Unity in Diversity: Analyzing Milli Yakjehti Council's Efforts in Building Interfaith Bridges

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Abstract
Exploring the MYC activities, this article discusses educational aspects of society along with regular conferences and dialogues, publications, and media campaigns. Theoretically, the potentials and difficulties MYC experiences are explored: organizational drawbacks, weak stakeholders' participation, and passive grassroots activities. According to the framework derived from social identity, conflict, and communication theories, this article assesses the MYC and its theoretical worth. Hence, the study's findings indicate that more can be done to improve MYC performance by countering existing criticisms of strategic planning, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and intensive monitoring and evaluation. Therefore, by applying a more structured and comprehensive process, MYC can effectively contribute to its primary goals of promoting interfaith tolerance and decreasing sectarian conflict in Pakistan.
Keywords: *Diversity, Harmony, Interfaith, Milli Yakjehti Council, Unity.*

Introduction

Religious tolerance, which entails the ability of distinct religious systems to live side by side and interact, is essential for unity in multicultural societies. It is a process of attending and listening to the other party with a view of understanding and well-being between religious parties. Interfaith harmony reduces the instances of conflict, prejudice, and social unrest in multicultural societies and maintains social order in countries where religious rights and diversity have been a problem and social integration remains mandatory for national cohesion. Interfaith programs and relations often include ways such as educational measures, speaking with religious leaders and congregations, or organizing joint projects in communities; these practices eliminate prejudice, resolve misconceptions, ease religious

tensions, and ensure mutually beneficial cooperation. They also contribute to the improvement of the general welfare of society by fighting for human rights, social justice, and the rights of the minority as well as non-prejudice on the people of other faiths.[1] The Milli Yakjehti Council (MYC) is one of the major interfaith organizations formed in Pakistan in 1995 and it comprises representatives from different religious and sectarian backgrounds. MYC was established in consonance with the increasing trend of sectarian violence and religious persecution; this mutual tolerance holds people from Islamic organizations comprising the Sunni and Shia sects alongside other religious associations. Some of the activities of the MYC are interfaith dialogues, educational programs, community initiatives, and many others to minimize sectarian rivalry. It has greatly contributed through the MYC to the creation and positive promotion of better relations between religious groups in Pakistan by being aware of interfaith dialogue among youths and improving trust and cooperation between religious groups. These initiatives have helped in the stabilization of the population's social relations and further cementing the nation's integrity through religious tolerance and minority representation.[2]

To capture and identify the MYC's strategies and activities such as educational initiatives, interfaith dialogue, and others in building interfaith harmony, this research assesses the Milli Yakjehti Council activities in Pakistan. The paper offers a theoretical analysis of Myc's outcomes based on the explanatory literature, reports, and research, which might identify its potential for decreasing sectarian conflict and raising tolerance and peace. Interpreting MYC's actions and outcomes of this research uses a theoretical approach to the matter. As a descriptive research design that employs frameworks on interfaith dialogue, and social cohesion, and includes peacebuilding, it synthesizes data from secondary sources like literature, reports, and studies. This method evaluates the impact of MYC's strategies and its role in enhancing interfaith tolerance.

Formation of Milli Yakjehti Council (MYC)

The Milli Yakjehti Council (MYC) of Pakistan was formed in 1995 to prevent sectarian violence and intolerance between Sunni and Shia sects in

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[1] Ali, S., & Rehman, T. (2018). Interfaith Harmony and Social Cohesion in Multicultural Societies. Social Science Review, 32(1), 45-63

[2] Siddiqui, A. (2017). Promoting Peace through Interfaith Initiatives: A Case Study of the MYC. Pakistan Journal of Social Issues, 41(2), 87-105.

Pakistan. Thus, there was more sectarian violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s due to perhaps political and global situations such as the Iranian Revolution and the Afghan Jihad which in a way injected more of the sectarianism dilemma.[3] Realizing the continued need for cohesion in the country's religious space, leaders of the various sects started a process of forming MYC to create an organizational platform where the religious factions could come together, discuss issues affecting them and how they could live together as one and avoid repeating the previous violence that has been witnessed.[4] The Milli Yakjehti Council was organized after getting cooperation from Sunni as well as Shia scholars such as Maulana Abdul Sattar Niazi, Allama Sajid Naqvi, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, and Qazi Hussain Ahmed. Sunni scholar Niazi stressed on reconciliation between Sunnis and Shias to sit together and discuss the issues. Naqvi who is a Shia cleric concentrated on defending the Shias and their representation within MYC. While Rehman from Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam linked political power to religious endeavors for handling sectarian matters, Ahmed, who was the chief of Jamaat-e-Islami stressed on the spirit of oneness in Islam in removal of sectarianism.[5] All in all, they sought to build long-lasting peace and stability based on understanding and cooperation and touched the lives of many people in Pakistan in terms of how Muslim and non-Muslim communities related to one another.

Goals and Objectives of MYC

Therefore, the Milli Yakjehti Council was initiated with the main purpose of enhancing tolerance between different faiths and cutting down on sectarian violence in Pakistan. It was to provide a forum through which leaders of these two differently viewing Islamic factions could sit down, erase misimpressions, and strive to be understanding of each other. MYC intended to mobilize the Muslims into coming together under one umbrella because it believed that despite different ways of worship and the following of different prophets, Muslims should not fight. As for the council's objectives, it aimed at reducing sectarian conflicts and enhancing the attitude of tolerance or acceptance of various religious groups. Thus, the

[3] Rizvi, S. A. (2018). Sectarianism in Pakistan: Causes and Remedies. Asian Journal of Social Science, 46(2-3), 204-222.
[4] Nasr, S. V. R. (2000). The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan: The Changing Role of Islamism and the Ulama in Society and Politics. Modern Asian Studies, 34(1), 139-180.
[5] Siddiqui, A. (2017). Promoting Peace through Interfaith Initiatives, 87-105.

goals of MYC have shifted in response to the dynamics of the 'socio-political realities' of Pakistan and other new challenges confronting the society. Originally, MYC was targeting short-term sectarian tensions, however, it became an umbrella for a range of projects that are intended to contribute to the peace-building agenda and the social reconstruction process. This transition can be observed in the expansion of MYC's role in educational initiatives together with other awareness-raising projects and initiatives of community campaigning for peace and tolerance. It is worth noting that in recent years MYC has tried to balance its policies about the new versions of religious radicalization. It is now directly involved in the fight against the radicalization process to promote moderate religion and actively combating extremism by developing youth programs and involvement in interfaith activities. Despite the objective and strategic changes the organization has gone through in its operational process, MYC continues to fulfill its role of maintaining and enhancing interfaith relations and social cohesion in Pakistan.[6]

Analysis of MYC's Educational Programs and Workshops

Milli Yakjehti Council has also been actively involved and has played a key role in developing and conducting educational programs and workshops on enhancing interfaith tolerance in the PAK Country. Some of these activities have included seminars, conferences, interfaith dialogues, and community forums that engage representatives of religious scholars, leaders, and members of the society to deliberate on such matters as sectarianism and hatred. One of the education activities carried out by MYC includes Interfaith dialogue sessions where participants from different religious affiliations are allowed to have an open dialogue with one another. These sessions are meant to involve the definition of general objectives and assumptions and are aimed at creating acceptance and understanding among the participants. MYC also actively engages educational institutions to education intending to preach interfaith harmony in the curriculum so that children could be in a position to learn different religious aspects from one another.[7] Moreover, MYC engages in the training of religious leaders and educators and provides them with the information and tactics that are important for creating tolerant attitudes in

[6] Ahmed, I. (2015). Religious Leadership and Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan. Journal of Peacebuilding & Development, 10(1), 61-74.
[7] Rizvi, S. A. (2018). Sectarianism in Pakistan: Causes and Remedies..., 204-222.

spiritual communities. These training programs bring out the need to be tolerant and respect other people's beliefs as well as reject radicalism. It also engages in the sensitization of the public through organizational activities such as propaganda to create awareness of the positive impact of inter-religious tolerance rather than sectarianism.

Analysis of the Theoretical Impact of These Programs

The social change potential of the Milli Yakjehti Council's educational programs and workshops can be assessed using the lenses of social integration, post-conflict reconciliation, and conflict transformation. MYC's strategies can be regarded as corresponding to the tenets of the contact hypothesis, which presupposes that prejudice and positive relations between groups can be ameliorated in the context of contact under proper conditions. The programs foster common social identity, a kind of unity in diversity which creates understanding thus encouraging people to trust and work together and therefore improving social cohesiveness. Further, through MYC's peace education, people acquire peaceful problem-solving skills in conflict resolution as well as possess a permanent healing attitude, which benefits social justice and minimizes sect animosity.[8] As a consequence, these programs are effective as testified by the capacity to alter attitudes and behaviors regarding interfaith understanding and the prevention of religious conflict in Pakistan.

Analysis of MYC's Efforts in Conferences and Dialogues

The Milli Yakjehti Council (MYC) has conducted several interfaith conferences and dialogues to facilitate mutual interaction and interconnection among the different religious groups of Pakistan. These events have been of significance in congregations of scholars, religious leaders, and members of different religious factions and sects to address issues touching on interfaith dialogue and conflict transformation. Of the conferences, one of the significant ones was the National Interfaith Harmony Conference held in Islamabad in 2016. This occasion involved Sunnites and Shias as well as representatives of Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs as powerful speakers crying out for tolerance between the religious groups. The interfaith conference focused on establishing an enhanced understanding of each other's faiths and provided practical solutions for

[8] Salomon, G., & Nevo, B. (2002). Peace Education: The Concepts, Principles, and Practices Around the World. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

improving interfaith relations on the local level.[9] Another major event was the Annual Interfaith Dialogue Symposium that has been held as a dialogue on interfaith relations. These symposia have generally featured opening or plenary addresses by well-known religious figures as well as academicians; multi-voiced and interactive discussions and /or workshops. In these dialogues, it is possible to touch upon such questions as theological similarities and differences, commonalities in the fight against sectarianism, and practical measures to eliminate it. The symposium has played a significant role in ensuring that various sects communicated directly with each other; this has provided a way not only for new ideas to be shared but for misunderstandings to be cleared as well. [10]

MYC has also initiated regional interfaith dialogue meetings in different regions of Pakistan including; Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar cities. These dialogues are targeted to solve sectarian problems which are topical for the particular regions and include the local leaders, and Islamic scholars in talks that are oriented on the problems of the concrete regions. MYC's localized positioning guarantees that the undertaking offered is relevant and effective at the community level. The respective academic analysis of MYC interfaith conferences and/or dialogues can be made within a conflict-resolving theoretical context as well as in the framework of the concept of peace-building and social integration.[11] These events decrease sectarian tensions because dialogue is established, and people become more tolerant of each other, which is closely connected to the contact hypothesis component stating that any contact between different groups will improve prejudice and their relations. MYC's efforts engage peoples in dialogue and negotiating as central to transforming conflict and establishing peace. They also lead to social inclusion since, according to social identity theory, they encourage the adoption of superordinate identities based on the individuals' imagined commonality across the presented subgroups.[12] Furthermore, MYC's actions can be associated with the principles of peace education which imply the use of empathy to avoid violent solutions to conflicts. All in all, MYC's conferences promote

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[9] Rizvi, S. A. (2018). Sectarianism in Pakistan: Causes and Remedies..., 204-222.

[10] Nasr, S. V. R. (2000). The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan..., 139-180.

[11] For details see: Fisher, R. J. (1997). Interactive Conflict Resolution. Syracuse University Press.

[12] For details see: Reardon, B. (1988). Comprehensive Peace Education: Educating for Global Responsibility. Teachers College Press.

interfaith relations and interfaith understanding to break barriers that lead to sectarianism, thus improving social integration.

Analysis of MYC's Efforts in Publications and Media Campaigns

MYC has achieved considerable progress in engaging the Pakistani people through publications, media shows, and films in contextualizing religion as a source of unity and harmony among the three major religions of the world. Some of the publications produced by MYC are research papers, articles, newsletters, and pamphlets; mostly concern relates to interfaith matters, sectarianism and religious harmony. These materials are equally intended to inform the public, advance scholarly works, and present measures to prevent religious conflict.[13] Besides the print media, MYC has tapped into the modern mechanized means of passing the message across through the following ways. It has prepared TV and Radio shows and shared status and posts on social networks to promote the culture of peaceful coexistence. Such media campaigns include programs with religious leaders, programs and discussions on interfaith issues, and programs that present awareness of the need to respect other people's faith. The media outreach plan by MYC is extensive covering different demographic groups, and using different means to pass a given message.[14] In addition to these, MYC conducts press conferences, and the formulation of press statements, and releases these for the public to be informed on what the organization is doing and its campaigns. Such endeavors help MYC to disseminate its message to various groups of people who may not have direct contact with the associations' publications or events. It is for this reason that MYC remains active in the media so that it can boost its credentials as the premier organization that endorses tolerance between religious groups in Pakistan.

Analysis of Their Theoretical Effectiveness in Building Interfaith Bridges

The amount and content of the MYC's publications and media campaigns are theoretically promising in their potential for achieving structured interfaith bridge-building, based on frameworks derived from theory in communication studies, social influence, and peace. According to the

[13] Rizvi, S. A. (2018). Sectarianism in Pakistan..., 204-222.
[14] Siddiqui, A. (2017). Promoting Peace through Interfaith Initiatives..., 87-105.

communication theory, changing people's attitudes and behaviors requires clear and accurate messages. The messages that Myc communicates through the printed and electronic media are therefore theme-based, concise, coherent, and convincing to bring out an understanding between those of different religions. Due to this, MYC makes sure that it uses print and electronic media in the dissemination of information, thus increasing the odds of changing people's attitudes. According to the social influence theory, media has the potential to bring change in the perceptions of the audience. The media campaigns devised by MYC are intended to change people's perceptions about interfaith relations and demonstrate the advantages of tolerance. In this way, via constant exposure to these kinds of messages, people are getting prepared to cultivate positive attitudes toward people from other religious groups that minimizes prejudice and promotes inter-group relations. [15]

From the peacebuilding point of view, it can be concluded that MYC's printing of materials and media work towards the development of a culture of healthy communication and collaboration. As a theory, peace education deals with the process of instilling appreciation for the principles underlying peace as well as conflict solving. MYC's education aids on how people can participate in positive interfaith relationships is vital, and makes people knowledgeable to learn how they can relate to other faiths positively. The media campaign under discussion, thus, contributes to the processes of depathologization and familiarization with interfaith cooperation. Thus, according to the theoretical analysis of the publications and media campaigns, the effectiveness of MYC in bridging interfaith gaps has been developed by employing various kinds of communication methodology, social persuasion, and peace education. Such actions help to alter the psychological environment to modify the people's mindset, minimize inter-group conflict, and cement the culture of a peaceful and tolerant society in Pakistan.[16]

Discussion on the Challenges Faced by MYC

In its models of operation, the Milli Yakjehti Council (MYC) of Pakistan comes across the following theoretical crises in its endeavor to pursue interfaith unity in the country. To elaborate, some of these challenges can

[15] For details see: McQuail, D. (2010). McQuail's Mass Communication Theory. Sage Publications.

[16] See: Cialdini, R. B. (2009). Influence: Science and Practice. Pearson Education.

be discussed with the help of such theories as social identity theory, conflict theory, and some kinds of communication theories.[17] According to Social Identity Theory, people obtain quite a large proportion of their self-concept from membership in social groups. This is particularly so in a multicultural and multi-religious context such as Pakistan; positively identifying with one's religion is likely to bring prejudice towards other groups. Thus, the addressed phenomenon harms MYC activities; attempting to extend interfaith tolerance might be met with opposition from certain individuals who feel threatened by the resolve to unite. There are these essential and very pervasive selves that MYC has to deal with, and the challenge that is posed includes trying to build a common single-group identity that will subsume all religious groups, while at the same time not erase their special selves. According to Conflict Theory, conflict happens on account of differences in power that various societies in today's world have.[18] Muslims' sectarian differences are a key cause of sectarian conflict in Pakistan, where socio-economic inequalities also play politics. While the MYC government is robust in instituting measures to foster interfaith co-existence, these structural disadvantages can still breed hatred and suspicion among religious groups. Dealing with these sources calls for actions beyond what can be achieved through communication and sensitization through MYC programs; it will demand policy reforms in society and the economy.

In Communication Theory, the focus is placed on explaining how messages can be used to facilitate change in society.[19] The main social problem that MYC experiences is the need to disseminate the messages of peace and tolerance far and wide and to make sure that those who receive the messages find them credible and timely. In a context where the media proliferates shocking content and encourages the division of people into us and them, MYC's messages can be drowned or distorted. For the organization to capture the audience and pursue its goals it has to apply various effective methods of communication initiating socio-political changes among the broader population. That is why numerous theoretical issues might be a great threat to MYC, such as social identity, inequalities,

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[17] Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), Psychology of Intergroup Relations (pp. 7-24). Nelson-Hall.

[18] Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1848). The Communist Manifesto. International Publishers

[19] For details see: McQuail, D. (2010). McQuail's Mass Communication Theory. Sage Publications.

and obstacles to communication. These issues should be solved through an integrated approach which includes the cultivation of the relevant strategies for identity building, social and economic changes, as well as the proper application of communication. Realizing these theoretical frameworks, it would be helpful for MYC to plan how exactly it will work towards ending religious intolerance in Pakistan.

Criticisms and Areas of Improvement

The Milli Yakjehti Council (MYC) has been doing a good job of making and maintaining interfaith harmony in Pakistan but like all other organizations and institutions, it has its plus points as well some big negative remarks, which are discussed below that can be changed and improved to make it the best. All these criticisms can be discussed in terms of the organizational theory, the stakeholder theory, and the social movement theory. The Organizational Theory is mainly centered on the structure of an organization and it's wholesome efficiency.[20] Using Myers and Cable's (2003) framework, critics have noted that MYC has managerial problems and lacks a proper planning system. Much of the activities carried out by the council are seen to be periodic and in response to a particular event or occurrence as opposed to being prolonged and proactive. This is an area that inflicts MYC's planning and execution with a major challenge and it requires the organization to shift to a more strategic planning system where there is more stringent coordination of these activities with consistent reference to organizational goals. Stakeholder Theory also focuses on the recognition of stakeholders' interests where necessary.[21] MYC has also been accused of poor handling of diverse stakeholders especially the marginalized groups of religious beliefs, and the youths. It is through such a council that most of its prepared activities engage in high-profile discussions with religious leaders and scholars but fail to pay much attention to the common people. To build on the success, MYC should diversify the ways through which it engages stakeholders, the engagement should involve women, the youth, and other groups who are usually ignored.

The Social Movement Theory which we are going to use as a theoretical framework for this research posits that every social movement needs a

[20] See: Mintzberg, H. (1979). The Structuring of Organizations. Prentice Hall.
[21] See: Freeman, R. E. (1984). Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach. Pitman.

strong base and mobilization.[22] Some critics quickly point out that MYC has not done enough in terms of involving the masses and the public in its campaigns and programs. These strategies adopted by the council are top-down oriented and, therefore, the council cannot easily incarnate real and effective changes at the community level. Expanding the importance of grassroots participation using local chapters and local events can improve the effectiveness of MYC as well as its endurance. Moreover, MYC receives criticism mainly concerning the effective monitoring and evaluation of programs that it implements. Suffice to recognize that feedback mechanisms are important tools, which help to determine the outcomes and success as well as the potential problems of interfaith work. It is important to note here that MYC should carry out an efficient monitoring and evaluation program as a way of measuring the impacts of the activities, getting views of participants, and adjusting correspondingly.[23] Despite these accomplishments, some criticisms affect the efficiency of the organization, relations with stakeholders, capacity to mobilize the grassroots, and evaluation of programs among other areas where MYC has been active in promoting interfaith harmony. Therefore, by applying a logical and comprehensive process, including key stakeholders, MYC will be able to bolster its operations' efficiency and effectiveness since its endeavors shall be well-planned, well-coordinated, and sustainable.

Conclusion

The Milli Yakjehti Council (MYC) being one of the leading institutions to work to promote interfaith tolerance in Pakistan has brought out numerous activities in the forms of educational programs, conferences, dialogues, publications, and media campaigns. This theoretical review articulates the effectiveness and the difficulties of the MYC's modulation process in achieving its goals. To a very large extent, MYC has played a major role in trying to encourage tolerance for religious rights in the context of Malaysia In this regard, one may note several areas that have been criticized to improve the benefits of the organisation further. These are; enhancing the internal efficiency of the organization, increasing the community outlook,

[22] See: Tarrow, S. (1998). Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics. Cambridge University Press.

[23] See: Patton, M. Q. (2002). Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods. Sage Publications

and increasing emancipation at the base level. Also, to ensure that its Health promotion initiatives are effective, proper monitoring and evaluation mechanisms need to be put in place so that if need be some evaluation can be made. MYC can adapt to the Pakistani religious demography more sensitively and effectively and cement its position as an interfaith organization. It is desirable to focus future endeavors on forming meaningful and long-lasting initiatives that target the core of the sectarian strife and contribute towards establishing the incorporated national identity, which would include respect for religious differences.