

Chain gang: Students ring mosques in Pakistan

Catholic group makes strong show of solidarity in defiance of terrorist attacks on shrines and other religious venues

Kamran Chaudhry, Lahore, Pakistan, *La Croix International*, 22 May 2019



Student activist members of the Catholic-led Youth Development Foundation form a human chain around the Masjid Wazir Khan mosque in Lahore. (Photo by Kamran Chaudhry/ucanews.com)

After a suicide bomber killed 12 people on May 8 outside a major Sufi shrine in Lahore, capital of the Pakistani province of Punjab, Sikh activist Gurjeet Singh and his friends made a pact to form human chains around local mosques to physically and symbolically ward off religious extremism.

"We spend our weekends protecting Muslim worshipers. This shows our solidarity with our brothers and sisters who subscribe to Islam, the majority faith in Pakistan. It also strengthens interfaith harmony in our troubled society," the 26-year-old told ucanews.com, adding the group plans to ring the bombed Data Darbu shrine in June.

The Sikh activist, who launched a free ambulance service last year at a government hospital, joined other interfaith activists in locking hands around the city's Jamia Masjid Minhaj-ul-Quran mosque on May 18 to safeguard the 50-odd worshippers inside.

For 20 minutes after sunset, they stood on the grounds of the mosque as it hosted a fast-breaking ritual known as *iftar*.

The morning counterpart to this is known as *suhoor* — a meal taken just before sunrise. Both are practiced daily during the holy fasting month of Ramadan, which this year runs from May 5 to June 4.

This was the second human chain organized by the Youth Development Foundation (YDF), a Catholic-led group for students, since this month's deadly terror attack outside Data Darbar, a shrine dedicated to Persian Sufi saint Abul Hassan Ali Hajveri, also known as Data Ganj Baksh.

Sufism is considered a more mystical branch of Islam that places more weight on introspection, divine love, and spiritual closeness with God.

The YDF formed the first chain on May 11 at the entrance of Masjid Wazir Khan, a 17th century mosque inside Lahore's walled city, to protect Muslims during their early afternoon prayers (known as *zuhr*).

"When Christians gather to perform annual fasts, or other spiritual practices, they usually do it at church-run centers," said Shahid Rehmat, executive director of the YDF.

"But we wanted to highlight the spirit of compassion, which can defeat hate, terrorism and religiously based extremism."

Interfaith delegations have been visiting the bombed 11th century shrine in a massive show of support. A wooden post erected there sits covered in floral wreaths — showing the victims, bereaved families and the community that they are not alone.

Military veterans led by a Catholic brigadier have also banded together to keep scores of churches in Pakistan safe in the aftermath of the Sri Lanka Easter bombings. The attack on Data Darbu heightened security concerns in Lahore, which boasts more than 4,000 mosques, with Ramadan seen as an especially vulnerable month.

In July 2010, about five weeks before Ramadan began, two suicide bombers hit Data Darbar — the shrine the YDF picked to form its second chain — killing at least 50 people and wounding 200 others.

It was the most catastrophic attack on a Sufi shrine in Pakistan since militant attacks began there in 2001.

The Wahabi threat

According to media reports, over 30 shrines across the country have been attacked in the past decade.

The Center for Islamic Research Collaboration and Learning claims more than 200 people were killed and 600 injured from 2005 to 2017 in 29 attacks targeting shrines devoted to Sufi saints in Pakistan.

The biggest threat comes from Wahabis, according to Reverend Amjad Niamat, chairman of the Ecumenism and Interfaith Harmony Commission of Presbyterian Church of Pakistan.

This ultra-conservative school of Islam is centered in Saudi Arabia — which funds Wahabi madrasas in Pakistan — but is spurned by most Sunni and Shia Muslims around the world, who see it as a misinterpretation of the Quran.

"Terrorists can strike anywhere, but these [Wahabi] extremists consider the practice of building shrines over graves and turning them into places of worship as un-Islamic," said Rev. Niamat, who joined Muslim clerics in a candlelight vigil at Data Darbar on May 11, three days after the blasts took place.

"Similarly, the Wahabis condemn the popular tradition of *dhamal*, a spiritual dance ritual that can transport performers and audience into a state of religious ecstasy. They see Christians and Shia Muslims as infidels. Sectarianism has become a major challenge to interfaith harmony."

Sufism has a history of more than 1,000 years in South Asia. Sacred dances at Sufi shrines are a common sight on Thursdays in Pakistan, with people fervently singing and dancing together, often barefoot, to the repetitive rhythmic beat of double-headed drums known as *dhol*s.

In 2016, a Taliban group claimed responsibility for killing Amjad Farid Sabri, one of the country's most famous Sufi singers.

The 45-year-old was a well-known performer of Qawwali, a devotional style of music rooted in Sufism. It involves the skillful repetition of a verse to the accompaniment of hand clapping and the banging of *tablas*, or small drums.

Church support

Many Christians also find themselves enthralled by this kind of music and listen to Muslim Qawwali songs on TV or their smartphones.

Workshop Audio Visual Education (WAVE) studio, the Catholic Church's national audiovisual center based in Lahore, has produced several CDs featuring choirs singing Qawwali songs about the life of Jesus. Famous singers have also performed for Catholic bishops at the studio.

Bishop Rufin Anthony of Islamabad-Rawalpindi, who died in 2016, was even nicknamed "Sufi" for his mystical lifestyle.

However, Taliban and other Sunni militant groups consider this mystical branch of Islam heretical.

Sabri faced blasphemy charges in 2014 when Islamabad High Court issued a notice to the singer and two TV channels for playing Qawwali songs during a morning show that mentioned some famous mainstream Muslim figures.

Framed against this backdrop of religious disharmony in the country, Sohail Ahmad Raza, director of Interfaith Relations Minhaj-ul-Quran International, thanked the YDF for forming the human chain at his mosque.

The NGO also manages a university that includes a former Jesuit priest, a Sikh and a Hindu scholar among its faculty members.

"We offer various courses including one Muslim-Christian relations and another on the life of Jesus," Raza told ucanews.com. "Our doors are open to anyone who seeks social cohesion and rejects the [false] narratives perpetrated by terrorists."

Touching on the subject of Khawarij, a seventh century Islamic cult that appeared in the first century of Islam during the First Fitna (a crisis of leadership after the death of the Prophet Muhammad), and which has been called the progenitor of extremist groups like the Islamic State, the Pakistani Taliban and Boko Haram, Raza described it and its "offspring" as aberrations.

"They basically made up their own version of Islam, one that is anti-human," he said.

Their followers are considered apostates in the Quran, with Khawarij seen as the first violent movement in Islamic history. Many Muslim scholars refer to the aforementioned terrorist groups by this name.