

**KURRAM AGENCY CRISES:
AN ANALYTICAL VIEW AND SUGGESTED WAY FORWARD**

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Abstract

Kurram Agency has an approximate area of 1,278 square miles with its headquarters at Parachinar. The agency hosts various tribes primarily divided into Sunni and Shia sects. The Mullahs (clerics) of the two sides have been exploiting the illiterate masses of the agency since long. The sectarian violence on various pretexts including disputes over land and water resources within and between Sunni and Shia tribes dates back to pre-1947 period. The area witnessed bloody clashes between the two rival sects long before the arrival of the Taliban phenomenon and foreign al-Qaeda elements in the region during late 2001. However, the 2007 clashes were the deadliest. Despite many truces and pledges of rival groups to end the hostilities, the mayhem continues and the Thal-Parachinar road remains mostly closed resulting in much suffering for the people for which the sectarian leadership is mainly responsible. Nevertheless, government indecision and inaction of the Law Enforcing Agencies (LEAs) are also to be blamed for the situation that amounts to asking for trouble from outside. Therefore, there is an urgent need to address the sectarian issue in earnest, keep the Thal-Parachinar road open and resettle the displaced persons, as economic prosperity and long term peace of the agency depends on peaceful coexistence of the two communities. The government must ensure the implementation of the Murree Peace Accord before it gets too late.

Preamble

Kurram agency is the most scenic valley in the entire tribal belt on Pak-Afghan border. It is also called the “little Switzerland” of Pakistan. The agency hosts various tribes mainly divided into Sunni and Shia sects. The Mullahs (clerics) of the two sides have been exploiting the illiterate masses of the agency and creating hatred against each other so much so that the two communities now find

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it difficult to coexist. There is a long history of sectarian violence within and between Sunni and Shia tribes. Sporadic incidents of communal violence have taken place since the 1930s, particularly during the month of Muharram.¹ These incidents of bloody clashes have been taking place since before the arrival of the Taliban/al-Qaeda elements in the region in 2001.

The conflict in this agency is complicated by sectarian divisions. Major sectarian riots took place for the first time in 1963. Violence erupted again in the mid-1980s. A third wave of major sectarian clashes occurred in 1996. As modern weapons entered the scene, clashes became fierce and frequent. It is said that General Zia-ul-Haq allowed a “purge” of the Turi Shia at the hands of the Afghan mujahideen with the support of the local Sunni population.² After a decade of relative peace since 1996, the agency once again plunged into a vicious cycle of sectarian violence that began in April 2007. This was the worst and deadliest fighting that paralyzed life in the agency. Despite many truces and pledges of rival groups to end the hostilities, the mayhem is still on and the Thal-Parachinar road remains mostly closed.³ Nevertheless, reconciliation efforts are being made and controlled traffic of convoys up to Parachinar under security arrangements takes place regularly.

Prior to the events of 2007, the Shia-Sunni strife had remained localized. But the chain of violence since then has got mixed up with outside elements through internal linkages that are exploited by Taliban on the one side and on the other by the Mehdi militia that the Shia community has raised with foreign sponsorship. Because of the presence of external actors on both sides, the situation went out of control of the LEAs present in the agency. The government actually failed to react timely and reach out to the people caught in the fight that has deprived them of peace and normalcy. Levelling accusations and counter accusations against each other has done no good to the two communities

¹ *Dawn* (Karachi), November 19, 2007.

² *Daily Times* (Lahore), November 11, 2007.

³ Baqir Rizvi, “Sectarianism, Insurgency and Talibanization - A Case Study of Kurram Agency,” *Aryana Institute for Regional Research and Advocacy*, July 2009. See also Brig Junaid Zaman, “Kurram Agency: No Food, No Life: Need Your Help,” *The Pakistani Spectator*, April 25, 2009. See also Imtiaz Ali, “Shiite-Sunni Strife Paralyzes Life in Pakistan’s Kurram Tribal Agency,” *Terrorism Focus*, vol. 5, issue 17, (April 30, 2008), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4893. See also *Dawn* (Karachi), April 12, 2007.

in the past and has only multiplied their problems. Long term peace can only come when the local communities realize that the agency's economic future depends on communal harmony which can only come if the Shia-Sunni elders see reason, sit down together to resolve the conflict and discourage foreign elements from interfering in their affairs. But this cannot happen without government's urgent response. The Thal-Parachinar road should remain open the year round and the rehabilitation process of the displaced families is initiated without delay.

In this backdrop, this paper focuses at highlighting the following: One, geography/demographic structure of the agency; two, brief history of the agency; three, identifying those important contributing factors which promote sectarian violence in the agency; four, critical analysis of the last episode of sectarian strife; and finally, the way forward to cope with the ongoing crises. The views expressed in this paper are solely of the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the institutional or government policies.

Geography/Demography

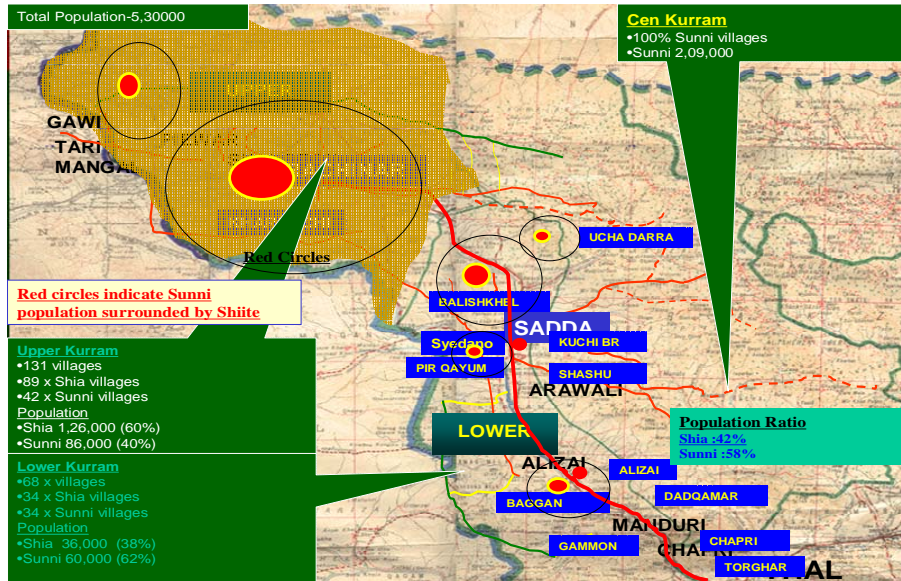
In contrast to the other agencies of Federally Administrated Tribal Area (FATA) of Pakistan, Kurram agency has a distinctive pattern of demographic and sectarian features. The population according to the 1998 census was 448,310; however, the current figures provided by the political administration is around 530,000. As per rough official estimates, 58 per cent of the population is Sunni and the remaining 42 per cent Shia. The great majority of them is Pashtun. The Shias dominate the Upper parts of the Kurram valley and Parachinar, while the Sunnis mostly inhabit the Lower and Central Kurram. The agency headed by the Political Agent is divided into three sub-divisions -- Upper, Lower and Central Kurram, each headed by an Assistant Political Agent.⁴

The infrastructure of the agency is far more developed than the rest of FATA. Literacy rate is also higher than other agencies. It has a number of private institutions besides government schools and colleges. The available education and health facilities are sufficient for the agency's needs if properly utilized. In addition to the basic health centres, there are three civil hospitals in the agency. The agency headquarters hospital at

⁴ Information provided by *Agency's Headquarters*, Parachinar on November 30, 2009. See also Ibn ul Hasan, "Sectarianism in Kurram Agency," *Daily Times* (Lahore), www.dailymailnews.com/200810/25 dmcolumnpage.html

Parachinar has a well equipped facility of 172 beds.⁵ Parachinar is a big market for the people of surrounding area while Sadda is a big trade market for the people of Lower and Central Kurram (Figure 1).⁶

Figure-1



An overview of Kurram demography⁷

Brief History

Background of Kurram Agency

In the early 19th century, the Kurram valley was governed by Kabul. During the second Afghan War, when Sir Frederick Roberts advanced through the Kurram valley and Peiwar Kotal towards Kabul, the local Turi tribe lent him all assistance that they could provide. For this help the British granted independence to the valley in the Treaty of Gandamak in 1879. However, later, its administration was returned to the British authorities at the request of the Turis themselves, in 1890. In consequence

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. See also Baqir Rizvi, "Sectarianism, Insurgency and Talibanization". See also "Historical and Administrative Profile of the Kurram Agency: FATA at a Glance," *FATA Secretariat*, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Peshawar.

⁷ The information obtained from *Kurram Militia* and authenticated by Agency Headquarters on November 30, 2009.

the Kurram agency was established in 1892 with agency headquarters at Parachinar. The first Political Agent, W.R.H. Merk, was appointed in 1892. Technically it ranked, not as a British district, but as an agency or administered area.⁸

Contemporary History

The contemporary history of the agency is full of crises emanating from the Shia-Sunni strife. The ongoing suffering of the Parachinar people dates back to the time of the Afghan “jihad” in the 1980s. B. Raman, a former Additional Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India, states that till 1977, the Shia majority was preponderant in the agency. However, the influx of Afghanistan refugees during the late 1970s and 1980s diluted this majority.⁹ The migration of more than three million poor Afghan refugees into Pakistan and the recruitment of jihad volunteers from across the country resulted in a fundamental demographic and power shift in the FATA. Parachinar’s plight is linked to this history. B. Raman explains that after the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in February 1979 which encouraged some Shias in the agency to demand the creation of a Shia majority province to be called the Karakoram Province, consisting of the Kurram agency, the Northern Areas and other contiguous Shia majority areas. The leadership of this movement came mainly from the Turi tribe. The movement was allegedly funded by the Iranian Intelligence which was put down by General Zia-ul-Haq who launched a campaign to resettle Afghan and Pakistani Sunnis in the agency. The Iraq Intelligence allegedly funded these Sunni settlers to enable them to fight the radical Shias’ of the agency.¹⁰

After 1986, there were major clashes again in 1996. Shia-Sunni violence in the recent past started in April 2007 after a procession in Parachinar was fired upon by Shias.¹¹ In October, 2007, there were reports of fresh tension in the agency in the wake of reports that the jihadi terrorists loyal to Osama bin Laden were targeting the Shia members of the Frontier Constabulary and the Frontier Corps (FC),

⁸ Ibn ul Hasan, “Sectarian in Kurram Agency”.

⁹ B. Raman, “Pakistan; Fresh Shia-Sunni Violence in Kurram Agency,” *IntelliBriefs*, November 19, 2007, intellibriefs@gmail.com

¹⁰ Ibid. See also Imtiaz Ali, “Shiite-Sunni Strife Paralyzes Life in Pakistan’s Kurram Tribal Agency”.

¹¹ *Gulf Times*, September 7, 2005; *Dawn* (Islamabad), April 9, 2007.

deployed in North Waziristan and Kurram agency.¹² These incidents led to a fresh outbreak of violence between Shias and Sunnis since the incident on November 15, 2007 in which Sunnis accused the Shiites of hurling a hand grenade at the central mosque in Parachinar during Friday prayers, while Shias accused Sunnis of firing rockets at Shia homes and mosques. This fighting claimed the lives of about 100 persons, including 11 to 12 members of para-military forces. In addition, property worth millions was destroyed as 513 shops and over 33 villages were set on fire by Shias. Sunnis also burnt down seven villages but thousands of them were displaced to other parts of the country¹³ where they continue to live awaiting arrangements for their rehabilitation.

The Sunnis accused Iran of providing funds and weapons to the Shias in the agency. In the clashes that followed, heavy weapons were used by both sides. During the last three years, more than 1,500 persons including security personnel have been killed and 5,000 others injured.¹⁴ In the violence that pre-dated February 2008 elections, the agency witnessed some of the worst carnage when a suicide bomber rammed his explosive-laden vehicle into the office of a candidate in Eidgah Market in Parachinar, killing at least 38 persons, including six children, and injuring 109 others.¹⁵

According to the UNHCR, 6,000 Sunnis, mostly women and children, fled to Afghanistan in January 2008. These figures are over and above those who migrated to other parts of Pakistan including Peshawar, Kohat and Dera Ismail Khan. As the violence continued, the road from Parachinar to Peshawar was blocked, resulting in shortage of edible supplies and medicines.¹⁶ The Afghan government sent life-saving drugs and surgical equipment to avert humanitarian crises in the strife-torn Parachinar and other parts of the agency.¹⁷ People going to Peshawar were forced to travel via Paktia and Kabul. As indicated by Mumtaz Alvi in an open letter/petition, the inhabitants of the agency have appealed to the government to rescue them from the siege and economic blockade

¹² B. Raman, "Pakistan; Fresh Shia-Sunni Violence in Kurram Agency".

¹³ Information provided by Agency's Headquarters.

¹⁴ *News* (Rawalpindi), November 19, 2007; April 6, 2007; B. Raman, "Pakistan; Fresh Shia-Sunni Violence in Kurram Agency"; *News* (Rawalpindi), September 19, 2008; *Dawn* (Internet Edition), August 15, 2008, <http://DAWN.com>

¹⁵ *Post* (Lahore), February 17, 2008.

¹⁶ *Daily Times* (Lahore), January 2, 2008; *Herald Monthly* (Pakistan), October, 2008; voiceofparachinar@gmail.com, reader.google.com

¹⁷ *Afghanistan News Center*, July 2008; *Dawn* (Islamabad), July 8, 2009.

continuing since April 2007 which has converted the paradise-like valley into a virtual Gaza Strip.¹⁸

The closure of the main road has, in turn, put the Kurram Shias under siege. The life of the Sunni minority, stranded inside Shia population, is miserable as they have no access to outside world. In certain cases, FC managed to provide some food to the starving Sunni families. The high mortality rate in Sunni women of the Upper Kurram is a testimony that they have been under-fed and under-nourished for the last three years.

There were accusations and counter accusations on both sides. Sunnis accused Iran of providing weapons to Shias while Shias blamed involvement of Taliban from Waziristan and al-Qaeda. Though less noticed, the agency also hosts the Mehdi militia, a well trained force of Shias duly sponsored by local as well as foreign Shia segments. During the 2007 Shia-Sunni clashes, Mehdi militia was brutal in the subjugation of Sunnis. In addition, according to Circle News, Afghan officers and soldiers were also actively involved in the sectarian conflict by way of providing arms and ammunition to Shias belonging to Turi tribe and physically participating in the fighting with Sunnis. The fallout of Kurram Shia-Sunni strife could also be seen elsewhere as there was an upsurge in sectarian attacks both in FATA and in the settled areas, notably Dera Ismail Khan and Hangu. The Taliban based in Lower Orakzai have been stirring sectarian violence in Kohat and Hangu.¹⁹

With the efforts of FATA Secretariat, a peace jirga was first convened at Peshawar and later in Islamabad/Murree. An agreement was reached, the road reopened, power restored and dozens of people who had been abducted by rival clans released.²⁰ The agreement could not be sustained and broke down within a short time. In the author's candid view, the agreement failed because the Shias had shown reluctance in implementing the next step of the agreement which required cooperation in rehabilitating the displaced Sunni families, though militants were also involved in blocking the implementation of this clause of the agreement.

The operation Rah-i-Nijat of the Pakistan Army also took the Kurram and Orakzai agencies in its swoop. With code name, "Operation

¹⁸ *Dawn* (Islamabad), September 6, 2008; Mumtaz Alvi, "Locals Cry for Freedom From Militants in Kurram," *News* (Rawalpindi), March 24, 2010.

¹⁹ *Reuters*, December 5, 2008. See also *The Hidden Stories Behind Suicide Attacks in Pakistan*, *Circle News*, September 24, 2008.

²⁰ *News* (Rawalpindi), December 7, 2008; December 17, 2008.

Khawakh Bade Sham”, a joint operation by Army and FC was launched in Lower and Central Kurram during December 2009 to clear Sadda and surrounding areas of militants including Doggar, an area hitherto unassailed in history.²¹

Causes: Perceptions and Reality

Though the agency is well provided for in basic needs and the literacy rate is also high, the tribal mentality persists. The sectarian issue is not the only cause that disturbs the peace climate. Frequent clashes among the tribes take place on minor irritants including land and water disputes. Smuggling and abduction for ransom are also common. While the agency’s graph of such crimes might be the lowest in the entire FATA, the tendency to settle even minor issues through squabbling is common among members of both communities. In addition, both sects accuse each other of drawing support from outside; the Sunnis are alleged to be backed by the Taliban and the Shias by Iran and the Afghan Hazaras. Traditional elders from both sects have lost control over the situation as very young fighters fill the ranks on both sides of the conflict. Jirgas are no longer effective in resolving issues, particularly in the rural areas of the agency.²² Religious differences notwithstanding, it is the tribal tendency to reach for the gun which is responsible for unending confrontation between the two sects.

During a day-long dialogue titled “Humanitarian Crisis in Kurram Agency: Need for Effective Remedial Measures”, organized jointly by Action Aid and the Centre for Research and Social Development (CRSD) held in Islamabad, the speakers expressed concern over the humanitarian crisis in the agency and termed the government, the neighboring countries and religious fanaticism responsible for the strife. Munir Hussain, a resident of the agency, while speaking at the occasion blamed the Mullahs of the two sides and suggested, “...Take power from them and things will be settled down”. He said that today the clerics were enjoying all powers in the agency and Maliks, elders and political administration had become powerless and helpless against them. Another speaker also held the religious outfits of both sides responsible for the conflict and suggested that unless they were eliminated; durable peace in

²¹ *Dawn* (Islamabad), December 15, 2009; Dr Maleeha Lodhi, “South Waziristan: Risks and Opportunity,” *News* (Rawalpindi), November 3, 2009.

²² *News* (Rawalpindi), September 2, 2008.

agency would remain a far cry. Attaullah Khan, another resident of the agency, alleged that religious organizations of the two sects were actively involved in fanning sectarian violence between the two segments.²³

Dr Said Alam Mahsud, leader of Amn Tehrik, held religious fanaticism responsible for the unrest in the area. He said that the trouble started during the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq. He strongly criticized foreign elements for meddling in the affairs of the agency, saying that Uzbeks, Arabs and Punjabis should keep away from the area. Senior journalist Shamim Shahid also accused some foreign countries of harbouring and providing huge funds to their respective ideological militant groups for their own vested interests. He said that the clergy exploited the Pashtuns in the name of religion and unless they were removed from the scene the people would not be able to resolve their disputes amicably.²⁴ Rehman Malik, then adviser to the prime minister on security, and presently the Interior Minister, also indicated that some foreign hands might be involved in the terror activities that were taking place in Dera Ismail Khan, Kurram agency, Balochistan and some other parts of the country.²⁵

Both sides nurture deep mistrust and hatred towards each other which can be judged from some inhuman acts in which bodies of the dead were disgraced during the 2007 disturbances. Unfortunately, the clergy continues to stoke this fire by insulting each others' faith publicly. In a situation like this it would need extraordinary steps to restore harmony between the two communities.

The presence of rival mosques in close proximity of 150 to 200 meters in the heart of Parachinar City has often triggered disturbances that have engulfed the entire agency within no time. These mosques are led by extremist clerics reportedly linked to groups with connections outside the country. The physical closeness of the two mosques in Parachinar city will continue to distance the followers of the Shia and Sunni sects in the agency.

The agency's pro-Northern Alliance tilt is widely blamed on account of its significant Shia population - a factor that explains the Taliban presence there. The pro-Taliban factions believe that the Shias of

²³ *Rantburg*, rantburg.com:81/?D=2009-07-30&HC=1&SO=, July 30, 2009.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Editorial, "Mind-forming Effect of Terrorism," *Daily Times* (Lahore), August 23, 2008; Ahmed Hassan, "Foreign Hands Blamed for Kurram Trouble," *Dawn* (Islamabad), June 10, 2008.

the area are active against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The Shias decision not to offer shelter to al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban fleeing Tora Bora in 2001 and handing over of some al-Qaeda members to government was a clear sign of their hostility towards Taliban/al-Qaeda.²⁶

A responsible official disclosed that over the past two years, Shia leadership is reported to have held a number of meetings with American military leadership/Afghan National Army sitting just across Pak-Afghan border. Taking advantage of the situation, the American side has encouraged the Shias and extended their support against Taliban and al-Qaeda because the US would like that Upper Kurram remains peaceful, under strict control of the Shia community. However, whether or not Shias are pro-Northern Alliance and against Taliban, Upper Kurram is the only part of FATA where Sunni militants are not present and which is being guarded by local Shia guards at various entrance/exit points.

Various peace jirgas instituted earlier have failed to bring peace because of the involvement of groups linked to external elements. The problem is no more a sectarian issue now. It has gained strategic importance because of external/internal factors and has to be tackled on more than one front.

Critical Analysis of the Agency Crises

The agency is at the verge of collapse. The war on terror and the sectarian violence have turned it into a living hell for the population. The situation has slightly improved due to ongoing reconciliation efforts. Till the recent past, there had been no food, no running water, no education, no health, no jobs, no business and no peace in the agency.²⁷ Above all, whatever goods reach the market are beyond the purchasing power of the common people. Secondly, the plight and misery of the Sunni minority in Upper Kurram are beyond description. The old, the sick and the children of this community are among the most affected due to isolation. Their basic health centers and schools have been closed since April 2007.

While quoting the notables of the area, Brig Junaid demands that government should take action against the trouble makers whom he did not identify. In the author's view, the responsible people are from within

²⁶ Hassan Abbas, "Pakistan's Grip on Tribal Areas is Slipping," *South Asia Times*, October 4, 2007. See also Mariam Abou Zahab, "Sectarianism in Pakistan's Kurram Tribal Agency," *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 7, issue 6, March 19, 2009.

²⁷ Junaid Zaman, "Kurram Agency: No Food, No Life: Need Your Help".

the agency who provide access to outside actors on both sides. They have become too powerful for their handlers who feel embarrassed by their acts. As indicated earlier, Shia-Sunni violence could have been contained if it had remained localized but, availability of modern weapons and involvement of non-state actors, has made it impossible for the LEAs to control the situation. No additional force was available as the army was engaged with the militants.

After the failure of Jirgas, dialogues and conferences, a military operation, howsoever painful that may be, seems the only option to bring peace in the agency, according to Brig Junaid.²⁸ He does not name the target of this operation. The militant groups have all kinds of weapons and ammunition. Almost all Imam Bargahs/Mosques in Shia control have basements which serve as ammunition dumps. Sunnis hold similar weapons under what they call *Quami* ammunition in their strongholds. Sunni displacement and closure of the road are grievances that can be exploited any time in the absence of other reasons or when it is required to change the strategy.²⁹

The author agrees with Brig Junaid that armed militants roam the agency as no serious operation so far has been conducted by the security forces. However, it may not be fully correct that militants are fanning sectarian violence in the agency by design. As pointed out earlier, the sectarian violence has a pre-partition history. In the author's view, the people of Lower/Central Kurram are equally agitated about the presence of militants' in their area. They regret their decision to allow them to enter their area. Their wholehearted support to the operation against the militants' in Satta and surrounding areas is testimony to the fact that the common Sunni civilians have no sympathy for the militants.

While the anti-Shia Taliban spare no chance to punish the Shias, anti-Sunni Shias pay them in the same coin. They molested and dragged the corpses in the streets in Parachinar City and charged heavy amounts for returning the bodies to the heirs. It is on record that death toll of the Sunni community in Upper Kurram was so high that political administration had to arrange mass burials. Over three hundred Sunni

²⁸ Junaid Zaman, "Kurram Agency Genocide", *The Pakistani Spectator*, July 3, 2009.

²⁹ Muhammad Khurshid Khan, "Analyzing Domestic Terrorism as a Threat to Pakistan's Security and the Policy Response", *IPRI Journal IX*, no.2 (Summer 2009): 59.

families of Upper Kurram were fortunate to leave their homes well in time and escape the slaughter by the Shias to the safety of the FC camp from where they were shifted to other parts of Pakistan.

There is another angle to the Kurram crises. According to one school of thought, unlike the past crises, the latest was unique in the sense it had an economic aspect. The Shias were probably politically and economically motivated in their effort to evict the Sunni community from Upper Kurram for ever. Their deportation would solve the sectarian issue and, make available to the Shia community large tracts of agricultural land in addition to 513 shops in Parachinar City belonging to Sunni traders. They knew that government forces present in the agency were insufficient to stop the sectarian cleansing so they could make good use of the opportunity. However in this scheme the poor masses had nothing to gain as the plot was planned and played by a few powerful stakeholders at the behest of their sponsors and on the assumption that sooner than later they will be able to assert their influence in opening the road without having to compromise on their gains and, in the long run, they would be the sole beneficiaries of the end result of the scheme.

This was not the first time that Shias took such an initiative. Historically the Turis were under Bangash domination until the 18th century when they attacked the Bangash and pushed them into Lower Kurram.³⁰ But, in the changed scenario, it would be very unfortunate and unwise to continue the enmity. Before conceiving that plan, the consequences of its failure should have been considered. The Kohat-Parachinar road serves as the spinal cord for the people of the agency. Likewise, the presence of Sunni community in Upper Kurram is a guarantee for peace and long term economic prosperity of the agency. Afghanistan cannot contribute to the economic prosperity of the agency even if all legal/illegal routes are opened for trade. Over the past three years, the closure of the road has cost Pakistan and the poor people of the agency the loss of billions of rupees as traders who travelled to and from Parachinar through Afghanistan had to pay heavy taxes not only to the Afghan government but also to armed bandits on the route. In addition, there was no guarantee of security to the travellers as many were murdered and body bags sent to Upper Kurram when ransom was not paid.

³⁰ Mariam Abou Zahab, "Sectarianism in Pakistan's Kurram Tribal Agency".

It is not possible and it would never be feasible in future to sustain Parachinar economically through Afghanistan. The quality agriculture products of the agency are not needed in Afghanistan. Its market is in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab. Therefore, economic prosperity of this area lies in peaceful coexistence of the two communities and immediate opening of the Thal-Parachinar road. No foreign hand would ever be able to support the Shia community in isolation. The self-centered approach adopted by some interested elements must be abandoned in the long term interest and prosperity of the agency.

There is a frequently quoted incident in which members of the local Sunnis, probably supported by militants, looted the government relief convoy bound for Parachinar at Pir Qayyum in Lower Kurram near Sadda and all the 22 vehicles were burnt down and the drivers brutally killed.³¹ Though undoubtedly a condemnable act it should not be seen in isolation. Prior to this incident, 33 Sunni villages, and according to another report, 42 Sunni villages, were set on fire by Shias in which hundreds of innocent women and children were burnt alive. The burnt remains of the villages still present a sad sight even after three years (Figure-2). The role played by LEAs accompanying the convoy has also been questioned.

Figure-2



An overview of one of 42 destroyed Sunni villages (Morakhel)³²

³¹ Baqir Rizvi, "Sectarianism, Insurgency and Talibanization - A Case Study of Kurram Agency"; "Afghanistan Sends Medical Aid to Kurram Agency," *Afghanistan News Center*, July 2008; *Dawn* (Islamabad), July 8, 2008.

³² The photograph of the destroyed village Morakhel was taken by the author while carrying ground survey of the agency on December 7, 2009.

As for the Taliban/militants' support to the Sunni community, it can be said that the militants are nobody's friends. They extort money from wherever they can including foreign agencies. The local people are their easy target. Abduction for ransom is the militants' common practice. According to a reliable source, the militants did not come to the rescue of the Sunni community but offered their services as mercenaries. As the Sunni community felt threatened by the Shias who had foreign support in terms of money and weapons, they hired the militants. But after getting money from Sunnis the militants approached Shias for a deal and quietly handed over the Quami Murchas (Tribal Bunkers) to them they were holding for the Sunnis leaving the latter at the mercy of the Shia rival groups. Their treachery exceeded all limits when the Taliban did not allow the fleeing Sunnis to take their valuables with them. In fact they looted the Sunni houses before the Shias came to burn down the villages. Members of the Sunni community are extremely contrite and regret their decision to accept Taliban protection against the Shias during the Shia-Sunni crises of 2007/2008. Today, the Sunni community is more cooperative and is willing to resolve all outstanding issues with the Shia community despite being the aggrieved party. The Shia community should now reciprocate the Sunni desire to resolve the dispute.

A study of the social contours of the agency indicates that the Shia community is comparatively advanced and is generally better educated than the Sunnis. They are well linked internally as well as externally and despite their minority position dominate the Sunnis politically. They control the media which tells only their side of the story. Though the Sunnis were the worst sufferers in 2007/08 disturbances the general impression is that the Shia community was the victim. The overall situation that has led to the current state of the agency has never been related in true perspective. In the turmoil created by internal and external players the poor and weak sections of society, whether Shia or Sunni, have been the losers while all other sections, business class and traders, have benefited from the prevailing security environment.

As an impartial observer, it is the author's view that the common Shias have been used for the benefit of strong elements of the community who oppose the Sunnis' return to the agency. While this group is economically well off because of its foreign linkages the fortune of the common people has seen a reversal since 2007. Since then the common masses of Upper Kurram are relying on a small group of traders/businessmen for all their needs and are therefore freely exploited

by the profiteers. It is because of this reason that this special class is not interested in reconciliation and it may not be wrong to point out that their political leadership may also be part of this conspiracy.

Another important factor that has had an adverse impact on the situation is the absence of that delicate balance that had held the society together for long. If the two communities remain mutually exclusive, the education gap between Sunnis and Shias will increase in favour of Shias because private educational institutions in Parachinar are under exclusive use of the Shias while the presence of militants in Lower/Central Kurram since 2007 affects the access of Sunni youth to education facilities. According to an official source, only one Sunni out of ten students in the agency is able to make it to professional colleges. Sunni villages in Upper Kurram like Bushara and Ali Mangola are totally isolated and have had no access to even basic education and health facilities since 2007 due to non-availability of staff.

Political indecision since November 2007 has led to this situation in which outside actors have become more active and are responsible for further complicating the situation. As indicated earlier, it is no more a local issue; the two factions are being exploited by outside elements. The Sunnis are under the influence of the militants pouring in from other agencies and the Shia community is being provoked against the former with money and weapons from foreign sources. Therefore, prolonged inaction and indecision at the political level is going to worsen the situation even further in the foreseeable future.

During the April 2007 clashes, the local leaders of the two sects accused that the LEAs were not impartial. The FC troops employed in the agency had serious problem maintaining its identity as a neutral force which affected its performance. Secondly, the Kurram Militia unit is predominately Turi Shia from Upper Kurram. Use of heavy weapons by the militia which may result in collateral damage puts the troops under serious risk as both factions believe themselves to be the aggrieved party. The Kurram Militia troops have their families living in the troubled areas and therefore remain tense which affects their performance.

Nonetheless, Kurram Militia and Thal Scouts under the guidance of Frontier Corps have already taken many initiatives to create conducive environment for political forces to come in and play their role. They have managed to melt the ice by opening the main road by involving the Sunni community. The presence of LEAs in strength in Lower Kurram has made the difference in pushing out militants. As a result Sunnis are

cooperating with the government. The last operation conducted by the army/FC has helped in stabilizing the security situation in the agency. While a conducive environment has been created for the Shias, the Sunni community is also looking forward to improvement in their situation which will restore the needed social balance in the agency.

The above mentioned circumstances and factors notwithstanding, the communities appear now to be cooperating, although there are hidden forces which want to derail the peace process to keep the agency in turmoil. The suicide attack on the Parachinar-bound civil convoy at Thall on March 5, 2010 and later during April 2010, a roadside bomb that took many innocent lives, are attempts to sabotage the peace process.³³ Such attempts are likely to continue to keep the confrontational environment between the two communities. The important point to note is that the government now seems determined to push the peace process forward. The Army Chief's symbolic visit to Parachinar on June 1, 2010 and his meeting with the agency's elders is a step in the right direction.

Suggested Way Forward

As pointed out earlier, since August 2009, the FC has been taking steps for creating conducive environment in the agency in which it has the full support of the political administration. This is the right time for the establishment to get the political process moving by involving all stake holders from a position of strength.

The solution to this humanitarian crisis calls for controlling the hands that control the criminal elements. The rise of extremism in Pakistan is essentially a political problem and its solution also lies in the political process. The establishment should protect the basic constitutional and human rights of all citizens of Pakistan including the population of Kurram agency, irrespective of their colour, creed, racial and ethnic affiliations. The criminals and those who support them should be brought to justice without delay.

Islam is a religion of peace and there is no room for anyone to impose his "brand of religion" on others. The only way forward is to promote the true Islamic values of accommodation, tolerance and peace and discourage those who preach otherwise. It is something to ponder

³³The author was present at Thall on March 5, 2010 and observed the post crisis management activities undertaken by Thall Scouts and local police. See also *News* (Rawalpindi), March 6, 2010.

over why the values of forgiveness, patience and tolerance have vanished from the society. All those who are involved, religious and political leaders, together with government officials and members of LEAs, must sit together to deliberate on ways to restore peace in the agency.

The situation in Kurram agency cannot be likened to the situation in the Khyber, Mehmound or Bajour agencies. It is not an issue of Taliban versus others. The issue is primarily sectarian in nature that has been influenced by other factors including the Taliban. The people of the agency have lately realized that the war in the area is not in their interest. Therefore, the government should curb the activities of conspirators and save Parachinar from becoming an incubator and a launching pad for sectarian violence all over Pakistan.³⁴ Intelligence agencies will have to play an important role in isolating the wrongdoers.

The 100 member grand jirga of the agency has already brokered a peace deal between warring sectarian groups in the region which is generally termed as Murree Peace Accord. Under the agreement, the two sides agreed to: (1) exchange kidnapped people; (2) reopen all roads to ensure supplies; (3) allow the displaced people to return to their villages; (4) bunkers would be vacated and handed over to the FC; and (5) a fine of Rs 60 million will be imposed for any violation of the agreement.³⁵ The accord presents a concrete strategy to initiate long term steps to maintain durable peace in the valley, as it was concluded with the consent of both the parties. Implementation of this accord in letter and spirit through political process will automatically discourage outside actors.

The Kurram agency issue has to be tackled at multiple fronts. While the political administration helps create a level playing ground for all sections in close collaboration with FC, it must be made to realize that the survival and long term economic prosperity of this agency lies in peaceful co-existence of these two communities. Few selected groups and individuals should not be allowed to hijack the future of over 0.5 million innocent people of this agency. Our media and the intellectual community must also come forward and expose the enemies of peace in the agency. The unrest in the agency needs immediate attention at the highest level.

Restoring peace in the agency by Kurram Militia alone especially in the presence of foreign elements is beyond its capabilities when the unit is also deployed against militants' in Lower/Central Kurram. If the road is

³⁴ Ibn ul Hasan, "Sectarian in Kurram Agency".

³⁵ Ibn ul Hasan, "Sectarian in Kurram Agency".

to be opened and maintained, a joint effort by army and FC will have to be ensured. The permanent opening of the over 180 km road between Kohat-Parachinar is an urgent need.

In order to implement the Murree Accord, Pakistan Government may involve the country's top religious leaders of both communities as well as political parties having religious agendas to help bridge differences and create understanding between the communities. But the political process in the agency needs to be supported by a visible force. The process has failed in the past due to lack of commitment and indecisive attitude of the LEAs. Therefore, LEAs will have to extend its full support to the political administration in implementing the recommendations while taking strong action against the militants/ violators.

To close all inlets from Afghanistan being used by foreign agents to support one community seems a challenging job as the border cannot be sealed permanently. However, if a consensus is reached at the political level, it might automatically discourage the intruders. In addition, our intelligence agencies can help in isolating the spoiler groups involved in derailing the peace process. In the same context, Afghanistan and Iran may be persuaded at an appropriate level to check the activities of such elements. In fact, the three Muslim countries should forge a united front in the interest of regional stability.

While the re-settlement process of the displaced families needs immediate attention according to the Murree accord and for which the losses of the affected people need to be compensated as far as possible, it is necessary that the religious leaders adopt a Code of Conduct to promote sectarian harmony. For this purpose the two rival mosques in Parachinar City may be relocated at a safe distance from each other with government assistance.

Although, the importance of the main road will remain central to the economic prosperity of the agency, the air strip at Parachinar must be made operational for use in emergencies.³⁶

An all-out effort must be made to stop infiltration of militants/Taliban from the adjacent areas in Kurram agency. The militants from the remaining part of the agency should also be flushed out.

³⁶ "Understanding Pakistan's Problems," *Pakistan Times*, Opinion, *Pak Affairs*, April 13, 2009.

It is the responsibility of political as well as religious leadership to change the perception that Shia and Sunni belong to different religions. For this only well read religious scholars should be allowed to lead the prayers.

If real peace is to be achieved, the agency will have to be made weapons-free. The ammunitions and weapons held by the two sections must be confiscated. A weapons free society will help in maintaining long term peace, stability and economic prosperity.

Last but not the least is the role of the media. As pointed out earlier, local media is being dominated by Shia community which has failed to bring out the real picture of the whole crises. Reporting of events must be objective and without bias and sensationalism is to be avoided. The media must play its positive role for long term security and stability of the agency.

Conclusion

Presence of Sunni community in Upper Kurram is a balancing factor without which long term peace and economic stability cannot be achieved. The permanent opening of the Parachinar- Thal and Kohat road, the spinal cord of the agency, is essential because trade through Afghan border is simply not economical or feasible for the agency.

It is heartening to know that there is a realization on both sides that their survival hinges on their mutual cooperation and coexistence. Therefore, both sides will have to give up the culture of accusation and counter accusation. A fresh sectarian surge in the agency can cause real damage to Pakistan. Thus, the situation warrants immediate involvement of the establishment which cannot afford to remain indecisive for very long. It has to play its role in saving the agency from isolation by implementing Murree Peace Accord in letter and spirit. Pakistan is already in a state of war with militants both at home and external fronts. Therefore, this ongoing vulnerability needs to be addressed sooner than later.

Insufficient strength and inaction of LEAs and their lack of commitment at the top level will not do any more. The establishment must come forward and help making health centers and schools functional and restoring supplies of essential commodities. Political administration which has at last become active must also help Lower and Central Kurram and encourage them to send their children to schools/colleges so as to bridge the literacy gap and restore the cultural

balance. Political administration should also come forward and help LEAs in isolating and tackling militants present in Central Kurram. In addition, while political administration is expected to do its best, it is to be hoped that both Shia and Sunni communities would look ahead and save the younger generation from negative influences of militancy. ■