjad, M. and Husnain, M. (2022) 'The Role of Sajjada Nashins in the Shrine Politics of Jhang 1947-71', *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, 59(2), p. 174.

Sehar, M.J. and Shahzad, A. (2021) 'Public Policy and Democratic Values in Pakistan Case Study of Punjab (2008-2018)', *Journal of Politics and International Studies*, 7(01), pp. 167–180.

Senninger, R., Bischof, D. and Ezrow, L. (2022) 'How transnational party alliances influence national parties' policies', *Political Science Research and Methods*, 10(3), pp. 651–658.

Shah, M.N. (2020) 'Evolution of sectarianism in Pakistan: A threat to the state and society', *South Asian Studies*, 29(2). Available at: <http://journals.pu.edu.pk/journals/index.php/IJSAS/article/view/2958> (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Shahab, S. (2021) 'Terrorist Organizations: Radicalization and Terrorism in South Punjab', *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, 58(4). Available at:

[https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/history/PDF-FILES/29\\_58\\_4\\_21.pdf](https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/history/PDF-FILES/29_58_4_21.pdf) (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Sharma, R. (2020) 'Sectarian Violence in Pakistan', in *Armed Conflicts in South Asia 2009*. Routledge India, pp. 42–61. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003157168-3/sectarian-violence-pakistan-raghav-sharma> (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Sial, M.A. *et al.* (2024) 'Geo-Temporal Profiling of Family Homociders in Tehsil Shorkot, District Jhang (Punjab) Pakistan', *Indus Journal of Social Sciences*, 2(2), pp. 663–685.

Syed, J. and Ali, F. (2021) 'A Pyramid of Hate Perspective on Religious Bias, Discrimination and Violence', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 172(1), pp. 43–58. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-020-04505-5>.

Ullah, M.I. (2024) 'Role of Elites in Local Politics of Punjab Particularly in Jhang', *Social Science Review Archives*, 2(2), pp. 2100–2109.

Umar, M. and Hippler, J. (2020) 'Sectarian infrastructure and Sunni-Shia parties in Punjab and their links with Jihadi and extremist organizations', *Journal of Historical Studies*, 6(2), pp. 277–301.

Zahoor, B. and Rumi, R. (2020) *Rethinking Pakistan: A 21st century perspective*. Anthem Press. Available at: <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=RxD8DwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=The+Potential+for+Religious+Parties+to+Adapt+and+Expand+Pakistan,+Punjab,+Jhang:+2020&ots=7ZnfdcgbHg&sig=go-hMwNYo1v7m8u1i0nq8gkhcwQ> (Accessed: 14 April 2025).

Ziring, L. (2019) *Pakistan Enigma Political Development*. Routledge.