

Pakistan awaiting the clerical tsunami

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Taseer's assassin is a Barelvi Muslim belonging to the Dawat-e-Islami, and 500 clerics of this faith supported his action. Most of these mullahs are part of the Sunni Tehreek and are supposedly anti-Taliban moderates. Those who claim that Pakistan's silent majority is fundamentally secular and tolerant may be clutching at straws.

On January 4, Salman Taseer, governor of Pakistan's largest province, was gunned down by his own security guard, Mumtaz Qadri. Salman Taseer was campaigning to reform country's blasphemy laws. His advocacy to repeal these laws, seen as a threat to religious minorities, invited clerical wrath. Mullahs issued fatwas and announced prize money on his head. Mumtaz Qadri, a religious fanatic declared unsuitable by police department for VIP duties, was deputed along Taseer's security details. A lapse? Given the influence of extremist in country's security apparatus, such a slip would indeed be intriguing. In his confession, the assassin said he was inspired by a mullah but did it on his own. Incidentally, his fellow guards on duty did not react until he had finished Taseer off. He peacefully surrendered. Ever since the media, mullahs and the Right have made a hero out of him. The clergy has bestowed upon him the religious honorific of Ghazi (Conqueror). The government has announced not to touch the controversial blasphemy laws. In an interview with Viewpoint, Dr Pervez Hoodbhoy discusses the situation in Pakistan. Hoodbhoy received his undergraduate and PhD degrees from MIT and has been teaching nuclear and high-energy physics at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad for 37 years. He also lectures at US universities and laboratories, and is a frequent commentator, on Pakistani TV channels as well as international media outlets, on various social and political issues. Excerpts:

Farooq Sulehria - The murder of Governor Salman Taseer, who opposed Pakistan's blasphemy law, has shocked the world. But in Pakistan the killer has become a hero for a sizeable section of society. Why?

Pervez Hoodbhoy - In a society dominated by traditional religious values, heroism often means committing some violent and self-destructive act for preserving honor. Although Governor Taseer was not accused of blasphemy, his crime was to seek presidential pardon for an illiterate peasant Christian woman accused of blasphemy by some Muslim neighbours. Taseer's intervention clearly crossed the current limits of toleration. With no party support, he went at it alone.

Malik Mumtaz Qadri - the official security guard who pumped 22 bullets into the man he was deputed to protect - is not the first such hero. The 19-year old illiterate who killed the author of the book "Rangeela Rasool" in the 1920's, and was then executed by the British, was held in the highest esteem by the founders of Pakistan, Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. It is reported that Iqbal, regarded as Islam's pre-eminent 20th century philosopher, placed the body in the grave with tears in his eyes and said: "This young man left us, the educated men, behind." Ghazi Ilm-e-Deen is venerated by a mausoleum over his grave in Lahore.

In his court testimony, Taseer's assassin proudly declared that he was executing Allah's will. Hundreds of lawyers - made famous by the Black Coat Revolution that restored Pakistan's Chief

Justice – showered him with rose petals while he was in police custody. Two hundred lawyers signed a pledge vowing to defend him for free. Significantly, Qadri is a Bareilvi Muslim belonging to the Dawat-e-Islami, and 500 clerics of this faith supported his action in a joint declaration. They said that those who sympathized with Taseer deserved similar punishment.

Significantly most of these mullahs are part of the Sunni Tehreek and are supposedly anti-Taliban moderates. Indeed, one of their leaders, Maulana Sarfaraz Naeemi, was blown up by a Taliban suicide bomber in June 2009 after he spoke out against suicide bombings. But now these “moderates” have joined hands with their attackers. Jointly they rule Pakistan’s streets today, while a cowardly and morally bankrupt government cringes and caves in to their every demand.

Pakistani voters have always voted for secular-leaning parties but it appears that today the religious parties actually represent popular discourse. Do you concur?

Yes, I do. Those who claim that Pakistan’s silent majority is fundamentally secular and tolerant may be clutching at straws. They argue that the religious parties don’t get the popular vote and so cannot really be popular. But this is wishful thinking. The mullah parties are unsuccessful only because they are geared for street politics, not electoral politics. They also lack charismatic leadership and have bitter internal rivalries. However the victory of the MMA after 9/11 shows that they are capable of closing ranks. It is also perfectly possible that a natural leader will emerge and cause an electoral landslide in the not too distant future.

But even without winning elections, the mullah parties are immensely more powerful in determining how you and I live than election-winning parties like the PPP and ANP. For a long time the religious right has dictated what we can or cannot teach in our public and private schools. No government ever had the guts to dilute the hate materials being forced down young throats. They also dictate what you and I can wear, eat, or drink. Their unchallenged power has led to Pakistan’s cultural desertification because they violently oppose music, dance, theatre, art, and intellectual inquiry.

To be sure there are scattered islands of normality in urban Pakistan. But these are shrinking. Yes, the Baluch nationalists are secular, and so is the ethnically-driven MQM in Karachi. But these constitute a tiny fraction of the population.

The government has capitulated. The prime minister has announced not to touch the blasphemy laws. Does this mean that religious fanatics can dictate their terms even without any parliamentary representation?

It is indeed a complete abdication. When the bearded ones brought out 50,000 charged people onto the streets of Karachi, a terrified government instantly sought negotiations with them. Even before that happened, the current interior minister – Rahman Malik, a venal hack and as crooked as they come – promptly declared that he’d personally gun down a blasphemer.

The government’s pants are soaking wet. In fact, so wet that the ruling party dumped Taseer – who was their own high-ranking member – after the murder. There’s talk now of getting American guards for Zardari since his own guards may be untrustworthy. Sherry Rahman, the brave parliamentarian who dared to table a bill to reform the blasphemy law, is now bunkered down. She is said to be receiving two death threats an hour. Significantly, the Army high command has made no public statement on the assassination, although it is vocal on much else.

Pakistan’s media is often described as independent and vibrant. But this media had painted Taseer negatively almost a month before he was killed. Your comments?

The media's so-called independence and vibrancy is reserved for attacking a manifestly corrupt, but nominally secular, government. On other issues – such as a rational discussion of religion and the army's role in society – it is conspicuously silent. Few sane people are brought on to shows, or are too scared to speak.

Let me recount some personal experiences. The day after Taseer's assassination, FM-99 (Urdu) called me for an interview. The producer tearfully told me (offline) that she could not find a single religious scholar ready to condemn his murder. She said even ordinary people like me are in short supply.

The next day a TV program on blasphemy (Samaa TV, hosted by Asma Shirazi) was broadcast. Asma had pleaded that I participate. So I did – knowing full well what was up ahead. My opponents were Farid Paracha (spokesman, Jamaat-e-Islami) and Maulana Sialvi (Sunni Tehreek, a Barelvi and supposed moderate). There were around 100 students in the audience, drawn from colleges across Pindi and Islamabad.

Even as the mullahs frothed and screamed around me (and at me), I managed to say the obvious: that the culture of religious extremism was resulting in a bloodbath in which the majority of victims were Muslims; that non-Muslims were fleeing Pakistan; that the self-appointed "thaikaydars" of Islam in Pakistan were deliberately ignoring the case of other Muslim countries like Indonesia which do not have the death penalty for blasphemy; that debating the details of Blasphemy Law 295-C did not constitute blasphemy; that American Muslims were very far from being the objects of persecution; that harping on drone attacks was an irrelevancy to the present discussion on blasphemy.

The response? Not a single clap for me. Thunderous applause whenever my opponents called for death for blasphemers. And loud cheers for Qadri. When I directly addressed Sialvi and said he had Salman Taseer's blood on his hand, he exclaimed "How I wish I had done it!" (kaash ke main nay khud kiya hota!). You can find all this on YouTube if you like.

One can debate whether this particular episode (and probably many similar ones) should be blamed on the media, whether it genuinely reflects the public mood, and whether those students fairly represented the general Pakistani youth. But there is little doubt which side the Pakistani media took. This was apparent from the unwillingness of anchors to condemn the assassination, as well as from images of the smiling murderer being feted all around. Mullah guests filled the screens of most channels. Some journalists and TV-show participants favorably compared Qadri with Ilm-e-Deen. Others sought to prove that Taseer somehow brought his death upon himself.

Many in Pakistan like Imran Khan, a cricket star turned politician, blame the recent rise of extremism on the US occupation of Afghanistan. Is that the root cause in your opinion?

If the US had never come to Afghanistan, Pakistan would not be the violent mess that it is today. So there is an element of truth in this claim, but no more than an element. Let me give you an analogy: imagine lots of dry wood and a lighted match. The US-led anti-Soviet war was that match. But the combustible material is that dangerous conservatism which accumulated over time. The strength of the Islamist parties vastly increased after Zulfikar Ali Bhutto kow-towed to them after 1973-4. This was 5-6 years before the Soviet invasion so one can scarcely blame America for that.

Yes, the West did set dry wood on fire. But the staggering quantity of wood comes from the rotting mass of Pakistan's state and society. Ours is an apartheid society where the rich treat the poor like dirt, the justice system does not work, education is as rotten as it can be, and visible corruption goes unpunished. Add to all this a million mullahs in a million mosques who exploit people's frustrations.

You then have the explanation for today's catastrophic situation.

Of course I would love to see the Americans out of Afghanistan. The sooner they can withdraw – without precipitating a 1996 style Taliban massacre – the better. But let's realize that US withdrawal will not end Pakistan's problems. Those fighting the Americans aren't exactly Vietnamese-type socialists or nationalists. The Taliban-types want a full cultural revolution: beards, burqas, 5 daily prayers, no music, no art, no entertainment, and no contact with modernity except for getting its weapons.

In Tunis, a dictator has been humbled by peaceful mass mobilisation instead of al-Qaida affiliates. In Bangladesh, superior courts have re-instated the basic secular constitution of the country and religion in politics has been banned in recent months. Do you see the tide turning in Muslim world. Does it offer a hope in Pakistan?

The grievances in Tunisia are similar in some ways to those in Pakistan: raging unemployment, grotesque corruption, and the opulent lifestyles of the elite. Like Zardari, who fills Pakistani cities with pictures of the Bhutto clan and renames streets and airports, Ben Ali also promoted his family. Both plundered national wealth, and both got the West's support because they claimed to be bulwarks against extremism. Today Ben Ali is gone, and tomorrow Zardari will be gone.

But the differences are profound: Tunisia's population of 10 million is miniscule compared to Pakistan's 180 million. Young Tunisians do not suffer from a toxic overdose of hard-line religion. So they came out bravely into the streets to fight for real social change. One can therefore hope that Ben Ali's departure will lead to a flowering of Arab democracy rather than invite the dark forces of religious extremism. Yet one can be absolutely sure that Zardari's departure, which may happen sooner rather than later, is not likely to lead to a more secular or more peaceful Pakistan.

As for Bangladesh: let us recall that it emerged from the collapse of Jinnah's Two-Nation theory. Nationalism triumphed over religion in 1971. Hence the positive new developments in Bangladesh are not difficult to understand.

What do you think is the way to stem the rising tide of religious extremism in Pakistan?

If you want the truth: the answer is, nothing. Our goose is cooked. Sometimes there is no way to extinguish a forest fire until it burns itself out. Ultimately there will be nothing left to burn. But well before the last liberal is shot or silenced, the mullahs will be gunning for each other in a big way. Mullah-inspired bombers have already started blowing up shrines and mosques of the opposing sect. The internet is flooded with gory photographs of chopped-up body parts belonging to their rivals. Qadri, the assassin, admitted his inspiration to murder came from a cleric. So you can also expect that Muslim clerics will enthusiastically kill other Muslim clerics. Eventually we could have the situation that prevailed during Europe's 30-Year War.

To save Pakistan, what miracles shall we ask of Allah? Here's my personal list: First, that the Pakistan army stops seeing India as enemy number one and starts seeing extremism as a mortal threat. Second, that Zardari's government is replaced by one that is less corrupt, more capable of governance, and equipped with both the will and legitimacy to challenge religious fascism. And, third, that peace somehow comes to Afghanistan.

P.S.

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