

Pakistan: Taseer's murder exposes liberals' crisis

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Campaign to repeal discriminatory laws cannot be won without popular confidence, and we will never win popular confidence without participating in, if not leading, struggles against the cruelty of everyday life in our country—for livable wages, decent housing, land rights, meaningful education, healthcare.

Last week's assassination of Salman Taseer has re-opened, with a vengeance, old questions about Pakistan, its people, and the future towards which we're hurtling. While the military operations in the NW seemed to have eased the earlier panic in Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad, our leading denizens have wrestled with even more sinister worries, in the aftermath of Taseer's murder: hasn't fundamentalism seeped, irreparably, into the psyche of the masses?

The question, of course, is as ignorant as it is unsurprising. It is a sign of our times that it seems necessary to take stock of elementary political facts.

For one, the masses have not flocked to the fundamentalists. While Munawar Hassan, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, and others have been shrill in their disgraceful defense of Qadri, the disproportionate coverage given to their rallies and public statements has obscured the fact that they remain politically weak. Barring a sociological miracle, parties like the JI and JUI-F have no chance of making significant inroads on a national scale, where the PPP and the PML-N have no rivals. In a handful of (glorious) parts of the country the Left can match the fundamentalists, for street power. In Balochistan, Sindh, and even Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, the nationalists—overwhelmingly secular, in inspiration—are much, much stronger.

(This remains true despite the favourite refrains of our lapsed leftists, for whom the gravity of Pakistan's plight apparently requires a rethink of the entire enterprise of left-wing politics: the masses are beyond us, we're told, better to teach them a lesson by calling on those with 'guns and butter.')

In short, far from offering their active support to Qadri and his backers, most Pakistanis—the 'silent majority'—have stood this clash out.

This fact, admittedly, invites its own questions.

There are those who would focus attention on the treachery of Taseer and his allies, arguing that 'liberalism' has been forever compromised in the eyes of the Pakistani people. Secular politics is fatally afflicted, we're told, to the drawing room chatter of our elites. Their secession into well-guarded enclaves amidst the crises wrought by neoliberalism and war has been a godsend for the right-wing; Islamists, it's suggested, have made hay of popular suffering in the service of reaction.

In this view, Taseer was killed not for his brave defense of Aisha Bibi, but because he—as media baron, business tycoon, and PPP stalwart (and, in between, as Federal minister in Soomro's

cabinet)—embodied a brand of politics that long ago abandoned ‘the people’ to the miseries of peripheral capitalism.

While there’s more than a nugget of truth in this perspective (and I will clarify exactly what, later), this specific argument oversteps, in two ways.

First, like the mainstreamers, it overstates the hold of the right-wing on popular consciousness: reactionary politics, as distinct from religious belief, is definitely still the preserve of a small minority in Pakistan. The suggestion that ‘whisky-drinking liberals’ have driven the masses into the arms of the Right is, therefore, incommensurate with the facts.

Second, the argument sidesteps the dreadfulness of Qadri’s crime. About this, we can’t afford any confusion: the thinking that inspired Qadri’s actions represents the negation of progressive politics, not its distorted echo. Qadri did not kill Taseer because he stood against PTCL workers in 2005, or because he billed a Mercedes to the public exchequer amidst austerity – he killed him because Taseer, in this instance, stood for a laudable principle that contravenes the obscurantist convictions of the Right. The importance of defending what he died for is undeniable.

At the same time, however, the current conjuncture does invite some reflection on the relationship of liberalism to mass politics. Because while it’s important to emphasize that Taseer’s reactionary (as in neoliberal) politics don’t explain his assassination, it doesn’t follow from this that they’re irrelevant to the larger discussion about the blasphemy laws, liberalism, and ‘the masses.’

Specifically, Taseer’s advocacy of an elitist, anti-people politics does exemplify the general plight of establishment liberalism: when you equivocate in defending the majority on issues of ‘bread-and-butter’ importance (or worse, if you’re consistently on the wrong side of these issues, like Taseer and the PPP), you forfeit the right to be surprised when that same majority fails to rise in your defense. The extent to which you stand in solidarity with them, on issues that touch them daily, is going to determine their readiness to stand with you around demands whose importance is, if nothing else, less immediate to them.

After all, the sad fact is that, even while the blasphemy laws remain a barometer of the cruelty of life in Pakistan today, they don’t figure in the everyday injustices faced by the vast majority, who remain centrally preoccupied by hunger, poverty, and war. The number of cases registered in the last three decades is in the hundreds—less than the number of Pakistani children that die, daily, from malnutrition-related causes. [1]

Again, this is not to suggest that these laws are unworthy of our urgent attention. But it is to argue that the task of making their repeal central to people’s understanding of progress is precisely that – a task. Progressives find themselves in a political context that requires them to make the case, as organizers and not just as commentators, that freeing the State from the grasp of religious bigotry is a precondition to changing this country for the better.

And what’s obvious is that our liberal intelligentsia is floundering. Both the substance and strategy of their campaign detaches the defense of these rights from demands that speak directly to popular grievances. And it is understandable why: many of the leading advocates come from either the earnest bourgeoisie which had come to the fore during the lawyers’ movement, or from the PPP and its sympathizers—groups that have been, as a rule, consistent cheerleaders of war and neoliberal restructuring.

In fact, their plight recalls Marx’s verdict on the Prussian bourgeoisie, after their betrayal of the revolution of March 1848: “Without faith in itself, without faith in the people, grumbling at those

above, frightened of those below, egoistical towards both and aware of its egoism; revolutionary with regard to the conservatives and conservative with regard to the revolutionaries... Haggling over its own demands, without initiative, without faith in itself, without faith in the people, without a historic mission." [2]

This is precisely why the tasks of democratic transformation fall, invariably, to the Left—if not as it exists today, then on account of what it stands for, and for the insights evident in its history, principles and strategy. The campaign to repeal discriminatory laws cannot be won without popular confidence, and we will never win popular confidence without participating in, if not leading, struggles against the cruelty of everyday life in our country—for livable wages, decent housing, land rights, meaningful education, healthcare, etc. The longer the movement is led by those who deem these demands premature, impractical, or downright threatening, the more likely the average Pakistani is to dismiss the campaign as political theatre.

It is undeniable that the burden is formidable. But it is no less true that this changes very little about what must be done, and how.

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References:

1. <<http://www.unicef.org/pon95/nutr0007.html>
2. Karl Marx, "The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-Revolution," Neue Rheinische Zeitung No. 169, December 1848:
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* Posted on Viewpoint Online ISSUE NO. 33, JANUARY 14, 2011 :
<http://www.viewpointonline.net/taseers-murder-exposes-liberals-crisis.html>

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