

Press Review: Easter Bloodbath in Lahore (Pakistan) and A Siege in the Capital ; an unending cycle of extremism

Friday 1 April 2016, by [ABBAS Akhtar](#), [ALI Mahir](#), [ALI Rozina](#), [ALI Tariq](#), [ARMYTAGE Rosita](#), [ASHGAR Mohammad](#), [JUNAIDI Ikram](#), [KHALID Haroon](#), [YASIN Aamir](#) (Date first published: 30 March 2016).

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Pakistan: Easter massacre

Dawn - 30 March 2016

by Mahir Ali

THERE are times when it is possible to be shocked and horrified without entirely being surprised. Sunday's atrocity in Lahore falls into that category. The mass murder in a public park, evidently aimed primarily at Christians celebrating Easter, in the full knowledge that a large proportion of the victims would be children, epitomises the mindless brutality of forces unleashed almost four decades ago.

A comment in The Guardian on Monday lamenting the Gulshan-i-Iqbal suicide bombing was titled 'Religious extremists will never succeed in taking over Pakistan'. It's a well-intentioned piece, but it ignores the fact that Islamic fanatics did in fact take over Pakistan in 1977. Their triumph was never complete, but what was wrought under the aegis of Gen Ziaul Haq has never completely been rolled back either.

The Taliban are a post-Zia phenomenon, but most factions, whether Afghan or Pakistani, would probably be willing to acknowledge him as a pater familias. Their infiltration into Afghanistan, reportedly alongside Pakistani security personnel, was intended in part to establish an Islamabad-friendly regime in Kabul. Another motivation, apparently, was to banish from Pakistan the dangerous ideology in which they had been indoctrinated.

What was wrought under the aegis of Zia has never been rolled back.

That turned out to be wishful thinking. It wasn't just that it was far too late to prevent a Taliban mentality from taking hold in Pakistan's northwest, or that the initial success of the Afghan Taliban lent succour to like-minded elements in the neighbouring state. The Pakistani security establishment, notably the ISI, remained determined beyond its role in Afghanistan to destabilise Indian governance in Kashmir through outfits such as Lashkar-e-Taiba.

More or less throughout the ascendancy of Pervez Musharraf, the United States was well aware that Pakistan was playing a double game, attacking some Taliban while coddling others. The acknowledgment earlier this month by Sartaj Aziz, the prime minister's foreign affairs adviser, that the Afghan Taliban have a sanctuary in Pakistan, was intriguing in respect of its confessional novelty, but hardly shifted the international perception of the nation's dubious role in Afghanistan.

It is not particularly reassuring, then, when the army gives notice of its intent to scour Pakistan's dominant province, Punjab, in order to root out extremism. Will it go after the Jamaatul Ahrar, a Pakistani Taliban splinter group that has unequivocally claimed responsibility for the Gulshan-i-Iqbal massacre, while ignoring other groups of the same ilk?

Surely, only an army that divests itself of all extremist links, domestically and internationally, could possibly play a decisive role in combating the terrorist threat. It is far from clear whether Gen Raheel Sharif's force measures up to that criterion.

There has been conjecture, apparently with good cause, that Sunday's mayhem was in part a response to the execution of Salmaan Taseer's assassin. It is certainly interesting that the despicable ex-policeman's chehnum was brought forward by almost a fortnight to March 27, which also happened to be the deadline given by religious groups to the Punjab provincial government for rescinding its attempt to legislate protection for women in the face of domestic violence.

Opposition to this mild and quite conceivably ineffective legislation has been articulated not just by outlawed outfits but by legitimate political parties, including the Jamaat-i-Islami. Such organisations have consistently bolstered the terrorists, even when they ostensibly do not advocate violence.

It was 60 years ago last week that Pakistan was formally designated an Islamic republic. The subsequent trajectory of the nation that Mohammad Ali Jinnah founded would in all likelihood have reinforced his fear that he had made a mistake.

The terrorist outrage in Lahore followed hot on the heels of the one in Brussels, where half as many people were murdered in suicide bombings at the airport and in the metro. The reaction to that appalling crime prompted some soul-searching about why it attracted so much more attention and outrage than bigger death tolls, in similar circumstances and by equally repulsive culprits, in cities in Iraq, Turkey and Yemen.

The whole problem stems, arguably, from a reluctance to see all victims as fellow human beings. Deaths by remote control, via drones, are not supposed to count as terrorism, and since no one can conclusively verify what is going on in the dark corners of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen or Somalia, the civilian deaths can easily be underestimated.

In Pakistan, the Sharif brothers, as businessmen, have been accused of pursuing relative liberalism as an economic end. Even if that is so, their project is worthy of support, provided its goals are unambiguous. Everyone knows that Nawaz and Shahbaz Sharif were nurtured by Zia, but if they have changed their minds about what they once stood for, it is a welcome development. The fruits of this switch, though, are yet to be harvested.

A Crisis for Minorities in Pakistan

The New Yorker, March 29, 2016

by Rozina Ali

When the bomb went off in Lahore's Gulshan-e-Iqbal Park, on Sunday, families were settled into the lull of Easter celebrations. Picnics were out and children were scattered across the playground. The suicide bomber walked purposefully to the swings before blowing himself up, along with the kids around him. More than seventy people died in the attack, at least twenty-nine of them children, and more than three hundred people were wounded. One reporter who arrived at the scene told me that victims were rushed to the hospital in ambulances, taxis, private cars, and rickshaws, while surviving children were rounded up as security guards tried to find their families.

Jamaat ul-Ahrar, a splinter group of the Pakistan Taliban that has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, took credit for the attack, claiming that it targeted Christians (in fact, more Muslims than Christians were killed). For nearly two decades, as terrorist attacks have intensified in the country, its minorities—Christians, Sufis, Shias—have been under assault. Mehreen Zahra-Malik, a Reuters journalist based in Islamabad, told me that the Christian families she spoke with in Lahore insisted that the government is doing its best to protect them. In the aftermath of past attacks, authorities had increased security at churches, especially on Sundays. Perhaps as a result, some surmised, the terrorists attacked a public park—not just hurting Christians, but Pakistanis of all faiths.

The news of another attack came as no surprise in Pakistan, where more people are killed by terrorism than in Europe and the United States combined. In one of the country's deadliest incidents, the Taliban massacred a hundred and thirty-two children at an Army school in Peshawar, in December, 2014. Lahore, too, has seen regular extremist violence. Jamaat ul-Ahrar attacked two churches last year, killing at least fifteen people. Still, Sunday's bombing, which was big, public, and in reality indiscriminate, came as a shock to the city. It reflected terrorism's alarming spread from the mountains of Northwest Pakistan and the chaos of Karachi into the heart of Punjab province, where Lahore—a city of history and poetry, fashion and music, famed foods and delicate gardens—is located.

Both Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his brother, Shehbaz, the province's Chief Minister, hail from Lahore. Despite this—or perhaps because of it—the province has enjoyed relative autonomy, escaping the strong fist of the Army. While the Army has been conducting widespread counterterrorism raids in Karachi over the past two years, detaining thousands, Sharif's political party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), has refused to allow such troop levels into Punjab. Instead, it has relied on police and counterterrorism forces inside the province to weed out extremists. Pakistan has regularly teetered between Army and civilian rule, and while 2013 saw the first transition from one civilian government to the next, the threat of military rule, especially in light of the government's failure to prevent recent terrorist attacks, is all too present.

Even as the tension between the military and political establishments came to the fore with the Lahore bomb blast, the government was under severe pressure from religious hard-liners in the capital of Islamabad, a hundred and sixty miles south. Last month, the government executed Mumtaz Qadri, a policeman who assassinated Punjab's relatively liberal governor, Salman Taseer, in 2011.

Taseer was trying to reform Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which criminalize desecration of holy (mainly Islamic) places and books, and he had defended a Christian woman, Asia Bibi, who was given the death penalty by Punjab's government for insulting the Prophet Muhammad (the sentence was later overturned).

When Qadri killed Taseer, right-wing religious groups lauded him as a hero. This weekend, tens of thousands of his supporters, members of the Barelvi movement of Islam, marched into Islamabad to protest his hanging, setting fire to buses and metro stations and damaging property around the city. Since Sunday, their numbers have dwindled into the thousands, but the group has settled in front of the parliamentary building as police try to quell any more violence. They have presented the government with a list of demands, which include implementing their version of Sharia law, removing secular and Ahmadi Muslim politicians from government, executing Asia Bibi, declaring Qadri a martyr, and releasing jailed Sunni clerics even if they were convicted of terrorism.

Unlike the Taliban, who follow the Deobandi and Salafi strains of Islam, Barelvis are relatively tolerant of minorities. Still, when I spoke with Raza Rumi, a commentator and analyst based in Ithaca, he said that blasphemy was a key issue for the Barelvis and that they condone violence to protect religion. Sharif's party, the P.M.L.(N.), has historically relied on right-wing groups such as the Barelvis for political support, but as the government moves toward tolerating a more outspoken civil society and clamps down on extremism (Rumi told me Qadri's execution would have been unthinkable five years ago), the right-wing base is pushing back. "These groups feel betrayed by Nawaz," Rumi said.

Yesterday, after closed-door deliberations and strong statements by Sharif that he will "avenge every last drop" of blood spilled in Sunday's attack, Army rangers entered Lahore for their first counterterror raids in the province. More than five thousand people have reportedly been arrested. The military's strong presence in the political heartland of the country could conceivably weaken the Sharifs' hold on power. Meanwhile, the protesters in Islamabad are in the third day of their sit-in. Some reporters speculate that government representatives are speaking with the protesters today, but so far authorities have neither cracked down on nor negotiated with them. Zahra-Malik, the Reuters journalist, articulated the question that almost everyone in Islamabad seems to have: "What is the government's strategy?"

There might not be a long-term one. Imtiaz Gul, the executive director of the Center for Research and Security Studies, in Islamabad, told me that the "reliance on counterterror actions" is effectively a reliance on the military. "The political capacity to handle matters such as in the Islamabad sit-in seems poor," he added. But security in Pakistan can't be maintained only by a military-led aggressive war on terrorism. Extremism in the country is intertwined with minority rights and tolerance, and requires a shift in politics that allows civil liberties and space for minorities. One start would be continuing Taseer's efforts and reforming blasphemy laws, a move that requires courage and will from the top.

Rozina Ali is a member of The New Yorker's editorial staff.

Suicide bombing in Lahore is the latest attempt to shut public spaces and

silence minority voices

The Conversation - 30 March 2016

by Rosita Armytage

Minorities are increasingly facing exclusion from Pakistan's public realm; and it's not only terrorists who are responsible.

The public park targeted in the recent suicide bombing in Lahore was popular with families. It is one of the largest green spaces in the city; a place where middle- and working-class Pakistanis go to picnic, exercise, and play with their children. The attack targeted Christians – a predominantly working-class community in Pakistan – who were celebrating Easter. Yet most of the 72 people killed were middle- and working-class Muslims.

This suicide bombing is the latest in a series of attacks seeking to eliminate Pakistan's religious minorities from the public realm. But while these atrocities target members of religious minority groups, attacking them in public spaces means that the damage is borne by all members of Pakistan's middle- and working-classes.

In Pakistan, there are few places where working- and middle-class families can spend time together, outside of their homes and places of worship. This is partly because many public places are not seen to be appropriate places for women.

For example, markets are often viewed as male-dominated spaces, where women should not loiter. And while shopping malls and coffee shops are considered by many to be appropriate places for women to meet, entertain their children, eat and shop, many working- and middle-class families are excluded, either because of the location, or the prohibitive cost of the merchandise available there.

By contrast, public parks are places where families can socialise, exercise and take their families outside of the segregated religious spaces of mosques or churches. They are also some of the only locations in Pakistan where Sunni Muslim families share space with members of Pakistan's minority communities – Shias, Christians and Ahmedis.

By targeting Gulshan-i-Iqbal park for the deadly attack, Taliban splinter group Jamaat-ul-Ahrar are seeking to intimidate religious minorities into abandoning the public realm. Sadly, they are not the only ones seeking to silence Pakistan's minority voices.

No space for minorities

At the same time as the bomb detonated in the Lahore park, 10,000 people were invading Islamabad's parliamentary area to protest against the execution of a self-confessed murderer: Mumtaz Qadri. Qadri was hanged in February for the assassination of former Punjab Governor, Salman Taseer, who had been seeking to reform Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

The blasphemy laws can lead to a death sentence for those accused of insulting Islam. Taseer had argued that the law was being used to victimise Pakistan's Ahmedi and Christian communities. The issue of blasphemy is politically sensitive, and attempts to amend the law have been virulently opposed by religious groups and conservative political parties.

The protesters gathered in Islamabad are demanding the implementation of Shariah law across the country; the release of Sunni religious clerics charged with murder and terrorism; that Mumtaz

Qadri be declared a martyr; and that members of the Ahmadi community and other religious minorities be removed from key government posts.

When fights broke out between protesters and civilian police, the military was called in to secure the site.

No space for debate

The attack in Lahore and the protests in Islamabad reflect different political agendas. Yet both are aligned in that they seek to eradicate religious minorities from the public space: from parks, and from leadership positions in government. These groups form an influential political power bloc, which each of Pakistan's successive governments has had to contend with and appease.

Pakistan's government and military – the de-facto power holder – have each contributed to division and intolerance in the country by systematically removing forums for public debate on a range of issues: from the blasphemy law, to the insurgency in Baluchistan. Those in power have sought to silence any direct critique of the military establishment, intelligence agencies, or their senior leadership.

Indeed, in April 2015, a public event titled “Unsilencing Balochistan” at the Lahore University of Management Science was cancelled at the instruction of the government. The speakers sought to raise awareness of the enforced disappearance of an estimated 18,000 Balochis – people native to the Pakistani province of Balochistan – in the conflict between separatists and national security forces.

A local activist, Sabeen Mahmud, rescheduled the cancelled talk by hosting the event in the small community space she ran above a bookshop in Lahore. Mahmud was assassinated by unknown perpetrators as she left the event.

The taboos around these issues have resulted in a national media which is reluctant to directly critique the government, the security forces, or conservative religious parties. Journalists reporting on these issues have been found dead in suspicious circumstances. Many others have received threats, both veiled and direct. Instead, the op-eds of major English language newspapers in Pakistan critique these institutions with vague allusions to “the Establishment” and “the Boys”.

Neither the ruling classes who hold government and leadership roles, nor the generals and brigadiers who staff the army, spend their time in public parks. They have their own private gardens, air-conditioned homes, and private security personnel. Meanwhile, the public spaces available to minority, working- and middle-class Pakistanis are getting smaller and smaller – and so are the forums to debate or critique the authorities' failure to address these issues.

Rosita Armytage, PhD Candidate, Anthropology, Australian National University

Lahore attack — Where do the real fault lines lie?

Dawn, March 28, 2016

by Akhtar Abbas

Gulshan-e-iqbal is a big public park situated in Lahore's Allama Iqbal Town. The place has long stretches of grass where families spend their leisure time eating home-made food over a spread bedsheet, or go boating in the lake, or explore the maze of inner Lahore or take joy rides in electric gondolas.

As a kid, I lived in a house just opposite one of its main gates; the park is featured in most of my childhood pictures.

Cricket was not allowed in the park area; even football was looked down upon by the gardeners. Mostly because the grass was fresh and the flower beds fragile.

However, near Gate No. 1, there was a secluded area, where the walls were a few feet higher and no one from the administration seemed to go there. We would often take out our cricket bat and play a game or two — the usual bet in summer times would be a breakfast of halwa puri and channay.

Recently, passing by the park, I wondered if kids still climb the wall and carry out their shenanigans the way we used to.

Yesterday, the place where you could not touch flowerbeds without a guilty conscience was riddled with human flesh and blood.

They chose the target carefully. Being Easter, the park was bound to be flooded with Christians. If their aim was maximum casualties, it was achieved without a doubt.

A year back, the Army Public School was attacked. The entire nation stood united in its message of fighting the war on terror. We even composed songs promising retribution against those who carried out these attacks and a safe country for our children.

Soon Operation Zarb-i-Azab (a joint military offensive conducted by the Pakistan Armed Forces against various militant groups) was declared a success and it seemed that issues like corruption in institutions and action against 'rogue' political parties would be the talk of town.

The Lahore attack reminds us that perhaps we were too quick in celebrating that victory.

Perhaps, the enemy lives deeper among us than we imagined, and perhaps it might take more than a few years to cleanse the mess we have generated for years.

The only way blasts like these can come to an end is by dismantling the terrorist network of well-wishers, sympathisers, sleepers, logistic supporters and planners.

The Lahore park carnage is a grim reminder that we are far from decapitating the terrorist network. Their network is like a jigsaw puzzle and we are far from sorting out the full picture.

Is it possible that somewhere someone is still holding an essential piece?

We may have understood how different religio-political groups have distanced themselves from violence in Pakistan, but can we be sure that all within the ranks of those groups adhere to this 'strategically' right proclamation?

There is a proverb in Pashto, "When an oven is hot, anyone can put their dough in it for cooking."

Are we still keeping the oven hot enough for others to take advantage? Where do the real fault lines

lie? Can we ever make a critical analysis of the situation we are in?

The biggest battle in this war is changing the mindset.

Recently singer-turned-evangelist Junaid Jamshed was targeted at the Islamabad Airport; a big mob is protesting against the hanging of Salmaan Taseer's killer, Mumtaz Qadri; a Shia lawyer was gunned down in Dera Ismail Khan last week. These occurrences are reminders that perhaps the narrative of peaceful sects of Islam and violent ones is a convenient tool that helps us avoid the real problem.

If looked at closely, these three recent incidents are of the same origin: Our across-the-board inability as a society to accept the opinions of others.

You don't have to agree with Junaid Jamshed or Taseer or the Ahmedis, Christians or Shias in their beliefs, but harming someone for their beliefs is where the trouble starts.

There are various degrees to this, the simplest by denigrating their epithets, the ultimate by blowing up near their festivals — and to some extent we are all guilty of it. Each layer is supported by the less violent one beneath it.

If we have to fight terrorist networks, we must fight extreme opinions.

The tools in the immediate battle against terrorists might be the guns and sticks of law enforcement agencies, but ultimately, it is the pen of the writers, the mic of the anchors, the voice from the pulpit and the clicks of ordinary citizens that will dismantle it.

The writer is an engineer from Pakistan.

Tariq Ali on Lahore Bombing: Is the Pakistani Government Turning a Blind Eye to Taliban Violence?

Democracy Now - March 29, 2016

[See the original SACW compilation for the video]

Pro-Qadri protesters given the night to disperse on their own: Nisar

Dawn.com — Updated Mar 30, 2016

ISLAMABAD: Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan announced that the government will clear the D-Chowk of protesters on Wednesday "at any cost", if they don't disperse by themselves in the night.

While addressing a press conference on Tuesday night, Nisar said “if the protest doesn’t end in the next one hour, then we will clear the Red Zone in the morning”.

It is not difficult to conduct an operation but there are innocent people in there who have been misled, “we don’t want bloodshed and want this to end peacefully”, said Nisar.

“The government is trying its best to protect people’s lives, but will make sure that it ends tomorrow anyhow.”

Currently the administration is discussing the issue that who should be allowed to leave and who shouldn’t as some miscreant elements are using the protesters as human shields, he maintained.

A rally organised by the Sunni Tehreek (ST) saw more than 10,000 charged protesters enter the federal capital on Sunday, damaging buildings and setting fire to the metro station, containers and buses.

The interior minister held Punjab government responsible for the security lapse but went on to say that the religious parties violated the written commitments they had made earlier.

“The permission to hold the gathering to mark chehlum of Mumtaz Qadri was granted on the written assurance that the participants will disperse in the evening following the Asar prayers. But a section of the gathering violated the commitment and resorted to violence.”

Some people tried to do politics under the cover of a religious gathering, he added.

Qadri, an Elite Force commando, was executed at Rawalpindi’s Adiala Jail on February 29. Qadri shot Taseer 28 times in broad daylight in Islamabad’s Kohsar Market on January 4, 2011.

Referring to the slogans chanted by the protesters, Nisar said “mere slogans don’t get you jannah, but you righteous actions do”.

“The Holy Prophet (PBUH) always kept his commitments. But unfortunately some people are carrying out violent activities in the name of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).”

Nisar maintained that legal action will definitely be taken against the people who caused damage to the state installations and announced that some arrests have already been.

A committee has been formed to closely monitor the security situation and access the shortcomings which lead to these people entering the Red Zone, he said.

We had already shared intelligence based information with the Punjab government, but it failed to control the situation and will be held answerable for its negligence, the interior minister said.

“But once the people had gathered, regardless of how, then it would have been inappropriate to exercise force against them.”

Additional reinforcements have been called and written orders have been passed that if there is a need to conduct an operation, then no security personnel — even an officer — will be armed, asserted Nisar.

The clean-up operation will be done in broad daylight in front of media so that everyone is witness to “who does what”, he said.

“I am thankful to the media for being sensible in handling the issue.”

The Islamabad district administration had earlier given the pro-Qadri protesters gathered outside Parliament House a two-hour notice to disperse.

The sit-in continued despite Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Monday night address to the nation during which he warned radical Islamists not to take the government's leniency as a sign of weakness.

The address followed a massive suicide bombing at Lahore's Gulshan-i-Iqbal park in which at least 72 people were killed.

The army responded by launching raids on suspected militant hideouts across Punjab.

More than 200 suspects have been detained in the raids in the past 48 hours, a security official said.

Pro-Qadri protests: Pakistan cannot be a progressive state until it loses its villainous heroes

scroll.in - 30 March 2016

A nation that lionises Ahmad Shah Abdali and Mahmud Ghaznavi would have to be tolerant of the Taliban and assassins like Mumtaz Qadri.

by Haroon Khalid

On Sunday afternoon, after their midday prayers, thousands of protestors headed in the direction of Islamabad, the federal capital of Pakistan. These were supporters of Mumtaz Qadri, the executed police constable responsible for the assassination of the governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, the same person he was assigned the task of protecting. Boastfully the assassin stood over the body of the governor, as his colleagues looked on. Some reports later said that Qadri had announced his intention to a few of his colleagues beforehand.

Disturbing scenes emerged after this assassination in 2011. Thousands rallied outside the court, where Qadri was to be presented, to garland him with flowers. Hundreds of lawyers, including the former Chief Justice of the Lahore High Court, Muhammad Sharif, offered to fight his case for free. On the other hand, the officially appointed maulvi of the Badshahi Masjid in Lahore refused to offer Salman Taseer's funeral prayer. Salman Taseer had come out in support of Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman accused of blasphemy, and in the process he criticised the blasphemy laws of Pakistan. For supporting a "blasphemer" and criticising the blasphemy laws, he was accused of blasphemy as well.

The debate on the blasphemy laws of Pakistan came to an abrupt end after Salman Taseer's assassination. Sherry Rehman, another liberal politician who had proposed a resolution in the Parliament for a review of the law, took it back and accepted the charge of Pakistan's Ambassador to the US. According to reports, there was a credible threat to her life and this was her way of staying out of the limelight for some time. A couple of months after Salman Taseer's assassination, Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian minister for Minorities Affairs and another critic of the blasphemy law, was shot down outside his home in Islamabad.

The parallel tracks

The assassination of Salman Taseer represents a pivotal event in the history of Pakistan. It was at this time that the myth of the silent, tolerant majority was busted. Before this, it was felt that religious extremism was confined to the fringes of the society, whereas the majority of the society was tolerant. But the way the public came out to support Qadri the miniscule liberal population realised that it was fighting a lost cause. It was around this time that I was working on my first book and interviewing different members of the minority communities. Most of them saw Salman Taseer as a hero and felt that due to public pressure Qadri would eventually be released. One of them even suggested that he would run for office after being freed and would become a Member of the National Assembly.

Mumtaz Qadri's case lingered on for several years, until finally this year the Supreme Court turned down his petition and his sentence was upheld. Strategically, on February 29, without any prior announcements, he was hanged. For the liberals of Pakistan, his execution emerged as a beacon of hope.

Only a few days later, Shahbaz Taseer, the son of Salman Taseer who had been kidnapped five years ago, was recovered miraculously. Pakistan received its second Oscar award through Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy's documentary *A Girl in the River*, prompting the prime minister to strengthen legislation against dishonour killings. The Women Protection Bill was passed soon after, providing solace to the victims of domestic abuse. While the men's cricket team received a thrashing at the T20 World Cup, the women's team made a mark. This was heartening for a nation which a few decades ago, under the same prime minister, had barred women sporting teams from attending Saarc games because it was deemed un-Islamic.

Meanwhile, Operation Zarb-e-Azab against militants was reported to be going successfully and it was being said by the army that the fighting capacity of the militants had been broken. The operation in Karachi was successful and peace, it seemed, had returned to the battle-worn city.

After a long time it felt as if Pakistan was on the right track.

But as the good news poured in, the uglier side of the picture emerged too. Spontaneous protests erupted all over the country after Qadri's execution. For a couple of days after Qadri's hanging, the city of Islamabad remained partially shut, as protestors roamed the streets, halting all traffic. According to some reports, as many as 2 lakh people attended his funeral ceremony in Islamabad. There was a public outpouring of grief. Some leaders of religious parties travelled all the way from Karachi to catch the last sight of Qadri. He had become a martyr, a shaheed and a ghazi, holy warrior. A small shrine has been constructed around his grave, and donations are pouring in from other parts of the country. Soon his shrine will be one of the most prominent shrines in Rawalpindi, the garrison city.

This Sunday about 2,000 protestors entered the Red Zone of Islamabad, an area cordoned off from the rest of the city. This is where the Parliament, the Supreme Court, the presidential and the prime minister's houses are located. Civilians are not allowed here without permission. However, for the 2,000 protestors, all the roadblocks and the hundreds of police officials deployed around the city were no impediment. They became violent as they gathered momentum, burning cars on their way.

The way forward

With the way things have played out in the past couple of weeks, questions are being raised once again. Is Pakistan actually heading in a progressive direction? I would argue that Pakistan is

desperately attempting to recast itself as a progressive country, particularly on the international stage. This explains the gestures mentioned above. However, if Pakistan truly has to redefine itself as a progressive country, graver structural issues need to be addressed. One of the most crucial features of that would be jettisoning a few of our cherished national heroes.

Much before there was Mumtaz Qadri there was IIm-ud-din, the son of a carpenter from Lahore who murdered a Hindu publisher called Rajpal for publishing a blasphemous book. On September 6, 1929, IIm-ud-din murdered Rajpal in broad daylight and pleaded guilty. Muhammad Ali Jinnah defended him in the court. Other prominent Muslim leaders too rallied behind him. He was hanged on October 4, 1929, and became Ghazi and Shaheed. His shrine was constructed in Lahore and is attended by hundreds of devotees even today. Various Pakistani politicians and bureaucrats have over the years acknowledged and praised his contributions to Islam. In a state where IIm-ud-din has been projected as a hero, it is only natural that Mumtaz Qadri would also become a Ghazi and Shaheed.

Another example is that of Ahmad Shah Abdali, the Afghan king who attacked India several times, leaving behind havoc. Pakistani textbooks refer to his attacks as Islamic jihad meant to combat Hindu kings. The political complexities are glossed over – neither is it mentioned that he fought and killed many Muslims while he was at it. Ahmad Shah Abdali unleashed terror on the Punjab and today in the schools of Pakistan Punjab he is celebrated as a Muslim hero. The same students whose ancestors once suffered at the hands of this Afghan king sing songs of his bravery today. In this context, it is no surprise that Munawar Hassan, the chief of Jamaat-e-Islami, one of the most important political parties in Pakistan, can make a statement declaring Hakimullah Mehsud a shaheed, the same Hakimullah who for years waged a war against the Pakistani state and its people.

Not too long ago I was talking to a cousin of mine who during the course of the conversation said that the Islamic State represents true Islam. I would be lying if I say I was horrified at his statement. It came as no surprise to me. We are taught to celebrate kings like Mahmud Ghaznavi in Pakistan because they destroyed the idols of Somnath. We are taught that they were true Muslims. Then why would we not view the Taliban and the Islamic State who destroyed the statues of Bamyán and archaeological ruins of Palmyra as Islamic heroes? As long as Pakistani historiography celebrates IIm-ud-din, Ahmad Shah Abdali and Mahmud Ghaznavi, we will continue to be tolerant of the Taliban, ISIS and people like Mumtaz Qadri.

Haroon Khalid is the author of the books In Search of Shiva: A study of folk religious practices in Pakistan and A White Trail: A journey into the heart of Pakistan's religious minorities.

Liaquat Bagh to D-Chowk — a trail of destruction

Dawn, March 28th, 2016

AAMIR YASIN | IKRAM JUNAIDI | MOHAMMAD ASGHAR

ISLAMABAD: From Liaquat Bagh to Parliament House, the supporters of Mumtaz Qadri left a trail of smoke and debris in their wake as they marched on the capital.

Citizens of the twin cities, meanwhile, were confined to their homes in the absence of up-to-date

information about the movement of the protesters due to a lack of coverage on electronic media.

Qadri's chehlum was held at Liaquat Bagh, where speakers including Sarwat Qadri of the Sunni Tehreek called on participants to march towards Islamabad.

Protesters demand release of Sunni prisoners, want Mumtaz Qadri declared martyr
Marchers were stopped by police at Chandni Chowk, where they retaliated and injured a number of law enforcement personnel. They were intercepted again at Shamsabad, where police used tear gas to deter them. However, the marchers pushed on, making it to Faizabad, where they moved the containers blocking their path and entered the capital.

City Police Officer Israr Ahmed Abbasi and Waris Khan DSP Zaman Raza were injured in clashes with protesters here. Around 1,000 people were booked and over a dozen were injured, the CPO told Dawn. "We are considering imposing Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) Section 7 (which deals with creating terror and violence in society) on these protesters. A case has not been registered yet but consultations with legal experts are underway," he said.

Once they entered Islamabad, the protesters had a clear path to the Red Zone. On their way, they torched the metro bus station at China Chowk and torched motorcycles and vehicles, damaged private and public property in Blue Area and tried to break the grills of the metro bus track.

Any policeman unfortunate enough to get in the way of the protesters was also badly beaten.

The retreating police kept firing a steady stream of teargas canisters at the advancing mob. This made it difficult to breathe and many people were seen gasping for breath. But the protesters seemed to be on top of things and certain individuals distributed salt, water and gas masks to protesters so they could cope with the effects of the teargas.

Rawalpindi-resident Kamran Hussain, who claimed to be a police official and former member of the Muslim Students Federation, told Dawn that the protesters had been peaceful, but it was the police that forced them to turn violent.

He claimed police opened fire at unarmed protesters. This enraged the mob, which then turned on the police officers. However, a police official, who was not authorized to speak on the record denied that police had fired live rounds on protesters.

"As many as 22 Rangers, police and FC personnel were injured when protesters pelted them with stones and beat them with sticks," he said.

Another protester, Mazhar Iqbal, who is an FSc student, told Dawn he had come to Islamabad with 16 other people from Sialkot.

"We came here because we want to atone for our sins and prepare for the afterlife. We will not go back unless our demands are met," he said.

Mohammad Farhan said he had come from Rawalpindi, but was forced to go back because of the intense teargas shelling. "If protest continues, I will come back to D-Chowk to show solidarity," he said.

The leaders of the protest, meanwhile, kept using abusive and derogatory language for media persons, saying that they were not on hand to provide them coverage.

The protesters at D-Chowk also released a set of 10 demands to the media. Issued under the banner

of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Ya Rasool (SAW), the statement claimed that Pakistan's Islamic identity was being threatened and that "an agenda to secularise Pakistan is rapidly taking shape".

The demands included the unconditional release of all Sunni clerics and leaders booked on various charges, including terrorism and murder; the recognition of Mumtaz Qadri as a martyr and the conversion of his Adiala Jail cell into a national heritage site; assurances that the blasphemy laws will not be amended; and the removal of Ahmadis and other non-Muslims who had occupied key posts. They also demanded the execution of blasphemy accused Aasia Bibi, the woman former Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer was killed for defending.

P.S.

* <http://www.sacw.net/article12549.html>