

# REIMAGINING PAKISTAN

## MADIHA R TAHIR

A scientist exhorts his followers to pray, and to hope for miracles. Dr Pervez Hoodbhoy, a nuclear physicist by training, speaks in apocalyptic terms. He declares to an overcrowded room that Pakistan will soon be deluged by a “clerical tsunami” unless the Pakistani Army takes its task seriously. This is a popular brand of Pakistani secularism at fevered pitch: it puts its faith in a miracle, its trust in the Army and it may be part of the reason why Pakistan is losing the battle for a secular, democratic, liberal future.

At the Karachi Literature Festival where Pervez Hoodbhoy delivered his lectures this February, the most popular panels had little to do with literature and a lot to do with the question of political Islam and extremism. The festival, hosted by Oxford University Press, underwritten by British and American government money, was largely an elite affair where Pakistan’s chattering classes exchanged pleasantries with the local and foreign media.

Feminist poet, Kishwar Naheed, remarked that the pagri, or headgear of Muslims should be removed so that “their minds may open up”. To hear the panellists tell it, political Islam is less a coherent project than an ensemble of murderous acts, each more pitiless, savage and more irrational than the last. And, the whole of the country is drowning in it.

Certainly, there’s reason to be aghast. On 4 January, Salmaan Taseer, the socially liberal governor of Pakistan’s most populous province, was shot dead by his own elite force bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri. A smiling Qadri admitted on television that he had killed Taseer because he had been advocating reform of Pakistan’s religious offences laws, popularly known as the “blasphemy laws” – a linguistic coup for Islamists who’ve managed to recast the law in divine terms. Then, last month, the Federal Minister for Minority Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian, was also gunned down in the capital, Islamabad. He too was a vociferous critic of Pakistan’s religious offences laws. The ruling Pakistan People’s Party government has refused to condemn the murders.

Little of this is new. Islamist parties have been seeking to capture state power and institute their interpretations of sharia since Pakistan was founded. They made gains under the populist, secular Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who acceded to their demands banning alcohol and criminalising a small Muslim sect, the Ahmadis, to bolster his weakening position. His successor, General Zia ul-Haq who took power in a military coup and hanged Bhutto, pushed ahead with Islamisation, institutionalising it in the state bureaucracy while churning

out mujahedeen with the support and financial backing of the US. Today, these organisations – a hodgepodge of acronyms armed with weapons – continue to operate backed by the Pakistani Army which sees them as a strategic asset.

Pakistan’s largest demographic today – urban youth under 30 – cannot recall a time before General Zia. But, that does not make them militants. These youth don’t want to smash the state; they want Pakistan to take its rightful place as a leader and keeper of the Muslim community. Their ire is mainly directed at outside forces from America to India to non-state actors that they believe are the cause of the country’s ills. They turn out for the rallies of Islamist parties to shout with them even if they won’t vote for them.

The blasphemy battle began as a feud over a woman. Taseer had filed a mercy petition for a poor Christian labourer and mother of five, Aasiya Bibi, who was sentenced to the death penalty last November for allegedly defaming the Prophet. Following his murder, Islamist political parties held a 50,000 strong rally in Pakistan’s teeming port city of Karachi to support the laws that Taseer had opposed. Besides me, there is only one other woman at the demonstration: an overly large poster of Aafia Siddiqui, the Pakistani scientist convicted of terrorism and sentenced to 86 years in

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the US, hangs over the crowd of men. The poster sways gently as the speech-makers fulminate and the men fervently respond. As a culminating gesture, a group of boys burn three American flags, tossing the burnt rags into the air.

The repertoire of visual imagery and performance embody a complete political narrative.

It is not accidental that a rally demanding blood from one woman should revere the other. Between Aasiya and Aafia, spans an entire political discourse. If the first marks the limits of the community, the second has become a potent symbol of its essence, the “daughter of the nation” whose imprisonment in the US underlines the relationship between the Pakistani nation and the American one. That’s the backdrop to objections to amending the religious offences laws. An advocate inside the camp of a banned Islamist organisation tells me that it’s not the religious ordinance but other political decisions that have killed many people. “The government is following American edicts,” says Omar Faitan, “That’s why thousands of people have been killed.”

The vice-chairman of a local Islamist party here, Owais Noorani, tells me that he objects to any amendment to the religious ordinance because: “You want to check the temperature of my nerves. This whole thing should not be touched,” then adds, as if for clarity,

“I am a Muslim.” The last is as much a political statement, as a religious one. Being a Muslim at this rally means being somebody who supports the political narrative – a narrative that’s far from the incoherence that secularists ascribe to it.

Islamism as an electoral programme is not widespread. Islamist parties fare badly in elections with awesome regularity. But, what Islamism does offer is a conception of the good life that counters the disappointment of secular nationalism to deliver, the failure of state modernisation projects and governmental complicity in the American imperial project.

It’s a point utterly lost on Pakistan’s secular intelligentsia. Here’s how Hoodbhoy describes the project as he understands it. He writes, “Islamofascism is a reality. This country is destined to drown in blood from civil war.” The term Islamofascism was popularised by the journalist Christopher Hitchens who employed it to highlight features that he says, fascism and Islamism share. The late critic and academic Tony Judt debunked its usage as part and parcel of a dying American liberalism. That it’s found its way into Pakistani discourse speaks to the paucity of Pakistani liberal thought and a complete failure of the imagination.

For Pakistani secularism to survive, we will need to reimagine ourselves, our enemies and our possibilities.

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