

# Pakistani militants have created their own political party. Can it actually win votes?

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Pakistan's next election may not be until July, but one newly formed political party was just [designated](#) a terrorist organization by the U.S. Department of State. The Milli Muslim League (MML) formed in August 2017 as the latest incarnation of an organization once [described](#) as “the most lethal terrorist group operating from South Asia.”

That organization, Lashkar-e-Taiba, (*Army of the Righteous*, also known as LeT) is perhaps best known for its involvement in the [deadly 2008 Mumbai attacks](#), which killed 166 people in a multiday battle. Hafiz Saeed founded the militant group in 1990, and it initially operated primarily in Indian-administered Kashmir. It is [widely believed](#) to have strong linkages to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence spy agency, which shares similar aims in Kashmir and uses the LeT in its [proxy war](#) with India.

While the MML claims to be an independent political party, it is an open secret — and U.S. policy position — that it is an “[affiliate](#)” of the LeT. Images of Saeed, the LeT's founder, are prominently [displayed](#) on MML campaign posters.

The United States put a [bounty of \\$10 million](#) on Saeed in 2012 for his role in the Mumbai attacks. Despite this, he has largely been [living openly](#) in Pakistan. He operates the LeT's charity wing, the Jamat-ud-Dawa (JuD), which enjoys a [considerable level of popularity](#) within the country for its charitable and philanthropic work — including [humanitarian relief](#). The LeT, MML, and JuD can be thought of as interlinked entities, each serving distinct functions toward an overarching goal.

## What does the creation of the MML mean for the LeT?

In the past, Saeed [said](#) that democracy and electoral politics were not compatible with Islam.

The transformation of armed groups into political parties — or the creation of political fronts for banned groups — is far from rare. The inclusion-moderation hypothesis argues that radical parties moderate their behavior, and perhaps even ideology, [once they join electoral politics](#). Seeking votes entices these groups to give up on radical tactics and accept the rules of the game. The logic of electoral competition compels them to broaden their [appeal to larger segments of voters, thus diluting their ideological commitments](#).

Does the creation of the MML signal a possible moderation of the LeT's tactics and ideology? The new party's president, Saifullah Khalid, hinted at a willingness to play by the rules of the game and abide by Pakistan's constitution. He even surprised many by acknowledging the importance of women in politics when he [said](#), "We cannot ignore the responsibilities of women in society as they constitute around 50 percent of the population."

### **How Pakistan's political system discourages moderation**

Such signs do not indicate moderation on other fronts. Groups may simultaneously hold seemingly moderate views on some issues while maintaining quite radical stances on others. But even if the MML leadership opens up to further moderation, there are three structural forces keeping the party from putting down arms and abandoning its anti-India stance.

First, violence is just one of "[a bundle of irregularities](#)" routinely employed around election time in Pakistan. Political parties of all stripes, including secular parties, have used violence directly or allied with violent actors when it has suited them electorally. This is because violence can, [under certain conditions](#), increase a party's vote share.

Similarly, while Pakistani citizens do not necessarily support violence against India, overall attitudes toward India [are hostile](#). A survey experiment conducted by Christopher Clary and Niloufer Siddiqui [found that](#), while Pakistani voters are generally more concerned with domestic political issues, they punish politicians for advocating friendly relations with India. More recent research by Clary, Siddiqui and Sameer Lalwani also [shows](#) that Pakistani respondents are more likely to support leaders who retaliate against India following a confrontation. Pakistan's politicians have incentives to appear hawkish in front of voters, and as a consequence are in a struggle to [outbid](#) one another in the policies they propose and the rhetoric they employ surrounding India. The MML is unlikely to break this cycle.

Finally, it is far from clear whether the Pakistani army is truly interested in the LeT abandoning violence. The alignment between the LeT's objectives in Kashmir and those of the army are precisely why the latter "[never forced them \[LeT\] to choose between terrorism and politics.](#)" Moderation in the MML's stance on Kashmir would unlikely be acceptable to Pakistan's most powerful political player.

### **The MML's electoral prospects**

If it is not [stopped](#) from running in the upcoming elections, how would the MML fare? While it is unlikely that the MML will achieve much independent electoral success given the [electoral record](#) of Islamist parties in the country, it may draw votes away from the ruling Pakistan Muslim-League Nawaz — which may explain why it has [reportedly](#) opposed the MML's creation. Last year, the MML took part in a special election and [surprised many](#) by finishing fourth. Together with [another newly formed Islamist party](#), it received 11 percent of the total vote cast, a number sufficient to swing an election in a more closely contested district.

The possible inclusion of the MML in the electoral politics of Pakistan offers an opportunity to take a new look at the puzzle of moderation. Ultimately, however, the structure of Pakistani politics is unlikely to encourage this influential and deadly terrorist group to refashion itself into a moderate political party.

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