

ALTERNATIVE DEMOCRACY: INFLUENCE OF SIAL SHARĪF IN ELECTORAL POLITICS OF PUNJAB

Muhammad Yasir Ali *

Abstract

'Alternative' democracy is styled on the pattern of the term 'alternative modernity'. Like alternative modernity, it tries to elaborate the alternative understanding of democracy, by investigating the electoral process, in post-colonial Punjab. This paper elaborates that Families with spiritual backgrounds have a remarkable influence on Politics and democratic development in Pakistan. They influence the electoral process by converting their spiritual capital into electoral influence.

This paper investigates the historical dimensions of the electoral influence of Pīrs. In the first instance, the Pir family of Sial Sharīf is influential in the politics of Punjab. This paper answers the questions of the historical authenticity of their spiritual capital. It involves the dialectical and hermeneutical understanding of their relationship with followers to define the historical dimensions of this relationship. Second, it answers the question of the validity of their political role. The question of validity is answered by using the hermeneutical and phenomenological tools of research on their speech acts, spiritual-political scripts, and data collected from interviews. It furthers the discussion by discussing the possible dimension of validity and authenticity of their role in the politics of Punjab. The paper concludes the discussion by presenting the 'alternative' pattern of the relationship between historical process, spirituality, and political development in a post-colonial Punjab. The concluding part also discusses the futuristic aspects as well.

Keywords: *Pīrs, Sial Sharīf, alternative democracy, electoral politics, Punjab*

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is defined as a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives. The human basis of democracy brings it close to History. Both depend on human participation and development. Ideological and identity-based adjectives are added to both democracy and history in an indirect and alternative manner. In their social performance, these indirect

*Assistant Professor, Department of History and Civilization Studies, Bahhaudin Zakariya University, Multan. Email: yasirbzu2@gmail.com

adjectives appear not only to be direct but also as an agent both in the process of history and in the operationalization of democracy. These trends are common in colonial and post-colonial states and societies (Little, 2010).

A trend of communal historiography in South Asia, for example, started in the colonial period and similar trends appeared in the political process (Ibid). Parties and individuals with superior regional, ethnic, and religious claims became part of the democratic process. Even those who opposed democracy, on ideological lines, had to be part of the democratic process to convey their ideas in the modern political structure. In Pakistan, we have different ethnic, religious, and sectarian political parties taking part in elections and raising their essentialist voice through a political process. They are blending the democratic spirit of modern political structures with their particular ethnic and religious claims. Another aspect of this blending is the politics of spiritual personalities and families.

Sufis families are participating in politics but their politics is different from the politics of regional and religio-political parties (Warraich, 2017). Their participation is manifold. Their electoral and parliamentary politics is diverse based on their participation (Ahmed, 2018). Traditional Sufi families are directly part of politics i.e. Gilānīs and Quraishīs from South Punjab. Bukhārīs of Shah Jewna and Raju‘a Sādāt and ‘Awāns from Sultan Bāhū participate in politics in Central Punjab (Reick, 2015). Pīrs of Sial Sharīf also take part in Politics and influence the electoral process in Sargodha and Faisalabad divisions (Kamran, 2014).

DIRECT POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Pīrs of Sial Sharīf began to participate in politics in the colonial period. Khawaja Zia al-Din supported the cause of Muslims in the political arena of the sub-continent. He was well aware of the religious and political developments of his time. He took part in *Tahrīk-i-khilāfat*. Although he belonged to the Bareilvi School of thought yet he was impressed by the religiopolitical and academic contribution of Dār-al-‘ulūm Deoband (Athīr, 1997). Khawaja Qamar al-Din Sialvi started their political career with Muslim League and Quaid-i-Azam (Iqbal, 2020).

After the creation of Pakistan, they maintained membership in the Muslim League. Their presence was challenged by the presence of the Shia feudal elite in the party, especially in District Jhang (Nuṣrat A. Athīr, 1997). The faction under the leadership of Syed Abid Hussain was playing a prominent role and his presence was reducing the political space of Pīrs of

Sial Sharīf and their followers (Sajanka et al., 2021). They reflected this challenge by, later, joining Jamī' at 'ulema-i-Pakistan (Tehmina Iqbal, 2020). Khawaja Qamar al-Din became president of *Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP)* in 1970. Their political performance in the 1970s election, in their areas of influence, remained extraordinary as they defeated their former rivals in Muslim League and won 7 seats in National Assembly. They cleanly swept in District Jhang by defeating the candidates of Syed Abid Hussains's group.

Khwaja Qamar al-Din was twice nominated as a member of the Islamic Ideology Council. He Received Tamgha-i-Imtiaz from President in 1981. He died the same year in a road accident. His Son Naseer al-Din had been elected member of the provincial assembly from 1988-1993. His spiritual descendant Khawaja Hameed al-Din remained a member of the Senate from 1988-1994. He later joined Pakistan People's Party. His nephew Khawaja Nizam al-Din remained MPA from 2008 to 2018. At the end of 2017, Sial Sharīf parted ways from PML (N) and joined Pakistan Tahrīk-i-Inṣāf in the movement that was focused on the ouster of Nawaz Sharif from the office of Prime Minister (Rameez Khan, 2017).

Pīrs of Sial Sharīf laid the bases of this opposition by labeling a statement of Rana Sana Ullah as controversial which according to them was favoring the Qadiani's claim of Muslim identity (Ideal Information, 2017). Khawaja Hameed al-Din conducted conferences and gathering against the sitting government and also demanded resignations from members of parliament (Rana Movies Islamic, 2017). Those political figures who made common cause with Pīr contested the elections of 2018 on the ticket of Pakistan Tahrīk-i-Inṣāf. Qasim Sialvi dominated the political scene and still played a vital role in politics. They again supported Pakistan Tahrīk-i-Inṣāf in the bye-elections of 2022.

INDIRECT POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Besides their political participation, they have also been involved in supporting the candidates of their own choice in the election. Their indirect participation is more significant as compared to their direct participation in politics. Their indirect presence in politics is a complex phenomenon regarding the cultural orientation of this involvement. The patterns of their indirect participation lack uniformity. They struggled for the Sunni cause on the platform of the Pakistan Muslim League after the partition (Athīr, 1997). They were supporting an anti-Shia block in Muslim League. This struggle was a mass struggle but Pīrs were relying on the feudal electable as far as electoral politics was concerned (Shamsher Ali Khan, Personal

Communication, June 22, 2022). The sectarian element was visible from the days of the Pakistan Movement in the organizational structures of the All-India Muslim League (Reick, 2016). Pakistan Muslim League inherited this element besides other divisive trends. Shias, being in minority, were represented by the feudal elite. Shia feudal elite was very active in different cadres of the Muslim League.

A similar phenomenon affected the politics of Pirs of Sial Sharīf and their fellow electable. For them, it was difficult to maintain their presence in the party in the presence of dominant Shia opponents. In the 1970s election, they brought their candidates under the umbrella of JUP and contested their elections by themselves. Their spiritual capital was blended with anti-Shiite sentiments (Mansabdar Jappa, Personal Communication, June 12, 2022). Shia feudal political elite was blamed to be behind the sectarian clashes (Athīr, 1997). The *Khiwa gate* incident also played an important role. The Sunni populace responded well (Khan, 2020).

Zia's period played havoc with Bareilvi politics in some areas, of influence, of Pir Sial. It became difficult for them to choose between a Shia and a Deobandi candidate. They either remained silent or supported Shiite candidates (S.A. Hussain, Personal Communication, September 30, 2021). They have a massive following in the Sargodha, Jhang, Chiniot, Mandi Bahauddin, Hafiz Abad, and Faisalabad districts. Keeping in view their electoral support in the recent past, they have supported both Sunni and Shia candidates in different constituencies in Sargodha, Faisalabad, and Jhang districts (S.M. Abbas, Personal Communication, September 15, 2021). It was in the 2018 election that they revived the glories they had in the past. With their help, Bareilvi candidates cleanly swept the elections in all seats of District Jhang on the platform of Pakistan Tahrīk-i-Insāf. It is an interesting episode that revived the lost political glory of Bareilvi politics.

It is argued that the Shia-Sunni discourse in the political realm was initially a discourse between Bareilvis and Shia. Deobandis replaced Bareilvis as a result of the so-called Islamization of the Zia regime. The elections of 2018 revived Bareilvi politics and Bareilvi candidates won the election against Shia and Deobandi candidates. They have maintained this political pace in the bye-elections of 2022 in two constituencies of the Provincial Assembly in District Jhang.

HISTORICAL DIMENSION OF INFLUENCE ON DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN PUNJAB

They have been successful in direct participation in politics to indirectly influence electoral politics. They have maintained their political relevance in different stages of History. They have developed a unique relationship with the '*will of the people*' that is manifested in the election results. They, besides spiritual practices, have adopted elections and democratic processes for their social representation and in turn have conferred some alternative meanings to democracy. Their political behavior brings their followers into the democratic process in an alternative manner.

Translating spiritual capital in electoral through human means

Detailed analysis of the electoral participation, of Pirs of Sial Sharif, reveals that their electoral support to the candidates is managed at the cost of their spiritual capital. This spiritual capital is not popular but deeply rooted in tradition (Mayer, 1967). The authenticity of this traditional aspect is evident from the fact that it remained intact in different conditions of the time in continuous transformations in the socio-cultural patterns in their area of influence. From Colonial Period till now, their spiritual position has resisted different sociocultural challenges (Pervez et al., 2020).

Various academic and journalistic studies present it as a simple phenomenon that is described in the negotiation of spirituality with electoral and political gains, but it is very complicated in its nature. It requires a serious analysis instead of generalizations. Their affiliation with Muslim League in the colonial period required a simple exercise of conversion of spiritual capital into political one (Gilmartin, 1979). They were sharing the context of Muslim identity under colonial rule with Muslim League (Shah, 2015). It was a culturally easy task to make a common cause with a political party that was raising the voice of representation of the Muslim community. Similar trends helped them to in aligning with Muslim League after the creation of Pakistan.

Culturally, it was similar to the former experience but the material circumstances were not favoring them. So, they compensated for the challenges in the organizational structures of the Muslim League by stepping back from a party of National character to a religio-political party to save the face of their Sunni-centered politics. They again negotiated their spiritual influence in the favor of the Muslim League in the 80s. This translation of Spiritual capital in electoral support becomes interesting when they negotiate

spirituality with their followers in the favor of parties with leftist identities and Shiite candidates.

Non-essentialist Religio-Political Claims

Their electoral influence is mainly based on their spiritual claims instead of the essential political claims of religio-political parties. It does not mean that they do not have certain religio-political claims but these claims are not directed toward the parliamentary and legislative end. This is an important aspect in the context of the politics of religion in Pakistan. The question of religion was introduced in politics in the initial phase of political and constitutional development. From the Objectives resolution to the constitution of 1973, religion got a permanent position in the formation of the modern state of Pakistan. Jamat-i-Islami represented the cause of political Islam (Shaikh, 2009).

Other religious parties were politically less trained and their demands were confusing as far as their political implementation was concerned. They made certain essentialist demands and claims regarding the position of Islam in the political and constitutional structures of the state. Essential religious claims and demand for absolute implementation of Shariah in politics and governance made them distinct from other political parties. As narrated in the above section that spiritual personalities negotiated their spiritual capital for political purposes, and similar patterns are found in religious leadership. They did not have direct spiritual capital but they tried to borrow agency from the slogan of Islam and shariah with the help of promises for the implementation of Islam and Shariah in the constitution and political structures. Pirs of Sial, like the rest of the spiritual families, abstained from raising essentialist claims regarding implementation. They compensate for 'implementation' with sureties and promises (Hamid Raza, Personal Communication, June 10, 2022).

Branding of religious symbols

As mentioned above that they do not essentialize the religious claims beyond the electoral scene, yet they coin religious symbols to support the political claims of political parties. Culturally, this aspect is even more powerful than their direct and indirect political participation. It is a complex task that requires religio-spiritual authority. It is something that cannot be achieved solely on the base of spiritual claims. A particular sense of religiousness is required with historical validity. In the case of Sial Sharif spirituality is mixed with a particular Deo-Barelvi religious tradition (Khan,

2020).

Historical representation of this blending is visible throughout the previous century. From the Colonial period to recent times, they have well-maintained their religious position and claims (Kamran, 2015). They positioned themselves in a way that was not only attractive for Barelvīs but also for Deobandīs. For example, Pir Zia al-Din recommended his murīd to admit his two sons to Dār al-‘ulūm Deoband. After partition, they inclined more towards the Barelvī school of thought. They created a joint space of interaction of ‘ulema and Mashāikh. So they historically maintained this traditional blending of different aspects of spirituality and religiosity besides handling their sociocultural expressions. In this way, they differentiated their existence from popular trends, slogans, and brandings. They not only structured their tradition but also distinguished this tradition from popular trends (Zafar Hussain, Personal Communication, June 14, 2022).

This aspect added to the validity of their spiritual and religious standing, besides, enhancing the authenticity of their claims. In this context, their branding of religious symbols for political purposes remained successful throughout the recent political history of Punjab. A recent example is that their religious slogan of Tājdār-i-Khatam-i-Nabūwwat Strengthened ‘Riyāsat-i-Madīnah’ of Pakistan Tahrīk-i-Inṣāf (Arshad, 2018). This symbolization does not impact the parliamentary and legislative parts of the democratic system.

Supporting National Parties

From All India Muslim League to Pakistan Tahrīk-i-Inṣāf, Pīrs of Sial Sharīf have joined major political parties in national politics. They supported the All India Muslim League and their demand for a separate state for Muslims of the subcontinent. After the creation of Pakistan, they continued their political journey with Muslim League. They only parted their ways from Muslim League in the elections of 1970 and joined Jamī‘at ‘ulemā-i-Pakistan. Their structuralist politics in the feudal context of Punjab again brought them to Muslim League during Zia’s regime.

Afterward, they enjoyed positions in both Muslim League and Pakistan People’s Party and recently they are with Pakistan Tahrīk-i-Inṣāf. It is an interesting feature that they avoided to join ranks of religio-political parties. They have bridged their supporters with national politics without being fallen prey to the claims of religious and regional parties. On one end, it is a positive point for their followers that it helps them to be relevant in national politics.

In seconds, it might have been a major cause of their political existence as well. They seem to be well aware that people avoid supporting religious and regional parties in elections. This tradition has strengthened national politics in the areas of their influence. It relates their followers to mainstream politics instead of being alienated and marginalized. Pīrs of Sial Sharīf are not exceptions in this regard. This trend of national politics is common in major spiritual families in Punjab. Gilanis and Qureshis of Multan are representing the Qādri and Suhrāwardī traditions in politics by making a common cause with major political parties.

Connecting Parties with political personalities

Political development in Pakistan has witnessed certain undemocratic trends. Horse trading is one of the trends that hinder the development of the true democratic tradition in Pakistan (Hussain, 2019). Horse trading has played havoc with ideological politics. It has blurred the boundaries of ‘right’ and ‘left’ politics (Ahmed, 2010). Besides the involvement of the establishment and the role of institutional imbalance, certain cultural justifications are also needed in this regard.

Parties are blamed in the name of corruption and political mismanagement and ways are paved for the dissidents. Spiritual families, including the Pīrs of Sial Sharīf, have played a central role in this regard. They provide a ‘waiting room’ for politicians who want to change their political affiliations. It happens before the elections that, keeping in view the political affiliation of the Pīrs, electable make common cause with the religious and spiritual slogans of Pīrs. This symbolic affiliation bears strong political meanings and it becomes evident in the division of party tickets of that particular party. Recently, those politicians who yearn to avail the ticket of Pakistan Tahrīk-i-Inṣāf are using the Platform of Pīrs of Sial Sharīf.

CONCLUSION

As argued in the introductory part that politics in Pakistan has not yet attained democratic maturity and still certain alternative patterns are influencing the political course. These alternative trends are not only de-secularizing politics with sectarian and regional claims but some of them are also affected by being part of major parties at national levels. Influence of Pīrs of Sial Sharīf represents the latter. They have provided alternative meanings to democratic tradition in Punjab, in the areas and constituencies of their influence. In the light of the above discussion, it can be argued that the influence of Pīrs of Sial Sharīf or any other spiritual family blends the

democratic process with spiritual claims that, in a way, are different from the religious and sectarian claims of religio-political parties. Their participation, although provides alternative meaning to democracy in the areas of their influence this participation is more human as compared to the religious and nationalist claims in Politics.

By detaching different levels of the democratic process and analyzing the influence of Pīrs of Sial Sharīf it can be established that although their role is creating alternative trends in the democratic process still this alternative role is not posing existentialist threats to the democratic tradition and structures. Their alternative position has evolutionarily maintained its existence. Their choice of parties of national character, for example, is a reciprocation of their alternative role in democratic development. Based on these findings, it can be assumed that the evolution of the historical process in Punjab will witness the reflection of democracy not only in politics but also in the religio-spiritual political constructions.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, I. (2010). The Rise and Fall of Left and the Maoist Movement in Pakistan, *Indian Quarterly*, 66 (3), 251-265.
- Ahmed, K. (2018, February 24) The Unpious Pir: The jousting and collusion of prayer and power in Pakistan, *The Indian Express*.
- Arshad, U. (2018). Pir Sialvi announces unconditional support for PTI in elections, *Daily Pakistan*.
- Athīr, N.A. (1997), *Dhikr al-Dhākir*, Jhang: Dhākir Academy.
- Farzana, S. (2009). *Making Sense of Pakistan*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gilmartin, D. (1979). Religious Leadership and Pakistan Movement in Punjab, *Modern Asian Studies*, 13 (3), 485-517.
- Hussain, Z. (2019, July 3). Back to Horse-trading, *Daily Dawn*.
- Ideal Information, (2017, December 24) *Peer Hameed Ud Din Sialvi Sial Sharīf Address 24-12-2017/ Noon ke vote nahi dena*, [Video File], Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDbfmzh_tnQ

- Iqbal, T. (2020) "Political Role and Impact of Chishti Dargah of Sial Sharif in Pre and Post-Partition Era of Punjab, Pakistan," *Journal of Research Society of Pakistan*, 57(3), 281-292
- Kamran, T. (2014). Sharī'a, Shias and Chishtiya Revivalism: Contextualizing the growth of Sectarianism in the Tradition of Sayyālvi Saints of Punjab, *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, 24(3), 455-77
- Khan M.Y.A. (2020) *Sectarian Discourse in Pakistan: A case study of District Jhang (1979-2009)*, Munich: Grin Publishers.
- Little, D. (2010). *New Contributions to the Philosophy of History*, New York: Springer.
- Mayer, A.C. (1967). "Pir" and "Murshid": An aspect of Religious Leadership in West Pakistan, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 3 (2), 160-169.
- Pervez, M. Dasti H.A. & Khan, A.R. (2020). The emergence of Khilafat Movement in Sargodha: Beginning of Agitational Politics and impacts on the Freedom Movement, *Global Political Review*, 105-112.
- Rana Movies Islamic, (2017, December 12) *Peer Hameed ud din Sialvi bayan Dhobi Ghat Faisalabad*, [Video File], Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqL30gd6lMA>
- Reick, A. (2015). *The Shias of Pakistan: An Assertive and Beleaguered Minority*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sajanka, A.D, Mushtaq, A.Q. & Rafique, Z.H. (2020). The emergence of Religio-political Landscape in Jhang: A Case Study of the politics of Maulana Muhammad Zakir (1903-1976), *PalArch's Journal of Archeology of Egypt/Egyptology*, 18 (4), 1233-1241
- Shah, M.S. (2015). The Mystics of Sial Sharif as Opponents of the British Rule in India, *South Asian Studies*, 30 (1), 237-256.
- Warraich, S. (2017, December 24) Between Pirs and Politicians, *The News International*