

Pakistan needs courage - and help - to fight intolerance

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The bravery of Pakistanis fighting repressive blasphemy laws must be matched by support from the international community.

In a climate where minority rights campaigners are subjected to an onslaught of violence and intimidation, rare is the individual who sticks their head above the parapet. Pakistan's minorities minister Shahbaz Bhatti and Punjab governor Salman Taseer were two such people, who were sprayed with bullets as a result of their campaigns to reform the country's blasphemy law. Muhammad Afzal Chishti was the cleric who led Taseer's funeral prayer. After seven months in hiding, he has now had to flee Pakistan himself, as a result of receiving threats from extremist groups. Other family members have also been on the receiving end of intimidation, and Chishti's son Moin has filed an application to the office of the Punjab police chief requesting greater security.

Lest we forget, the blasphemy law in question regards hearsay as valid evidence, and is therefore frequently used to subjugate religious minorities such as Christian mother-of-five Aasia Bibi. A recent report from US-based NGO Human Rights First sheds more light on the perilous enforcement of blasphemy laws: it documents more than 70 cases in 15 countries where the application of blasphemy laws led to death sentences and lengthy prison terms, and sparked "assaults, murders and mob attacks". During one such trial in Indonesia this year, where a Christian was accused of insulting Islam, more than 1,000 rioters attacked the court and burned churches.

Blasphemy laws were entrenched by the Organisation of the Islamic Co-operation (OIC), formerly the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. Since 1998, it has put forward a series of resolutions at the UN human rights council aiming to combat the defamation of religion. However, a counter-campaign spearheaded by the US commission on international religious freedom - supported by a coalition of over 180 NGOs - led to a dramatic turnaround in March 2011. Pakistan promoted a resolution in which the words "defamation of religion" seemed like a distant memory. Instead, the resolution simply condemned intolerance and discrimination on religious grounds, calling for "a global dialogue for the promotion of a culture of tolerance and peace at all levels, based on respect for human rights and diversity of religions and beliefs". In a refreshing nod towards pragmatism, it compels states to "adopt measures to criminalise incitement to imminent violence based on religion or belief". Hence, the new resolution strikes a balance between freedom of religion and freedom of expression, and embraces the symbiotic nature of their relationship. (Both of these rights came to the fore during my involvement in the April 2011 campaign to defend Muslim scientist Dr Usama Hasan, who had received threats and intimidation after discussing evolution at a mosque in east London).

The appearance of Shehribano Taseer, the daughter of Salmaan Taseer, on a Geneva panel in March 2011, where she discussed the abuse of blasphemy laws, brought the urgency of these proposals into sharp relief. This new resolution is a positive step in challenging the "mob rule" mentality that showered her father's killer with reverence and rose petals. The same mentality that does not

believe in universal values of equality, fairness and human rights (unless opportunism takes hold), and actively seeks to stifle voices that promote these values.

The old “defamation of religion” resolutions – no matter how well intentioned they may have been – were not conducive to religious harmony and stymied legitimate criticism of the application of blasphemy laws. Not only did Governor Taseer receive opprobrium for his views on the unjust application of these laws, but his detractors tried to give the false impression that he had spoken against the prophet Muhammad (pbuh). What a departure from the mature approach advocated by the prophet Muhammad himself (he encouraged open, respectful dialogue on a variety of issues). This underscores the fact that the rules of engagement for debate and discussion are just as important as the ideas being discussed. In a further shocking twist, Taseer’s own son Shahbaz was kidnapped this morning in Lahore, by four men on motorbikes. No group has claimed responsibility for his abduction so far.

The best hope for Pakistan’s current crisis is for the international community to provide greater financial and moral support to civil society practitioners on the ground: people like Karachi medical student Sana Saleem, who has braved death threats in order to write about human rights issues on her blog. Or the Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance and Settlement, which came up with this pearl of wisdom back in 1999:

“Laws are not only a reflection of society’s attitudes to any given issue; they can change the prevailing attitudes. Good laws can help foster tolerance; bad laws can fire hate. Attitudes once set into motion are hard to bring to rest. The blasphemy law has very rapidly incited hate, and its misuse continues with impunity.”

The blasphemy debate is often framed as a struggle between conservatives and liberals, but at its heart lies the value of simple humanity and courage. As Governor Taseer himself used to point out, quoting his Urdu poet uncle Faiz Ahmed Faiz: “Even if you’ve got shackles on your feet, go. Be fearless and walk.”

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P.S.

* Source: <http://www.sacw.net/article2256.html>. The Guardian, 26 August 2011.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2011/aug/26/pakistan-intolerance-blasphemy-laws>