

# **Pakistan & religious bigotry: Silencing Mashal - The gruesome lynching of the young Mardan university student**

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MASHAL Khan was neither the first nor is he the last victim of the religious bigotry that has become so pervasive in our society. The gruesome lynching of the young Mardan university student shows how easy it is to inflame a mindless mob in the name of faith. The men who pumped bullets into Mashal and beat his lifeless body were mostly his fellow students.

Most horrific was the alleged role of some faculty members and university employees in inciting the students to violence and that too on trumped-up blasphemy charges. A seat of higher learning was the venue of the incident and a mob of educated men were involved in this beastly act. This kind of medieval barbarity is unprecedented even in this country where human life comes cheap.

It was murder most foul and the motive was to silence a brilliant student who dared to speak his mind and question what was going wrong at the university and in the country. It apparently angered some in the university management and they sought to teach him a lesson for being so outspoken. The charge of blasphemy came in handy to inflame sentiments.

There is no shortage of bigots devoid of any sense of reasoning. However educated they may be, they are ready to kill in the name of faith. It took no time at all for a mob to gather, many of them not even very religiously motivated, just a mindless lot. Even watching a grainy video of the violence makes one sick. One wonders if they were even human beings.

Another horrific part of the incident was the reported involvement of members of some political parties, including an elected district councillor, in the gruesome act. A video showed them celebrating the killing. That raises many questions about the conspiracy to murder. It is intriguing that persons with disparate political affiliations joined hands in carrying out the crime. It gives the incident a new twist. It seems a clear case of using blasphemy allegations to cover up the actual reason behind the murder.

*"Certain sections of society have whipped up sentiments over 'blasphemous' social media material."*

Mashal was a progressive person who had a thinking mind, a rare commodity in the increasingly regressive atmosphere that prevails in our educational institutions. Decades of nurturing religious extremism by the state have produced a culture of violence and intolerance, causing the space for rational thinking to shrink.

The April 13 tragic incident cannot be seen in isolation. Over the past few weeks, we have seen a systematic campaign initiated by a section of the government, judiciary and media to whip up public sentiments over 'blasphemous' material on social media. Progressive bloggers are hunted and picked up without any evidence of their being involved in any blasphemous activity. The frenzy generated by the campaign has further empowered the radicalised section of society and hard-line clerics to question the religious belief of anyone who dares to differ with their retrogressive

interpretation of religion.

Even the prime minister has not been spared the allegations of committing blasphemy for remarks he made in his speech at a Diwali celebration by the Hindu community. It was not just hard-line clerics but even some so-called TV commentators who led the campaign against him. Among them was a retired senior air force officer-turned-defence analyst. It reminds one of the inquisition in Europe during the Middle Ages, where everyone was suspected of having heretical propensities. Even an accusation is licence to kill, thus generating an atmosphere of fear. Silence of the administration regarding targeted religion-based killings has further emboldened the extremist elements.

One example of how the murderers are glorified is the construction of the grand mausoleum of Mumtaz Qadri on the outskirts of Islamabad. The murderer of the former Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer is being projected as a martyr of the faith and as a saint. Thousands of devotees visit the shrine; among them retired judges and politicians. They come to pay homage to a convicted murderer. The administration appears completely helpless in the face of this defiance of law and justice. This weakness of the state, or rather its complicity, has been a major factor in causing incidents like the Mardan lynching.

Surely most of the perpetrators of this murder have been arrested and are likely to be indicted. But it is not just about this one incident, it is about the culture of impunity that legitimises killing merely on the accusation of blasphemy. Despite the public outrage over the savagery there are many clerics and members of Islamic parties who are not willing to condemn last week's incident. Is there any complicity or fear of annoying their conservative constituency? It may be both.

Initially, the reaction from some mainstream political parties was muted and it was only after the media highlighted the crime that they picked up the courage to deplore the killing. It is both fear and political expediency that caused this ambiguity. The gruesome killing may have sent shock waves across the country, but as in the past, one fears it could also prove transient and be forgotten with the passage of time. It is not enough to condemn this act of terrorism, there is now a need to take concrete steps to counter the growing religious extremism in the country.

The latest tragedy has provided an opportunity for the political leadership to work towards amending the blasphemy law to stop its misuse and to prevent Mardan-like incidents from happening in the future. There is a need to build a national consensus on reforming the blasphemy law before it is too late. The scourge of extremism cannot be eliminated without taking some bold measures to deal with the sources.

By silencing Mashal, the extremists have sent a loud and clear message. But does the political leadership have the courage and will to confront the challenge upfront? One hopes the Mardan tragedy will shake them out of their apathy.

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**P.S.**

\* "Silencing Masha". Published in Dawn, April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017:  
<http://linkis.com/www.dawn.com/news/SNb85>

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