

Fundamentalist onslaught in Pakistan

The assassination of a secular politician for seeking change in Blasphemy Law

Tuesday 11 January 2011, by [Daily Times \(Pakistan\)](#), [IJAZ Saroop](#), [RAHMAN Rashed](#), [RAZVI Murtaza](#), [SHAMSIE Kamila](#), [WALSH Declan](#) (Date first published: 7 January 2011).

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Contents

- [\(i\) MURDER MOST FOUL!](#)
- [\(ii\) A BRAVE MAN CUT DOWN \(...\)](#)
- [\(iii\) EDITORIAL: A FOUL MURDER](#)
- [\(iv\) A DIVIDED PAKISTAN \(...\)](#)
- [\(v\) THE REAL BLASPHEMY](#)
- [\(vi\) IF IT TAKES UP THE \(...\)](#)
- [\(vii\) Salman Taseer's children](#)

(i) MURDER MOST FOUL!

Dawn, 4 January 211

by Murtaza Razvi

Pakistani police officers cordon off the site where Punjab Gov. Salman Taseer was shot dead by one of his guards, in Islamabad, Pakistan, Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2011. - AP

The assassination of the Punjab Governor Salman Taseer this afternoon in Islamabad by an armed guard reportedly deputed for his security raises the fundamental issue once again: that religious indoctrination is feeding the fires of hatred and intolerance. Although details as to the motive of the crime have yet to emerge, by the very trappings it seems little else but a crime of hate.

Mr Taseer had few friends left in his last days. His outspoken defence of the Christian woman, Aasia Bibi, who was accused of blasphemy under questionable charges leveled against her by fellow Muslim villagers and who has been on the death row in a Punjab prison for over a year awaiting appeal in a higher court, made him a hate figure for extremist and Islamist outfits and parties. Major religious parties called out nationwide strikes on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve to demand Aasia Bibi's execution under the controversial blasphemy law, and to condemn her sympathisers, Mr Taseer being one of the foremost public figures amongst the latter group and thus the object of hate.

He, along with the PPP MNA Sherry Rehman, who has courageously sought to repeal or amend the blasphemy law, have been the only leaders to openly oppose the controversial law, like Benazir Bhutto before them had opposed extremism and Talibanisation and paid for it with her life, while a deafening silence prevails on the subject within the ranks of the PPP itself.

On the political front too Mr Taseer became a controversial figure in his home province the day President Zardari appointed him the governor in Punjab to watch over a provincial government led by his political arch rivals, the Sharif brothers. The sacking of Shahbaz Sharif's government in 2008, the imposition of governor's rule and then the restoration of Mr Sharif under court orders in March 2008 as the chief minister, added to the political bitterness that existed between Mr Taseer and the Sharifs. There was little love lost between the rivals till the time of Mr Taseer's assassination, with no signs of any rapprochement on the anvil whatsoever.

Of late the Sharifs responded to Mr Taseer's political opposition to their way of governance by resorting to means that were both unfair and untenable. Often volleys were fired at his personality, and his family's lavish and somewhat indulgent—read 'un-Islamic'—lifestyle. Only last month Mr Taseer was accused of having left the country without informing the Punjab government in breach of the state protocol; a sustained media campaign followed which despite its best efforts failed to prove that Mr Taseer had gone abroad. Earlier photographs of his family partying away in the privacy of their home were placed in the media. Mr Taseer had the courage and the old world grace not to be bogged down or issue a denial in the face of such ungainly criticism that was clearly below the belt.

The Islamists openly called for his dismissal from the office for supporting the case of the Christian convict, for seeking presidential pardon for her, if it should come to that, and for being a vociferous opponent of the so-called Islamic laws that were introduced by Gen Ziaul Haq and which at best have remained highly controversial. A few also threatened to try Mr Taseer for condoning blasphemy against Islam. But he in that ideological sense represented the somewhat traditional liberal stance of the PPP, which the party itself has not truly been very comfortable with of late.

It remains to be seen what actually motivated the killer to open fire on Mr Taseer, inflicting a fatal wound, but it is not far from informed conjecture to say at this point that the motivation could have most likely been religious intolerance which leads to extreme reactions. The trend is rampant nowadays, and has led to wholesale killing of citizens, attacks on Sufi shrines and places of worship of rival Muslim sects, and of the minorities.

This is partly because hypocrisy takes the best of many politicians from across the spectrum. Even non-religious parties like the MQM, the PML-N and the PML-Q, could be seen losing their composure when it comes to issues such as demanding the release of Dr Aafia Siddiqui from her American prison, citing little else in her defence besides her bona fides as a Muslim woman convict, but in reality wishing to add to the woes of their political rivals' government. Similar is the stance taken on American drone attacks, even though everyone knows that Pakistan Army provides or shares the intelligence over which such aerial strikes are carried out against extremist elements.

Back to Mr Taseer's assassination, it was rather uncanny to overhear a conversation that I did between two security guards outside the building they were deputed to guard, within minutes of the news of Mr Taseer's death breaking. One guard congratulated the other on the assassination while the other responded by saying that the killer was indeed a very courageous man, God be praised.

This is not the country that makes one feel very safe.

(ii) A BRAVE MAN CUT DOWN BY FANATICISM

Daily Times 5 January 2011

A brave man cut down by fanaticism

by Rashed Rahman

The whole country has been shaken and sent into new depths of depression and gloom by the assassination of Governor Punjab and publisher of Daily Times Salmaan Taseer. A man of conviction and courage, Salmaan Taseer was gunned down by one of his own Elite Police Force guards. The assassin, after the dastardly deed, surrendered to police. He has stated that he had killed Governor Salmaan Taseer because he had called the Blasphemy Law a black law.

The incident shows that the fanatical mindset has now permeated broad sections of our society. The governor's defence of Aasia bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death by a lower court on an alleged charge of blasphemy evoked the religious lobby to condemn him. Fatwas were issued calling for his death, and many of our 'heroes' of the electronic media joined the chorus of condemnation of the Governor for his bold stand in defence of a poor, helpless Christian woman. Much food for thought here for those still capable of thinking in our increasingly irrational society.

Salmaan Taseer grew up in straitened family circumstances due to the untimely demise of his father, famous intellectual Dr. M. D. Taseer. His mother, Chris, struggled in penury to bring up her three children, Salmaan and his two sisters. From such humble beginnings, Salmaan went on to qualify as a chartered accountant from England, set up his own accountancy firm on returning to Pakistan, and ventured into the (then) booming Gulf States to build a business base that later catapulted him into the ranks of the captains of industry and commerce in Pakistan.

His association with the PPP was both emotional and consistent. He was the author of a book on Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, whom he greatly admired, a prolific reader and writer, and a man who never shrank from expressing his firmly held opinions without fear. This boldness often landed him in trouble. Arrested during the MRD movement of 1983 by the Ziaul Haq military regime, he was subjected to horrendous torture in the notorious Lahore Fort. Undeterred, he rose to Leader of the Opposition in the Punjab Assembly in 1988, a stint that sealed his enmity with then Chief Minister Punjab Nawaz Sharif and the PML-N. For his outspoken criticism of the Sharif government from the floor of the Assembly and outside, Salmaan was beaten black and blue by the Punjab government's goons, suffering fractures in the process.

None of this broke his spirit though. He concentrated on building up his business empire, and then re-entered the political fray as a federal minister in the caretaker government that oversaw the elections of February 2008. Later, in May 2008, he was appointed Governor Punjab by the PPP-led government, an office he held until his untimely death.

For his boldness and courage of conviction, friendship and generosity, fearless advocacy personally and through his media group (which includes Urdu daily Aaj Kal and TV channel B-Plus) of liberal causes, Salmaan Taseer will live on in our hearts and memories.

God grant his family the strength to bear this irreparable loss.

Rest in peace, my friend.

(iii) EDITORIAL: A FOUL MURDER

Daily Times, 5 January 2011

There are no words to describe the shock and horror of the assassination of Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer. This is yet another high profile murder of a political figure from Pakistan's People's Party (PPP) after Benazir Bhutto. The governor could not survive 27 bullet injuries, which were inflicted when one of the guards of his security detail opened fire at him as he came back to his car after having lunch with a friend at a restaurant in Kohsar Market in Islamabad. The autopsy has revealed that his death was caused by a bullet wound in his neck. Interior Minister Rehman Malik has told reporters that the assassin, Punjab Elite Force member Malik Mumtaz Hussain Qadri, confessed to killing Taseer for criticising the blasphemy laws. The governor held an open stance against the blasphemy laws promulgated by General Ziaul Haq and had called for their repeal, or at the very least their amendment to guard against the misuse and abuse of many years since the law was promulgated by a dictator and then made more stringent by successor governments of the right. However, it would be premature to say that this indeed was the motive behind the assassin's act. This explanation sounds too pat. If history is any guide, such minor operatives act as tools in the hands of their cloaked masterminds and are usually killed after the deed is done. The strange circumstance is that the assassin was able to unload his gun into the victim without being fired back on or even accosted by the rest of the governor's security detail. So far, the assassin and the entire security detail are in policy custody and being investigated. Only time will tell whether this was an individual act or someone orchestrated it to create political instability in the country at a time when the federal government is already teetering after losing its majority in parliament with the departure of coalition allies JUI-F and MQM.

If indeed it was an individual act and done to avenge the governor's opposition to the blasphemy laws, then this murder is a grim commentary on the state of affairs in Pakistan. If the religious extremists who consider themselves the guardians of the Prophet's (PBUH) honour can go so far as to take the life of someone who opposed man-made laws, then society is heading for anarchy and barbarism. This means that there is no space for a rational discourse and even a person of such high profile as the Governor Punjab cannot escape their wrath. It also speaks of the weakness in the security regime of the Punjab government.

The Punjab government is responsible for the provision of security to all VIPs in the province. It is strange that a person with such extremist inclinations as Malik Mumtaz Hussain Qadri was deployed in the governor's security detail. The Punjab government cannot absolve itself of part of the blame for this murder. Its call for a judicial inquiry has yet to be responded to by the federal government, which has so far set up an inter-agency investigation team to look into all aspects of the assassination, including whether the assassin acted alone or a deeper conspiracy was at work.

Salmaan Taseer was an entirely self-made person and created a career as a businessman and politician by dint of sheer hard work, courage in the face of adversity, and a fearless stance even when threatened by malign forces. He was a highly qualified chartered accountant, having obtained

his qualification from England, and initially made a business fortune in the Gulf. He relocated to Pakistan and established the First Capital Securities Corporation, a full service brokerage house in 1994, and next year founded WorldCall Telecom Limited in 1995. The company has since become a major private sector telecom operator and expanded its network to the Gulf region. However, business was not his only interest. Politically motivated since his student years in London, Taseer participated in politics from the PPP's platform and experienced the tribulations of the martial law of Ziaul Haq during the Movement for Restoration of Democracy in 1983, including a spell of incarceration and torture in the infamous Lahore Fort. He also authored a biography of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1980 titled, *Bhutto, A Political Biography*. In 1988, he was elected a member of the Punjab Assembly, eventually taking over the slot of the Leader of the Opposition. Due to his trenchant criticism of the PML-N government in Punjab, he was rounded up and tortured by the security forces on the directives of the Sharifs. His later attempts to enter the National Assembly in successive elections during the 1990s did not succeed. He, however, continued to exercise considerable clout within the party. After developing his successful businesses, Salmaan Taseer ventured into the world of the media, a project close to his heart. He launched the Daily Times newspaper and television channel Business Plus (now renamed B-Plus). This was followed subsequently by the launch of a liberal Urdu daily, Aaj Kal. He was appointed Governor Punjab on May 15, 2008, much to the chagrin of the PML-N. He had since gained prominence in the political arena and served as the strongman of the PPP in Punjab and therefore a thorn in the side of the PML-N.

His murder has been strongly condemned by leaders across the political spectrum. The PPP workers have reacted by staging a demonstration in front of the Governor's House in Lahore and various locations in most major cities. Markets in Lahore, Faisalabad and other parts of the country closed as soon as the news of the assassination spread. The prime minister has announced a three-day mourning, the PPP two weeks of mourning, while the Punjab government has decided to close all educational institutions in Punjab today, partly as a mark of respect, partly out of security concerns. The nation suffered a great loss in this assassination. A liberal and progressive voice in a political scene infested by rightwing politics has been silenced. Now justice and the very well being and future of the country demands that the culprit/s be punished to the full extent of the law as a deterrent to such fanatics who seem to be teeming in the very entrails of our state and society.

(iv) A DIVIDED PAKISTAN BURIES SALMAN TASEER AND A LIBERAL DREAM

The Guardian, 5 January 2011

Liberals have long been a minority force in Pakistan, reviled for importing 'western' ideas and culture; now they are virtually an endangered species

Declan Walsh in Lahore

Prime minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani at the funeral of assassinated Punjab governor Salman Taseer. Photograph: Ilyas J Dean/Rex Features There was silence in the ancient city of Lahore yesterday as Salman Taseer, a pugnacious son of the soil who made his name by speaking out, was lowered into an early grave.

Soldiers in fantail turbans snapped to attention; a cluster of stone-faced relatives looked on. A helicopter had carried Taseer's body from the governor's residence, a short distance away:

authorities feared another fanatic, like the one who gunned down the Punjab governor 24 hours earlier, would show up.

At the graveside Taseer's three sons, men with black shirts and soft red eyes, flung clumps of rose petals into the grave. One was supported by a friend. A bugle sounded.

As graveyard workers shovelled sticky winter clay onto the coffin, many Pakistanis wondered what was disappearing into the grave with the outspoken politician.

Liberals have long been a minority force in Pakistan, reviled for importing "western" ideas and culture; now they are virtually an endangered species. As Taseer was buried, petals also flew through the sky in Islamabad where a cheering throng congratulated his assassin, a 26-year-old policeman named Mumtaz Qadri, as he was bundled into court. "Death is acceptable for Muhammad's slave," they chanted.

Taseer's crime, in Qadri's eyes, was to advocate reform of Pakistan's blasphemy law. Few other Pakistani politicians dared to speak against the law, which prescribes the death penalty for offenders yet is widely misused. Those who did now live in fear.

Sherry Rehman, a female parliamentarian from Karachi who tabled a parliamentary bill advocating reform of the blasphemy law, has disappeared from public view. Supporters have urged her to flee the country; sources close to her say she is determined to stay. Rehman has not yet requested extra police protection. A source said she "wasn't even sure what it means any more".

Religious parties refused to condemn Taseer's death, implying that he got what he deserved; some described him as a "liberal extremist". But intolerance from the religious right is nothing new in Pakistan; more striking is the lack of leadership from the country's secular forces.

The opposition Pakistan Muslim League-N party was conspicuously absent from the Lahore funeral, perhaps mindful of a decree by Barelvi mullahs that those condoling with Taseer also risked death. But capitulation to the religious right has also infected the ruling Pakistan People's Party, of which Taseer was a staunch member.

Since Taseer's death party supporters have burned tyres and chanted the old slogans: "Jiye Bhutto!" and "If you kill one Bhutto another will rise!" Party leaders painted Taseer's death as part of a "conspiracy". "We need to find out if this is an attempt to destabilise Pakistan," said law minister Babar Awan, announcing the inevitable judicial enquiry.

But the tired rhetoric masked a less palatable truth: that Taseer had been abandoned by his own leadership. After Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman, was sentenced to death under the blasphemy laws on 8 November, Taseer visited her in jail with his wife and daughter to show his support.

Shortly after, an Islamic mob rioted outside the governor's house in Lahore, burning his effigy and calling for his death. On television prominent media commentators joined the chorus of criticism.

Senior figures in his own party turned tail. Awan, the law minister, said there was no question of reforming the blasphemy law. "As long as I am law minister no one should think of finishing this law," he said on 26 November. Another minister confirmed that position one week ago.

The U-turn was the product of a huge miscalculation. At the start of the Aasia Bibi affair on 8 November, President Asif Ali Zardari suggested he might pardon the Christian woman if she was convicted. But he stalled, apparently hoping to extract political mileage from the affair.

Then on 29 November the Lahore high court, which had a history of antagonism with Zardari, issued an order forbidding him from issuing a pardon. The issue became a political football, a struggle between the government, the courts and the mullahs. Zardari was powerless to act.

And the Punjab governor was left swinging in a lonely wind.

In his last television interview, on 1 January, Taseer said it had been his “personal decision” to support Aasia Bibi. “I went to see her with my wife and daughter. Some have supported me; other are against me [...] but if I do not stand by my conscience, then who will?”

The answer, he knew, was simple: not many. Taseer’s liberal politics were controversial in Pakistan’s media, which is increasingly dominated by rightwing commentators. He ridiculed his enemies with messages on Twitter, a medium that he relished for its ability to deliver brisk, barbed jabs.

In December even Meher Bokhari – a leading female journalist who had once been ridiculed as a “CIA agent” after attending a US embassy party — asked Taseer if he wasn’t following a “pro-western agenda” by supporting the Christian woman. Taseer retorted that he didn’t know what she was talking about.

For many, the debacle shows how the heroes of yesteryear have fallen in Pakistan. In 2007 brave journalists, judges and lawyers came together to help oust the military leader President Pervez Musharraf from power. Today the judiciary has become enmeshed in controversy, the media offers an unfiltered platform to extremists, and the lawyers movement has been badly divided.

Ayaz Amir, a progressive commentator, noted yesterday: “The religious parties will always do what they do. You can’t blame them. It is up to the other sections of Pakistani society to stop the rot and reverse the tide. But it’s the political parties and the army should have done it. And they did nothing.”

Pakistan’s military and civilian leaders face many grave challenges, not least the still-burning Taliban insurgency in the north-west. But for embattled liberals, the death of Taseer exposed something ugly in their wider society, much as the shoulder-shrugging reaction to the massacre of minority Ahmadis in a Lahore mosque last May did.

Lahore is the capital of Punjab, the large and wealthy province that is the boiling cauldron of Pakistan’s ideological battle. Punjab is the breeding ground of extremists nurtured by the pro-Islamist policies of Pakistan’s army, which has used militants to fight Indian soldiers in Kashmir. According to US assessments in the recent WikiLeaks cables, it still does.

Two years ago extremists attacked the police training centre outside Lahore that is home to the Punjab Elite force, the province’s best-trained police commandos. This week a member of that same force – Qadri – was responsible for killing Taseer.

Taseer’s death has focused that ideological fight around blasphemy. The law originated under British colonial rule in the 19th century but only acquired notoriety in the 1980s when the dictator Zia ul Haq decreed that blasphemy was punishable by death (a provision that Islamic scholars say has little theological foundation). The law is also of questionable civil law value: it contradicts fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution.

It is a crime where no proof is required. The religious slander allegedly uttered by Aasia Bibi, for instance, has never been repeated by her accusers – to do so would be to blaspheme again. As a result, she has been convicted on the say-so of her neighbours, with whom she was having an argument in a field.

If Bibi's conviction is upheld she will be hanged, the first woman in Pakistan's history to be executed for blasphemy. If freed, she will have to flee Pakistan immediately.

Senior supporters say that Canada has made a tentative offer of asylum. But in the present climate in Pakistan it seems unlikely that Bibi will be set free. Senior human rights campaigners told the Guardian they feared she could be killed by zealots in jail or on the steps of the court, as has happened in other blasphemy cases.

The question now is who will speak up for her. For liberals, Taseer's death is a sign that their political space, already highly constrained, is becoming impossibly small.

"If Pakistan and Pakistanis do not try to excise the cancer within, the future of this country is very bleak," read an editorial in Dawn yesterday.

The face of Mumtaz Qadri, smiling beatifically as he was led away by police after killing Taseer, perhaps dreaming of his rewards in heaven, has become the image of Pakistan's national agony. Qadri claims to act in the name of Islam, the reason that Pakistan was founded.

Yesterday on Twitter, the medium beloved of Salman Taseer, liberal Pakistanis bemoaned the disappearance of "Jinnah's Pakistan" - the tolerant, pluralistic country envisioned by its founder, the lawyer Muhammad ali Jinnah, in 1947. Others tried to remember if it had ever existed.

And in the streets outside Pakistan's silent majority - the ordinary, moderate people who do not favour extremism or violence, and only want their society to thrive - were saying nothing. But in Pakistan, that is no longer good enough. Silence kills.

(v) THE REAL BLASPHEMY

Los Angeles Times

Pakistan's law not only threatens people like Asia Bibi, it strengthens radicals and the Taliban.

by Saroop Ijaz January 5, 2011

In June 2009 in Punjab, Pakistan, Asia Bibi, a mother of five and a farmhand, was asked to fetch water. She complied, but some of her Muslim co-workers refused to drink the water, as Bibi is a Christian and considered "unclean" by them. Arguments ensued, resulting in some co-workers complaining to a local cleric's wife that Bibi had made derogatory comments about the prophet Muhammad. A mob reportedly stormed her house, assaulting Bibi and her family.

However, the police initiated an investigation of Bibi, not her attackers. She was arrested and prosecuted for blasphemy, under Section 295C of the Pakistan Penal Code. She spent more than a year in jail. On Nov. 8, she was sentenced to death by hanging; she has since filed an appeal.

There is a need for broad legal and social reforms in Pakistan, and it can start with the repeal of this law. But the assassination Monday of Salmaan Taseer, the governor of Punjab, by one of his official security guards shows how difficult that will be. The alleged assailant reportedly gave a statement

after his arrest expressing no remorse as he was ostensibly “protecting Allah’s religion.” Taseer was perhaps Pakistan’s most brave, vocal and liberal statesman. He had met with Bibi in prison and subsequently lent his support to the campaign calling for the repeal of the blasphemy law.

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Section 295C was introduced into the Pakistani legal system in the 1980s by the military dictator Gen. Zia ul-Haq as part of his broader effort to Islamize laws in Pakistan. It stipulates that “derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet ... either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo or insinuation, directly or indirectly ... shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine.”

Bibi is far from the first person from a minority community in Pakistan to be sentenced to death for blasphemy. Although no person has yet been executed under the blasphemy law, at least 32 people have been killed while awaiting trial or after they have been acquitted of blasphemy charges. In 2009, 40 houses and a church were set ablaze by a mob of 1,000 Muslims in the town of Gojra, Punjab. At least seven Christians were burned alive. The attacks were triggered by reports of desecration of the Koran. The local police had already registered a case under Section 295C against three Christians for blasphemy. Hence a conviction or even an accusation under this law is often a death sentence.

The blasphemy provisions were an important component of a social engineering campaign devised and implemented by Zia during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s. The ostensible objective was to Islamize the Pakistani state. But the goal was also to tailor the social and legal system of the country to aid the mujahedin (loosely, the contemporary Pakistani Taliban) by making them appear to be indigenous freedom fighters.

The infamous discriminatory Hudood Ordinance, supposedly based on the Koran, was put into effect. It sought to charge women who were raped with adultery if they could not bring forth four pious male Muslims who were witnesses to the rape. Zia also undemocratically amended the constitution to implement Sharia, or Islamic law. The school curriculum was modified to make it more Islamic. Female television anchors were ordered to cover their heads on the air; heavy censorship was exercised on the print and electronic media to safeguard the glory of Islam.

But it is not only Pakistan that has been adversely affected.

Zia’s Islamization efforts played a significant role in today’s global war on terrorism because of his social engineering, aimed to deliberately introduce ethno-centrism and intolerance into the moral fabric of Pakistani society. This, in turn, aided in the rise of the Taliban in the region, particularly the Pakistani Taliban.

It is almost an accepted fact now that the war on terrorism, both globally and in Pakistan, cannot be won by military might alone. Stopping Al Qaeda is still important, but the Taliban has become the top priority. We must isolate the Taliban, and not only geographically. It must also be stripped of all moral authority and public sympathy. That is hard to achieve with provisions like the blasphemy law in place. Institutionalized biases influence human behavior.

Legal and social reforms in Pakistan are imperative not only to save many like Asia Bibi but to provide a long-term, sustainable solution to the growing threat of extremism inside and outside Pakistan.

Pakistan and its democracy are in a state of ethical and political uncertainty, and the coalition

government is too fragile to address the crisis without internal and external help. A tolerant and secular Pakistan is crucial for eradication of global Islamic fundamentalism. And the international community is well placed to demand change, given Pakistan's extraordinary reliance on foreign support.

Bibi needs to be saved, and the laws perpetuating these barbaric practices need to be repealed.

Saroop Ijaz is a lawyer and human rights activist based in Lahore, Pakistan.

_(vi) IF IT TAKES UP THE EXTREMISTS' BATON, LIBERAL PAKISTAN IS LOST

The Guardian, 7 January 2011

The murder of Salmaan Taseer is terrible enough. But the feting of his killer has tipped people into a response of utter despair

by Kamila Shamsie

That Pakistan is a nation bound upon a wheel of fire is not in any doubt. The assassination of Salmaan Taseer, killed for speaking out against a blasphemy law that has been used time and again to persecute minorities and settle private scores, would itself have been a significant blow, depriving the nation of one of the few politicians willing to be fearless in facing down radicalism. But it was the image of lawyers sprinkling rose petals on to Taseer's smiling assassin - as though he were a bride and they the family of the groom welcoming him into their fold - that dealt a body blow from which Pakistan's liberals and progressives are unsure they can ever recover.

How far the nation has travelled over the decades is evident in the distance between the petal-throwing lawyers and the finest document in the country's history - not its ever-amending constitution, but a judicial report penned by Justices Munir and Kayani in 1954, in response to the anti-Ahmadiyya riots of 1953, which marked the first time the religious right used violence against the state to try and push forward its programme of defining Pakistan.

The riots were designed to press the government into declaring members of the Ahmadiyya sect as non-Muslim. The attempt failed, but showed up certain dangerous problems within the new state. The Munir-Kayani report didn't merely look at the facts surrounding the riots, but delved into theology, philosophy and dry wit to expose the dangers and absurdity of the religious right's position. In a particularly brilliant section the report asks 10 ulema (Islamic scholars) to lay out the minimum conditions a person must satisfy to call themselves a Muslim. After reproducing the wildly divergent answers, the justices write: "Need we make any comment except that no two learned divines are agreed on this fundamental ... And if we adopt the definition given by any one of the ulema, we remain Muslims according to the view of that alim [scholar] but kafirs [infidels] according to the definition of everyone else."

One thing the justices never envisioned as they highlighted the impossibility of "an Islamic state" when so many different versions of Islam exist, was that anything could band together the disparate groups of the religious right. Yet that is precisely what happened around demands for the blasphemy laws to be amended. There are far too many differences and enmities between those groups for

agreement to stretch very far. But the site of agreement has encroached on the liberal space within Pakistan.

The extent of this encroachment became clear recently as many of those who had been insisting that a decisive response was needed in the name of anti-extremism blogged and tweeted their delight at a fatwa apparently issued by a previously unheard-of mufti, Muhammad Idris Usmani of the Jamia Islamia. He declared that, on examining all the evidence, it was clear Salmaan Taseer was not guilty of blasphemy; rather, the real blasphemers were those who praised or justified his assassination in the name of Islam. Their punishment, in accordance with the Qur'an, was "execution, or crucifixion or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile". He then went on to list all those real blasphemers, including "200 lawyers who cheered up the killer; dozens of journalists, scholars and media persons who justified the killing".

The authenticity of the fatwa - and the man himself - is in serious doubt. But the responses to it from liberals were genuine enough. Some who expressed delight at the fatwa probably would be entirely pleased to see the execution of those cheering on the assassin - in Pakistan you can be both a liberal and a fascist, so long as you're a secular fascist. But in other places the approval for the mufti seems indicative of a deep despair born of a certainty that extremism has won. We are left with the image of liberalism's last act - the attempt to hurl extremism's weapons back at it, not in the hope of causing serious damage but because there are no other weapons left. At least, that's how it feels today. That is the cheeriest note it's possible to strike at the moment.

For those who insist that Pakistan's religious right problem started with the rule of General Zia in 1977, look at the warning within the Munir-Kayani report of 1954: "Provided you can persuade the masses to believe that something they are asked to do is religiously right or enjoined by religion, you can set them to any course of action, regardless of all considerations of discipline, loyalty, decency, morality or civic sense."

That should have been a wake-up call; it wasn't. Two decades later, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who had campaigned on a secular socialist platform, declared the Ahmadiyyas non-Muslim, in an awful attempt to outflank the religious right. Like many other politicians before and since, he thought he could use Islamic rhetoric to his advantage, without too much concern about fallout. And so we are left with the haunting final words of the report: "But if democracy means the subordination of law and order to political ends - then Allah knoweth best and we end the report."

_(vii) Salman Taseer's children

Salman Taseer's children on father's killing in Pakistan (BBC Video)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12157338>
