

# Salman Taseer Remembered

Sunday 16 January 2011, by [ALI Tariq](#) (Date first published: 14 January 2011).

Mumtaz Hussain Qadri smiled as he surrendered to his colleagues after shooting Salman Taseer, the governor of the Punjab, dead. Many in Pakistan seemed to support his actions; others wondered how he'd managed to get a job as a state bodyguard in the carefully screened Elite Force. Geo TV, the country's most popular channel, reported, and the report has since been confirmed, that 'Qadri had been kicked out of Special Branch after being declared a security risk,' that he 'had requested that he not be fired on but arrested alive if he managed to kill Taseer' and that 'many in Elite Force knew of his plans to kill Salman Taseer.'

Qadri is on his way to becoming a national hero. On his first appearance in court, he was showered with flowers by admiring Islamabad lawyers who have offered to defend him free of charge. On his way back to prison, the police allowed him to address his supporters and wave to the TV cameras. The funeral of his victim was sparsely attended: a couple of thousand mourners at most. A frightened President Zardari and numerous other politicians didn't show up. A group of mullahs had declared that anyone attending the funeral would be regarded as guilty of blasphemy. No mullah (that includes those on the state payroll) was prepared to lead the funeral prayers. The federal minister for the interior, Rehman Malik, a creature of Zardari's, has declared that anyone trying to tamper with or amend the blasphemy laws will be dealt with severely. In the *New York Times* version he said he would shoot any blasphemers himself.

Taseer's spirited defence of Asiya Bibi, a 45-year-old Punjabi Christian peasant, falsely charged with blasphemy after an argument with two women who accused her of polluting their water by drinking out of the same receptacle, provoked an angry response from religious groups. Many in his own party felt that Taseer's initiative was mistimed, but in Pakistan the time is never right for such campaigns. Bibi had already spent 18 months in jail. Her plight had been highlighted by the media, women had taken to the streets to defend her and Taseer and another senior politician from the Pakistan Peoples Party, Sherry Rehman, had demanded amendments to the blasphemy laws. Thirty-eight other women have been imprisoned under the same law in recent years and soon after a friendly meeting between Yousaf Gillani, the prime minister, and the leader of the supposedly moderate Jamaat-e-Islami, a member of the latter offered a reward of ten thousand dollars to whoever manages to kill Bibi.

Taseer's decision to take up Bibi's case was not made on a whim. He had cleared the campaign with Zardari, much to the annoyance of the law minister, Babar Awan, a televangelist and former militant of the Jamaat-e-Islami. He told journalists he didn't want the socio-cultural agenda to be hijacked by 'lunatic mullahs', raged against governments that had refused to take on fanaticism, and brushed aside threats to his life with disdain. He visited the prison where Bibi was detained – the first time in the history of the Punjab that a governor has gone inside a district jail – and at a press conference declared his solidarity with her. 'She is a woman who has been incarcerated for a year and a half on a charge trumped up against her five days after an incident where people who gave evidence against her were not even present,' he told an interviewer. He wanted, he said, 'to take a mercy petition to the president, and he agreed, saying he would pardon Asiya Bibi if there had indeed been a miscarriage of justice'.

Two weeks after this visit Taseer was dead. I never much cared for his business practices or his political affiliations and had not spoken to him for 20 years, but he was one of my closest friends at

school and university and the two of us and the late Shahid Rehman – a gifted and witty lawyer who drank himself to death many moons ago – were inseparable. Some joyful memories came back when I saw his face on TV.

It's 1960. The country is under a pro-US military dictatorship. All opposition is banned. My parents are away. The three of us – we are 17 years old – are at my place and we decide that something has to be done. We buy some red paint and at about 2 a.m. drive to the Cantonment bridge and carefully paint 'Yankee Go Home' on the beautiful whitewashed wall. The next morning we scrub the car clean of all traces of paint. For the next few weeks the city is agog. The story doesn't appear in the press but everyone is talking about it. In Karachi and Dhaka, where they regard Lahore as politically dead, our city's stock rises. At college our fellow students discuss nothing else. The police are busy searching for the culprits. We smile and enjoy the fun. Finally they track us down, but as Taseer notes with an edge of bitterness, Shahid's father is a Supreme Court judge and one of my aunts is married to a general who's also the minister of the interior, so naturally we all get off with a warning. At the time I almost felt that physical torture might be preferable to being greeted regularly by the general with 'Hello, Mr Yankee Go Home.'

Two years previously (before the dictatorship) the three of us had organised a demonstration at the US Consulate after reading that an African-American called Jimmy Wilson had been sentenced to death for stealing a dollar. On that occasion Salman, seeing that not many people had turned up, found some street urchins to swell our ranks. We had to stop and explain to them why their chant of 'Death to Jimmy Wilson' was wrong. Money changed hands before they were brought into line. Years later, on a London to Lahore flight, I met Taseer by chance and we discussed both these events. He reminded me that the stern US consul had told us he would have us expelled, but his ultra-Lutheranism offended the Catholic Brothers who ran our school and again we escaped punishment. On that flight, more than 20 years ago, I asked him why he had decided to go into politics. Wasn't being a businessman bad enough? 'You'll never understand,' he said. 'If I'm a politician as well I can save money because I don't have to pay myself bribes.' He was cynical in the extreme, but he could laugh at himself. He died tragically, but for a good cause. His party and colleagues, instead of indulging in manufactured grief, would be better off taking the opportunity to amend the blasphemy laws while there is still some anger at what has taken place. But of course they are doing the exact opposite.

Even before this killing, Pakistan had been on the verge of yet another military takeover. It would make things so much easier if only they could give it another name: military democracy perhaps? General Kayani, whose term as chief of staff was extended last year with strong Pentagon approval, is said to be receiving petitions every day asking him to intervene and 'save the country'. The petitioners are obviously aware that removing Zardari and replacing him with a nominee of the Sharif brothers' Muslim League, the PPP's long-term rivals, is unlikely to improve matters. Petitioning, combined with a complete breakdown of law and order in one or several spheres (suicide terrorism in Peshawar, violent ethnic clashes in Karachi, state violence in Quetta and now Taseer's assassination), is usually followed by the news that a reluctant general has no longer been able to resist 'popular' pressure and with the reluctant agreement of the US Embassy a uniformed president has taken power. We've been here before, on four separate occasions. The military has never succeeded in taking the country forward. All that happens is that, instead of politicians, the officers take the cut. The government obviously thinks the threat is serious: some of Zardari's cronies now speak openly at dinner parties of 'evidence' that proves military involvement in his wife Benazir Bhutto's assassination. If the evidence exists, let's have a look. Another straw in the wind: the political parties close to the ISI, Pakistan's main intelligence agency, have withdrawn from the central government, accusing it of callousness and financial malfeasance. True, but hardly novel.

Another necessary prerequisite for a coup is popular disgust with a corrupt, inept and failing civilian

government. This has now reached fever pitch. As well as the natural catastrophes that have afflicted the country there are local wars, disappearances, torture, crime, huge price rises in essential goods, unemployment, a breakdown of basic services – all the major cities go without electricity for hours at a stretch and oil lamps are much in demand in smaller towns, which are often without gas and electricity for up to 12 hours. Thanks to the loan conditions recently imposed by the IMF – part of a gear change in the ‘war on terror’ – there have been riots against the rise in fuel prices in several cities. Add to this Zardari’s uncontrollable greed and the irrepressible desire of his minions to mimic their master. Pakistan today is a kleptocracy. There is much talk in Islamabad of the despised prime minister’s neglected wife going on a shopping spree in London last month and finding solace in diamonds, picking up, on her way back home, a VAT rebate in the region of £100,000.

Can it get worse? Yes. And on every front. Take the Af-Pak war. Few now would dispute that its escalation has further destabilised Pakistan, increasing the flow of recruits to suicide bomber command. The CIA’s New Year message to Pakistan consisted of three drone attacks in North Waziristan, killing 19 people. There were 116 drone strikes in 2010, double the number ordered in the first year of the Obama presidency. Serious Pakistani newspapers, Dawn and the News, claim that 98 per cent of those killed in the strikes over the last five years – the number of deaths is estimated to be between two and three thousand – were civilians, a percentage endorsed by David Kilcullen, a former senior adviser to General Petraeus. The Brookings Institution gives a grim ratio of one militant killed for every ten civilians. The drones are operated by the CIA, which isn’t subject to military rules of engagement, with the result that drones are often used for revenge attacks, notably after the sensational Khost bombing of a CIA post in December 2009.

What stops the military from taking power immediately is that it would then be responsible for stopping the drone attacks and containing the insurgency that has resulted from the extension of the war into Pakistan. This is simply beyond it, which is why the generals would rather just blame the civilian government for everything. But if the situation worsens and growing public anger and economic desperation lead to wider street protests and an urban insurgency the military will be forced to intervene. It will also be forced to act if the Obama administration does as it threatens and sends troops across the Pakistan border on protect-and-destroy missions. Were this to happen a military takeover of the country might be the only way for the army to counter dissent within its ranks by redirecting the flow of black money and bribes (currently a monopoly of politicians) into military coffers. Pakistani officers who complain to Western intelligence operatives and journalists that a new violation of sovereignty might split the army do so largely as a way to exert pressure. There has been no serious breach in the military high command since the dismal failure of the 1951 Rawalpindi Conspiracy, the first and last radical nationalist attempt (backed by Communist intellectuals) to seize power within the army and take the country in an anti-imperialist direction. Since then, malcontents in the armed forces have always been rapidly identified and removed. Military perks and privileges – bonuses, land allocations, a presence in finance and industry – play an increasingly important part in keeping the army under control.

Meanwhile, on a visit to Kabul earlier this month, the US homeland security secretary, Janet Napolitano, announced that 52 ‘security agents’ were being dispatched to the Af-Pak border to give on the spot training to Afghan police and security units. The insurgents will be delighted, especially since some of them serve in these units, just as they do in Pakistan.

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**P.S.**

\* From the London Review of Books, Vol. 33 No. 2 · 20 January 2011, pages 11-12:

[http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n02/tariq-ali/salman-taseer-remembered?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=3302](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n02/tariq-ali/salman-taseer-remembered?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=3302)

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