



Sectarianism or Separatism: Iran, Pakistan, and the Dynamics of Shia Politics in Kashmir

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INTRODUCTION

Every year, thousands of Shias defy the government of India's (GOI) ban to take out peaceful mourning processions in Srinagar during the month of Muharram. Each time, they are intercepted by armed contingents of police and paramilitary personnel who lob tear gas shells, resort to baton charges, and brutalize the participants while detaining the leaders and activists. These scenes bring waves of painful memories for Kashmiri Shias who have faced the atrocious annual assaults on religious freedom since 1990, when the ban was first announced. Unsurprisingly, the ban coincided with the curbs to other limited socio-political freedoms in Kashmir, partly due to the rise of a strong insurgent movement against the Indian government. The government has been justifying the ban as a precautionary measure against security threats and anti-government sentiments stoked in such processions (Mehdi 2022).

Unexpectedly, after a three-decade ban on Muharram processions, the government issued a notification in August 2021 allowing the historical procession in Lal Chowk on the tenth of Muharram. Taking Shias by surprise, the notification was issued against the backdrop of the continuing ban on all major religious gatherings including the congregational prayers at Srinagar's Jamia Masjid. Many Shia leaders rejected this move as a ploy by the Government to create a Shia-Sunni divide in Kashmir (Qadir 2021). Though the

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