

By Ahmed Rashid

<http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/mar/18/pakistan-extremist-democracy>

This spring was supposed to open a new chapter in Pakistan's tenuous embrace of inclusive democracy. At midnight on March 17, following constitutional rules, the Pakistan government of Asif Ali Zardari stepped down and the national assembly was dissolved, in preparation for national elections in May, which will mark the first time the country passes from one elected leadership to another. And yet a terrifying escalation of extremist attacks against religious minorities and aid workers since the start of the year has shown the government and the security forces' utter failure to deal with a festering culture of intolerance.

Sectarian killings in three very disparate parts of the country—Quetta, in the western province of Balochistan, Karachi, in the south, and Lahore, in the Punjab heartland—are just the latest incidents of large-scale violence. In Quetta in January and February, the Sunni extremist organization Lashkar-e-Jhangvi killed nearly two hundred Shias of the Hazara ethnic group in two separate bomb attacks. For days after the second attack, outraged members of the Hazara community refused to bury their dead, blocking roads with coffins, while others said they were ready to flee the country. On March 3, in the heart of Karachi, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi militants killed another fifty Shias in a truck bombing that did extensive damage to a Shia neighborhood. In other incidents, Shia naval officers have been gunned down and Shia doctors have been targeted in major cities. The total number of Shias killed this year already approaches the [more than four hundred](#) killed in all of 2012, a figure that was itself a dramatic rise from previous years.

Nor have other groups been spared. On March 9, in Lahore, an enraged crowd set fire to more than 150 houses and two churches belonging to the Christian community. The mob had apparently been incited by a report that a Christian sanitation worker had insulted the Prophet Mohammed. Such attacks have been encouraged by the country's controversial blasphemy law, which makes it a crime to offend Muslims or denigrate Islam. Dozens of people, most of them Christians, were charged with blasphemy in 2012 and sixteen are on death row, including Asia Bibi, a Christian who is the first woman of any faith to be sentenced to death for blasphemy. Ali Dayan Hasan, Pakistan director at Human Rights Watch, says, "Law enforcement authorities need to put aside their prejudices and protect religious minorities who are clearly in serious danger." (This may be more difficult than it sounds: Pakistan's ambassador to the United States, Sherry Rehman, is herself being [investigated](#) under the blasphemy laws simply for suggesting that the laws be reformed.)

Meanwhile, NGO and aid workers have been attacked across Pakistan, often by criminal gangs and sectarian groups that are hostile to their work. Earlier this week, two gunmen on motorbikes shot and killed Parveen Rehman, the leading NGO activist in Karachi, who was the director of the Orangi Pilot Project, one of the largest housing and drainage projects in slum areas in all of Asia. Her killing shows how powerful the land-grabbing mafia, whose abuses she had brought to light, have become and the impunity they enjoy. Her tragic killing follows the killings of some 16 aid workers, in separate incidents in December and early January, who were targeted by the Pakistani Taliban in the tribal areas for distributing polio vaccines.

While these incidents have many causes, religious intolerance in Pakistan goes back decades. The tiny Hindu and Sikh population were the first to abandon Pakistan and seek shelter in India after a wave of programs against them in the 1960s and 1970s. The small Christian population which number an estimated 1.6 million were next. Many who could do so migrated to Canada and Australia; many of those remaining belong to the poorest strata of Pakistan's population. Ahmadis, a Muslim sect who were declared non-Muslim by the state and have few legal rights, have been viciously persecuted not just by Sunni extremists but also by state institutions. Many of them now cannot find jobs.

Shias, who make up an estimated 20 percent of Pakistan's 180 million people, have been persecuted off and on

since the 1980s, when anti-Shia groups began to be backed by the army and funded by Saudi Arabia to prevent the growing influence of Iran in the years after the Iranian revolution. At that time, there were attacks against individual Shias, though not the large-scale bombings of whole communities that have taken place recently. But under the rule of General Zia ul-Haq (1977-1988), Pakistan greatly expanded its blasphemy laws—which dated from the partition of India in 1947—to make them into a powerful tool to use against religious minorities, including Ahmadis.

Despite being banned several times since 2001 militant Sunni groups have been allowed to continue functioning under new names and leaders. Groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, which say their main aim is to “cleanse” Pakistan of Shias, are now so powerful and ruthless that the police, judiciary, and intelligence agencies are reluctant to bring charges against them or put them on trial for fear of reprisals.

In Quetta it is well known that the Sunni extremists who have orchestrated the killings of Hazaras are living and studying in madrassas or religious schools in the nearby town of Mastung, but no police or military action has been taken against them. “The barbarians are billeted inside—long since done with waiting at the gates,” Cyril Almeida wrote recently of the extremists, in the Pakistani daily Dawn.

Now Hazaras, who are among the best-educated citizens of Pakistan, and other professional Shias such as doctors and businessmen, feel so threatened that they are trying to leave the country. A report in the Pakistani media two weeks ago that Australia would be granting asylum to 2500 Hazaras this year caused a rush of applications for Australian visas. The report turned out to be false.

Why is there so much intolerance now? The recent wave of attacks may be partly an outgrowth of more widespread tensions between the state and extremist groups. In Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa or KP province, the Pakistani Taliban continues its guerrilla campaign to defeat the army, unseat the government, and impose its version of Islamic law. In Balochistan, as part of their fight against a brutal separatist insurgency, the Pakistani intelligence agencies have “disappeared” hundreds of Baloch dissidents, who usually end up dead.

The important business center and port of Karachi, with a deeply divided population of 18 million people, is beset by multiple forms of violence—ethnic, sectarian, and gang related. According to the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2,284 people were killed in violent incidents in the city last year, a breakdown into lawlessness that is increasingly leading many businesses to uproot and move to Dubai.

While the violence remains unaddressed, the country is heading toward a critical election, the first fully democratic transition in Pakistani history. According to the Constitution, the vote must take place within 60 days of the March 17 dissolution of parliament. But no date has yet been set and it is difficult to see how a free and fair election can take place amid so much violence and so little state control.

The army has said it will not interfere in the polls and will only, as stated in the constitution, provide security to keep the peace if the government calls upon it to do so. On the eve of elections, however, civilian politicians will be loathe to call in the army, which has a long history of meddling with or even taking over the Pakistani government. The caretaker government that will supervise the elections will be even weaker than the outgoing administration and will not have a mandate to go after the extremists. Many fear that the violence will increase in the weeks before the elections.

This should not be an excuse for delaying—or worse cancelling—the election. After all, in neighboring Afghanistan elections were held during an all-out war with the Taliban. Instead the army and the government must work together much more closely, in order to carry out military operations against the extremists before the elections. The demoralized police force, which has been a major target of these groups, cannot be expected to take on such a task alone.

At stake is not just the future of Zardari’s ruling Pakistan People’s Party and whether it can hold on to power, but the future of Pakistan itself. Under the pressure of such violence and intolerance the state risks losing control before it can reaffirm democracy.