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Pakistan

Salmaan Taseer: The political context of a “religious” assassination

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Just over a year ago, Salmaan Taseer, governor of Pakistan’s largest province, the Punjab, was assassinated in the most cowardly manner by a government-assigned security guard in federal capital, Islamabad. The killer, a trained commando of the Punjab Elite Force, Mumtaz Qadri, pumped 27 bullets into the Governor’s back as he headed to his car on the afternoon of January 4, 2012.

This sensational murder that rocked the nation and reverberated around the world was not a spontaneous enraged act but a well-thought out, cold-blooded plan. One man executed this plan – but was he acting alone and was it an act motivated only by “religious fervour” as has been depicted or is there more to the issue than meets the eye? And even if the action was purely altruistic, should the law of the land not be applied to punish the guilty?

The Governor was already a target of those whom he termed as “hate-filled organisations” well before they saw an opportunity to (mis)use the “blasphemy law” and the Asia Bibi case to unite their own until then divided ranks.

To do this, they needed a target. They found it first in Asia Bibi, the Christian woman whom a trial court sentenced to death on Nov 8, 2010, for “blasphemy”, and then in a much bigger and more prominent figure, Salmaan Taseer, who publicly championed her cause.

Let’s rewind further back to put this situation in context. In Feb 2008, a democratically elected government came into power, replacing Gen. Musharraf’s military regime. Policy changes began to be visible. It was no longer a one-man rule. There was a Parliament through which policy matters had to be routed. The new government began completing Gen. Musharraf’s half-hearted “u-turn” against the Taliban, opposed by the security establishment that still sticks to the outdated paradigm of “strategic” depth - a continued influence in Afghanistan because of a perceived threat from India.

Pakistan was the last country to end diplomatic ties with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (it was one of only three countries to recognise that regime in the first place, along with UAE and Saudi Arabia). Gen. Musharraf’s policy of running with the hares and hunting with the hounds essentially meant that while Pakistan officially withdrew support from the Taliban after 9/11, it continued to turn a blind eye (and covertly support) the “home grown jihadis” that it saw as useful to keep the fire smouldering in Indian administered Kashmir.

What does all this have to do with Salmaan Taseer and the politics behind his assassination?

Everything. This mindset and political ideology disguised in the rhetoric of religion, is furthered and jealously guarded by a security establishment that sees its duty as being to guard not just Pakistan’s physical frontiers but also the so-called “ideology of Pakistan”, fashioned along conservative religious lines particularly since the 1965 war with India.

The third military ruler, Gen. Ziaul Haq (r 1977-88) firmed up this “ideology” in cahoots with his American masters. Together they converted a national war of liberation in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion, into a “jihad” or “holy war”, promoting the concept of “jihad international” in modern times, as Dr Eqbal Ahmad pointed out in his talk on “Terrorism, theirs and ours” (1998).

Pakistan’s home-grown “religious” organisations, which had flourished and gained immeasurable strength, pumped up with Saudi and American dollars, arms and training during the Zia years continued to flourish and function freely

during the military-dominated decade of musical chairs democracy (1988-1999) in which no democratically elected government was allowed to complete its tenure. Their powers and privileges continued unabated during the Musharraf years (1999-2008) although the General's u-turn following pressure from Washington after the events of September 11, 2001, meant that their activities had to be less visible.

Their rage at being demoted from blue-eyed boys to pariahs began spilling over after an elected government replaced the Musharraf regime and even covert government support for them ended. The genie released during the Zia years that had grown so big during Musharraf's time was not going to go tamely back into the bottle. It had turned into a multi-headed monster with no central command. Thousands of these trained, armed, ideologically indoctrinated men, easily incited and ready to kill for their cause, were, and are, on Pakistan's soil.

Governor Taseer was already in their sights for his outspoken and rational views on religion, human rights and justice (as opposed to the emotional ones of the “Taliban ideology”). In May 2010, after armed men opened fire on worshippers in an Ahmedi mosque in Lahore, killing over 80 people and injuring scores of others, Governor Salmaan Taseer went to give his condolences to them.

The elected parliament under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1974 had declared that Ahmedis to be non-Muslim (a shameful capitulation to the mullah lobby). A decade later, in 1984, more amendments under Gen. Zia's military regime criminalised their status, making them liable to be prosecuted for matters like using Muslim greetings or Islamic terms, in short, “pretending” to be Muslim, which has come to mean “blasphemous”. The Taliban ideology takes this thread forward, seeing Ahmedis as heretics (kafir) and liable to be killed.

The adherents of this ideology have conflated these issues with so much success that many people actually think that these views are in accordance with Islam. Few people dare to publicly argue with the rhetoric that is whipped up on these grounds – and those who do, risk becoming targets as well. Even Islamic scholars who provide a rational counterpoint based on the Quran are targeted. Several have been killed, and others have had to lie low or go into self-exile.

Yet, during his condolence visit, in front of dozens of television cameras, Salmaan Taseer clearly and boldly countered this warped view - a video of the visit is available [here](#). He stated that in his view and in his party's view, Ahmedis are “noble, patriotic” Pakistanis. He not only agreed that there was a need to correct past wrongs but he openly named “these hate-filled organisations – Sipah-e-Sahaba, (Lashkar-e-) Jhangvi,” that, he said, “all have same ideology - Taliban, Al Qaeda... They should be prosecuted in the courts; don't let them off. There should be zero tolerance towards them.”

He also took a dig at the provincial Punjab government, hinting at their hobnobbing with these groups – “No political alliance is possible with these organisations, you can't go around having them at your political meetings, the Punjab government should prosecute them”.

It was barely months later that the religious parties started raising the “blasphemy” issue, conflating it with the issue of the “honour of the Prophet, peace be upon Him”. Walk chalkings proclaimed: “hurmat-e-Rasool par jaan bhi qurbaan hai” (for the honour of the Prophet lives can be sacrificed).

The Aasia Bibi case exploded in November 2010 – over a year after she had been arrested and the case registered, three days after the alleged incident took place in which during an argument with some fellow villagers, she uttered “blasphemous” words. A decade or so ago, a “low caste” woman (as most Christians in the Punjab are considered to be, being descendent of converts from a low caste during the British Raj), would not have argued back as Aasia reportedly did. The fact that the case, like most blasphemy cases, was registered days after the alleged incident also indicates a political motivation. As in other such cases, elements from the religio-political parties appear to have used the opportunity to “work” on the other women, to invoke religious fervour and convince them to

register a case.

This was the first ‘blasphemy’ case in many years in which a court handed down a death sentence to an accused – and the first time such a sentence was awarded to a woman. Protests against the sentence by human rights and Christian organisations led to counter protests by ‘Islamic’ groups that used the issue to build up their political strength.

The situation was reminiscent of the early 1990s when several ‘blasphemy’ cases were registered, and the first ‘blasphemy murder’ was committed. Since then, although the lower courts have occasionally handed down death sentences, country’s higher courts have acquitted the accused. Pakistan has never carried out a ‘blasphemy execution’ although several men have been extra-judicially killed after being accused of ‘blasphemy’.

The frenzied propaganda built up against Salmaan Taseer was amplified umpteen times in 2010 because of the reach of the electronic media by now. Many in the 24/7 news media, keen for a sensational story to boost their ratings, jumped into the fray. Taseer was projected in the public domain as a blasphemer.

In one particularly vitriolic television talk show, the anchor, known for her high-pitched approach, put him in the dock, taking him aback – not an easy thing to do. “Bibi, you are acting as I have committed some blasphemy,” he reprimanded her, but she continued her tirade. (watch the programme [here](#) and [here](#))

Meanwhile, Sunni Tehrik and other extremist organisations were holding rallies and demonstrations calling for the blood of blasphemers. Mumtaz Qadri was a known figure at such rallies where emotions were being whipped into frenzy. He even recited ‘naat’ [poetic rendition in praise of Prophet Muhammad] at some of them – like at this one, just three days before he killed the man he was supposed to be protecting.

The question arises how, especially in such an atmosphere, a man who was attending such gatherings, who was already known for his extremist views – and had been earlier removed from police’s Special Branch because he was perceived as a security threat – was inducted into the Elite Force in the first place? Secondly, how was such a man assigned guard duty to a high profile target like the Governor Punjab? And thirdly, “why did the other guards not open fire, as per standard operating procedures in VIP guard duty? (In Qadri’s confession after his arrest, he said that he had told his colleagues what he was going to do and asked them not to open fire, as he would surrender.)”

Citizens for Democracy (CFD), an umbrella group of several professional and activist organisations formed on Dec 19, 2010 in Karachi, raised these and other questions in its statement of January 7, 2011, that “indicate the involvement of retrogressive forces in Pakistan that have over the past couple of decades made inroads into all sections of society and institutions of the state, including those institutions upon which Pakistani citizens rely for their security.”

Salmaan Taseer’s murder was followed barely a couple of months later by the murder of the Minister for Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian by faith, who had also been speaking out about the blasphemy issue. No one has been arrested for that murder, and trial court judge who sentenced Mumtaz Qadri to death has had to leave the country for his own safety.

The question many are asking (but not too loudly) is that if Qadri is willing to die for his faith and he believes he has done right, why are his supporters calling for the death sentence to be commuted?

On Jan 4, 2012, at a gathering to ‘celebrate’ the anniversary of Governor Taseer’s assassination, the Sunni Ittehad Council, a religious umbrella organisation, was ready to pay Rs100 million [over a million US dollars] for the “holy gun” that Qadri had used for the murder.

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“Presumably that the gun is currently held in an evidence bag. Why not petition for the police to complete whatever ballistic tests are needed and for the court to hand the gun back to the government, who own it,” suggests one analyst asking not to be named. “The government can then sell it to the Sunni Council for Rs 100 million. The money will then not be in the pocket of the Sunni Council, and can be spent on things like rehabilitation of victims of extremist violence. And if they do not pay up, they will have been exposed as hypocrites, again.”

So there are two urgent needs in Pakistan now, aside from the perennial ones of clean drinking water, healthcare, education, shelter and so on. These urgent needs are: to enforce the rule of law (charge, try and prosecute the guilty without fear or favour), and to expose the hypocrisy of the Taliban mentality.