

Statement

Pakistan: Appeasement policy towards religious intolerance leads to murder of a governor

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A Statement by the Asian Human Rights Commission

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The nation has suffered a great loss due to this tragic murder. A voice of sanity has been silenced. This has happened at a time when the kind of political leadership provided by Salman Taseer is most needed. He stood for basic values which are essential for the stability of Pakistan. His shocking death should be an awakening for all right-thinking people of Pakistan about the perils that the country is facing. Creating chaos is not difficult under the tense conditions under which Pakistan has functioned for a considerable time now. The benefits of such chaos will only go to a few. However, the consequences of this death can seriously harm the population which may begin to react with fear of such murders. It is time for all concerned persons and the government to react soberly but strongly on this occasion in order to ensure that the benefits of this situation will go to those are bent on creating chaos.

The incident is a clear demonstration of the religious hatred and fanatical mindset that has seeped into the society. The sin of Governor Salman Taseer was that he was openly criticising the misuse of the blasphemy laws not only by the fundamentalists but also by the courts and politicians. He was opposed to section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code which was promulgated by the former military dictator, General Zia-ul- Haq which dictates the death penalty to alleged blasphemers.

It is very ironic that the fanatic Muslim leaders were openly declaring that Governor Salman Taseer is Wajibul Qatl (must be killed). They even publically announced reward money for the killings of any person who opposes the blasphemy laws. However, the government has made no move to arrest the fundamentalists. The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) on December 8, 2010 issued an Urgent Appeal demanding that the government prosecute Muslim leaders who issued decrees to kill Aasia Bibi. The AHRC also mentioned that Governor Salman Taseer has been declared infidel so the government should provide protection.

The policy of appeasement for the Muslim fundamentalists is simply political expediency. In particular, the governments of Pakhtoon Kha, Punjab provinces and the federal government have ignored the severity of the religious madness which has made the society intolerant. The media and its anchor persons are also responsible for the killing of the governor as they were enjoying the controversy over the blasphemy laws and were inviting fanatic Muslim leaders to take part in their discussions. It was during these media discussions that they openly urged the masses to act against Governor Taseer and Ms. Sherry Rehman, the former federal minister who introduced a private bill in the national assembly against section 295-c of blasphemy laws, as they were both infidel and

Wajibul Qatl.

It is also found that Punjab provincial government is notorious in providing shelter to the leaders of banned religious terrorist organizations and in many cases particularly during the election campaigns, the provincial law minister was taking leaders of banned religious parties in the processions so as to garner the votes of the fundamentalists. The Punjab government was holding the conferences of Tahafuz-e-Namoos-e- Risalat where the religious leaders were openly threatening death to religious minorities and liberals for blasphemy, particularly against the Ahmedis.

The governor's assassin, Police Constable Mumtaz Quadri of the Elite Force fired a burst from his machine pistol of which 26 rounds struck Taseer. According to a pre-planned arrangement no security policemen attempted to stop him. He first fired one shot and this was followed by a total of 40 rounds. Three days before the shooting Quadri told his colleagues that he was planning to kill the governor after which he would surrender so as not to be killed himself. The Elite Force was created by the chief minister of Punjab in 1997 and since then it has become parallel to the police force. All appointments are made by the ruling party of Punjab on political basis. Quadri claimed that he killed the governor because he was opposed to the blasphemy laws.

Controversies abounded between the ruling party and the governor's house. The chief minister never liked his presence because the governor was very vocal against the lukewarm attitude of the ruling party towards the militant religious groups. The provincial government did not obey the orders of the governor and, in fact, they were not even on speaking terms.

The reports in the media suggest that the incident was not carried out by a single person but was rather the result of a conspiracy. It must be noted that the conspiracy was hatched through the Elite Force which is run by the provincial law minister who was very much against the governor and supportive of militant Muslim organisations. The Punjab government was responsible for the provision of the security to all VIPs in the province. It is a strange that a person with such extremist inclinations was deployed in the governor's security detail which raises eye brows on the murder.

The murder of the Governor Taseer shows that the country is being controlled by the military and the Mullahs and is rapidly turning into a fascist state. The use of loud speakers from the mosques, which is actually already against the law, must be halted firmly so that religious and sectarian hatred cannot be spread throughout society. The government must come out from behind the policy of appeasement of the fundamentalists and put a stop to the cancer that is destroying the country.

P.S.

* About AHRC: The Asian Human Rights Commission is a regional non-governmental organisation that monitors human rights in Asia, documents violations and advocates for justice and institutional reform to ensure the protection and promotion of these rights. The Hong Kong-based group was founded in 1984.