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Pakistan

# Pakistan's Dark Journey

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**The recent verdict of a lower court sentencing a Christian woman to death in a “blasphemy” case, and the subsequent murder of the Punjab Governor and then the Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti of who both supported the imprisoned woman, have posed the very vital question of whether Pakistani society has become intolerant, violent and extremist to the point of incorrigible.**

The Asia Bibi case occurred in June 2009 in Pakistan’s Punjab province when a group of female Muslim laborers complained that Bibi, a Christian woman and a fellow farm laborer, had made derogatory remarks against the Islamic holy book and Prophet Mohammed. A police investigation was opened, which led to a trial and guilty verdict for Asia. The verdict has attracted worldwide attention.

Asia Bibi reportedly was asked to fetch water by her co-workers. She complied, but some of her Muslim fellow workers refused to drink the water as they consider Christians to be “untouchable.” Apparently arguments ensued. There had already been a running feud between Asia and a neighbor about property damage. Later some co-workers complained to a local cleric that Asia Bibi had made derogatory remarks.

A mob came to her house, beating her and members of her family before she was rescued by the police. However, the police initiated an investigation about her remarks resulting in her arrest and prosecution under blasphemy charges. She spent more than a year and a half in jail. In November 2010, a judge of the lower court sentenced her to death by hanging. Additionally, a fine equivalent to \$1,100 was imposed.

During the trial many from her village (in fact, almost the entire village council) testified against her, saying they heard her make the remarks and reaffirmed them twice. The exact words allegedly used by Asia Bibi, although central to the accusation, remain unknown, as under the Pakistani blasphemy law to repeat them, even in accusation, would be to commit the same offense.

It may be recalled that blasphemy laws were introduced by U.S.-supported dictator General Zia ul Haq in the 1980s. [Zia seized power in a 1977 coup and oversaw the execution of the former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Proclaiming himself president, he ruled Pakistan until his death in a plane crash in 1988. During the 1980s he was warmly supported by the Reagan administration, while he launched the brutal suppression of Ahmadiyya and Shia Muslims, as well as Christians in Pakistan, in the name of “Islamicization.” Needless to say, in those days there was no rhetoric about “Islamofascism” from U.S. neoconservatives; quite the contrary, Islamic fundamentalists were lauded as anti-Communist warriors against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan” ed.]

Since then hundreds of persons faced blasphemy charges and were convicted under the law, with death penalty sentences in most of the cases. Between 1986 and 2007 over 647 people, half of whom were non-Muslims, were charged with offenses under the blasphemy laws. Twenty of those charged were murdered during their trial process and on prison premises.

### Punjab Governor Assassinated

The latest incident, the assassination of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, indicates the growing domination of religious extremism in Pakistani society. Although not accused of blasphemy, Taseer’s “crime” was seeking a presidential pardon for an illiterate peasant Christian woman accused of blasphemy, and speaking out against the law.

The murderer of Taseer, a bodyguard assigned to him by the security forces in Islamabad, proudly declared in court that he was “executing Allah’s will.” Hundreds of lawyers showered the killer with rose petals while he was in police custody. Two hundred lawyers signed a pledge vowing to defend him for free. This kind of mass frenzy, with religious extremism rising to new heights, is a matter of great concern for the progressive forces in Pakistan.

The local intelligentsia, which always claims that Pakistan’s silent majority is fundamentally secular and tolerant, also finds this hard to prove in the aftermath of the murder of the governor, who dared defend an alleged blasphemer. The frequent argument that the religious parties don’t get a large vote, and so cannot really be popular, also needs to be reviewed as rising public support to the extreme right is an alarm bell for the radical, left and progressive forces in Pakistan.

Even without winning elections, Islamist parties are in a powerful position, influencing major social and political issues more than election-winning mainstream bourgeois political parties. For a long time the religious right has dictated what we can or cannot teach in our public and private schools. No government has had the guts to dilute the hate materials being forced down young throats. Their unchallenged power has led to Pakistan’s cultural desertification because they violently oppose music, dance, theatre, art and intellectual inquiry.

The current Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government has capitulated and totally bowed to extremists’ pressure. The prime minister has announced that the blasphemy laws are not to be touched. The post–assassination situation has totally swung to the religious parties. Religious fanatics are going to be powerful enough to dictate their terms even without any parliamentary representation.

Ms. Sherry Rahman, the brave parliamentarian who dared to put forward a bill to reform the blasphemy law, is now bunkered down. She is said to be receiving two death threats an hour. Although her own party is in power, the Minister of Interior has advised her to leave the country as the government cannot protect her. The Army high command made no public statement on the governor’s assassination, although it is vocal on much else.

The Pakistani media also reflects the public mood dominated by religious extremism. This was apparent from the unwillingness and hesitation of TV anchors to condemn the assassination of the governor by a fanatic, as well as from images of the smiling murderer being feted all around. Mullah spokesmen filled the screens of most TV channels.

### Against Extremism and Occupation

The dominant opinion in Pakistani civil society is that the recent incident has helped the rise of extremism, adversely impacting the women’s rights movement throughout the country. Many believe that the octopus of religious extremism is getting bigger and bigger, especially after the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and the Pakistan government joining the “war on terror.” Secular sections of society consider that if the United States had never come to Afghanistan, Pakistan would not be the violent mess that it is today.

The widening socio-economic gap also plays an important role in sliding the poor sections of society towards the fundamentalist political parties. Pakistan has become a society where 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.

Americans must get out of Afghanistan. The sooner they can withdraw, the better. But Pakistani intellectuals also realize that the situation has become so serious that even U.S. 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, five daily prayers, no music, no art, no entertainment, and no contact with modernity

except its weapons.

The situation has become a colossal challenge for the already feeble progressive forces and women's rights movement in Pakistan. The mullahs will continue to get stronger as long as the U.S. presence in the region, in the name of war on terrorism, continues.

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