

Pakistani regime shuts newspaper and charges editors with blasphemy

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26 February 2001

Under the pressure of Islamic fundamentalist groups, Pakistan's military regime headed by General Pervez Musharraf has arrested the editor and other staff members of the English language daily, the *Frontier Post*, over the publication of an email insulting to Muhammad, the founder of Islam. Those arrested face the death sentence or life imprisonment under the country's reactionary blasphemy law.

The newspaper, which is based in Peshawar, the provincial capital of North-Western Frontier Province, published the email from a "BenDZac" in the US entitled "Why Muslims Hate Jews" in its January 29 issue. According to an account in the *New York Times*, the editor had assumed that the letter was an attack on Jews, failed to read its content and was horrified to find later that it denounced Muhammad as a liar, a murderer, a womaniser and a "nazi". The email is out of character with the general editorial line of the newspaper, which in the past has referred to the prophet in nothing but reverential terms.

But the letter was immediately seized upon by Islamic fundamentalists to stir up outrage, prompting the district magistrate to order the newspaper's press to be sealed and its staff arrested. According to the magistrate, "the contents of the letter were highly sacrilegious and derogatory to Islamic faith" and caused "resentment" among the people. The *Frontier Post* offices were sealed that evening. Those arrested were Aftab Ahmed (News Editor), Imtiaz Hussain (Chief Reporter), Qazi Sarwar (layout), Munawar Moshin (Opinion Page Editor) and Wajithullah (layout).

The action against the newspaper came from the highest levels. It was initiated by the provincial military administration on instructions from Islamabad. Musharraf himself declared that a serious offence had

been committed and the government "would not let the culprits go unpunished". He hinted at a broader crackdown on the media, commenting that the letter was an example of the unacceptable transgression of "press freedom". The provincial military authority has since closed the Urdu language newspaper *Maidan*, which is affiliated to the *Frontier Post*, along with its web site.

On January 30, the *Frontier Post* issued an unqualified apology in an advertisement published in other papers and claimed, "the matter is the outcome of a conspiracy". On the same day, however, a mob of around 1,000 Islamic fanatics drawn from the city's Madrassas (autonomous Islamic schools) and other religious institutions stormed and set fire to the newspaper's offices, destroying its printing presses. Police officers on the scene stood back and watched.

Fundamentalist organisations including the Pakhtoon Federation, which is affiliated with the Awami National Party, Jamaat-Ittehad-ul-Ulema and Pasban organised demonstrations in Peshawar and announced a 2 million rupee reward for anyone who killed the letter's author, "BenDZac". Demonstrators attacked journalists and photographers who were present to report on the protests.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has written to Musharraf demanding the release of the arrested journalists. Another international journalists' organisation, Reporters sans Frontiers (Reporters without Borders), sent a letter to the Interior Minister calling on him to "ensure the safety of journalists" and "guarantee the right to inform and to be informed."

While condemning the publication of the letter, the Pakistani media has been critical of the military regime for bending to the demands of Islamic fundamentalists.

In its editorial in the February 9-15 issue, the *Friday Times*, attacked Islamic extremists saying: “Civil society is increasingly held hostage by religious fanatics in Pakistan. So-called Islamic laws, which distort reality, hinder rather than help progress.”

The blasphemy law was introduced in Pakistan in 1980 by military dictator General Zia Ul Haq as part of his “Islamisation program” aimed at appeasing Islamic fundamentalist groups that demand the full implementation of the Islamic religious or sharia law. By imposing the death sentence on anyone who “defiles” Islam, it has been used to intimidate and terrorise non-Islamic ethnic and religious minorities inside Pakistan, particularly Christians.

In May 1998, a Roman Catholic bishop in Pakistan John Joseph committed suicide in protest over the country's blasphemy laws and the conviction of Ayub Massih for blaspheming Islam. He shot himself in the head in the corridors of the court house where Massih was tried. The bishop had claimed that the charges against Massih were false and aimed at forcing 15 Christian families to drop a local land dispute.

Last year the military regime attempted to make a minor amendment to the law requiring an inquiry prior to any charges being laid but backed down in the face of protests by Islamic organisations.

Musharraf is particularly sensitive to the demands of Islamic extremists. When a non-governmental organisation, the All Faiths Spiritual Movement International, held a demonstration in January against the use of the blasphemy law to suppress minorities, the police broke it up violently. Islamic groups have now seized on the *Frontier Post* letter as a means of stepping up their demands on a range of issues.

Under pressure from the major powers, Musharraf has begun to implement elements of the United Nations sanctions imposed on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan last month. The Taliban's offices in Islamabad have been shut and Pakistan's interior minister visited Kabul to call on the Taliban to stop supporting Islamic groups in Pakistan.

Most of the Islamic groups have connections with Taliban, which had its origins in the Madrassas religious schools and was covertly backed by the Pakistani government and military. Over the last month following the imposition of UN sanctions on Afghanistan, the pro-Taliban fundamentalists have

launched a campaign against the Western powers, preaching the “legitimacy” of a Jihad (holy war) against “enemies of Islam” and demanding the implementation of Islamic law.

The regime is facing demands from the US and other powers that it curb the activities of Islamic extremists who are accused of being involved in the Kashmir conflict and in anti-government activities in Central Asia. On February 12, Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider announced to the press that he had given orders to the police to prohibit groups from “displaying arms” in public and to “just shoot them” if they did not obey. He also banned the raising of funds for “jihad” groups, which provoked a call from Islamic fundamentalists for his resignation.

Musharraf is also facing protests from opposition parties grouped in the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy over rising prices and other economic issues. On January 29 police opened fire on a demonstration of peasants who were protesting against power cuts by the state-controlled Water and Power Distribution Board to the pumps for water wells and irrigation. Nine people were killed and 15 more injured.

The crackdown on the *Frontier Post* certainly meets up with the military regime's need to pacify Islamic extremist groups. At the same time, it also sets the stage for broader repression against the media and opposition groups and the further curtailment of democratic rights.



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