**[The politics of religion](https://www.dawn.com/news/1425703/the-politics-of-religion)**

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THE 2018 elections have proved to be a mixed bag for the religious right. While the vote bank of the mainstream Islamic parties has shrunk, the strong showing of a newly formed radical group has led to jitters. Although it has failed to win even a single seat in the newly elected National Assembly, the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) has [emerged as the fifth largest group](https://www.dawn.com/news/1425085) in terms of vote share, and is nominally behind the MMA which itself is an alliance of the mainstream Islamic parties.

Indeed, the growing electoral support for the extremist outfit whose politics is based on animus against other religious groups and that justifies violence in the name of faith is worrisome; yet it is not likely to change the power matrix in the country. The rout of the top leadership of the MMA came as a huge surprise in the elections, and so has the expansion of the TLP’s popular base. There may or may not be any correlation between those two developments; still, the spectacular rise of a radical Barelvi movement has given a new and dangerous twist to the issue of religion and politics in the country. It may be indicative of disenchanted voters of the mainstream Islamic parties leaning towards extremist groups with a stronger bias against adherents of other religious beliefs.

Although they remain on the fringes of power politics, religious groups in the country continue to wield more influence than their electoral support base indicates. The combined share of the vote for the religious parties, mainstream or otherwise, however, remains below nine per cent. It was significantly lower than the over 11pc achieved by the MMA during its remarkable success in the 2002 general elections when for the first time in Pakistan’s history the religious parties had managed to lead a provincial government. Their triumph, however, was largely limited to one province, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

While also losing ground in its stronghold, the mainstream Islamic coalition seems to have been completely wiped out in Punjab and Sindh where the TLP has made significant inroads. That also raises the question of whether the TLP electoral gain has largely been at the expense of relatively moderate Islamic parties like the Jamaat-i-Islami and the JUI-F.

*The spectacular rise of the TLP over the past year has changed the dynamics of religious politics in the country.*

Traditionally, the JI, in particular, has had a significant vote bank in the two provinces. This time, it was perhaps the worst electoral performance by the party that has long been the face of political Islam in the country. Most shocking has been the humiliation suffered by the religious parties’ coalition in KP where the entire top leadership comes from. Its resurrection has raised the prospect that the MMA would at least present a formidable challenge to the PTI juggernaut. But that did not happen. There have been several factors contributing to the defeat.

It was evident that both the JI and the JUI-F which remained in opposite camps for the past five years had lost much credibility in KP. It was mainly an alliance of expediency to prevent the division of the religious vote that had cost the two parties in the 2013 elections. Moreover, there was nothing new the alliance could offer to the electorate to counter the PTI’s overwhelming support in KP. The slogan of Islam was not enough to win public support.

Meanwhile, the spectacular rise of the TLP over the past one year has changed the dynamics of religious politics in the country. In fact, it is a movement rather than a well-knit and organised political party born out of the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, the murderer of former Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer. It has also been an assertion of Barelvi radicalism against Wahabi and Salafi groups.

Led by firebrand cleric Khadim Hussain Rizvi, the TLP used the blasphemy issue to whip up religious sentiments both in the urban and rural areas. It was given further impetus during a two-week siege of Islamabad. The virtual surrender of the state emboldened the group. The clerics were also encouraged by the widening civil-military divide.

The group showed its electoral prowess for the first time in the by-election for NA-120 in Lahore last year by getting a significant number of votes, more than the JI candidate. Its growing electoral appeal was also witnessed in the Peshawar and Bhakkar by-elections. Yet the TLP’s performance in the general elections across Punjab and Karachi was beyond expectation. It had put up candidates in almost all the constituencies of the national and provincial (Punjab) assemblies, eating not only into the vote bank of JI but also of the PML-N that had traditionally enjoyed the Barelvi vote.

Surprisingly, the TLP’s biggest success came from Karachi where it won two provincial seats and came very close to winning a National Assembly seat. The party seems to have received support from followers of groups like the JUP that has traditionally had a significant vote bank in the metropolis. The disintegration of the MQM and the gap thus created also helped the TLP make inroads.

It was most intriguing how the Election Commission registered a party with a sectarian/communal base and that preached extremism and violence, and then allowed it to participate in the elections. It gets more and more bizarre as even Pemra had banned the telecast of TLP rallies because of the vitriolic speeches of its leaders. How come the two state agencies have different laws applied to a such a group? Similarly, some banned militant outfits were also allowed to participate in the election under new banners in violation of the law. This is more than a policy of appeasement and has raised questions of tacit backing from some state institutions.

Radical groups deal a serious blow to the nation’s struggle against extremism and militant violence. The TLP may not have a concrete programme for it to be a formidable electoral force in the long term. But allowing such groups to operate freely and participate in elections could be disastrous. It remains to be seen how the new PTI administration deals with this scourge of extremism. Given its soft stance towards the religious right, fears are that such groups may get greater space.

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