The Two Faces of Civil Society: Ahmadi and Islamists in Pakistan

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This project explores how democracies turn illiberal through the hijack of civil society by radicalism. Civil society, typically considered a promoter of liberal and democratic values, turns dark, hateful and violent depending on the social actors that gain salience within it. Focusing on Pakistan—a Muslim democracy—I trace the development of the Pakistani civil society from 1931, when it is part of the colonized public space, to 1974, when Pakistan obtains its first democratically elected government. This development is studied through the relationship of the Muslim public with its Ahmadi population—a Muslim sect considered heretical in the constitution and among the Sunni majority of Pakistan.

The Pakistani constitution declared Ahmadi non-Muslim in 1974 for rejecting the finality of Prophet Muhammad. This outcome, however, was neither inevitable nor automatic. Opposition against Ahmadi began shortly after their inception in 1889 and took 90 years to reach legal and systematic discrimination. I study how the anti-Ahmadi movement, led by the Ahrar, ulama and the Jamaat-e-Islami, perfected the use of civil space and thus succeeded in its efforts to exclude Ahmadi from the fold of Islam and Pakistani citizenship. Between 1949-1953, the anti-Ahmadi movement used the Urdu press and public meetings to penetrate hatred of Ahmadi in the Pakistani society. Until 1974, the movement gained important political alliances; and in 1974, could influence the state. The state, embedded within society and its values could not overlook country-wide protests demanding the exclusion of Ahmadi and obliged with the popular national sentiment.

Through newspapers, pamphlets, a court inquiry report, letters and transcripts of speeches, in addition to secondary sources, my project highlights how state-led, legal persecution stemmed from a bottom-up process from within society and why majoritarian interests bifurcated civil space itself. This project also sheds light on the limits of tolerance and inclusion for heretics and minorities in democracies founded on a popular ideology rooted in religion.