

# The Milli Muslim League: The Domestic Politics of Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba

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**L**ASHKAR-E-TAIBA (LET) IS THE PAKISTANI ARMY'S MOST SUBSERVIENT proxy. Founded in Afghanistan during the fag end of the anti-Soviet jihad, LeT has never conducted a terrorist attack within Pakistan nor has it set its sights on any Pakistani target at home or abroad. For these reasons, the LeT enjoys the unstinting support of the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment. In 2002, the United States designated LeT a Foreign Terrorist Organization along with Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) after the latter conducted a suicide attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. That attack precipitated the largest Indian mobilization of forces since the 1971 war. The Pakistanis responded by moving their own forces from the west, where they were ostensibly supporting U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, to the east to counter a potential Indian attack. Washington, which was dependent upon Pakistan's cooperation on its western border, sought to alleviate India's concerns. In an effort to get Pakistani forces to swing back towards the west, Washington pressured India to de-escalate while insisting that then-President Pervez Musharraf ban both JeM and LeT, which provided India with the requisite diplomatic victory to justify softening its rhetoric.

The bans were a feint: Pakistani intelligence notified both JeM and LeT of the pending bans, which allowed them to regroup under different names and move their funds to new bank accounts. In the case of LeT, the group's leader, Hafiz Saeed, announced the formation of a new organization, Jamaat ud Dawa (JuD). As one American official observed, "LeT's old offices merely changed the name on the door."<sup>1</sup> Pressure again mounted on Pakistan to ban JuD after it perpetrated the spectacular attack—launched over several days and which took the lives of 166 people—on multiple high-profile targets in India's massive port city of Mumbai in November 2008.<sup>2</sup> Pakistan has continued to defy international calls to ban its pliant proxy and, under the watchful eye of the state, LeT has continued to proliferate other front organizations including the ostensibly humanitarian organization, Falah Insaniat Foundation (Foundation for Welfare of Humanity, FIF). Most recently, in August 2007, LeT audaciously floated a political party, Milli Muslim League (the National Muslim League, MML), for the purposes of contesting Pakistan's upcoming 2018 general elections.

Little has been written about this new organization and what has been written has been misleading. Some authors have suggested that the MML reflects Pakistan's sincere desire to defang its nastiest militant group by shunting its stalwarts and cadres into a useful political role, whereby it can counter the army's civilian enemies within Pakistan. Below, I argue that Pakistan's move is much more profound than a quest to find an alternative to demilitarizing the LeT/JuD or even manipulating electoral outcomes. I contend that the formation of the MML is part of a more serious effort to use the pro-state organization against the myriad militant groups tearing the state apart, while also investing in another political alternative to the current political parties that will pay dividends over the longer time horizon. Based upon available information about the MML, its ties to the JuD and its mentorship by Pakistan's security organizations, I reject the claim that the MML's formation signals a new effort on the part of the Pakistani state to redirect JuD's external militarism towards a new domesticated political role, and thus serves as a state-directed "de-radicalization" or "demobilization" effort to mainstream Islamist militants.<sup>3</sup> I argue, instead, that the MML will be a complement to JuD's efforts to stabilize Pakistan internally and enhance LeT's external activities in the service of the deep state.

# The Emergence of the Milli Muslim League

IN EARLY AUGUST 2017, HAFEZSAEED ANNOUNCED THE FORMATION OF THE MILLI Muslim League (MML), with the aim of rendering Pakistan a “real Islamic and welfare state.”<sup>4</sup> While Saeed initially claimed that the MML would be an entirely distinct entity from the JuD, in December 2017 he declared that JuD could participate in the 2018 general elections under the banner of the MML.<sup>5</sup> It is very unlikely that Saeed could have launched the MML without the explicit approval and active assistance of the army and the ISI given that Saeed made this announcement a mere few weeks after he was released from house arrest. Equally noteworthy, Saeed’s release and his announcement of the MML’s formation was coincident with the U.S. Congress’ decision, under Pentagon pressure, to remove the requirement that Pakistan retard the activities of LeT/JuD as a precondition for American security assistance.<sup>6</sup> This Congressional decision may reflect a bilateral understanding that Pakistan will not turn against the LeT. Oddly, despite Trump’s bluster about getting tough on Pakistan,<sup>7</sup> Washington has been silent about these developments.<sup>8</sup>

The MML, which is headed by Saifullah Khalid, a close aide of Saeed and a foundational member of JuD, intends to field candidates in the 2018 general election. The organization wasted no time entering the political fray: after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was forced to resign on 16 August 2017 and thus vacate his seat in the National Assembly for the NA 120 constituency,<sup>9</sup> JuD quickly fielded a candidate under the MML banner for the 17 September 2017 by-election to fill that vacancy. Because the MML had not yet been registered as a political party, the candidate, Muhammad Yaqoob Sheikh, filed his nomination papers with the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) as an independent candidate.<sup>10</sup> Remarkably, although the MML had only been in existence for a mere four weeks by the time of the by-election, it garnered four times as many votes as did the Pakistan Peoples’ Party (PPP). This success is most certainly due to the fact that it enjoyed the explicit backing and support of the Pakistani security establishment.<sup>11</sup> It then fielded Alhaj Liaqat Ali Khan, in an October 2017 by-election for the N-A4 constituency in Peshawar, however, that candidate did not fare as well.<sup>12</sup>

In early March 2018 the Islamabad High Court invalidated the ECP’s objections to registering the MML as a political party.<sup>13</sup> While Saeed initially said that

this party was separate from JuD, like many of his pronouncements, this too, ultimately proved to be rank fiction. Campaign posters for the NA-120 and NA-4 by-elections clearly featured the pictures of the candidates as well as that of Saeed. Furthermore, upon Saeed's release from "house arrest" in late November 2017, MML leadership asserted that "Mr. Hafiz Saeed will soon start planning out our membership strategy and getting others on board through networking."<sup>14</sup> Saeed dropped the façade in early December when he announced that JuD is "planning to contest the 2018 general elections under the banner of Milli Muslim League."<sup>15</sup> It is not inconceivable that Saeed himself will contest those elections. Moreover, former President and Army Chief, General Pervez Musharraf declared his unstinting support for Saeed, LeT/JuD, and the MML upon hearing that Saeed had been released from house arrest. Musharraf even suggested absurdly that he would like to contest the 2018 elections in alliance with the MML.<sup>16</sup>

Rumors about a possible LeT/JuD-tied political party have been floating around for at least the past two years, and two pieces of information clearly indicate its ties to Pakistan's army and the Interservices Intelligence Directorate (ISI). First, one of its founding members and current information secretary, Tabish Qayyum, has long been associated with the deep state.<sup>17</sup> In 2016, Qayyum earned his M.A. degree at Pakistan's National Defense University in the Department of International Relations, Faculty of Contemporary Studies. He wrote his thesis on the presence of the Islamic State (IS) in Pakistan and available means to defeat the organization. In this thesis, he highlighted the current effort of JuD in combatting the Islamic State (IS) and argued for a larger role for the organization in these efforts. He correctly noted in this thesis that the Islamic State has even declared JuD to be an apostate organization for its staunch opposition to IS and its deep ties to Pakistan's security establishment.<sup>18</sup> Qayyum's writings and digital footprint provide the clearest evidence of the support that the MML has enjoyed from Pakistan's security establishment as well as its inherent ties to JuD.

Second, the MML has aggressively marketed its manifesto and Pakistan's English and Urdu media has obliged. The clearest exposition of its aims and goals are articulated in the October 2017 issue of *Invite*, JuD's newest English-language publication. In this issue, the party clearly states that its aims include, *inter alia*: to ensure that both Pakistani society and the state conform to the injunctions of the Quran and *Sunnat* ("habitual practice," body of social and legal custom and practice); promote domestic security; protect Pakistan's ideological, moral, and cultural ethos; inculcate that ethos into the country's citizens; rendering Pakistan a modern Islamic welfare state; foster a "political environment in which all members of the society, especially the lower and the middle class, get complete rights

and prepare them for leadership roles”; restore Pakistan’s honor and place in the international system; safeguard the rights of women and minorities; morally and diplomatically support the struggle in Kashmir; promote a foreign policy that furthers the interests of the global *ummat* (Muslim community); and “counter the Takfeeri extremist ideology of the *Kharijites*, educate the people in battling it, and to work towards curbing sectarianism.”<sup>19</sup>

What is puzzling about the MML’s emergence is that even though Saeed has abjured politics since its founding, he has not bothered to offer even a modest explanation for the *volte face*. (Notably, no one has asked Saeed to justify this reversal.) Instead, Saeed and the JuD are behaving as if the MML is a natural progression for the organization. Ironically, in many ways, it would have been a natural growth of the group’s activities had it not been for LeT’s long-standing principled opposition to electoral politics. After all, the state has given every kind of support to JuD and the FIF, which has enabled the LeT to rebrand itself as a domestic provider of public goods as early as the 2004-05 Asian tsunami and the 2005 Kashmir earthquake.<sup>20</sup>

## The Political and Ideological Aims of the Milli Muslim League

THE JUD HAS PROFFERED THE CLEAREST STATEMENT OF THE MML’S OBJECTIVES in the October 2017 issue of *Invite*, its newly launched publication. What is immediately evident is that the MML’s stated positions completely align with the interests of Pakistan’s deep state. For example, the MML is unstinting in its promotion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).<sup>21</sup> The MML is also committed to persuading those in Balochistan who are opposed (often violently) to the CPEC, that they should accept Chinese projects in the country because the MML believes, as does the army, that they are necessary to secure Pakistan’s financial independence.<sup>22</sup> (It should be noted that CPEC will likely have the obverse effect.<sup>23</sup>)

The MML also embraces several contentions of the deep state: India is an existential threat; the Pakistani army’s role in the Saudi-Arabia-led Islamic Military Alliance in Yemen is a legitimate extension of Pakistan’s interests; the army’s internal security operations in the country are legitimate despite their enormous

human and other costs; and the scourge of terrorism perpetrated by *Khawarij* (alternatively neo-*Khawarij*). This conception of the *Khawarij* is rooted in deeply divided opinion about the proper course of action against those Muslim leaders who fail to impose *shariat* and the apposite practice of *takfir*, and subsequent capital punishment.

Salafis use the labels of *Khawarij* or neo-*Khawarij* pejoratively to denounce groups such as IS and, in the case of Pakistan, Deobandi groups who attack Shia and Bareilvi for their cavalier and inappropriate use of *takfir*, drawing upon the name of a long-defunct sect in Islamic history which embraced violent rebellion against disreputable leaders. In turn, Salafi jihadists denounce such critics for their use of *takfir* as *Murji'i* or neo-*Murji'i*, referring to another defunct group of early Muslims. This group asserted both that rebellion is impermissible irrespective of how contemptible a Muslim leader may be unless he commits *kufir* (act of unbelief), and that this judgment is reached using a juridical process that satisfies their rigorous evidentiary standards for declaring someone a *kafir* (unbeliever).<sup>24</sup>

The MML (and JuD) believes that *Kharijite*-terrorism must be fought on both the military and ideological fronts. For example, the JuD/MML contends that while the “Pakistani armed forces have been working tirelessly on the military front and have laid great sacrifices to protect Pakistan from the scourge of terrorism. JuD on the other hand has taken up the ideological front.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, and in complete alignment with the internal security interests of the deep state, the MML pledges to uphold and secure the rights of religious minorities and women. It even boasts religious minorities in its ranks.<sup>26</sup>

The one group about which JuD and the MML alike are very cautious is the Ahmadis.<sup>27</sup> When Pakistan’s Law Minister, Zahid Hamid, amended the *khatam-e-nabuwat* clause (declaration of faith in the finality of the prophet) in the Election Act of 2017 to require merely an affirmation, the MML viewed the move as a disturbing effort to dilute the standard oath taking practices for politicians assuming office. For Ahmadis, who do not recognize the ordinal finality of the prophet, the oath as previously written effectively barred them from contesting elections. In response to Hamid’s amendment, Barelvis mobilized and formed the *Tehreek Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah* (Movement for the Prophet, TLYR),<sup>28</sup> and in November 2017, organized a sit-in that lasted several weeks until Hamid reversed his action as a “clerical error.” Unlike the Barelvis, which launched a threatening street mobilization to shut down the government, the MML took a legalistic approach to defend the original requirement of taking an oath. Tabish Qayum, writing in the Urdu-language *Daily Khabrain*, focused on the subtle differences between an oath and a declaration or affirmation:

Before the amendment people reaffirmed their faith in the finality of the prophethood by saying “I take an oath truthfully” and after the change it was “I affirm truthfully,” meaning the difference is between oath and affirm. If both these words have the same meaning then why was there a need to bring in a change? Where the person has to sign on the form, there too the change has been made from “Statement of Oath” to “Solemn Affirmation.” What is the difference between the meaning of oath and affirmation?<sup>29</sup>

To answer his rhetorical question, he cited similar developments in European history to accommodate, for example, the concerns of Quakers who refused to take an oath because, according to them “everyone had a bit of God in them” and instead, offered an affirmation of their belief rather than an oath. He also cited the example of Scottish atheists who opposed taking an oath citing their disbelief in a god. Qayyum also asks why there is a need to facilitate the separation of church and state in Pakistan, where the population is 99 percent Muslims?<sup>30</sup>

Here and elsewhere, Qayyum fastidiously avoids mentioning the Ahmadis even though this is perhaps the most important community affected by this issue of an oath or an affirmation. Noting this studied silence in his writings, I asked him to articulate the MML’s views of Ahmadiyya. Qayyum responded, “There is a consensus on Ahmadis being a non-Muslim minority.” After all, the Constitution of Pakistan says as much. However, he continued, “They, like any other minority should have right to practice their faith without posing as Muslims or representatives of Islam, which would stand in violation of Pakistan’s constitution.”<sup>31</sup>

## The Army has a New Partner

IN ADDITION TO FOSTERING THE INTERNAL SECURITY CONCERNS OF THE DEEP state, there is little doubt that the army anticipates that the MML, over the longer term, will be a future partner in curtailing Pakistan’s beleaguered democracy. Presently, the army lacks a political partner, which will reliably do the army’s bidding. The army views the two mainstream political parties (the Pakistan Peoples’ Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif (PML-N)) as nemeses while Imran Khan, for his part, has repeatedly demonstrated that his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) can be a tool for disruptive politics, but not a party

able to form a government. Deprived of its traditional political quislings, the army needs to cultivate new political partners if it has any hope of continuing to keep Pakistan's democracy on a short leash.<sup>32</sup> While the MML will not likely fare well in the upcoming 2018 general elections (as no religious party ever polls more than 10 percent in a free and fair election),<sup>33</sup> it can make itself useful as a member of an army-groomed coalition. Notably, the MML's leadership has carefully avoided articulating any strategy publicly.<sup>34</sup> It is "too early to comment on this," Qayyum explained to me and added, "We welcome and appreciate all such alliances and parties that are working for a stable, progressive and peaceful Pakistan."<sup>35</sup>

## A Risky Gambit

THE DEEP STATE HAS GONE TO TREMENDOUS LENGTHS TO HELP ENSCONCE JUD firmly and formally within Pakistan's domestic politics and it has successfully fended off international pressure to clamp down on the organization. The MML's formal entry into electoral politics will likely further normalize the deep state's reliance upon JuD at home while protecting the group's Kashmir-based arm, the LeT, for operations in Kashmir and elsewhere.

This move on the part of the deep state is risky for several reasons. First, what if the MML—despite the deep state's most concerted effort—fails to become a viable party with national standing? Given that the MML is the *de facto* political wing of the JUD, will an MML political electoral catastrophe adversely affect the legitimacy of JuD's militant activities abroad or its efforts to fight *takfiri* foes at home? Second, will the MML simply join the crowd of religious parties or could the MML be a competitor to or collaborator with the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Islamist political party that has long been the political handmaiden of the army and the ISI at home and abroad? When confronted with the demands of winning votes, how will the MML's staunch opposition to *takfir* as practiced by the myriad Deobandi militant groups manifest itself in political competition with various factions of the Jamiat Ulema-e Islam (JUI), the Deobandi political party? The JUI has provided political cover to a broad swath of Deobandi militants such as the Afghan Taliban, factions of the Pakistani Taliban, the anti-India Jaish-e-Mohammad, and the sectarian Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.<sup>36</sup> Alternatively, what happens if the MML manages to establish a robust grassroots presence throughout Pakistan as transpired when General Zia-ul-Haq helped Nawaz Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim



League-N become a party with a national presence and political legitimacy? Will the MML and the JuD be able to maneuver itself into a position of greater financial and policy independence from the ISI and the army, which has patronized the organization for so long? Presumably the army anticipates that it will be able to enjoy many years of acquiescent partnership with the MML before it has to consider a serious divergence of interests.

## NOTES

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- <https://www.outlookindia.com/newsscroll/us-defence-secy-meets-pak-pm-to-mend-frayed-ties/1202293>. The odd timing of these events almost prompts the question of whether the Department of Defense cajoled the US Congress to remove the conditionality that Pakistan do more to combat the JuD/LeT with actual knowledge that the JuD was fielding the MML. No doubt Pakistani officials would have justified this move arguing that it was a “deradicalization” plan.
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<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/pakistan-trained-people-to-use-social-media-for-jud-let-propaganda/articleshow/49946412.cms>.

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22. "What is Milli Muslim League All About?" *Invite*, Issue No. 7 (October 2017), p. 18.
23. C. Christine Fair, "Pakistan Can't Afford China's "Friendship," *Foreign Policy*, July 3, 2017, accessed March 8, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/03/pakistan-cant-afford-chinas-friendship/>.
24. *Khawarij* literally means seceders, derived from the Arabic verb, *kharaja* (to secede or move out), while *Murji'i* literally means one who postpones or defers, derived from *irjah* (to postpone or defer). See Wagemakers, Joas, "Seceders" and "Postponers"? An Analysis of the "Khawarij" and "Murji'a"abels in Polemical Debates between Quietist and Jihadi-Salafis,' *Contextualising Jihadi Thought*, (ed.) Jeevan Deol and Zaheer Kazmi, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, pp 145-164; and Mandaville, Peter, *Global Political Islam*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2007.
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