

Innovative Pakistani mosque takes on sectarianism

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ISLAMABAD—In a country where sectarian violence is spiking, Zahid Iqbal is playing an innovative role in trying to bring peace to Pakistan's competing Islamic sects by simply not taking sides.

His mosque in the capital Islamabad markets itself as "sect free" and is open to everyone. Despite pressure, Iqbal has refused to follow convention and define the mosque as Sunni, Shiite or any of the other subgroups that divide Islam, sometimes violently.

"We don't belong with any sect of Islam," said Iqbal, a real estate businessman in his 30s who also serves as the mosque's president. "We only belong to Islam."

Much of the sectarian violence that Pakistan has experienced in recent years has been attacks by radical Sunni militants on minority Shiites they consider heretics. There were 77 such attacks between January 2012 and June 2013 that killed 635 Shiites and wounded 834 others, according to a recent report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The schism between the Sunni and Shiite Muslims traces back to the early days of Islam and arguments over successors to Prophet Muhammad.

But over time, the divide between the Sunni, which represent about 85 percent of the world's Muslims, and Shiite has taken an increasingly bloody turn across Pakistan and the greater Middle East.

There has also been occasional conflict between different strains of Sunni Islam in Pakistan, such as Wahabbi, Barelvi and Deobandi.

Iqbal said he thought the conflict between Islamic sects was based on ignorance and invited everyone to come to his mosque, including Christians and Jews, to learn "the reality of Islam." A large sign on the side of his mosque says it is "open to all Muslims irrespective of their sect."

The businessman collected nearly \$300,000 to build his mosque, which first opened in 2010 but is still a work in progress. There are piles of red bricks and cinderblocks in the courtyard, and wooden polls hold up a shaky looking brick archway that marks the mosque's entrance.

Iqbal said he had difficulty registering the mosque with the government because authorities told him it must be affiliated with a specific Islamic sect. Amir Ali Ahmed, who heads the department that registers mosques in Islamabad, said there was no such requirement.

However, he suggested a low-level employee could have pushed the issue since it's relatively unusual for a mosque not to identify itself with a sect.

"We would encourage someone to say they aren't attached to any sect," Ahmed said.

Iqbal said he also encountered difficulty when a rival imam and his students seized the property before the mosque was built, a common problem in a country where land is often taken by force. He managed to resolve the conflict by calling the housing society that donated him the property.

The businessman has faced persistent pressure from rival religious leaders to link the mosque to their sect, but always has refused, he said.

"I'm not afraid of them," Iqbal said. "I believe my life is in God's hands, not in the hands of others."

There are at least three other mosques in Islamabad that aren't affiliated with a specific sect, Iqbal said. But he touted his facility in Islamabad's Sector E-11 as the only full-fledged Islamic center that also included a separate section for women and a library filled with books about various religions. Some of the more surprising titles included "Angels, Jinns and Satans" and "Sanctity of Circumcision in Bible."

More than 200 men and young boys filed into the mosque on Friday for prayers, lining up on rugs under whirling ceiling fans that sought to beat back the oppressive heat and humidity.

The imam, Mohammed Yasin Rashid, delivered his weekly sermon over a microphone headset that looked like something a call center employee would use. Rashid spoke of the importance of religious harmony.

"The best people are those who promote harmony and treat people well despite their affiliation," Rashid said.

But he did take a dig at Christians and Jews, saying they became cursed when they started worshipping prophets instead of a single God.

Most of the worshippers who attended the service said they come to the mosque because it is close to their home, not because of its sect-free stance. But they tended to support the message, saying Pakistan needed less conflict between the different sects.

"There are a few fundamentalists who brainwash the people," said Aftab Malik, a surgeon who was building a home nearby. "We do not believe in sects. Sunnis and Shiites are all one because they both believe in one God."

Associated Press writer Asif Shahzad contributed to this report.

<http://www.times-standard.com/nationandworldnews/ci_23693067/innovative-pakistani-mosque-takes-sectarianism>