[**The bare minimum**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1663453/the-bare-minimum)

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IS violence based on religious extremism a law-and-order problem or an ideological/cultural one? This debate is neither new, nor particularly unique to Pakistan’s context, but it remains an important one in the aftermath of the [Sialkot lynching](https://www.dawn.com/news/1661878/ghastly-murder-of-lankan-man-in-sialkot-shames-nation). The immediate response to such incidents tends to gravitate towards one or the other camp, either through calls for exemplary punishment, or calls for reflection, attribution of responsibility towards the state, and cultural/political/ideological transformation of society.

The easy and, in my view, correct answer is that it is both. If we’re looking for prescriptions, law and order cannot be detached from deeper factors that contribute to the emergence of a problem. However, those of a progressive/liberal persuasion are (often rightly) sceptical of this approach because of several reasons. First, since law and order is the responsibility of the state, citing it as a solution means you’re giving more authority to a set of actors that have played a part in fostering religious extremism, or, at the very least, cynically utilised it for various political purposes.

Secondly, it ignores the content of several laws, including one, which is central to the weaponisation of religious notions to settle personal/political or ideological scores.

Third, it artificially detaches law and its maintenance from the social and cultural context in which it operates. Laws emerge from societal norms and reflect the cultural or ideological values of some sections of society. If religious intolerance is deeply embedded, as appears to be the case in Pakistan, law will either reflect that or be futile in front of it. The same logic applies to law-enforcement officials, who are likely to side with majoritarian or powerful interests against those on the receiving end of intolerance and violence.

**Editorial:** [*The lynching in Sialkot seems to be a watershed moment*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1662748/a-watershed-moment)

Law and order can be expanded beyond just exemplary punishment after violence has occurred.

These are all sound reasons to be sceptical of law and order as a solution to the problem and therefore deserve full consideration. The problem is that they lead us down a path where the solutions are only long-term (to a problem that is both long-term and extremely immediate), and ones that rely on the same logic through which others suggest stronger law and order enforcement as a solution.

Long-term solutions include changing curricula to counter hateful ideologies, disavowal of the use of extremists for political ends by political parties and the establishment, and paying greater attention to inequalities, poverty and the lack of opportunity that enables extremism to spread in the first place. These are all extremely important and it is hard to imagine any shift away in the status quo without their implementation.

However, they are all reliant on decision-makers — political and state elites and other influential social actors — to change their behaviour and their preferences away from short-term gain. In essence, we’re pleading for course correction and hoping there are enough people pleading the same to create sufficient demand for it.

This is not dissimilar from asking the state to enforce law and order to protect the life and property of vulnerable groups. In both instances, there is a plea for change. In both instances, there is a hope that vocal demands will change incentives for decision-makers to pursue a different course.

**Read:** [*Lessons from the Sialkot tragedy*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1662547/lessons-from-the-sialkot-tragedy?preview)

The nuance that can be added to this discussion is that the idea of law and order can be expanded beyond just exemplary punishment after violence has occurred. To this end, I want to draw on some case studies of how religious extremism and local administrative structures interact with one another and produce undesirable or desirable outcomes.

Back in 2015, I along with a group of researchers documented how local law-enforcement officials responded differently to different political cues and guidance from local elected representatives and senior political personnel. In one particular district in Punjab, the electoral needs of a politician as well as the social influence of several local businessmen meant that an extremist organisation that had previously been involved in violence against a minority sect was given considerable space to operate. They commandeered most of the mosques in town, maintained several offices, ran large proselytising operations and actively worked to marginalise members of minority sects and beliefs. As a consequence, small-scale incidents of violence were frequent, while riots and large-scale destruction of property had taken place at least twice in the past two decades.

In contrast, in another district senior political figures associated with the then government paid heed to the vocal demands of a minority community and took a greater interest in regulating the activity of several hard-line religious groups. It wasn’t like they weren’t allowed to operate — just that the local administration ensured that their activities were monitored closely, leaders were frequently asked to cease and desist from any contentious messaging and activity, and that during certain religious occasions, compliance with local regulations to ensure peace was prioritised. As a result, outright disturbances and incidents of violence, once rampant, had declined considerably over a five-year period.

This comparison helps draw out the value of looking at law and order beyond just the punishment stage. It also helps establish the fact that, if demanded, political and administrative oversight can reduce outright violence. What is also clear from both cases is that it won’t get rid of the problem of intolerance or extremism. Actors dealing in such toxicity are present in both cases, but their ability to cause harm was reduced in one location. It is those long-term solutions mentioned earlier that would need to be instituted to ensure the complete eradication of such actors. But in the short run, just the bare minimum of prioritising safety and the right to life would be a welcome change from the current condition. Is that still too much to ask and expect from those in power?

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