Magnifying Dissent:
Researching Religious Outrage
amidst the Pandemic

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Introduction

In the month of April 2021, the world's acknowledging of the first anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with Ramadan. Unlike 2020 when the virus was still new and governments had imposed strict lockdowns, the Ramadan of 2021 in Pakistan was mostly business as usual. This was despite the fact that the pandemic was still very much there and officially an average of almost 5000 cases was reported on a daily basis. It seemed however that people had accepted Covid as a parallel reality which was endured as one among many other problems that life brings. In this Ramadan, unlike the previous one, mosques were open, congregational prayers were held across the country, often with an attempt to follow the SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures), which were set by the government for congregational prayers. However, this journey to the "new normal" had not been an easy one. A study by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics noted that Covid caused loss of work for 20.6 million, a decrease in income for 27.31 million people belonging to the working classes and an increased food insecurity from three to ten percent (PBS 2020).

Among the many challenges that the pandemic posed (and continues to pose), managing religious groups had proven to be the most sensitive and volatile for the Pakistani state. In the Ramadan of 2021, a religious

political party called Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) launched nation-wide protests against France, over the issue of blasphemous cartoons. The party demanded that the government cuts diplomatic ties with France. Protestors were armed and clashed with the police resulting in the death of one constable, forty injured and eleven persons held hostage by the protestors. The party also suffered the death of four activists and hundreds were arrested. After a series of violent defiance in the month of Ramadan, amidst the persisting risk of Covid-19 infections, the government banned the party under the country's Anti-Terrorism Act (Dawn 2021a & 2021b).

I had been closely following the TLP since 2018, the party being a case study of my doctoral thesis which studies the dynamics of contemporary Barelvi activism in Pakistan. Barelvis are a sub-sect among Pakistani Sunnis and have become particularly active in the political sphere in the recent past (Khan 2011; Suleman 2018; Basit 2020). The main research objective of my study was to understand the impact of religious associations on civic engagement. I have been exploring how people's association with religious groups effects their participation in community-based problem solving, volunteering, welfare work and political activism. I selected three types of organisations for this purpose: Dawat-e-Islami, which is a large Barelvi reform group; Saylani Welfare, which is a charity organisation; and a political party, the TLP. The key premise of the study is that associational lives not only provide skills, opportunities and avenues for civic engagement, but they also generate discourses which provide content and motivation for civic engagement. Association with religious groups of different formats generates civic engagement of different types, such as reform activism, donation, volunteering and also participation in political protests. The dominant assumption is that civic associations produce social capital[1], encourage interactions which inculcate tolerance and forge reciprocal relationships which are conducive to democracy and efficient governance (Boggs 2001; Skocpol 1997).

Most studies of civic engagement use quantitative methods (Wollebæk & Strømsnes 2008; Lussier & Fish 2012; Sarkissian 2012) and some also use ethnographic approaches (Hooghe & Stolle 2003), however, I decided to choose to use qualitative methods. This choice was driven by epistemological commitments, because beyond just quantifying civic engagement and determining its correlates, I wanted to explore the subjective meanings and values that underscored civic engagement among the groups. I was also interested in the discourses which demanded greater interaction with my interlocutors and deeper penetration into my research sites. This kind of research uses multiple

sources of data which can be textual such as, speeches, narratives, publications, interview transcripts etc. and also non-textual such as nature of people's interactions, use of symbols and affective sensibilities in assemblies and rituals.

As the world transitioned into the pandemic it forced changes in lifestyles, social interactions, religious practices, domestic roles etc. Yet, it also reinforced existing divisions, such as gender hierarchies, social polarisation, inequalities, and political hostilities (Jackson 2021). On the one hand, the pandemic offered me to observe this dual dynamic of continuations and disruptions unfolding in my field. On the other, it offered me the chance to observe how various sources of discontent found their expression in religious outrage. Covid-19 acted as a magnifying glass enabling me to connect everyday life of my interlocutors to their politics of resistance. Through the example of TLP, my aim in this paper is to show how the pandemic laid bare the underlying sources of discontent which find resonance in identity politics. I begin with a discussion of the field and my positionality, which were important elements of knowledge construction. This is followed by an account of my research on TLP before the pandemic, which was mainly an exploration of everyday politics from mosques, madrassas, and ritual spaces. In the next section, I offer my reflections on follow-up WhatsApp interviews during the Covid-19 crisis. I take the case of one of my interlocutors Bilal (pseudonym) as an illustration to demonstrate how following lives of my interlocutors from afar, using digital tools, and taking the interview as an affective encounter offered me a peak into their lives and helped sharpen my gaze. As an 'affective encounter' the interview constitutes a dynamic relationship between interviewer and interlocutor, shaped by different relational intensities' (Bilgin et al. 2018: 65).

Interviews conducted during Covid were different because the absence of shared physical environment was compensated by mundane details and intimate reciprocity. These interviews served as an "ethnographic imagery" through engaged and reciprocal interactions (Seale et al. 2004, Gerard Forsey 2010, Skinner 2012). The aim of ethnography is to get detailed in-depth description of everyday life and practices. Interviews with engaged and affective listening can provide access to those descriptions. Engaged and affective listening requires attuning to the feelings of self and then interviewee during the interview process. I argue that interviews conducted over WhatsApp during the pandemic were more intimate because the contravening impact of the environment and its related performativity was absent. Also, the conditions brought about by the pandemic made these interviews less formal and

roused greater emotional reciprocity between me and my interlocutors. This allowed greater self-disclosure from the interviewees and a more intimate interaction. My evolving presence in the field, first physical and then digital, helped me see multiple sides of my interlocutors' lives, offering me an insight into the contingency of meaning making process. As a significant disruption, Covid-19 made it clear that ideologies are discursive and conditioned by the context.

Field and positionality

As a woman, conducting research among Islamic groups did not prove to be easy because these sites are extremely gender segregated. My inquiry demanded deeper insights which could be partial if my access was limited to women only. I was aware of this limitation when I began data collection and therefore decided to first develop a good rapport with my interlocutors who were predominantly women in the beginning. Eventually, these women invited me into their homes, events and rituals such as Milad and recitation gatherings where I was able to interview their husbands, brothers and sons. These family-based connections proved to be more durable and enabled me to remain in contact with some of my interlocutors. The relationships which I had built with them during my presence in the field proved to be useful when Covid-19 arrived.

I define the field broadly here. It is the geographical, historical, social and political context in which the research takes place (Grimm et al. 2020). Hence the field is not confined to the geographical location, rather it is the broader context and the networks in which the research takes place. In the early stages of my fieldwork, the field was rather dispersed because I was researching three different groups, however as I developed connections with the actors, a more coherent and connected context emerged. The three groups, despite being institutionally separated, are connected through ideological commitment and their mission. There are overlapping memberships and connections among them, enabled through mosque spaces, rituals, and social media. Eventually, I found myself in a field which was inhabited by people with different roles but pursuing a similar agenda, in the same social and political context, despite belonging to different socio-economic classes. It was the field of activism which had different formats and programs of achieving a goal.

Building connections and developing trust in one setting helped me get introduced to another and then another. It definitely helped that I am from Pakistan, therefore, know how to conduct myself in these

settings, speak their language (and the dialect) and share similar life histories, challenges and apprehensions. Although the primary identity which they presented to me was their role as activists, but they also invoked other identities as believers, citizens, parents, students and of class, ethnicity gender etc. As an insider, I had a deep contextual knowledge of the field, but I was also an outsider who did not share their ideological agenda. Equipped with similar language, history, and even socio-economic status, when I entered the field, I had my own repertoire of knowledge and conceptions, which had also shaped my research questions.

However, as I spent more and more time, I realised that how I think about being a Muslim, or a Pakistani or even a woman was very different from how my interlocutors understand these categories. This was true for other concepts, such as freedom, rights, citizenship, civility, nationhood and even religion. It was then I realised that although I spoke the same words as them, the meanings we attached to them were different. I had to embark upon the task of learning their semantic and to construct my knowledge through their meanings. This required dismantling of my own preconceived notions and approaching social constructs as discursive and evolving. My insider/outsider status required that I reframe my knowledge using the lens of my interlocutors. As I continued with data collection, analysis, and reflection, I began to see the field from the eyes of my interlocutors.

The fact that I chose to see the field from their perspective does not imply that my analysis is merely a duplication of their claims and opinions. Although, my field notes and interview transcripts are pre-dominantly comprised of observations and statements of how my interlocutors see the world, the analysis is a contextualised and critical review of their discourses and activism. In this way knowledge is co-constructed; seeing through the eyes of the people and learning their semantics is simultaneously situated in the context and triangulated with other sources of data to deduce knowledge. As my interactions with the people and sites continued, the dispersed narratives and multiple discourses began to emerge as a coherent field of many actors (Burrell 2009). This field as a shared space of ideas, discourses and networks stayed with me even after I physically left the field. Being able to understand my interlocutors–but not necessarily agree with them–helped me establish rapport, which proved to be useful when Covid-19 arrived, and the field changed considerably.

Although I had finished data collection in the end of 2019, I continued to follow the party's activities and stayed in touch with some of my interlocutors. My connection with the field stayed with me until 2021,

thus spanning a period of four years. Four years is a duration long enough to observe the continuities and discontinuities of narratives and their appeal to the people. Extended connections with the field serve as persistent accumulation of co-constructed knowledge, by going back and forth to see how narratives evolve with the context. These four years however were not just the normal four years. The last one and a half year of this time had been overshadowed by the pandemic. Lives were badly disrupted and as humanity we were forced to create a "new normal" with alternative forms of connectivity. I also stayed in contact with my interlocutors, through occasional WhatsApp messages, on Eids and other events. These lingering interactions provided me a chance to know my interlocutors more closely, particularly during Covid-19.

As I got a deeper insight into their personal lives, it became more evident that meanings and associations are contingent. Just as I was in a constant process of reframing my knowledge, my interlocutors were also in the process of re-interpreting their lifeworld. Researching religious dissent during the Covid crises shifted my gaze from social lives to individual ones. During Covid-19, my interlocutors inhabited a drastically changed environment which compelled them to re-assert their association with religion. This was a useful insight as it showed that meaning making is contingent upon the context, and that in a highly uncertain environment, religions prove to be a strong force of hope and belonging. Relationship to ideology is contingent upon its constitutive elements which are rooted in social, political, and economic conditions.

Before the pandemic

I began my fieldwork in Karachi in 2018 which continued until 2019. In addition to conducting interviews, I was a regular participant in the activities of the groups under study. The head office of TLP is located in a mosque called Bahar-e-Shariat, located in an upper middle-class neighbourhood called Bahadurabad. TLP is a nascent Islamist political party in Pakistan which was formed in 2017. The origins of the movement go back to 2011 when the incumbent governor of Pakistan´s largest province Punjab was murdered in broad daylight by his own bodyguard, named Mumtaz Qadri. The latter justified this murder because he thought that the governor had committed blasphemy. The governor, Salman Taseer, had been campaigning for the release of a Christian woman, named Asiya Bibi, who was convicted under Pakistan's blasphemy laws[2]. He was also actively raising his voice against the misuse of the blasphemy laws and calling for a reform in the laws. The murderer Qadri proudly confessed and was arrested. Two weeks after Salman Taseer was killed, the only Christian minister in the federal

cabinet, Shahbaz Bhatti, also critical of the blasphemy laws, was gunned down[3].

The issue of Asiya Bibi had become a litmus test for the government´s attempt to reform the blasphemy laws. However, this has remained a challenge because the laws have acquired a sacred status, to the extent that they are termed as "God's laws" (Omar Khan 2016). This matter has been hotly debated because Pakistan has a long history of anti-blasphemy politics which is pursued under the banner of Sanctity of Prophethood (Rumi 2018; Ahmed 2021). Islamist politics in Pakistan is largely centred around the issue of Finality of Prophethood and Prophet's honour. Both social and political forms of activism carried under this banner is understood to be a badge of piety and moral superiority. Additionally, through activism of Islamists Sanctity of Prophethood has become an issue that is increasingly invoked as a significant element of Pakistan´s ideological foundations as a state. More importantly Sanctity of Prophethood also fuels the competition between different Islamists from various denominational and sectarian affiliations, all who claim to be "true" claimants of Islam (Rollier, Frøystad & Engelsen Ruud 2019). Pakistan´s ideological foundations as an Islamic state, although largely ambiguous in its definitions, has opened a space of multiple Islamist groups to lay their claim of moral superiority in the field of politics.

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In this ideologically charged, highly competitive context, the murder of the governor acted as a catalyst for the formation of a movement which later consolidated itself as a political party–the TLP. Mumtaz Qadri was eventually sentenced to death and his funeral was attended by over 100,000 people. This funeral provided the momentum and social networks to certain Islamist leaders who then went on to launch TLP. TLP had gained considerable political influence through its street protests which were carried out on several occasions and had been able to force the government to concede to their demands (Fawad Hasan 2017). Emboldened by these successes, in the 2018 elections, leaders of TLP staged their candidates in almost all of Pakistan. The party secured two seats in provincial assembly both from Karachi and ranked as the fifth in its vote share among all parties. This was an astounding success given the party was only a year old. However, it must be kept in mind that TLP's success owed largely to the emotional mobilisation and tapping into the religious sentiments. It also benefitted from the power vacuum created by inefficiencies of mainstream political parties. Another political opportunity that favoured TLP most was the absence of a sound political leadership among Barelvis–the Sunni denominational group. TLP claimed itself to be the party of the Barelvis but it insisted on using the word Sunni because, according to their ideological approach,

Barelvis are the "true" Sunnis. Thus, a religious identity was given political salience through the emotive politics of Sanctity of Prophethood.

Bahar-e-Shariat mosque had become the centre of activism since 2011 when some religious leaders launched a campaign for the release of Mumtaz Qadri. When Qadri died, and TLP was launched, this mosque was chosen as the provincial headquarter. In 2018, when I began my field work, this mosque was the administrative and mobilisation centre in Karachi and the activists of TLP were busy in their election campaign. There are several ritual gatherings organised in this mosque in addition to the regular prayers. In months leading up to the elections these gatherings were used as sites for electoral campaigning. The rituals were followed by passionate speeches of TLP leaders. I attended the weekly sermon gatherings of this mosque and carried out several interviews during this time. I was also invited to the different events that were held by the women's wing of TLP. Moreover, I enrolled myself in a girls' madrassa associated with the party, which I attended on a daily basis for two months. In the madrassa, too, the teachers often combined their activism with Islamic teachings. For them, being a "good Pakistani" was equal to being a "good Muslim." In one class held just before the Independence Day, the teacher urged the students to celebrate the Independence Day in pious manner. 'To be a responsible Pakistani means that one should guard the ideological foundations of the country' she insisted. 'Hence, a responsible Pakistani does not stay silent when blasphemy is committed. To protect the Sanctity of Prophethood is the responsibility of every Muslim Pakistani, even it demands that they sacrifice their lives.'[4] Voting for TLP was therefore not only a moral but also a civic responsibility.

TLP's activism also has a strong digital element to it, because they use social media, WhatsApp groups to disseminate videos, of speeches, sermons, Prophet's praise and recitals. These videos are very animated with music and images, intended to incite emotions. The pervasive use of religious text alongside political messaging is a way to incite religious sentiments for political ends. On ground, their electoral campaign was anchored mainly in mosque networks where sermons and speeches were conducted after worship and ritual gatherings. TLP's politics is mainly politics of protests and defiance and a claim to moral superiority. This claim combined with stories of victimisation and appeal to religious sentiments has resulted in the party's increasing popularity among the lower middle classes (Basit 2020; Sabat, Shoaib & Qadar 2020).

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Interview as ethnographic inquiry

My in-person interactions with my interlocutors and my physical presence in the field continued until late 2019 and I was able to gather a considerable amount of data. I then decided to wrap-up data collection and proceeded to the analysis. Most of the year 2020 was spent in analysis and writing up, however this did not necessarily imply a break from the field. I often conducted follow-up interviews during this phase, however, most of them were restricted to digital tools. Since I had already spent considerable time in ethnographic data collection, I had enough insights on the mechanisms and narratives deployed for mobilisation. However, the online interviews done during Covid-19 offered me a window to the lives of my interlocutors and allowed me to gain a microscopic view on the macro processes.

In-depth, conversational interviews have the advantage of furnishing rich accounts of data which encompass opinions, ideas, propositions related to a specific research questions and also details related to personal lives of interviewees. With considerable trust and rapport, it is possible to conduct interviews which are not merely resources but in Rapley's words 'co-construction of accounts' (Rapley 2001: 303). He argues that 'the interviewer is a central and active participant in the interaction' (Rapley 2002: 317) and hence as an active participant the interviewer must contextualise the interview in the goal and environment. During Covid-19, both the goal and environment of my interviews had changed. The pandemic had resulted in considerable upheavals, yet I saw that TLP workers and supporters continued their agitation. My goal was therefore to understand why the support had not waned despite risks of contracting Covid. I knew that the lockdowns had caused mosque closures for a considerable period, although these closures entailed significant tensions between the government and religious leaders. Initially religious leaders blatantly defied government restrictions but after a series of negotiations mosques were allowed to open with SOPs.

The environment, within which the party operated, had changed as it was forced to comply to government's demands in terms of the use of mosque spaces. The interviews, conducted in this changed context, were different not only terms of their modality–with a shift from in-person interaction to WhatsApp calls–but also in terms of the goal and environment. This time, more than understanding the support I was interested in knowing why this support had intensified during Covid. As an active participant of the interview, I therefore drew the conversation more towards the impact of Covid. This shift in my own query resulted in responses which were more personal and emblematic of everyday

politics of resistance which lies at the core of TLP's antagonism. In this section I take the example of Bilal to argue that interviews conducted during Covid were different in their nature as they revealed precarity of life conditions of my interlocuters which were hitherto obscured under the veneer of righteousness.

Although Bilal is not formally associated with TLP, he has been a strong supporter and had participated actively in TLP's electoral campaign during the 2018 elections. I had many meetings with him during my field work. Bilal is a struggling entrepreneur from a lower-middle class neighbourhood in Karachi and has a strong association with his denominational identity. On his part he became a spokesperson of Barelvi politics for the purposes of my research and graciously agreed to follow up interviews, several of which I conducted over the span of four years. When I first met Bilal in 2018, he was running a canteen in a local school. His business was not going too well and therefore he gave tuitions to children to meet the expenses of his wife and four children. Despite being in a tight financial situation, Bilal did not complain much. Once he noted that 'the Prophet was poor too. An austere life is fine as long as a person manages to fulfil his obligations and lead an honourable life'.[5] When Covid arrived, the canteen had to be shut down because of the lockdown. This put his family is an extremely difficult situation. Losing his main source of livelihood was compounded by the loss of spaces of social interaction which could potentially result in some social and financial support. Confined within his home, unable to find any form of support, Bilal was forced to make the ends meet on his meagre savings. In one phone interview during that time, he noted; 'they will let people die of hunger, but not of Covid. This is insane'. Referring to the religious leaders of Barelvis, he noted:

> Our leaders are demanding that not only mosques should be opened but also businesses should be allowed to run with SOPs. The lockdown is favouring the rich, secular segment of the society who think of themselves as superior to the poor and the Mullah.[6]

His support for TLP was combined with anti-elite, anti-lockdown rhetoric. It was becoming evident that his financial problems not only under-scored but intensified his approval of TLP's defiance. The disproportion-ate impacts of the lockdown laid bare the inequalities which successive governments in Pakistan had not been able to mitigate. The limited capacity of the state in a largely deregulated economy had only ex-acerbated the stark disparities of life. The appeal of religious identity, which if nothing else promises dignity, found resonance in voices of discontents.

In 2020 when the pandemic arrived and gained momentum, governments around the world, imposed lockdowns. For some it meant confinement and loss of social interactions whereas for others it meant loss of livelihoods and precarious conditions which put their lives at increased risk. Covid 19 put humanity in a situation of crises, requiring states to take emergency measures and resort to exceptional policies which affected people in highly disproportionate ways. This meant that some lives were rendered more expendable than others and some deserved greater protection than others. More importantly, Covid created conditions in which the state was able to exercise greater impunity for its actions under the pretext of crises, operating on necro-politics in which the question of life and death became techniques of governance and of doing politics (Mbembe 2003). In Pakistan, where religious nationalism looms large, the exceptional circumstances brought about by Covid and the necro-dynamics of power, thus ensued, spilled into politics of religion and became a tool of shifting blames. Consequently, the pandemic triggered already existing sectarian tensions. The first patients in Pakistan were Shia pilgrims who returned from Iran, a country among the worst hit by the pandemic in the region. On the one hand, some extremist Sunni groups began labelling Covid as the 'Shia virus', on the other, Sunnis themselves were not spared from such allegations.

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The crises demanded that congregational prayers be restricted in order to contain the spread of the virus. Closing down mosques is not an easy decision because mosques not only act as community centres but also retain a symbolic value. Additionally, they are the main source of donations which fuel the activism of religious groups. It was therefore no surprise that religious leaders did not concede to the government directive of mosque closure. In 2020 when Ramadan was approaching, some prominent leaders met the government and charted out a twenty-point strategy to continue congregational prayers with Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that would help contain the spread of the virus.

The government largely gave in to the demands of religious leaders and it was clear that the issue of mosque closure was being used as a tool by these religious leaders to claim their moral superiority. They used the rhetoric of 'fear Allah and not corona' to present themselves as pious Muslims with the moral authority to lead the people through the crises. They challenged state's monopoly over necro-politics and professedly rested it in the sovereignty of God because that state's response to Covid had resulted in greater disparities. Covid had not only incurred a health crisis but also of livelihoods for the poor. Daily wage earners, domestic

workers, transporters, small business owners, labourers etc. were amongst the worst hit. The anti-lockdown rhetoric of religious leaders was therefore appealing to the poor segments of the society because they were amongst those who suffered the most in the lockdown.

This rhetoric was also echoed by supporters of TLP. 'People have already rejected the government directive of closing the mosques. Even if they have forcibly shut down the mosques, we are doing congergation-al prayers on roof tops of buildings', Bilal noted in one interview in early 2020. 'This lockdown is just pushing people further into misery. It has taken away our livelihoods and it is also taking away our religion from us', he continued.[7] I could sense a deep sense of frustration in his tone. Although we were talking over a WhatsApp call, I could hear the pain that was simmering beneath the spoken and the unspoken.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been detrimental to the economy, resulting in loss of livelihoods and increasing uncertainty, which repeatedly emerged in my interview encounters in both verbal and emotional ways. A report by United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNTCAD) noted that Pakistan would be hardest hit by the impacts of Covid-19 (UNTCAD 2020). The worst affected were small and medium entrepreneurs whose livelihood depends on regular economic activity which was battered hard by lockdown measures (Shafi, Liu & Ren 2020). For a majority of Pakistanis belonging to the working classes it was not the virus as such but the lockdown that brought great misery. One study noted that suicides in Pakistan increased during the pandemic, the primary reason behind this increase being the lockdown related economic recession (Mamun & Ullah 2020). The pandemic not only resulted in economic shocks, but also social ones, compounding the situation further. The closure of mosques was not merely closing spaces of worship. It was also taking away critical spaces of relief from the poor. As Muhammed Hanif in an insightful opinion piece in the New York Times wrote:

> The poor don't have anywhere to turn. Mosques are Pakistan's only social centres, except for the clubs of the very rich and some parks for the middle class. They are equipped with public-address systems and have running water; many are air-conditioned. Mosques could have been used to disseminate health tips and distribute food to the needy, or as quarantine centres and temporary hospitals. (Hanif 2020)

In a megacity like Karachi, where public service delivery is poor and there is a sheer failure of governance, life is already difficult in normal times. When the pandemic arrived, the city, which attracts workers from all over the country was brought to a standstill. The loss of jobs has been extremely detrimental for the social life of the city. In a piece

published in a lead English language daily *Dawn* the authors note:

> The lived experiences of daily wagers and working class should not be disregarded because living through pandemics does not only create havoc in the public health system but it also reconfigures the society in unimaginable ways. Such experiences destroy the social fabric of society, as individuals undergo a trauma which is unprecedented and unknown, with little or no relief. (Shahid & Shekhani 2020)

My interviews in pandemic times shifted my attention from the politics of religion to the lived experiences of those who were instruments of that politics. This became possible not because the modality of interviews had changed but because the environment of the interview and my focus had changed. Persisting support for TLP's antagonism was an indicator that it was not merely the sites and symbols that feed politics but the daily lives of the people which become important factors in politics. It also revealed the failure of the state in providing equal access to means of sustenance.

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Qualitative research tends to privilege the ethnographic component because it boasts immersion in the context and environment which are considered crucial components of data. When I conducted field work before the pandemic, my interactions with my interlocutors were held in shared spaces, such as offices, mosques, madrassas, ritual gatherings etc. This offered me a physical presence in the field were my interlocutors shared their stories and experiences. While this presence allowed me to experience the life-worlds of my interlocutors, there was a significant influence of the environment in which I met them. For example, a collective ritual is a site where attendees come for a religious purpose and the interactions over there are greatly influenced by the sights and sounds of the setting. Often interviews at such sites allow us to observe the effects of contextual variables such as presence of other people or activities such as food distribution, speeches, announcements etc. Although these contextual variables help build a holistic picture, enabled immersion into the experiences of my interlocutors, they did not necessarily facilitate a peek into their lives.

As sites of "performances" they helped me observe the encounters which enable political claim making and the social dynamics which embed such claims. Yet, despite being important for analysis, my presence in the field was only one source of data. The main sources of my data were interviews which helped me explore aspects of the individual lives and their social dimensions, beyond political performances. Although I had no intention of doing more interviews after I formally completed data collection, it became inevitable as TLP continued to remain active. However, since the beginning of the pandemic, I was

largely restricted to online tools for data collection. This restriction compelled me to interview a few select people with whom I had developed a good rapport during my physical presence in the field. Instead of conducting interviews with different people, which I would have preferred if situation allowed, I was limited to the few. Unlike on-site interviews, these online interviews proved to be more detailed, personal, and intimate.

The relationship between an interviewer and interviewee is a dynamic one and the intensity and depth of this relationship is influenced by temporal, spatial and emotional contexts. The shifts in contexts which constitute the field impact the ways knowledge is co-constructed. Hence an interview is not merely a tool of collecting data, rather, it provides ethnographic imagery in which non-textual and non-lingual dimensions are as important as the spoken narratives (Bilgin et al. 2018). In online interviews my interlocutors offered me greater access to their lives and seemed less restrained in sharing their vulnerabilities. At times they even shared graphic descriptions of their experiences, giving me remote embeddedness into their social worlds. Moreover, through repeated online encounters unspoken and concealed, yet crucially important elements of their lives became more accessible. In a WhatsApp call there was less formality and structure, which allowed the conversations to move beyond the main topic. We shared Covid related problems and the ways we were coping with the pandemic. The self-narration of experiencees with greater emotional reciprocity gave me deeper insight into how my interviewees interpret their social world. Since, by design these were follow-up interviews, with repeated encounters, they offered me a peek into various aspects of my interlocutors' lives. The data base of several interviews conducted with each person over the span of four years also helped unveiled repetitive narratives and triangulate those with insights into their lives.

It is important to remember that as researcher when we approach an interview as an encounter rather than merely an exchange we are inevitably opening to the affective dimensions of the interview. Covid provided an impulse for me to get more attuned to the affective dimension of the interview encounter. The changes brought about by Covid caused shifts in my approach to the field. Before Covid when I was physically sharing the spaces with my interlocutors, emotions of anger were loud and intense. As the environment changed, I could hear more attentively the pain which gave energy to anger. Although this shift in my approach was made possible through the Covid-induced changes in temporal and spatial environments, it nonetheless required more emotional self-awareness on my part. It required that I become more attuned to the

relationality between myself and my interlocutors, which was constantly evolving as I continued to remain in touch with them. There was an accumulation of intimacy and feelings, and I was becoming more open to being affected myself from the encounter. The affective nature of the interview encounter was instrumental as it caused a shift in the gaze. By allowing myself to be affected by the emotions of my interlocutors and reflecting on this experience I was able to see how feelings generate affect[8] in politics.

Anxieties, uncertainties, and pain caused by challenging life conditions get expressed as normative feelings of righteousness and consequently emerge as political resistance. I could establish the link between personal pain and political anger when I deliberately set aside my common sense, objectivist epistemology and allowed myself to feel with my interlocutors. My conversations with Bilal are illustrative of the ways in which interviews as an "ethnographic inquiry" became the conduit of the affective encounter. Covid-19 facilitated the affective aspect of the interviews with some of my interlocutors enabling me to observe the interconnections of resistance politics with anger, solidarity, and honour but also despair, pain and shame (Leser & Spissinger 2020).

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Although Bilal was in a financially disadvantaged position, his defiance towards lockdown wasn't motivated purely by economic rights. Rather, economic discontent ran parallel to a sense of injustice which was intensified by the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic. Barelvis, particularly, had a burning sense of injustice since the state's co-option of militant groups particularly from the Deobandi denomination. These militants had attacked Barelvi shrines, bombed ritual spaces and killed Barelvi leaders and yet they were extended patronage by the state and imperial powers to further the latters' geopolitical agendas (Pio et al. 2016). The state's preferential treatment of religious ideologies contributed to growing competition among sects. With the intersectionalities of class and ethnicity, sectarian competition had led to consolidation of vernacular, cultural identities which found their voice in identity politics. Economic inequalities compounded with inequalities of respect, recognition, and representation. Embedded in forcefields of religion, class, and ethnicity these inequalities generated defiance and protests anchored in the claim of Love of the Prophet. The protests, such as those in Ramadan, are attempts to equalise the field of social and political recognition through claims of moral superiority (Hassner 2011). More importantly they are a means of showing discontent, the sources of which are well beyond religion or ideology.

Towards the end of 2020, Bilal told me that he had been able to start a small store in his neighbourhood with financial support from family

and friends, extended as loans. These were interest free loans[9] and offered under the pretext of assistance without the desire to extract profit. Although the amount of loans was increasing, he seemed a bit relaxed because the shop was giving enough revenue to meet daily expenses. Yet, he also complained that if the government opened schools, he could start his canteen business and start repaying the loans. The store was not allowed to remain open full time because the government had announced an evening lockdown. Disobeying lockdown restrictions could result in arrest or hefty fines. 'If the police arrest a shopkeeper, then he must pay one to two lac rupees as extortion money to get released'[10], he told me. He nonetheless opened the store despite the risk of being arrested. The risk of getting arrested was unavoidable if he didn't want to risk starving his children. There was a sheer disregard for state authorities and political leaders in his narrative. In Pakistan, the treatment of the poor by the institutions of the state, particularly the police, is extremely preferential. This has contributed to the erosion of legitimacy of the state, creating a vacuum which is filled with religious claimants of legitimacy. In a study of police legitimacy and vigilantism conducted in Lahore the authors argue that perceptions of police illegality contribute to greater support for vigilantism. However, the analysis also revealed perceptions of procedural injustice by the police were higher in low-income neighbourhood and contributed to greater erosion of police legitimacy in that area (Tankebe & Asif 2016).

These 'frontier sites' where the legitimacy of the state is in question are fertile grounds of discontent which can then exploited for political purposes. During the pandemic, the Pakistani state's legitimacy was further compromised because the crises had deepened faultiness and exposed inefficiency of successive governments. At these sites, the reach of the law is compromised, and they inhabit an increased sense of injustice. Social control is achieved mainly through religion which provides grounds for public morality. Consequently, political parties such as TLP, who claim legitimacy through appeals to religious sentiments, make gains, despite not offering any practical solutions. In times of crises such as during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, these 'frontier sites' became more susceptible to defiance and intensified mobilisational capacities of politics. The anger and dismay of people like Bilal are consequently echoed from the frontier to mainstream politics albeit in the language of morality.

August 2020 coincided with the month of Muharram in which Shias celebrate a ritual of mourning by holding processions. By this time important religious events were being held with SOPs. Likewise, this procession was carried out with most SOPs being followed. However,

right after the procession, some Sunni leaders accused Shias of blasphemy. It was alleged that Shia leaders had disrespected some of the Prophet's companions and demanded that the state must arrest them under blasphemy charges (Dawn 2020). Sectarian tensions were heightened by these blasphemy accusations and in the month of August alone 40 cases of blasphemy charges were filed against Shias. A report released by Center for Social Justice noted that since 1987, the highest number of blasphemy accusations was reported in the pandemic year of 2020 and of these 70 percent of the accused were Shias (ICC 2021). These cases are not benign as they make the alleged susceptible to murder by vigilantes.[11] Later, large rallies were carried out in Karachi for three consecutive days from 11 to 13 September. These were led by leaders of different Sunni denominations and all of them carried anti-Shia slogans. Through WhatsApp, Bilal shared a video of the rally organised by Barelvi leaders, with the text 'Ours (Barelvis) was the largest rally. We registered our protest through a peaceful demonstration.' Later in an interview he noted; 'It is common sense. If you are going to insult my father, I will definitely feel offended.'[12] These protests were indeed peaceful and attended mostly by lower and lower-middle income class groups of the city.

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Although Bilal kept insisting blasphemy as the main motivation of these protests, I could see a pattern emerging. He persistently included other complains with the issue of blasphemy, such as lack of employment, inefficiency of service delivery, increasing inflation, police brutality, etc., further heightened under the Covid-19 pandemic. In the same interview quoted above, he noted: 'If the governor of Sindh or the prime minister just announce that they will visit our neighbourhood in Karachi, then the municipal corporation will clean the area. But nobody cares. They don't even need to do anything. All they need to do is announce a visit.'[13] There was no mention of Covid-related risks. It seemed that the magnitude of the problems posed to him by life in general far exceeded health problems posed by the arrival of Covid. If anything, Covid merely exacerbated what already existed–misery, anxiety, uncertainty, resentment, pain and also support for TLP.

Conclusion

The October 2020 decapitation of a French history teacher prompted protests in France and the protestors carried the sketches of the Prophet. In a speech, the French president noted that Islam was a religion in crises and vowed to continue with sketches under the pretext of Freedom of Speech. In Pakistan, this provided an opportunity to TLP to launch another series of protests which ultimately became violent. These

protests which lasted two days resulted in hundreds of police officials, paramilitary staff and protestors injured. The government banned TLP however, this did not result in calming the storm. Angry protestors abducted police officials including a deputy superintendent of the police (DSP) and forcing the government to resume talks. Ultimately, on 20 April 2021 the government presented a resolution in the parliament which ended inconclusively (Dawn 2021a).

This was not the first time when TLP had resorted to violence in its protests. In the famous Faizabad protests of 2017, the party had managed to unleash riots across all major cities of the country. In the recent protests however, it was evident the party was not only emboldened after its performance in 2018 elections but also had become particularly hostile towards the state. Indeed, many supporters of TLP were angry and the source of their anger was not only blasphemy. Neither was declining economic condition the only explanation. Rather the sense of being unheard and uncared for, amplified by the apathy of the better-off sections of the society, mainstream political parties and law enforcement agencies had compounded the feelings of injustice and insecurity. TLP's politics is led by sectarian identity, and, like any form of identity politics, it also lies at the intersection of recognition and redistribution. Banning the party may serve to curtail the activities of its leaders, but it will not eliminate the sources of discontent which fuel its campaign. This became quite evident when just days after its banning it participated in by-elections of the constituency NA-249 in Karachi. Although the party did not win, it nonetheless ranked third and secured 18 percent of the total votes casted (The Correspondent PK 2021).

This constituency lies in a poor neglected neighbourhood–Baldia Town of Karachi, where most people struggle to survive. Their political leaders have been a sheer disappointment and there is a strong sense of injustice. In these frontier sites, economic inequalities, ethnic rivalries, political injustice, urban anxieties, police brutality etc contribute to the sense of injustice which is expressed in "righteous anger." During the Covid-19 pandemic, the depth of these faultiness and injustices was exposed because the crises had significantly intensified the struggle for survival. For me this exposure was reflected through the disclosure of my interlocutors such as Bilal. The interviews conducted during Covid attuned me to the everyday struggles of my interlocutors who found their voice in the politics of TLP. The ethnographic inquiry that was enabled through these interviews was more personal. It furnished a source of data which helped identify an important variable in the politics of blasphemy–injustice. The daily life narratives helped reveal the patterns through which injustice finds its expression in "righteous

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anger." The many sources of injustice have always remained an important component of the politics of blasphemy in Pakistan. But in the time of crises, they became more evident not only in the narratives of my interviewees but also in protests of TLP.

In this paper I have attempted to make two interconnected arguments. Using the example of TLP, I have demonstrated that the disparities in economic and political realm overlap to produce conditions within which sectional interests gain precedence. The fact that TLP has gained greater appeal among the urban lower middle classes shows that anxieties and discontents are often expressed in the language of morality. During Covid these anxieties were magnified as the state attempted to expand its control under the pretext of crises but ultimately resulted in producing conditions which amplified burdens for the working classes. The resistance of people like Bilal gives us insights on the forms of social relations, emotions and subjectivities which gain salience when some lives are rendered more disposable over others in a time of crises. Through necro-politics the pandemic reproduced and deepened existing frictions and inequalities. People like Bilal find recourse in the sovereignty of God to challenge the necro-politics of the neoliberal state when no other force comes to their rescue.

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The alternative offered by religious ideology becomes appealing in such situations even though ironically it fails to provide any practical solutions. The relationship of individual subjectivities to ideology is thus contingent upon the context in which social relations, economic conditions and political repression have a significant role. In other interconnected argument I note that making the link between subjective conditions and politics of ideology is made possible when we as researchers move beyond objectivist approaches of establishing correlations and documenting mechanisms. This is because the link is not static, rather it is embedded in the power-dynamics which shift constantly. During Covid this became more obvious because the crises ensued disparate levels of sufferings resulting in overlap of various forms of marginalities, particularly in frontier sites where the necro-politics ensued by the pandemic deepened discontent. Thus, anti-blasphemy slogans and blasphemy accusations against the Shias are not merely instances of religious outrage, rather they are emblematic of the structural conditions of injustice and violence. However, in order to uncover these links a researcher must allow herself to be emotionally responsive and empathetic to the feelings of her interlocutors.

In political science there is a tendency to privilege objectivity and treat emotions as external, confounding variables. Particularly in the study of far-right political groups the emotive aspect of their activism is

often dismissed. This constricts our knowledge because affect has a strong resonance in politics. During Covid-19 I found myself a bit more attuned to the emotions of my interlocutors as we conversed with greater intimacy and reciprocation. The interviews conducted during Covid crises proved to be less formal and more fluid opening the possibility of greater disclosure. Interviews as 'affective encounters' turned into fields of ethnographic inquiry where my interlocutors shared their apprehensions and vulnerabilities. This enabled me to uncover the link between life precarity and religious honour which had previously remained elusive.

Covid-19 is a time of crisis we share together as a humanity. Indeed, the extent and nature of vulnerability varied, these variations not only exposed but also amplified various forms of inequalities. While some people resorted to panic buying, others worried about one day's meal and whereas some lamented the loss of social contacts, others mourned their dead. These different pandemic responses were emblematic of the different ways we make sense of things beyond our control. More importantly they reveal the stark and very unfortunate reality of the world that we in live in. The reality that the world we inhabit is very unequal, in terms of rights, race, geopolitics and economy. Covid-19 has accelerated already existing political tensions and exacerbated inequalities. As a researcher, such a pandemic crisis made me more cognisant of these differences, injustices, and inequalities and thus more attentive to voices of discontent.

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Endnotes

[1] Social capital is the composite of advantages and opportunities that result from one's membership in groups, networks or associations. It has remained a focus of development policy as it renders advantages in terms of access to opportunities, resolving conflict and confronting vulnerability (Woolcock & Narayan 2000).

[2] The set of blasphemy laws in Pakistan are stated in chapter XV of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) and titled "Offences Relating to Religion." They were instituted during the colonial rule however during the military rule of Zia between 1977 to 1988 five additional clauses 295-B, 295-C, 298-A, 298-B, and 298-C were added. The clause 295-C of these new clauses declares that the defilement of the Prophet is punishable by death. Other clause 298-A is concerned with the use of derogatory remarks for holy people. This clause was the basis of anti-Shia protests during Covid. For details see Siddique and Hayat 2008.

[3] Blasphemy laws in Pakistan have been abused by people to settle personal enmities and its targets include both Muslims and non-Muslims, but the non-Muslims have been disproportionately targeted. The laws have also been used as pretext for vigilante actions, mob violence and extra-judicial killings. See (Ashraf 2018; Julius 2016; Suleman 2018.

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[4] Participant observation, conducted on 13 August 2018 in Karachi.

[5] Interview conducted via WhatsApp call on 11 November 2019.

[6] Interview conducted via WhatsApp call on 20 April 2020.

[7] Interview conducted via WhatsApp call on 20 April 2020.

[8] Affect is not emotion, but an unconscious sensory flow which enables us to feel and to give intensity to emotions. It is unformed and unstructured and lies prior to consciousness. Feelings and emotions are translated into action through affect (Papacharissi 2015).

[9] In Islamic systems these forms of loans are called as 'Qarz-e-Hasana' which do not put the receiver under the added pressure of paying interest.

[10] Interview conducted via WhatsApp call on 20 November 2020.

[11] Since 1990, blasphemy accusations have resulted in the extrajudicial killing of 77 people (Amnesty International 2016).

[12] Interview conducted via WhatsApp call on 20 November 2020.

[13] Interview conducted via WhatsApp call on 26 April 2021.

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