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BAN ON POPULAR FRONT OF INDIA (PFI)

A LONG OVERDUE STEP

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Ban on Popular Front of India - A Long Overdue Step

Preview

Finally, after a long and tiring wait, in September 2022, India's Ministry of Home Affairs banned the Popular Front of India (PFI), a hybrid Islamist organization that often surfaced with active involvement in terrorist activities. The much-awaited ban came after a National Investigating Agency (NIA) and Enforcement Directorate (ED) led nationwide crackdown and raids on 93 locations of PFI in 15 states, leading to arrests of its more than 100 key leaders and masterminds (*The News Minute, Sept 2022*). Some of the prominent names among these are its chairman OMA Salam, Delhi chief Parvez Ahmed, Kerala head CP Muhammad Bashir, national secretary, VP Nazrudheen, former chairman E Abu Backer, and national council member Prof. P Koya (*The News Minute, Sept 23, 2022*). During the raids, the NIA seized some weapons, homemade explosive devices, more than 200 mobile phones, 100 laptops, and other incriminating evidences like papers, vision records, enrolment applications and bank details (*Jamestown Foundation,*

Sept 23, 2022). The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) statement declaring the ban stated, "The Popular Front of India and its associates or affiliates or fronts have been found to be involved in serious offenses, including terrorism and its financing, targeted gruesome killings, disregarding the constitutional set up of the country, disturbing public order etc. which are prejudicial to the integrity, security and sovereignty of the country (*First Post, Sept 28, 2022*)."

The PFI and its terror activities are discussed in detail in the VIF sponsored book, *Radicalisation in India: An Exploration* (Pentagon Press, March 2019). In this book, a detailed history of PFI and its involvement in religious conversion, radicalization, and terror-related activities have been discussed in detail. This Brief focuses on more recent activities of PFI and the future threat emerging from its Islamist agenda.

PFI's History of Sabotage and Subversion

Though officially it was formed in 2006, PFI's origins go back to 1977 when the Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) was formed in Aligarh (UP) by Muhammad Ahmadullah Siddiqi, a Professor of Journalism and Public Relations at Western Illinois University (US) (*SATP*). SIMI was a terrorist organization involved in many terror attacks in India. It bitterly opposed secularism, democracy and nationhood. Its long-term agenda included overthrowing the Indian constitution, establishing an Islamic caliphate and organizing mass conversions of Hindus. Notably, it adored Osama Bin Laden as a hero of Muslims. Reportedly, PFI's founder members had strong links with the SIMI until it was banned in 2001. PFI's founding chairman, EM Abdul Rahman, served as the national secretary of SIMI for more than a decade (*First Post, Sept 30, 2022*). P Koya, a former professor and PFI's most effective recruiter, is also marked with having drafted the SIMI's extremist manifesto (*First Post, Sept 30, 2022*). In intelligence circles, it's a common belief that SIMI members resurfaced under PFI's banner

after the ban. In 2012, the Kerala Government published a report named “PFI, resurrection of SIMI (*First Post*, Sept 22, 2022). Then, in 1993, after the Babri mosque demolition, the National Democratic Front (NDF) was formed. Despite maintaining the veneer of an organization devoted to socio-economic reforms and educational work for Muslims, its extremist and violent agenda was exposed when some of its members were arrested for rioting and killing eight Hindus on Marad beach in Kozhikode in 2003. NDF's leading members also served in various capacities in SIMI.

NDF's activities were confined to Kerala, so in 2006 a new organization, PFI, was created by integrating all the like-minded organizations, such as *NDF*, *Karnataka Forum for Dignity*, and the *Manitha Neethi Pasarai* (Tamil Nadu), with a nationwide Islamist agenda. Soon, it was joined by *Goa Citizen's Forum*, *Rajasthan's Community for Social and Educational Society*, *West Bengal's Nagrik Adhikar Suraksha Samiti*, *Manipur's Lilong Social Forum*, and *Andhra's Association for Social Justice*. Today, PFI has its network and operations in more than 17 states and several Union Territories of India. Its operations are spread in far-off North Eastern states such as Assam and Manipur, western states like Rajasthan and Gujarat, North Indian states of UP, and several southern states.

In 2010, 37 PFI members were booked for chopping off the hands of Prof. TJ Kurien for setting a paper allegedly offensive to Prophet. A Kerala State Government report of 2012 mentioned that PFI was involved in the murder of 27 members of the Rashtriya Sevak Sangh (RSS) and Communist Party of India- M (CPI-M). Another Kerala Government report of 2014 stated that 86 attempt to murder cases were registered against PFI. PFI and its affiliated organizations like the *National Women's Front* and *Satya Sarini* organized forced religious conversions. Intending to prepare Kerala as a breeding ground of jihadists and terrorists, PFI organized a terror training camp in Kannur forests, from where NIA seized swords, country-made bombs, and IED ingredients (*Kannur PFI case*, Case no. RC-05/2013/NIA/

KOC). In 2007, PFI supported the Wagamon training camp organised by the banned SIMI. The camp charted out the strategy to bypass the ban, and after the camp, the Indian Mujahidin came into existence. To further continue its Islamist agenda, PFI's Dar-ul-Khada started a major campaign to constitute Sharia courts in Kerala in 2009 and urged all Muslims to approach Sharia courts only.

PFI's Recent Activities

Over the years, PFI grew more radical and spread its tentacles across the country. Because of its anti-national activities, it is already outlawed in states like Jharkhand. In the current scenario, PFI has immense political and social clout in states like Kerala and Karnataka. It has 50,000 members in Kerala and more than 300,000 sympathizers. It has presence in over 17 states and the Police and the NIA have filed 1300 cases against its cadres and its front organisations (*First Post, Sept 28, 2022*). On account of its social and political clout, the Congress and CPI-led political dispensations in Kerala went into an appeasement mode. On the question of banning the PFI, Kerala's Chief Minister Pinrayi Vijayan said, "It is not a policy of the Government to ban any communal or political outfit. Any outfit that creates riots in India and divides society, then it should be banned, and that organization is the RSS." Further, he stated that the organizations like PFI could not be dealt with a ban but with legal action.

PFI cultivated linkages with global Islamist networks and extremist Salafi organizations. It collected funds from various Gulf-based front religious organizations such as *India Fraternity Forum* and the *Muslim Relief Network* (MRN). According to the NIA dossiers, PFI members like Abu Backer, A. Syed, and EM Abdul Rahman camouflaged their fund-raising trips to West Asia as visits undertaken for Hajj/Umra and meeting relatives. MRN received funds from the *Islamic Bank of Jeddah* and has links with the *World Assembly of Muslim Youth*, an organization known for its alleged links

with Jihadist groups. After the enforcement of the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act 2020 (FCRA), PFI, along with many dubious NGOs, lost their unaccounted foreign funding. After that, PFI diversified its fundraising portfolio and methods. One of the methods majorly used by PFI to bypass FCRA is 'pocket funding'. Since the act prohibits donations from foreign sources to Indian Non-Government Organisations (NGO) for political activism and advocacy, PFI took the money in the individual accounts of its members and office-bearers, and the money received was shown as the payment made for commercial transactions such as the export of goods or services and speaking assignments. Later, PFI members and office bearers 'donated' those funds to the PFI in the Indian currency, which made it even easier for it to receive foreign funds. PFI received large amounts through this method from China. PFI's national general secretary of its students' wing, the *Campus Front of India* (CFI), KA Rauf Sherif, received more than Rs 1 crore from China, masked as a commercial transaction between KA Rauf Sherif and the Chinese party (*News 18, Oct 3, 2022*). Later, KA Rauf Sherif transferred this money from his own bank account into the account of PFI. In another such case, PFI's political wing, the Social Democratic Party of India's (SDPI) official Kaleem Pasha received INR 5 lakhs from a Chinese-controlled firm, Jumpmonkey Promotions India Pvt Ltd (*News 18, Oct 3, 2022*). In ED's investigation of 600 Indian contributors of PFI and bank accounts of 2600 beneficiaries, it came out that most of these were bogus accounts. The account holders were fictitious entities created to receive foreign funds (*News 18, Oct 3, 2022*).

In addition to the aforementioned method, PFI's other methods to bypass the scrutiny of security agencies include Zakat, cattle smuggling, fake currency, narcotics smuggling and illegal mining in Jharkhand (*First Post, Sept 28, 2022*). Reportedly, PFI controls 25 percent of illegal coal and sand mining in the Santhal Pargana of Jharkhand (*First Post, Sept 28, 2022*). If ED investigation reports are to be believed, then PFI received INR 120 crore from dubious foreign sources. In the Hathras gangrape case in which

a 19-year-old Dalit girl was raped by four upper-caste men, PFI tried to incite caste-based riots and violence. As per ED's preliminary report, it received INR 50 crores from Mauritius (*India Today*, Oct 7, 2020).

More recently, PFI's name has figured in Shaheen Bagh protests and the anti-Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAA)/National Register of Citizenship (NRC) riots in Delhi during President Trump's visit, leading to the death of 53 people. Also, PFI's role as a mastermind figured in the Love Jihad cases in Kerala (2017), Karnataka Hijab protests (2022), Mangalore violence (2019), gold-smuggling racket (2020), a series of riots on Ram Navami in Goa, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, and Jharkhand, and the nationwide anti-Nupur Sharma protests which led to the brutal ISIS-styled beheading of Kanhaiya, a Udaipur-based tailor, for a post in Nupur's favor, and a series of other murders related to the alleged insult of the Prophet by supporting Nupur Sharma.

It can be seen that PFI has been playing an instrumental role in terror funding, love jihad, radicalisation people, criminal activities, murders, fomenting communal riots, giving arms, explosives and combat training to its cadres and inciting them to revolt against India and challenge its integrity and unity. Recent raids at some PFI cadres in Bihar revealed that PFI aims to make India an Islamic country by 2047. However, the most alarming aspect that made the ban on PFI a compulsion is its relations with the transnational terrorist groups. It has links with Jamaat-ul-Mujahiddin, Bangladesh, a terrorist outfit involved on a series of murders in Bangladesh (*First Post*, Sept 28, 2022). In Kerala, PFI has facilitated Islamic State (IS) recruitment on a large scale in Kerala. In 2017, two individuals linked to PFI were arrested in Turkiye trying to escape to Syria to join the IS. According to the intelligence reports, 40 to 50 PFI members from Kannur (Kerala) joined ISIS (*First Post*, Sept 22, 2022). Muhammad Muhsin from Kerala, a former member of PFI, was involved IS-Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa's (ISKP) gurudwara attack in Kabul in 2020, in which 27 Sikhs died. Rashid

Abdullah, ISKP's main recruiter in Kerala and a man responsible for the mass escape of 16 men and women from Kasargod and Palakkad to join the ISKP, said in the 70th edition of his voice message that many PFI members shifted loyalties to join the IS because PFI was losing its Islamic character (*Radicalisation in India: An Exploration, Pentagon, 2019*). Further, he said, there were many IS supporters in PFI, but they were lying dormant, and PFI was trying to convince them not to join IS by arguing that PFI would join IS later, and that it is the 'Islamic State of India'. Abdullah's video provides ample evidence of PFI's links with IS recruitments and its Islamist agenda in India.

PFI has also maintained links with the radical Islamist groups and charities of Turkiye. An Al Qaeda (AQ) linked Turkish charity organisation, *Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief*, which was responsible for supplying arms to AQ jihadis in Syria in 2014, arming Libyan rebels and funding the Hamas (*IPT News, June 9, 2010*), hosted P Koya and EM Abdul Rahman, two PFI officials, in Turkiye (*Outlook, Sept 29, 2022*). Interestingly, PFI supported Erdogan after the 2016 coup and in return, Erdogan supported PFI as a 'civil rights group oppressed by the Indian state' through Turkiye's state media Anadolu Agency (*Outlook, Sept 29, 2022*). It is also pertinent to mention here that Erdogan is making serious efforts to reach out to Indian Muslims through various Indian extremist organizations and clerics, to radicalize them and to get their support for his ambition to lead the Muslim world (*VIF, Feb 2020*). After the revision of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, Erdogan has also been very active in the global diplomatic forums against India on the Kashmir issue, harshly criticizing India on the issues of security and communication lock down in Kashmir, (*VIF, Feb 2020*). Turkiye's TRT world news has engaged in massive fake propaganda and information war against India by highlighting the fabricated stories of human rights suppression of religious minorities, Dalits and Tribals (*VIF, Feb 2020*). It is important to note that Turkiye under Erdogan has maintained questionable

links with global terrorist groups like Boko Haram, Hamas, Hezbollah, ISIS and Al Shabab (*VIF, Feb 2020*).

PFI- Understanding its Ideology, Organisational Dynamics and Influence

‘India-2047’, the PFI's secret document recovered in raids on its hideouts in Phulwari-Sharif (Bihar), while explicitly mentioning its goals of ‘Islamizing’ India by 2047, states how they can "subjugate the coward Hindu community and bring the lost glory of Islamic rule back to India" even if only ten percent of Muslims rally behind them (*OpIndia, July 14, 2022*). Here, in this discussion on PFI's future game plan, it needs to be acknowledged that it does not only have the intent to Islamize India by 2047, but also the capability, if not that of completely Islamizing India, at least of carrying out major sabotage and subversion, thus presenting a serious internal security threat.

PFI's robust organisational strength, grassroots presence and penetration has been documented in various media reports. The *Dainik Bhaskar* (*Rajasthan edition, Oct 6, 2022*) claims that the PFI has 200,000 followers in 17 states of India. In his article on PFI's ideological and operational similarities with Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood, Zahack Tanvir, an expert voice on Islamic issues writes, "It has at least two to three units at the grassroots level, which report to an ‘Area’, Areas report to a ‘Division’, while Divisions reports to the ‘District’. Districts report to a level known as the ‘State Executive Council’; multiple SECs report to the ‘National Executive Council’ (NEC). Moreover, their chief is referred to as ‘National Chairman’, not as President (*First Post, July 19, 2022*).” Further, in a section on PFI's recruitment and indoctrination techniques, he states that the new recruits at Level-1 are emotionally brainwashed, mostly through sensitive communal issues. Its recruiters use, "visuals and footage of the conflict zones like Palestine, Gaza, Kashmir, etc, are used to create a sense of grievances

and responsibility in order to stand up for the 'Ummah'." At Level-2, the recruits are imparted teachings in Islamic history and exposure to the Muslim Brotherhood ideologues. In Level-3, they are indoctrinated into believing that only PFI can offer the ultimate solution to all the challenges the Muslim community is facing. Furthermore, he writes that at Level-4, "the members are fully enrolled into the organisation, where they are obliged to give 'Bayyah' to the chief by keeping their hands on their chests (*First Post, July 19, 2022*)." ."

Ideologically, many of the PFI leaders and cadres in their informal conversations claim to practice Wahhabi-Salafi school of thought. Also, in intelligence circles and many security experts in India understand PFI as a practitioner of Wahhabi-Salafi thought. However, many Salafi clerics have condemned and criticized PFI's beliefs, methods and practices as un-Islamic (*New Indian Express, Apr 27, 2022* and *ATZ Media Official*). German post-doctoral researcher Arndt Emmerich, in his book *Islamist Movements in India* writes that the PFI chairman admitted that PFI was different from Salafis and Tablighi Jamaat. Further, he told him that "we are more like Hamas, a religiously inspired community organization." This question of whether or not the PFI is wrongly perceived as Salafi-Wahhabi by Indian academic and intelligence circles should ideally fall in the purview of a debate by theological scholars on Islam, which is not the focus of this piece. However, it is pertinent to mention that in the Indian Islamic setting, Barelwis are demographically dominant, constituting 60 percent of Muslims in the Indian sub-continent. They are relatively moderate and bent towards Sufi beliefs which are comparatively accommodating, tolerant and aligned with India's vedantic spiritual traditions of the oneness of being. Also, Barelwis perceive Salafis and Deobandi ideologies as fundamentalist, extremist and foreign. As a result, one witnesses massive sectarian rivalry and violent clashes between these abovementioned sects. Hence it can be argued that the general perception of Deobandi-Salafis-Wahhabis as fundamentalist, also leads generalist security experts and academics to

view PFI from the Salafi-Wahhabi prism.

In practice, PFI is more like Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Hamas and Jamaat-i-Islami. About Syed Qutb, MB's main ideologue, Zahack Tanvir writes that he was a, "cocktail of India's Syed Abul Ala-Maududi and Iran's Nawab Safavi of Fidayeen Islam — as assassin cult infamous for murdering political leaders (*First Post, July 19, 2022*). Later Qutb became a source of inspiration for Khomeini to carry out the 1979-Iranian revolution against the Pahlavi family." Syed Qutb's exegesis on Quran, *Under the Shadow of Quran*, has been the most potent source of inspiration for Al Qaeda and IS. It was MB which initially recruited AQ's founder Osama Bin Laden (through an offshoot Palestinian Brotherhood) and the now-dead AQ supremo, Ayman Al Zawahiri (*First Post, July 19, 2022*). No wonders, PFI system of 'Bayah', i.e. an oath of allegiance to its leader, is strikingly similar to 'Bayah' in AQ and IS.

On the lines of Muslim Brotherhood, its operations and spread in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Yemen, the PFI has also spread its tentacles in media, charity, universities, Islamic seminaries, schools, Islamic social and cultural institutions, political circles and other public spheres. PFI has its students' wing, the CFI, the National Women's Front (NWF) and its political offshoot SDPI. Besides, it has number of affiliated organisations, front groups and charity entities. In the recent ban, the Government banned several such affiliated groups which include *CFI, NFW, Rehab India Foundation, All-India Imam Council, National Confederation of Human Rights Organisation, Junior Front, Empower India Foundation* etc. (*Dainik Bhaskar, Sept 26, 2022*). Further, PFI's strategy of secret training of its cadres in weapons and explosives and unarmed combat to terrorise the adversary, demonstrate its strength and exhaust its enemy's morale and military might by engaging in hybrid war of street violence, terrorist attacks and protests, also finds similarity with the Hamas, Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and MB playbook. Several intelligence reports suggest that PFI leaders

were in communication with MB leaders and their proxies in Turkiye and Qatar, and that allegedly, PFI received funding through hawala channels.

In the light of the aforementioned analysis, it can be argued that PFI, essentially, is a socio-political community movement instigated by religion or religious principles and identity as the fundamental tool for mobilization of the Muslim community for political and social goals. It differed from its predecessor SIMI in the sense that SIMI was an outright terrorist organisation that challenged the Indian State by openly advocating the establishment of Caliphate by overthrowing the Indian Constitution. On the other hand, PFI, in its official pronouncements through its press releases, manifesto and website always claimed to work for social, educational, human rights issues and charity work of the Muslim community. It kept many front organisations as mentioned above to expand and strengthen its presence across the spectrum, particularly amongst the younger generation. Over the years, it has cultivated relations with left-liberal activists by projecting itself as the defender of the rights of socio-economically backward Dalits and the tribal communities of India. PFI's Islamist proxies in the US like IAMC (Indian American Muslim Council), ICNA (Islamic Circle of North America), American Muslim Association and several others also peddled the fabricated and biased narratives of Dalits and tribals facing oppression under the 'Hindutva' regime. Hence, for the relatively moderate and leftist Muslims youngsters and Hindu activists, PFI plays the card of victimhood in the name of Islam, Hijab, caste, CAA/NRC, minority rights, human rights, Palestinian issue, Hindutva etc.

In the religious domain, it propagates an extremist version of Islam which has the political objective of establishing Sharia-ruled society. Realising that India's overwhelming Muslim population belongs to Barelwi sect, PFI, as a part of its strategy, avoids the sectarian differences between Salafis, Deobandis and Barelwis, and has made strong efforts to create a pan-Islamic movement on religious issues for all the Muslims of India.

By playing a lynchpin role in the Shaheen Bagh agitation, anti-CAA/NRC riots in Delhi, the series of riots across the country during Ramnavmi and the anti-Nupur Sharma riots, PFI has projected as a champion of Muslim issues and rights among all the Muslim sects in India across the sectarian spectrum. For Barelwis, the PFI played a major role in orchestrating the countrywide anti-Nupur Sharma protests. The highly radicalised social, religious and political milieu which PFI creates and operates in, prepares a fertile recruitment ground for terrorist organisations like Lashka-e Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e Mohammad (JeM), AQ and IS playing upon the victimhood and 'Islam in danger' card. Also, the said milieu polarises society on religious grounds, radicalises individual Muslims and helps in fomenting bloody communal riots, which in turn feeds into the victimhood narrative and helps terror groups recruit more cadres. This model is quite similar to what Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) has done in Kashmir.

Like JI, PFI has also penetrated Kerala's state institutions of administration, police, judiciary, media and academia. In the ongoing NIA investigations, it came to light that 873 police officers in Kerala, including those serving in special branch, law and order and intelligence wings as well as those who were in-charge of the office works of top Kerala police officers, have links with PFI (*Swarajya, Oct 4, 2022*). Reportedly, many officers of the rank of Sub-Inspector and Station Head Officer, leaked vital information about the NIA raids to PFI cadres. In Karnataka, the police are investigating the alleged involvement of two retired police officers, one of whom is a former IPS officer, for training the PFI cadres (*Swarajya, Oct 4, 2022*). Reportedly, this training took place in Mangaluru, and focused on how to evade investigating agencies, how to handle police interrogations and what should the arrested PFI cadres do during the court hearing etc. (*Swarajya, Oct 4, 2022*).

Thus, PFI presents a hybrid threat which officially operates like a social and educational organisation working for Muslims, but, covertly, it works as an

Islamist and terrorist groups. This duality makes it immensely challenging for security agencies and law enforcement machinery, in a democratic country like India, to deal with such covertly totalitarian and fascist organisations.

Dangerous Game Plan- Riots, Killings, Terror Attacks and Anarchy

It appears that the PFI-led Islamist lobby which includes its affiliated and proxy groups, other Islamist political and social groups, a large number of extremist Islamic religious leaders, and their ordinary Muslim sympathizers and supporters perceive that if the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) comes back to power in 2024, there will be a complete dismantling of the appeasement policy practiced for the last seven decades, shattering their dreams of Islamizing India by 2047. They also fear that after its 2024 election victory, it will be near-impossible to uproot BJP out of power. Besides, they see a strong possibility of a series of perceived anti-Muslim legal and constitutional changes such as a Uniform Civil Code, a Population Control Bill, and amendments to laws such as the Places of Worship Act and the Waqf Board Act being implemented. Their worst fear is that overtime a 'Hindu Rashtra' will be established, leading to the in the death of secularism and resulting in their persecution and degradation to second class citizens. Though delving deeper into the aforementioned fear is not the key focus of this brief, most of these fears are unfounded, resulting from the sense of entitlement created by decades of appeasement that allowed flourishing of devious extremist designs to overthrow the Indian Constitution and deliberate spread of false propaganda and religious hatred by extremist preachers, Muslim politicians, other political parties who thrive on minority vote bank, and a section of civil rights activists and intellectuals.

Islamist organizations like PFI and some of the influential Muslim political and religious leaders who nourish and sustain the hateful, separatist, fundamentalist, extremist and anti-national narrative amongst the Muslim community are likely to orchestrate a massive street-level communal violence in India from mid-2023, as India moves closer to the national elections of 2024. Even a rudimentary logical analysis suggests that they are likely to see the current situation as a 'do or die' situation and the current regime as a humongous existential threat to their ambitions of Islamizing India. To deal with the challenge, they can make robust and strong effort to create social and political anarchy and a country-wide law and order crisis by organizing violent protests, demonstrations, caste riots by inciting Dalit/Tribal groups and communal riots. On a parallel track, they are likely to organize lone-wolf terrorist attacks on Hindutva supporters or social media Hindu activists, terrorist attacks (bomb blasts/IEDs) on Hindu religious places, offices of BJP/RSS, and assassinations of BJP/RSS leaders, ideologues of national, regional and local stature and top-level political leadership of the country. This forecast is also supported by PFI's India-2047 document, which mentions PFI's goal of armed uprising against the state with the support of countries like Turkiye and Qatar to establish an Islamic state. As mentioned above, it also states that if only 10 percent of Muslims support them in the armed uprising, they would be able to achieve their goal of Islamizing India by 2047.

In these terror attacks, PFI will be aided and supported by the transnational terrorist groups like AQ and IS-Khorasan and Pakistan-supported groups like, Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami (HuJI), Jamaat-ul Mujahideen (Bangladesh), Lashkar and Jaish, rendering crucial support in men, money, operations and logistics. Over the last few years, massive amounts of weapons including AK 47 assault rifles, pistols and hand grenades along with drugs and cash have been smuggled into India from the Punjab, Jammu and Rajasthan borders through drones. Until recently, it was believed that most of these weapons are going to Kashmir; however, during the recent arrest

(Oct 2022) of the three LeT terrorists of its sleeper cell in Hyderabad, the police recovered Chinese-made hand grenades smuggled from Punjab border through drones (*Times of India*, Oct 3, 2022). The recovery suggests that the weapons are being supplied to various parts of the country. Also, the three LeT terrorists arrested were in contact with their Pakistan-based handlers Fathullah, Hanzala and Majeed, working with the ISI (*Times of India*, Oct 3, 2022). Reportedly, they were planning to kill BJP leaders and conduct terror attacks in the Dussera rally.

Through such anarchy, violence and terror attacks, the PFI intends to terrorize the large majority of the Hindu population, weaken their faith in BJP's leadership and demolish its credibility. This is so because PFI believes that brutal and bloody communal violence or lone wolf attacks like the beheading of Kanhaiya in Udaipur or the murder of Umesh Kolhe in Maharashtra are likely to scare a large segment of Hindus, particularly the middle-class and upper-class supporters of BJP, who are currently the strength of the BJP, supporting the Modi Government for its foreign policy, economic policy and a firm stand against Islamic extremism. PFI also believes that if the violence by Islamist elements at the grassroots level escalates beyond a point, then it may discourage these supporters, distancing them away from the BJP. For example, in the recent Bengal election, when Hindus were targeted by the Islamist goons supporting the Trinamool Congress, there was a huge resentment and demoralization among the Hindu supporters of the BJP in Bengal and other states of India, for the Central Government's failure to protect the Hindus.

If such a scenario arises, then the state reprisal under a strong-willed government is likely to be harsh and tough against the perpetrators of the violence. Some of the recent measures, like the bulldozing of the houses of rioters in Uttar Pradesh and the Madrasas with Al Qaeda links, and the ban on PFI have amply demonstrated this. To counter this might and to psychologically break the morale of the Indian state, the Islamists have

already been running a global campaign to strengthen their fabricated narrative of 'Muslims facing genocidal conditions under the fascist Hindutva regime' (sic). Reportedly, in this global anti-India and anti-Hindu propaganda war, they are ideologically and financially backed mainly by Pakistan, followed by some state actors like Turkiye and Qatar. Also, the Islamists are joined by fifth columnists including an array of intelligentsia, journalists, civil rights activists, Islamist religious leaders, politicians and extremist ideologues echoing the above-mentioned narrative in the international, particularly the western print and electronic media, social media, academic circles, universities, civil society groups, think tanks and influential human rights watchdogs.

Internally, some heavy weights from the opposition political parties also see 2024 elections as a 'do or die' situation because for them BJP's victory means a sharp decline or complete devastation of their political ambitions. After the recent ban on PFI, political parties supported it in a half-hearted manner, with some equating RSS with PFI and asking for banning the former also (*CPI Press brief*). Communist Party of India (Marxist) even condemned the ban calling it 'anti-democratic' and 'draconian' step of 'brahmanical Hindutva regime' and 'criminalising the Muslim community. Interestingly, the same narrative is peddled by the PFI's supporters in the West and some Dalit rights' organisations. One such example of the alliance of PFI-led Islamists and foreign-funded Dalit/Tribal agent provocateurs can be witnessed in the Southern Rajasthan districts of Dungarpur and Banswara. The local Bhil tribals constitute a majority in the total population in the region. Despite several attempts at mass conversions of tribals into Christianity and efforts to incite Naxal-like armed guerilla movement in the region on account of its tribal population, hilly terrain and dense forests, the inter-community relations between the Bhil tribals and Brahmins, Rajputs, Baniyas and other professional castes like Nai (barber), Panchal, Suthar (carpenters) etc. have remained extremely cordial until recently on account of the strong roots of Sanatan traditions.

In 2017, a new political group, viz. 'Bhartiya Tribal Party' was formed. Allegedly, the new political group mobilises the tribal community for political objectives, around the anti-upper caste and anti-Hindu slogans and narratives. One comes across the standard cliches of atrocity literature such as 'non-Hindu' identity of Bhils, 'colonization' of tribal lands, 'oppression' of Bhils and 'usurpation' of their resources by upper caste Hindus like Brahmins, Baniyas and Rajputs. Reportedly, many tribal and Dalit activists with foreign links and operational activities in Chhattisgarh are the masterminds behind this new group. Interestingly, the new political entity which has tremendous influence over the younger generation of tribals, have developed close ties with PFI-led Islamists. This new bonding is manifested in the social media posts, WhatsApp status and messages of the tribal community on Muslims festivals. A crucial reason, why PFI is making determined efforts to widen the rift between the tribal/Dalit groups and upper castes Hindus and wean away the former to its fold is that in Southern Rajasthan, like in the other parts of India, the Dalits and the tribal communities have historically resisted forced Islamic conversions and more recently, have actively fought back against the Islamic extremists during communal riots. In PFI's vision, if this block of Tribals/Dalits, which constitutes an overwhelming majority of Hindus, is weaned away, their chances of success in violent communal riots against Hindus and armed uprising against the state get significantly strengthened.

A close and nuanced observation reveals that the said discourse is being propagated in the western world with extreme hatred, abuse and vitriol against Prime Minister Modi. Notably, the idea behind this exercise is much more than tarnishing India's global image and harming its economic interests by portraying it as a bad investment destination. Islamist conspirators believe that once this said narrative is firmly embedded in the global perception of India, say by mid-2023, then the heavy state reprisal against the planned Muslim protest resulting in casualties among the violent protesters will reinforce and prove the said narrative with

substantial empirical evidence. Ultimately, as the Islamists expect, it will lead to tremendous global diplomatic, media and civil society pressure on the Modi Government to buckle down. The conspirators have a strong faith in this strategy because in the past, they could successfully use it to paralyze the state machinery through the anti-CAA/NRC riots of Delhi (Feb 2022) and put the Government on the backfoot in the case of CAA/NRC, farm laws, and anti-Nupur Sharma agitation by roping-in support of the global left-liberal cabal and Islamist state and non-state actors.

The impact of the global anti-Hindu campaign can be witnessed in the form of fast-rising racist and hate crimes against Hindus in the US, Canada and the UK. Recently, after an India-Pakistan cricket match, gangs of Pakistani thugs attacked Hindus and desecrated their temples in Leicester (UK). Muslim mobs, including a large number of illegal immigrants, threatened to kill Hindus and Jews in a wild rampage in Leicester. India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has issued an advisory to Indians warning against traveling to Canada in the wake of rising hate crimes against them. Interestingly, in this anti-Hindu and anti-India propaganda and violent hate crimes against Hindus, the Islamists are also joined by the Khalistani supporters. They realize that the Khalistan movement is dead in India, and attempts to revive it continue to fail despite Pakistan's vigorous efforts in the more recent past to pump in huge amounts of cash, drugs, and weapons. Hence, to make up for their failures in India and sustain the deceitful narrative of Khalistan separatism, they have joined the Islamists of all hues.

The likelihood of large-scale violence is also accentuated by the hardening of the Hindus' stance against Islamic extremism and the rapidly expanding tentacles of extremist organizations like the PFI. Recent brutal killings of Kanhaiya, Umesh Kolhe and several cases of 'love jihad' have jolted the faith of relatively moderate and liberal middle-class and the elite segments of the Hindu society over the notion of secularism and forced them out

of their pacifist and politically correct standpoints on the issue of Islamist terrorism and radicalization. So far, it seems that the animosity and communal frictions are confined to the shrill and abusive TV debates and social media posts on Hindu-Muslim issues like the Gyanvapi mosque, CAA/NRC, raids on PFI, etc.; however, it is just a matter of time when they spill over to the Indian streets.

As regards the capability of PFI to unleash mass violence and terror attacks, it could be argued that with its tentacles spreading over 17 states, a range of front organizations spread across the country and strong links with widespread global Islamist networks, it should not be underestimated. It has several front and affiliated organisations, some of which have been discussed earlier in this essay. As per informed interlocutors, over the last two years the PFI has created local, district level and regional groups of extremist cadres and leaders with non-religious names. With them, they have no formal ties, which gives PFI a strong alibi for deniability in the event of the local organization caught inciting a communal riot and facilitating a terror attack or any other kind of sabotage. Since PFI has its original inspiration in MB and JI which mastered the art of bypassing and surviving the ban and state repression, it can also defy and dodge the ban and resurrect itself in other names or continue its operations through its front or affiliated organisations.

In the past, PFI has been majorly involved in radicalization and terror attacks in Southern states. Their alleged role in facilitating IS recruitment and links with IS recruiters has been well-documented earlier in this essay. More recently, the PFI played a crucial role in instigating riots in multiple cities in different states. Even after the arrest of their 106 coordinators, Delhi Police foiled a major attempt by PFI to unleash mass protests and violence in the capital city. For now, because of the preemptive arrest of the key masterminds and coordinators, PFI's morale may be damaged; however, its grassroots base, second-rung leadership, and deep-rooted

network constitute its core strengths. The situation is quite similar to Jamaat-i-Islami in Kashmir. The organization is banned; however, its cadres and base are intact and continue to mobilize and operate through proxies. Another factor accentuating the threat is the weak operational capabilities, poor skill set and low morale of the state-intelligence departments and the police. In the recent Kanhaiya murder case and a series of PFI-orchestrated riots, intelligence failure was clearly evident. The state intelligence wings are more or less defunct because mostly the officers are given such assignments as punishment postings or those who fail to perform well in the field postings.

In light of the afore-mentioned facts and reasons, it is highly likely that PFI, with its local cohorts, offshoots, proxies, and transnational terrorist supporters, will attempt to orchestrate massive violence. It needs to be made sure that the state law enforcement bodies and intelligence agencies are not caught unawares in such a situation.

Conclusion

Amidst the transforming world order, India's situation is precarious. For India's perennial adversaries in the western strategic and intelligence world, widening and sharpening Hindu-Muslim faultiness resulting in some kind of anarchy aligns well with their objectives of halting India's economic growth and rising global geopolitical footprint. It is so because China, due to its dictatorial governance model and internal suppression, appears unsustainable beyond a limited time period, say 15-20 years. After that, India remains the prime rival to challenge and uproot the western hegemony. The ongoing frictions between the US and India, because of India's principled stand in the Ukraine War and other Indo-pacific issues, based on its values and interests, and refusal to blindly support the US against Russia, has given an added incentive to the western intelligence agencies and civil rights organizations, acting as the front organizations,

to foment and facilitate communal and caste violence in India. Pakistan and China's support to internal and internal anti-India Islamist lobbies and terrorist groups is already well-documented. Hence, it can be argued that New Delhi should brace up to deal with the adverse equation from the foreign state actors, vis-à-vis internal security challenges emanating from the Islamist groups.

Alternatively, it can also be reasoned that the current world order is moving towards multipolarity. The US faces a tough geopolitical challenge from China and Russia, in which it needs India to its side. Also, India has a strong political leadership and robust economy. It has already surpassed the British economy in size. With the growing Chinese hostility and influence and espionage operations, the western multinational companies and technology giants will need to relocate their firms, assets and businesses to other locations. In that India comes out as a promising place because of robust and stable state institutions, law-and-order, skilled and English-speaking population, large market and business-friendly government. Therefore, India can leverage this position to assertively deal with pressure tactics of the west exercised through their civil rights groups and covert sabotage designs.

In another scenario, the PFI-led Islamist ecosystem supported by Turkiye and Qatar, and the deep state in the West may think that if BJP comes back to power in 2024, its confident leadership will move ahead with an array of constitutional and legal changes related to the Waqf Board Act, Uniform Civil Code, Population Control Bill, Places of Worship Act, and Gyanvapi matter to allow re-construction of Hindus temples, registration of madrasas, implementation of CAA/NRC etc. If so, it will create opportune moments for the PFI to present these measures as anti-Muslim to further radicalize the Muslims, facilitating and enhancing the smooth entry of terrorist groups like the AQ and IS-KP amongst the Indian Muslims. Such a situation is also likely to result in massive communal violence and

terrorist recruitment in the Indian hinterland over the next several years. The above-mentioned anti-India entities expect these disturbances to transform into a civil-war like situation to split India into several parts.

The last scenario could be the one in which the non-PFI Islamist ecosystem which includes those Bareilwi, Deobandi, Tablighi and Salafi leaders and groups who oppose the PFI for its aggressive approach, because they believe that this might invite severe state reprisal, may not join the PFI in a massive violence. They are likely to consider that violence and terrorism by Islamist actors will shore up Hindu support for the BJP, including those of Dalits, tribals and Other Backward Castes (OBC) if the Islamists murder poor Hindus like Kanhaiya from the tailor community, in Udaipur. Hence, they may prefer to stay silent and remove the present government by consolidating electoral support for the opposition political parties. If they succeed, then they are likely to force a new non-BJP government to annul the decisions on ban on PFI and JI, activation of CAA/NRC acts, restructure of Article 370, monitoring of madrasas etc., and thus strengthen the Islamist constituency through legal and constitutional changes.

Therefore, in light of the different scenarios presented above, it is highly likely that over the next four to five years India will face immense internal security challenges from the PFI-led Islamist ecosystem with foreign players' support.

Recommendations

Certain policy recommendations to deal with the Islamist challenge are as follows:-

Firstly, there is an urgent need to revamp and overhaul the state intelligence department and anti-terrorism squads (ATS). These must be given specialized courses on terrorism, Islamist organisations and their

global, regional and local networks, terror funding, sectarian dynamics, indoctrination methods and espionage techniques. The state and district level intelligence bodies should keep a close watch on the activities of PFI and its cadres, their visits and the meetings in the madrasas. In the long run, separate intelligence cadres may be created in states which could work in close coordination with the central intelligence agencies. While working in the states, their agenda, mandate and routine functioning should not be hampered by the narrow and short-term motivations of the local political parties for partisan electoral gains.

Secondly, state level ATs, supported by precise and actionable intelligence, should organize operations to neutralize sleeper cells, terror funding conduits and operatives of PFI and other terrorist groups. Preemptive arrests of the key sabotage masterminds can help prevent violent protests and large-scale communal riots. Intelligence personnel have to enhance their physical combat skills.

Thirdly, the state should establish strong communication channels with the Muslim leadership and community, build confidence, and involve them in anti-terrorism and anti-radicalization operations. They should effectively impress that the fight was not against Islam or its religious institutions, it was against the rabid Islamists and terrorists. The state must encourage rise of counter-narrative from within the Muslim community. The counter narrative should focus on peace, harmony, tolerance, education and development.

Fourthly, political parties must show strong resolve by resolving, in the Parliament, stating the there was complete unity of thought and purpose on the matters of national security. The message should be loud and clear to domestic and international anti-India entities, both state and non-state, that India stands with firm resolve against such attempts of sabotage and subversion.

Lastly, red-lines need to be drawn for the media, intellectuals, political, social and civil rights activists, advocacy groups and academics. Strong legal measures, including a law on radicalization and terror funding are the need of the hour to clearly state that attempts to challenge India's unity and integrity will be firmly dealt with.

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The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organisation to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelise fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its inception, VIF has pursued quality research and scholarship and made efforts to highlight issues in governance, and strengthen national security. This is being actualised through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of VIF form lasting deliverables of VIF's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



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