

Vigilante Islamists: Religious Parties and Anti-State Violence in Pakistan

Joshua White. New York, Oxford University Press, 2025. 312 pp. \$29.99.

As White notes, one of the most striking developments in Pakistan over the last forty years has been the ascendance of violent religious movements that have taken on the state and its citizenry, justifying their actions based on Islamic law. This observation is salient: Pakistan is consistently among the world's most violent countries according to the Global Peace Index (See various annual reports Institute for Economics and Peace, Global Peace Index, <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/reports/>). Between 6 March 2000, and 23 February 2026, there were more than 18,537 terrorist attacks in which 74,309 people lost their lives, which is nearly fourfold more than the combined Pakistani death toll of 20,000 from all major wars with India combined (South Asia Terrorism Portal, “Yearly Fatalities, Pakistan,” 23 February 2026. <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terroristattack/fatalities/pakistan>).

While this violence is not new, beginning in the 1990s, Pakistan experienced newly potent forms of antistate violence from religious movements. Rather than studying the myriad groups that “inhabit the radical fringe,” this book studies some of their most important enablers, interlocutors and competitors: Pakistan’s Islamic political parties” (4). In this ground-breaking book, White asks “why these parties enable religiously justified antistate violence—how they deal with antistate organizations on the radical fringe, and with vigilant impulses within their own party structures; how they navigate their dual and often conflicting interests in democratic participation and state Islamization; and what their decisions might mean for the trajectory of antistate discourse and violence in Pakistan” (4).

White generally dilates upon the most prominent religious parties in Pakistan: the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), the Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam (Fazl ur Rahaman faction) (JUI-F), Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam (Sami ul Haq Faction) (JUI-S), and the Tahrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). White contends that these groups are worthy of study even though they have never garnered no more than 12 percent of the national vote (4).

White claims that there are three reasons why it is important to do so despite their electoral weakness. First, Islamist parties could “presage organic threats to the state—not to its territorial control directly, but to its ability to justify its institutions and actions as legitimately Islamic” (5). Second, “as organizations that often bridge the worlds of respectable democratic politics and vigilante activism, the Islamist parties are in a position to wield influence over important nonstate actors to either stoke or rein in antistate violence” (5). Third, studying the relationship between mainstream religious parties and fringe antistate movements in Pakistan may have implications for Islamic democracy elsewhere.

In this book, White asks “Why, and under what conditions, do Pakistan’s Islamist parties enable religiously justified antistate violence” (7). White argues that Islamist parties are

semiloyal participants in the democratic process, which enable antistate violence for the same reasons that mainstream parties in Pakistan do so, namely, ideological sympathy, opposition targeting, and competition management (9). Through specific case studies, he explores the conditions under which Islamist parties elect to enable religiously justified violence. White puts forward and tests two hypotheses. The first is that an Islamist party's willingness to enable antistate violence is largely a function of structural vulnerabilities to the state and antistate movements rather than any ideological commitments per se. When Islamist parties are vulnerable to the state, they will be reticent to publicly endorse antistate violence entrepreneurs. When they feel vulnerable to antistate movements, they will undermine those movements even if their rhetoric appears positive (10).

The second group of hypotheses put forward by White addresses the underlying roots of these vulnerabilities. Hypothesis 2A holds that Islamist parties that rely upon clientelist party linkages are more vulnerable than those parties with programmatic party linkages. Hypothesis 2B posits that those Islamist parties that are weakly institutionalized will be more vulnerable to both the state and violence entrepreneurs than those that are strongly institutionalized (12).

To test these hypotheses, White uses a variety of textual sources, including publications by the parties themselves, as well as several dozen semistructured interviews with an array of interlocutors in Pakistan.

The volume is arranged in two parts. The first part of the book comprises five chapters, including the book's introduction. The second chapter provides a working introduction to the Islamist parties discussed in the book and the role they have played in Pakistani politics from 1947 to 2023. The third chapter introduces the parties' respective ideological moorings. The fourth and fifth chapters detail the structural drivers of the various Islamist parties' behaviors. The second part of the book, Chapters 6–10, contains concise case studies.

Chapter 6 is a study of the Tarik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), which was an Islamist movement led by Maulana Sufi Mohammad that emerged in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province (now known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) in 1989. This chapter expositis the first TNSM uprising from late 1993 to 1995. This episode was one of the "earliest and most foundational cases of antistate Islamic mobilization" (17–18). The movement drew further attention a decade later when a revived TNSM allied with antistate militants based in Waziristan and formed the Pakistani Taliban. In 2013, a TNSM leader acceded to the leadership of the Pakistani Taliban. The JI and the JUI were compelled to "confront the new movement and reconcile its demands for sharia—with which they largely agreed—with its confrontational posture and use of violence towards the state" (172). The JI's approach to the TNSM was complex. "It attempted to undermine the movement in private while at the same time supporting it in public" (192). The JUI-S, in contrast, enthusiastically supported the TNSM while the larger JUI faction, the JUI-F, was more cautious and disciplined.

The second case, addressed in Chapter 7, explores the period during which a coalition of Islamist political parties, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), governed the Northwest Frontier Province from 2002–2007. During this period, the alliance struggled with the decision to pursue its agenda through vigilante violence or legal means. "While the MMA was in power in NWFP, it tolerated some degree of violence and vigilantism, but its behavior was essentially cautious: It did not directly threaten mass unrest if its demands were not met" (219).

Chapter 8 narrates the events of the 2007 Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) crisis through the lens of Islamist decision-making. The Lal Masjid crisis was a week-long armed confrontation in July 2007 between Pakistan's government and the mosque's militant clerics and students after months of escalating vigilante actions and demands for sharia enforcement. It ended

when the Pakistan Army stormed the Lal Masjid–Jamia Hafsa complex in Islamabad, resulting in over 100 deaths and marking a major turning point in Pakistan’s conflict with radical Islamist groups. In this case, the JI, JUI-F, and JUI-S were the main parties responding to the crisis. White finds that the responses of JI and JUI-F diverged. JI supported the leadership of the mosque and the adjacent madrassah, the Jamia Hafsa. In contrast, the JUI-F appeared to be “testing the limits of Islamist party rejection of vigilantism—whether Islamist parties could in fact disassociate themselves from madrassah students taking the law into their hands” (235–6).

The fourth case study detailed in Chapter 9 turns to Islamist party responses to the rise of new movements that were identified as the “Taliban” in Pakistan’s northwest in 2007. One of the most critical developments after the Red Mosque crises in the summer of 2007 was the emergence of the Pakistani Taliban, *Tahrik-e-Taliban-Pakistan* (TTP) under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsood. The TTP confronted the state, but it also presented particular challenges to several Islamist parties, notably JI and the factions of JUI. The TTP threatened to “ideologically outflank the Islamist parties by arguing that *all* of Pakistan’s political parties, together with the democratic system as a whole, were insufficiently Islamic” (240). While Islamist parties jockeyed to be the mediators between the TTP and the government, the TTP ultimately picked specific leaders from the JUI-F and JUI-S. In doing so, the TTP “was effectively corraling Islamist parties to represent its interests to the government” (251). Ultimately, Islamist parties did not play a “decisive role in bringing the TTP to the negotiating table or ensuring the success of the subsequent talks between the group and the state” (253).

The final case study in Chapter 10 explores the rise of Barelvi activism and vigilantism following the 2011 assassination of the Punjab Governor, Salman Taseer, by his Barelvi bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri. The trial and subsequent hanging of Qadri catalyzed a “new generation of activists to create a broad-based and energetic Barelvi movement” (262). This movement was centered on issues broadly construed as “blasphemy” and the protection of the prophet. It also had a sectarian dimension: mobilize Barelvi leaders, devotees, and students in competition with Deobandis. It also had political aims of contesting elections in Punjab and Sindh. The responses of established Islamist parties to the TLP were not uniform. Factions of the *Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan*, a Barelvi party, were most outspoken in their support, followed by the JI and the JUI-F, which offered only qualified support.

The concluding chapter brings together the analytical materials in the first part of the book with the evidence from the case studies to cast light upon the incentive structure that shapes Islamist organizations’ relationships with the religiously justified antistate violence.

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