

# Pakistan History and Blasphemy Wars

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**Last month, Pakistan witnessed some of the most violent clashes between protestors and security forces in the country's recent history, which left 6 police officers and 12 protestors dead. The protests were led by Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a right-wing religious group that came to prominence defending the 'honour' of the Prophet Muhammad after the publication of blasphemous cartoons in France last year. The unrest not only expressed the profound contradictions embedded in the Pakistani state; it also demonstrated the tragic consequences of a weakened internationalist left.**

Pakistan's blasphemy laws can be traced back to the competing religious nationalisms of Colonial India. The eruption of a mass anti-colonial movement in the region after the First World War coincided with an increase in political violence among Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities. Known in colonial lexicon as 'communal tensions', these clashes tore apart the social fabric of India, leading eventually to the partition of the subcontinent along religious lines in 1947.

In the 1920s, blasphemy became a flashpoint for the growing antagonism between Hindus and Muslims, as Hindu extremist organizations published vitriolic books targeting the prophet Muhammad and the Muslim community. The backlash to these texts – including the murder of a Hindu publisher in 1929 by a young Muslim carpenter, Ilm Din – provided the template for both popular Muslim sentiment on this question and the state's response to it. Eager to maintain order, the colonial government drew up laws that made intentional insult and injury to other people's religious beliefs punishable. These were ostensibly meant to provide a legal avenue for resolving disputes between different religious communities, and included protections for 'reasonable criticism' of religion. Yet the government aggravated tensions by imposing the death sentence against Ilm Din, turning him into a martyr for many Muslims, who attended his funeral in their thousands.

Following the creation of Pakistan, Islam once again became a political issue, when in 1953 Islamist parties led deadly protests calling for the minority Ahmadiyya community to be officially declared non-Muslim for denying the finality of the Prophet. The government initially refused to bow down to this demand, yet an even larger and more violent movement in 1974 caused Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's administration to capitulate. The legal codification of religion that began in British India was used to exclude an already marginalized community. Three years later, Bhutto's government was overthrown by General Zia-ul-Haq in a military coup. Zia was backed by the United States in its 'Jihad' against the Communist government in Afghanistan. As the military regime clamped down upon leftists and pro-democracy organizations, it revitalized political Islam to shore up support. One of the most glaring examples of Zia's opportunistic use of religion was the strengthening of blasphemy laws in 1986. The amendments to the law introduced by the dictatorship not only included the death penalty for the crime of blasphemy; they also stated that even if an off-hand remark was interpreted as being blasphemous, it could be punishable by death.

The passing of this law fuelled more accusations of blasphemy, which rose from less than 10 cases between 1947 and 1986 to more than 1,500 cases over the following thirty years. Its ambiguous language allowed people to weaponize such charges in a plethora of private conflicts, including

many cases of property disputes. One of the most shocking abuses of the law occurred at a university campus in the city of Mardan in April 2017. Mashal Khan, a journalism student, was organizing against the corrupt practices of the university administration. In response, the university authorities launched a smear campaign against Mashal, accusing him of blasphemy and placing him under official investigation – just one month after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif called for a decisive crackdown on blasphemous social media posts. As a result, a mob of angry students dragged him out of his room and lynched him while dozens of policemen stood by. A state inquiry later proved that the blasphemy allegations were entirely false. This gruesome incident highlighted the ease with which false accusations could be wielded to eliminate potential opponents.

In 2011, the Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, was gunned down by his own bodyguard for criticizing the blasphemy laws. Mumtaz Qadri, the policeman who killed Taseer in broad daylight, was arrested and hanged in 2016. But he was immediately hailed as a hero by the religious right, who invoked the memory of IIm Din against the sovereign power of the state. Qadri's actions gave a renewed impetus to the Islamist movement across the country, which was further strengthened with the emergence of Khadim Hussain Rizvi, a wheelchair-bound cleric whose tirades against the West and their subordinates in Pakistan distinguished him from an uninspiring political class. Rizvi formed the TLP in 2015. In a country devastated by foreign interventions, drone strikes and a crumbling economy, his message had immediate cut-through.

The cleric's moment of triumph arrived in 2017, when it was rumoured that the government planned to remove fidelity to Prophethood from the oath of allegiance undertaken by legislators. This came at a moment of growing tensions between the civilian government led by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the country's military, which had long been conspiring to depose the party and install cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan as Prime Minister. (These machinations were nothing new: the Pakistani military has a long history of destabilizing elected governments through proxies in order to maintain its grip on key political, economic and security decisions.)

Rizvi announced a sit-in in Islamabad over the government's decision, blocking the main highways for days. Imran Khan's Pakistan Justice Movement yielded to the pressure and announced its support for the protests. As clashes intensified between police and the protestors, the military leadership stepped in, calling for a 'truce' between the two sides. The government was thereby forced into a humiliating capitulation. Over the following days, viral videos emerged of senior military officials handing Rs. 1000 (approx. \$7) cheques to each protestor, revealing the covert support for the movement within sections of the security state.

Since the government's climb-down in 2017, an emboldened TLP has made further inroads into the country's political system. In the 2018 elections, the military managed to manufacture a majority for Imran Khan, who displaced the two traditional parties to become the new PM. What received less attention, however, was how the TLP garnered the fourth largest vote share. While Rizvi died of Covid-19 in November 2020, the organization continues to grow in popularity under the leadership of his 26 year-old son, Saad.

The recent clashes can only be understood within this larger history of state-led discrimination. They were triggered by the beheading of the French schoolteacher, Samuel Patty, following accusations of blasphemy. The incident, along with the consequent rise in Islamophobia in France, became the focal point for demands by TLP to expel the French ambassador. In November 2020, as TLP protestors once again blocked major highways, Imran Khan signed an agreement with TLP, accepting their central demand and promising to discuss the matter in parliament.

This was a delaying tactic intended to diffuse a potentially explosive situation, but the decision came back to haunt the government when Saad Rizvi announced a 'Long March' in April 2021 to enforce

the terms of their agreement. While Khan had previously used the TLP as a tool for blackmailing political opponents, the party's hardline nationalism was now threatening the interest of the country's ruling elite, which is dependent on foreign loans and Western military equipment. As such, the PM gave a televised address explaining that, despite his earlier promises, he would not be expelling the French ambassador. The security forces subsequently arrested Saad Rizvi, prompting street battles between protestors and the police which culminated in over a dozen deaths. In the wake of this chaos, the government decided to ban TLP, designating it a 'terrorist' organization.

Yet after almost a week of intense clashes, Khan, whose abrupt policy reversals have earned him the title of 'U-Turn Khan', announced another round of negotiations with the TLP. Acknowledging the prevalence of its ideology in parts of the state apparatus, the government decided to release arrested TLP activists and the party was allowed to petition for a review of its ban. It also agreed, for the second time, to bring the resolution to expel the French ambassador to parliament, hoping that lawmakers would reject it.

When the resolution was tabled, the scenes in parliament were like a dark comedy, with nearly all legislators going out of their way to avoid discussing the topic. The supposedly liberal PPP boycotted the session, arguing that the government should have consulted their party earlier, while PML-N, which was the target of TLP's protests in 2017, condemned the government's crackdown on the protestors while stopping short of endorsing the expulsion of the ambassador. Even government legislators themselves claimed that they supported the TLP's demands 'but not its methods'. Their paralysis highlighted the inability of the country's traditional political class to challenge an ideologically ascendant far-right.

While this power bloc threatens to go the way of India's Congress, the public finances are in freefall. The European Parliament recently passed a resolution condemning Pakistan's blasphemy laws and religious persecution, warning that it could bring the country to its knees by removing its trading privileges. Meanwhile the IMF continues to tighten its stranglehold on the economy. Pakistan signed a punishing \$6 billion agreement with the financial institution in 2019 which demanded unprecedented cuts to higher education, privatization of health services and freezing salaries of government employees. For the first time in 70 years, the country has a negative growth rate, while unemployment and inflation continue to skyrocket. The IMF has also directed the country's policymakers to make its central bank 'independent' so as to remove it from democratic pressures.

At the same time, Pakistan is witnessing a mushrooming of popular dissent against the ravaging effects of global capitalism, led by revitalized movements of workers, students, women and ethnic minorities. In November 2019, students in more than 50 cities coordinated mass protests via the Progressive Students Collective, demanding an increase in spending for higher education, restoring student unions (banned by the military dictatorship in 1984) and the establishment of a public holiday in memory of Mashal Khan.

Another organization that has inspired the country's youth is the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), whose young leaders come from the minority Pashtun group. Pashtuns have faced the brunt of the War on Terror in the shape of religious extremism, military operations, drone strikes and enforced disappearances. Now they are fighting back, calling for an end to the militarization of the region and formation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to hold the Pakistani deep state accountable for its actions. Unsurprisingly, leading members of both the Progressive Students Collective and the PTM are facing sedition charges through a colonial law that can lead to a life sentence for 'conspiring against the state'.

Pakistan is also seeing a resurgence of labour militancy, as workers' living conditions continue to deteriorate. Last October, hundreds of government employees staged an 'IMF Out' protest in

Islamabad to reject the IMF-imposed austerity measures. A month later, farmers from across the province of Punjab organized the largest ever mobilization against the exploitative practices of multinational fertilizer and seed companies. The Khan government responded by firing tear-gas shells at the protestors, one of whom was killed. The event demonstrated the widespread discontent simmering beneath the surface of Pakistani society, as well as the government's willingness to appease its global creditors by using brute force.

Serious talks are now underway among militants of these movements to form a new political force that could confront the current deadlock and beat back the TLP. The affective power of religion in Pakistan shows that, far from producing ideological homogeneity, capitalist modernity reproduces and accentuates pre-modern symbolisms, which find their clearest expression in populist movements. The decadence of Pakistan's political culture and the subservience of the state to global powers have created a pervasive paranoia about the threat posed to its native religion and 'national security'. In the absence of a popular anti-imperialist vocabulary, legitimate criticisms of the West lapse into essentialist binaries which serve the TLP. Public rage is directed towards phantoms, and emancipatory alternatives are foreclosed. Today, many forget that the Muslim world – from Indonesia to Pakistan, Lebanon to Afghanistan – was once home to mass left-wing movements that were systematically crushed by right-wing forces under the tutelage of the 'enlightened' West. Now these reactionary Islamist ideologies, supported by the US and its client states, have become Frankenstein's monsters. Yet, alongside them, a progressive coalition is beginning to re-emerge.

**Ammar Ali Jan**

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- "Blasphemy Wars". New Left Review, sidecar. 11 May 2021:  
<https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/blasphemy-wars?pc=1341>