

Pakistan: Government minister opposed to blasphemy laws assassinated

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Pakistan's Minister for Religious Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, was shot and killed by unknown gunmen in Islamabad on March 2.

The assassination of Bhatti, the only Christian member of the federal cabinet, occurred just two months after Salman Taseer, the Governor of the Punjab and a prominent leader of the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), was shot dead by an Islamist in the same city. Both politicians had been associated with the call for Pakistan's draconian "blasphemy" laws to be amended—an initiative that the PPP leadership had begun to disassociate itself from even before Taseer's death.

Introduced under the rule of US-backed dictator Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s, the blasphemy laws have frequently been used to persecute religious minorities. They are the reactionary outcome of an official policy—rooted in Pakistan's bloody birth through the communal partition of the subcontinent—that promotes the identification of Islam with the state, thereby reducing non-Muslims to second-class status and feeding religious fundamentalism and the power of the *ulema* (clergy).

The murders of Bhatti and Taseer are an indictment of the Pakistani bourgeoisie and its political parties, which have all refused to take a principled stand against the blasphemy laws and religious bigotry.

Shahbaz Bhatti was elected in 2008 to the National Assembly in a reserved seat for Christians as a member of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and was appointed the country's first minister for religious minorities when the PPP was able to form a governing coalition. He was shot as he headed to a cabinet meeting and pronounced dead on his arrival at a nearby hospital. According to Inter Press Service, "Bhatti had earlier requested extra security after he received threats and shots were fired at his house in Islamabad by unknown assailants," but apparently no action was taken on his request.

The Tehreek-i-Taliban claimed responsibility for the killing, calling Bhatti a "blasphemer of the Prophet (Muhammad)." This group, which is based in the war-torn Pashtun tribal-belt in Pakistan's northwest, has threatened further attacks against anyone who speaks out against the blasphemy laws.

Nevertheless, hundreds, if not thousands, of Christians took the streets in towns dotted across Punjab to protest the killing and the persecution of minorities.

Bhatti, a Roman Catholic, had been one of the more vocal critics of the blasphemy laws. According to his relatives, Bhatti had received numerous death threats after he spoke in support of Pakistani Christians who had endured pogrom-style attacks during 2009 riots in Gojra, in central Punjab. In that incident, several Christians were killed when Muslim fundamentalists set fire to homes owned by Christians after a banned, anti-Shia Islamist group falsely accused local Christians of desecrating the Koran. The grotesque killings sparked protests across the country.

In the weeks before his assassination, Bhatti had received threats for making statements in defense of Aasia Bibi, a Christian farm-hand from a small village in the Sheikhpura District of Punjab who in November

became the first woman in Pakistan ever sentenced to death for blasphemy.

Bibi, a 45-year-old mother of five, had a difficult and strenuous job as a laborer for the local bricklaying industry in Nankana Sahib where she was forced to contend with unfair labor practices as well as harassment and abuse. In June 2009 Bibi had been working in the fields when she was asked by the village chief to fetch drinking water. An argument ensued after she returned with the water and some of her Muslim co-workers refused to drink it, claiming that the water was "unclean" since it had been collected by a non-Muslim.

"My wife took offence, saying, 'Are we not humans?' This led to an altercation," said Ashiq Masih, Bibi's husband. The incident was quickly forgotten until a few days later when Bibi was set upon by a mob of Muslim fundamentalists. She had to be taken to the local police station for her own safety.

"The police were under pressure from this Muslim mob, including clerics, asking for Aasia to be killed because she had spoken ill of the Prophet Mohammed," reports Shahzad Kamran, a member of a Christian group, the Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan. "So after the police saved her life they then registered a blasphemy case against her."

Bibi was held in isolation for over a year before being sentenced to death by a local court last November. The sentence came as a shock to her supporters and was condemned by Pakistani and international human rights organizations, as well as by Christian groups. Because Bibi's relatives have continued to insist that she is innocent and a victim of religious persecution, they too have received death threats and been forced to go into hiding. A local Muslim cleric has put a bounty on Bibi's head and warned people may "take the law into their own hands" if she is pardoned or released.

Although no one has ever been executed under Pakistan's blasphemy laws and most of the accused are released on appeal, over 30 people have been killed by lynch mobs after being accused of blasphemy.

On January 4, Taseer—who had visited Bibi's family, urged she be pardoned, and called for the blasphemy laws to be amended—was assassinated by a member of his own elite security team, Malik Mumtaz Qadri, while the other members of his security detail looked on.

While Islamic fundamentalism has contributed to the large number of blasphemy cases, the vast majority of blasphemy accusations are made over property and other financial and personal disputes. Bigoted clerics and corrupt landlords have been capitalizing on the miserable poverty that plagues Pakistan in order to advance their own interests.

"It's an obscene law," said Ali Hasan Dayan of Human Rights Watch. "Essentially the blasphemy law is used as a tool of persecution and to settle other scores that have nothing to do with religion. It makes religious minorities particularly vulnerable because it's often used against them."

A recent example of this is the arrest on February 16 of a Christian woman, Agnes Nuggo, on charges of blasphemy in the city of Faisalabad. Nuggo had been involved in a dispute over property with some of her

Muslim neighbors. According to the *Pakistan Christian Post*, “When Muslims failed to acquire a plot from Agnes Bibi, they filed a complaint against her for defiling Islam in Saddar Police Station, Faisalabad.” Her arrest has been condemned by the Pakistan Christian Congress and the Christian Lawyers Foundation.

Faisalabad is the same city where two Christian brothers were gunned down by Islamists

last July. Rashid and Sajid Emmanuel were shot dead outside a courtroom where they were being tried on blasphemy charges. They had been accused of scrawling messages insulting the Prophet Muhammad, but the handwriting on the messages didn’t match that of either of the brothers. The victims’ relatives maintain their innocence and have been forced to go into hiding after being threatened by Muslim supremacists.

Attacks against Christians and other minority groups usually go unpunished in Pakistan. And in many cases, Pakistan’s notoriously corrupt police forces have participated in the violence.

There are approximately three million Christians in Pakistan, accounting for less than two percent of the total population. Most of them are the descendants of untouchables who converted to Christianity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They are the largest non-Muslim minority group in Pakistan. Christians in Pakistan must contend with not only class oppression, but caste oppression as well. Dire poverty and employment discrimination compel many of them to perform menial tasks for which they are often taunted as “cleaners” or branded as “dirty.”

In recent years, reactionary clerics and Islamic militants have consciously exploited the crimes of US imperialism in Pakistan and Afghanistan in order to create animosity between Muslims and Christians. Under orders from Washington, the Pakistan’s ruling elite has mercilessly suppressed Taliban-aligned militants in the country’s northwest, resulting in the displacement of millions of ordinary Pashtuns. The Pakistani military has used kidnappings, torture, extrajudicial killings and collective punishment in carrying out the orders of its imperialist sponsor.

While the US-backed dictator Pervez Musharraf was finally forced to relinquish power in 2008, the past two-plus years have demonstrated that the difference between civilian and military rule is largely one of appearances. The Obama administration, in partnership with the PPP-led national coalition government, has made Pakistan central to its Afghan counter-insurgency war, with illegal drone attacks having tripled since President Obama first took office. The current government’s despicable attempt to get CIA murderer Raymond Davis released on the pretext of “diplomatic immunity” is but the latest example of its utter subservience to Washington. (See: Pakistan: US spy Raymond Davis allegedly tied to Islamicist groups)

Ever since the inception of the Pakistani state, the national bourgeoisie has used communalism to divert popular anger over its inability to meet the basic needs of the working class and toilers into regressive channels. The Pakistani elite has long used Islamic fundamentalists to advance its interests, dating back to Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s reactionary “Islam in danger” campaign that aimed to divide Muslims and Hindus and gain support for the communal partition of the Indian subcontinent among sections of the ulema. The Muslim League and the Indian National Congress betrayed the mass anti-imperialist movement that shook India during the first half of the 20th century by partitioning the subcontinent into rival bourgeois states, a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Pakistani society was further communalized under the US-backed dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq. Zia actively promoted the Muslim clergy and Islamic political parties as a buttress against the working class. Under the direction of Washington, the Pakistani state armed the mujahideen in Afghanistan and made Islamic militias an indispensable part of the Pakistani elite’s geopolitical strategy. As part of his “Islamization” campaign, Zia also promoted Islamic

schools and social services as an alternative to state funding for education and health care.

Between 1980 and 1986, a number of clauses were added to the blasphemy laws. In 1980, a clause was added that made making derogatory statements about Islamic personages an offense, punishable by up to three years in prison. In 1982, another clause was added which states: “Whoever willfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Quran or of an extract there from, or uses it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life.”

Additional clauses were added for the sole purpose of preventing members of the Ahmadiyya community from freely practicing their religion. Ahmadis had earlier been declared “non-Muslims” in 1973 by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the PPP’s founder, who after coming to power on a nationalist-populist program that promised to marry Islam and socialism, moved sharply to the right, and sought to curry favor with the Muslim clergy and Islamicist parties as he came into open conflict with the working class. Under Zia, the Ahmadis were banned from calling themselves Muslims, preaching their faith, or using Islamic terms like “mosque” to describe their houses of worship or religious rituals.”

Often scapegoated in times of crisis, Pakistan’s Ahmadis have fled the country in large numbers.

In 1990, the Federal Shariat Court, established by Zia, made death the only punishment for blasphemy. The Zia era was a turning point in the history of Pakistan and had devastating consequences for Pakistan’s working class and rural toilers. Today, all factions of the bourgeoisie have adapted to the reactionary forces unleashed during the last three decades. Politicians from all the bourgeois parties engage in reactionary religious, nationalist, and ethno-linguistic appeals, making them complicit in the communal violence and religious bigotry that plagues the country.

The PPP and all the other parties have refused to take a principled stand against the blasphemy laws. In February, the PPP leadership prevailed on Sherry Rehman, a former PPP minister, to withdraw a private member’s bill that would have scrapped the death penalty for blasphemy, while keeping the draconian laws largely in effect. “We are all unanimous that nobody wants to change the (blasphemy) law,” Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani said at the time.

The religious right had mounted a belligerent campaign warning of dire consequences if the laws were amended, let alone repealed. But their street protests were far from massive.

Predictably the government’s capitulation only emboldened the Islamists, resulting in yet another assassination.

The purportedly liberal faction of the Pakistani bourgeoisie represented by the PPP and newspapers such as the *Dawn* now claim that the only way to combat Islamic fundamentalism and safeguard democratic freedoms is through an alliance with Washington and support for the US drive to subjugate Afghanistan. This claim is refuted by the entire history of Pakistan. The US has supported a succession of dictatorships in Pakistan, with callous indifference to the democratic rights of the Pakistani people. The entire Pakistani bourgeoisie, especially its military-intelligence apparatus but including the PPP, have connived and colluded with the Islamic right. While on occasion Pakistan’s venal elite may rule through civilian governments and even hold elections, six decades of independent Pakistan have demonstrated that it is utterly hostile to the democratic and social aspirations of the Pakistani people and relies on a bloated military and the promotion of communalism and all manner of reaction to safeguard its rule.

Basic democratic tasks like the separation of mosque and state, the eradication of landlordism, and the smashing of the reactionary axis between Washington and Islamabad will only be carried out through a working class-led mass movement of all the toilers against the bourgeoisie, imperialism, and the profit system as a whole.

Recent months have seen a growth of working class struggles. But if these struggles are to have an enduring positive impact they must take the path of independent political struggle against the entire retrograde economic program of the bourgeoisie and against the US-NATO war in Afghanistan. The working class must not allow the religious right and their allies and paymasters within the military-security apparatus to monopolize and manipulate the opposition to the war and use it to promote their own toxic brand of nationalist, capitalist politics.



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