

Perspectives

Politics

Forfeiting the Future

Pakistan's crisis can't simply be explained by religion

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A COLUMN BEARING THE TITLE *Ki Muhammad se wafa tu nay* appeared on 1 January in the *Daily Jang*, the largest Urdu newspaper in Pakistan. Written by Mushtaq Ahmed Qureshi, it was quite close, in tone and in content, to an array of writing in the Urdu press commenting on the country's blasphemy laws, which have attracted considerable international attention due to the case of Asiya Bibi, a Christian woman who has been imprisoned for a year and faces a death sentence for the crime of insulting the Prophet Muhammad.

Hewing close to the conventions of Urdu column-writing, Qureshi opened with the description of a social setting (a funeral) where some sober men were gathered, discussing the affairs of the day. One asked, why is the governor of Punjab giving speeches against *khatm-e nabuwat* (Finality of Prophethood)? Another, a *maulana*, replied that he did not know—but said he did know that whoever maintains that there is another prophet after Muhammad, or denies the prophethood of Muhammad, can be legally killed. It was a shame, Qureshi wrote, that even though Salmaan Taseer knew that he would die one day and be judged for his words, he was so careless. At the end of the column, Qureshi cited, with great praise, a couplet by the renowned Urdu poet Muhammad Iqbal:

Ki Muhammad se wafa tu nay to hum teray hain/ Yeh Jahan chiz hay kiya, Loh o Qalam teray hain

Be faithful to Muhammad and I am yours/ This world is nothing, the Tablet and Pen are yours.

Three days later, on 4 January, Salmaan Taseer was killed—and his assassin publicly proclaimed that the murder was an answer to Taseer's efforts to amend or repeal the blasphemy laws. Much has been written, since, about Taseer himself and about the wide approval of the assassin's act in certain segments of Pakistani society. Once again, in an echo of the aftermath of Benazir Bhutto's assassination in 2007, political commentators have depicted Pakistan facing a grave crisis, one caused by a more or less natural progression of rightist Islamic ideologies, whose dominance has erased not only liberal and secular thought but all possible futures for the nation-state.

Such ahistorical views take as given that these conservative, sectarian and militant ideologies emerge organically from Islamic theology—and reflect, in turn, the inevitable effect of growing religiosity in Pakistan. The fault, dear Brutus, lies in the Crescent.

It is clear, of course, that a rather biased and selective understanding of the Muslim past and Islamic theology underlines the violence and fear widely on display in Pakistan. It is valid to ask what enables a columnist to make the illogical leap of equating speech against a legal principle to speech against the dominant religious truth? In a nation of over 90 percent religious conformity, why this sense of deep, abiding fear that some word, some gesture, will unravel the very fabric of belief? Why does the Prophet need Pakistan to defend him?

It behooves us to look for answers beyond the scripture and practice of Islam—for such mass hysteria is not evident among Muslims in Bangladesh or Malaysia or Tunisia or China or America—and toward the political life of religious discourse in South Asia. What we find, in fact, is a long history of the politicisation of the Prophet in Pakistani civil society, tracing its development is critical if we are to understand what possible futures still exist for Pakistan.

In 1913, Muhammad Iqbal published his 'Jawab-e Shikwa' ('Answer to the Lament') responding to the critiques that his long poem 'Shikwa' ('Complaint, or Lament'), published a year earlier, was blasphemous because of its anger and flippancy towards God. Where 'Shikwa' was Man addressing God ("Hear, O Lord, from the faithful ones, this lament/ From those who only sign praises, a little complaint"), 'Jawab-e Shikwa' reversed the narrative voice, and God answers directly—telling the beleaguered "Muslim" that it was his own lack of faith and courage that was responsible for his political and moral decline. The two poems reflect, remarkably well, the general mood of a South Asian Muslim community that saw itself under siege and at a particular nadir in historical time—colonised, devoid of political and social power, and mired in internecine and communal conflicts. Where 'Shikwa' had alienated Iqbal from some of the more orthodox contingents, 'Jawab-e Shikwa' was received with an ecstatic fervour. Iqbal was now the Poet of the East and in the decades that followed his devout and mystic poetry shadowed closely his political thought that presented, in 1930, the idea of a Muslim "homeland" in the subcontinent.

Many years later, under the military dictatorship of General Zia ul-Haq, Iqbal came to personify Pakistan itself. His verses became second only to the citations from the Qur'an as adornments in public and private spaces. It was then that the last couplet of 'Jawab-e Shikwa,' quoted above, emerged as the lynchpin of the Sunnification strategy of Zia ul-Haq—a strategy that aimed to re-format both the political and cultural life of Pakistanis along "jihad" lines.

This non-scriptural, non-ritualistic, non-sectarian prescription for the ills of Muslims had some echoes in the growing corpus of praise-poetry on the Prophet in the early decades of the 20th century, but it was startlingly original in its invocation of a political promise—that the Muslim, through fealty to the figure of the Prophet, could control his own destiny ("the Tablet and the Pen").

This particular prescription by Iqbal did not seem to make much of an impact in colonial India. Iqbal, of course, wasn't advocating any great shift in doctrine; Muhammad *is* the central figure of Islam and his figure *is* revered above all. Yet, after the tumultuous birth of Pakistan, there was indeed a change. Pakistan's emergence was soon connected, in narratives both political and religious, to the Prophet—he appeared in dreams to key figures to foretell the division of India and his sayings were variously interpreted to prophesise the role of Islam in Pakistan's political life. Yet, in Zia-ul-Haq's Pakistan, the Prophet became part of the daily political life in a way that would have been unimaginable to Muslims in the 1910s. Routinely, politicians professed to receive divine sanction from the Prophet for their decision to endorse a public platform or to run for office or to oppose the call for democratic reform; the *sunnah*—the daily habits of the Prophet—became axiomatic and emblematic rules for everyday life.

This emergence of the Prophet as a centralising and orienting *raison d'être* for Pakistan, however, was not merely an organic outgrowth of a religiously inclined society, it was a deliberate state policy, aided by Islamist parties, to mould public faith. The blasphemy riots of the 1950s, when the Ahmadi sect was violently resisted by the Jama'at-i Islami, had taught one clear lesson to the religious right: the veneration of Muhammad was great political theatre with infinite malleability for nearly every segment of the Pakistani population. With the explicit favour of the military regime, the figure of the Prophet quickly became central to national political memory—the celebration of his birth, the Mi'raj (ascension) and other milestones from his life were heavily funded and carefully orchestrated events, with the massive participation of the religious elite across Pakistan. Within this discourse, the religious right and the Islamist parties, constructed a categorically Sunni Pakistan (implicitly suppressing the Shia veneration of Ali) while projecting a non-sectarian universalism to their public lives.

Iqbal's poetry, and his concept of the Prophet as *mard-e kamil* (The Perfect Man), was a key component of Zia-ul-Haq's Sunnification politics. Even as he promoted Sunni militant organisations to wage jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan, he pushed Iqbal's vision across school curriculums and public spheres. He even branded himself as a *mard-e morin*

(Pious Man) and *mard-e haq* (Righteous Man). However, this was not a mere appropriation of a decades-old poetical register for communal and political consumption. Zia-ul-haq, and the Islamist parties, reinvigorated the claim to Muhammad's memory by casting it in nationalist, martial terms: Pakistan was envisioned as the "Castle of Islam"—the lone defender against a world arrayed to corrupt or corrode the very foundations of Muslim belief.

Even after Zia-ul-Haq's death, the Islamist parties retained both the political theatre and the political force that the figure of the Prophet could mobilise across sectarian and class boundaries. The protests against *The Satanic Verses* in 1989 melded the defense of the Prophet, blasphemy, and virulent anti-Americanism into one heady brew—which has been feeding the Islamist parties to this day.

Even as the figure of the Prophet grew in public consumption to deified realms, it withdrew both from historical light and from political dissent. The Islamist parties, though nationalist, are also explicitly anti-statist, and can effectively mobilise public sentiment against the state by invoking Muhammad—this was clearly visible in the various demonstrations against the Danish cartoons of the Prophet in 2005, graffiti from which still litters walls across Punjab.

Taseer's cold-blooded murder, and the chilling response to his assassination, reveals less about the crass "Islamisation" of the Pakistani public and more about a deeply entrenched political program that routinely marshals potent symbols against critical voices. The evident success of this program, however, does not erase the fact that the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis battle stark poverty, high inflation, and a lack of access to basic facilities. Even as Islamist parties orchestrate demonstrations against blasphemers, every day brings another demonstration against rising electricity and gas prices and the pernicious effects of "load-shedding." There are, in other words, many other potent narratives available to those in Pakistan who seek to change the cultural and political landscape. Vigilante or terrorist violence cannot be the last word in this discourse, and history itself cannot remain silent.

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