

Pakistan will regret stirring up Sikh nationalism in India

Supporting Khalistan will backfire on Islamabad, also vulnerable to insurgencies

Sreeram Chaulia

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Members of various radical Sikh organisations shout pro-Khalistan slogans and brandish swords in Amritsar, Punjab state on June 6. © Hindustan Times/Getty Images

Following its failure to galvanize international intervention against India for its removal of autonomy in Jammu and Kashmir on August 6, Pakistan has been striving to kindle other fires to weaken its rival.

One front which Pakistan's military establishment is reactivating is the campaign for Khalistan -- the demand for an independent country for the Sikh religious majority in India's Punjab state which borders Jammu and Kashmir. Sikhs make up almost 60% of Punjabis but only 1.7% of all Indians.

Khalistan was a key component of Pakistan's military doctrine of "bleeding India with a thousand cuts" and avenging its defeat in the 1971 war, when India backed a rebellion of Bengali-speaking Pakistani Muslims and carved out a new country, Bangladesh, out of former East Pakistan.

Islamabad actively stoked a violent separatist insurgency for Khalistan from the mid-1980s until the early 1990s. India ultimately weathered the Khalistan storm in Punjab and succeeded in weaning Sikhs away from secessionism by 1995. But rump elements of pro-Khalistan factions remained in Pakistan and have been trying to regain the initiative for years.

After Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's structural change in Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan has ratcheted up the Khalistan rhetoric by organizing Sikh religious gatherings in Pakistan and mobilizing radicals in the Sikh diaspora to call for a referendum for the independence of Indian Punjab.

Pakistan-based Khalistan leaders like Gopal Singh Chawla and Harmeet Singh, also known as Happy, are attracting greater concern from Indian authorities for their alleged attempts to recruit youth visiting Sikh shrines in Pakistan and online.

India has also accused Pakistan's intelligence apparatus of ramping up the coordination of Khalistan followers in Canada, the U.K. and the U.S., international hubs from which the insurgency of the 1980s and 1990s was managed.

Despite these clandestine operations by a small set of extremists, Sikhs in Indian Punjab are well integrated into Indian society and have moved past the era of Khalistan militancy. The voter turnout in Punjab in general elections held in May 2019 was a healthy 66%.

Sikhs in Indian Punjab are well integrated into Indian society. © Hindustan Times/Getty Images

Sikhs comprise 57% of Indian Punjab's population and politicians from their community continue to get elected as Chief Ministers of the state. From 2004 to 2014, the Prime Minister of India was a Sikh.

The grave mistakes and petty politicking by Indian governments during the 1980s, which had provoked Khalistani fundamentalism, are not being repeated by New Delhi today.

Despite Pakistan's push from across the border and in radical Sikh circles in Western countries, the ground reality in Punjab is not conducive for a renewal of Khalistan

sympathies. Notwithstanding the proximity of Indian Punjab with Pakistan's Punjab province, Islamabad has a low chance of fostering anti-India alienation among Sikhs.

Targeted killings and forcible religious conversions to Islam by extremists against the dwindling Sikh minority in Pakistan also undermine Pakistan's credibility as a champion of Sikh minority rights in India.

Sikh activists in Pakistan estimate that their community's numbers have shrunk drastically from 40,000 in 2002 to just 8,000 by 2018. Khalistan's proponents conveniently ignore the near-extinction of Sikhs in Pakistan while harping on about Sikhs being victimized in India.

The other minority group in India that Pakistan has tried to instigate is the Nagas in the northeast, bordering Myanmar. An overwhelmingly Christian tribal community, the Nagas had for decades waged insurgencies for secession from India. They had received aid from what used to be East Pakistan, but eventually ran out of steam like the Khalistanis.

India has instituted an elaborate dialogue process under which Naga rebel outfits are settling for internal autonomy and abandoning their bids for independence. But after Modi's scrapping of special status for Jammu and Kashmir, Indian agencies have reported a surge in provocative fake videos and social media messages originating in Pakistan which are inciting Naga youth to rise up in another wave of revolt against the Indian state.

As with Khalistan in Punjab, Naga secessionism has low likelihood of catching on with the bulk of the population in India's Nagaland state. Still, for Pakistan, it is a way to jab at India and promote its foundational idea that religious minorities cannot be safe in Hindu-majority India.

But this shadow war is costly for Pakistan. India has visibly increased its advocacy for the cause of Balochistan, the troubled western province of Pakistan where ethnic minorities are alienated from the central government in Islamabad and are challenging the Pakistani army's harsh counter-insurgency.

Praise for India by Altaf Hussain, the exiled leader of Pakistan's Muhajir Muslim minorities, has gone viral on the internet and exposed another form of discontent within Pakistan. Islamabad accuses New Delhi of abetting and financing both Baloch and Muhajir militants.

The more Pakistan pursues the policy of stoking minority fears and sentiments in India, the less likely it is that Islamabad will breathe easy. Given that Pakistan lost its entire eastern wing in 1971 as a result of a tit-for-tat game of mutual provocation of each country's

minorities for strategic leverage, raking up Khalistan or "free Nagaland" could be a self-defeating ploy.

The Pakistani military's assessment that it is time to intensify pressure on India after the revocation of special status in Jammu and Kashmir is a miscalculation and could end up a losing bet.



Sreeram Chaulia is a professor and dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs in Sonapat, India. His forthcoming book is "Trumped: Emerging Powers in a Post-American World."