

Blasphemy Estate  
*The 'Deep State' and Deepening Fundamentalism in Pakistan*



K. M. SEETHI

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The deep state in Pakistan is no more a mere conglomerate of civil bureaucracy, army, intelligence, and/or other administrative agencies. The 'state within the state' has also its predictable partners in religious constituencies across the country. There is a growing concern now if the judiciary is also becoming a partner of the deep state congregation. A few years back, a report from the International Crisis Group argued that "the judiciary has failed to uphold the constitution and to oppose Islamic legislation that violates fundamental rights." It pointed out that "the legacy of military rule in Pakistan includes discriminatory religious laws that undermine the rule of law, encourage vigilantism and embolden religious extremists." The report underlined how the country's blasphemy law discriminates people on the ground of religious views and "imposes harsher sentences, including the death penalty, for offences against Islam." It said that Pakistan's blasphemy law has been "widely abused, particularly by radical Sunni groups targeting religious minorities" (International Crisis Group 2008). The situation has not changed since then and it got worsened as years have rolled by. The latest incidents—that too in a gap of two months—have shown that even judiciary cannot be seen as the last hope of the common man in Pakistan.

On 8 September a sessions court in Lahore granted death sentence to Asif Pervaiz, a young Christian, after finding him guilty of sending 'text messages' containing 'blasphemous content.' Pervaiz was already in custody for nearly seven years, facing blasphemy charges that were targeted against him by his supervisor in a garment factory he had worked at. Pervaiz was accused of sending derogatory remarks about

Prophet Muhammad in a text message, according to reports (*The Dawn*, 8 September 2020). The judgment says, Pervaiz would first serve a three-year prison term for ‘misusing’ his phone to send the derogatory text message. Then “he shall be hanged by his neck till his death” besides paying a fine Rs 50,000. Pervaiz having already spent seven years in jail, and having denied all charges against him, the lawyer of the accused said he had no option but to go for an appeal to the Lahore High Court. On the same day, a local court in Peshawar remanded into police custody a suspect, Bashir Mastan, arrested on charges of committing blasphemy through a video message on social media (*The Dawn*, 9 September 2020). Reports also indicated that more than three dozen people were arrested in Pakistan, on the same charges, in the month of August alone.

It was only two months ago that Tahir Naseem, an American citizen on trial for blasphemy in Pakistan, was shot dead in a crowded courtroom in Peshawar by a teenager who accused Naseem—a member of the minority Ahmadiyya community—of insulting the Prophet Muhammad (*The Washington Post*, 31 July 2020; *The Dawn*, 30 July 2020). A few hours after Naseem’s brutal murder, a social media hashtag campaign began praising the killer as a ‘hero’ (*The New York Times*, 30 July 2020). There were many Taliban supporters among them who went on pushing the social media campaign on behalf of the ‘hero.’ Naseem was reported to have survived several Taliban assassination attempts already. Even as the United States took the issue seriously, civil rights activists in Pakistan have come up against such judicial and extra-judicial acts, saying that Pakistan’s blasphemy laws were frequently misused to persecute religious and ethnic minorities even to settle personal scores. There were reported cases of lynching or street vigilantism throughout Pakistan. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, nearly 80 people were already imprisoned in Pakistan on such charges — half of whom face life in prison or the death penalty (USCIRF 2019; USCIRF 2020).

It may be noted that Pakistan has been a strategic partner of the United States in South Asia for a long time.

Early this year, a Lahore court sentenced a man to death in a three-year-old blasphemy case which also involved a fine of Rs. 200,000. Similar cases were also reported in the recent past (*The Dawn*, 20 June 2020). The commencement of the year 2020 witnessed new measures being put in place in the country. For example, the Punjab Assembly passed a resolution in early January 2020 to make Pakistan's blasphemy laws more stringent and introduce a Saudi type filtering of online content to intercept blasphemous material. The Assembly urged the federal government to make new or improve existing laws to rigorously punish those indulging in blasphemy. The resolution reads: "The existing (anti) blasphemy laws in the country had a weak implementation and lack enforcement in letter and spirit, allowing some people to commit blasphemy in the garb of freedom of expression and hurt feelings of Muslims...Therefore, this house demands the immediate establishment of a Saudi Arabia-like central filtration and screening system to prevent blasphemous content." The resolution also demanded that the authorities should ban and confiscate books containing blasphemous material. It called for revising the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 and Pakistan Penal Code Sections regarding blasphemy to ensure stricter punishments. As soon as the resolution was passed in the Punjab Assembly, the lower house of Pakistan's National Assembly also adopted a resolution to condemn all blasphemous content (*The News International*, 26 January 2020; *The Dawn*, 1 January 2020). In late 2019, a Pakistani court in Multan convicted Junaid Hafeez, a Muslim lecturer at Bahauddin Zakariya University in Multan, sentencing him to death under the blasphemy law for allegedly spreading anti-Islamic ideas. Hafeez has been in jail for almost six years awaiting trial. He has been in solitary confinement most of the time because he would most likely be killed if left with the general population, according to reports (*Arab News*, 21 December

2019). Earlier, Hafeez's first lawyer, Rashid Rehman, was killed in 2014 after he agreed to undertake the case (BBC News, 21 December 2019). The Amnesty International (AI) continued to press for his release before the judgment. It said "Junaid's lengthy trial has gravely affected his mental and physical health, endangered him and his family and exemplifies the misuse of Pakistan's blasphemy laws. The authorities must release him immediately and unconditionally and drop all charges against him" (Amnesty International, 25 September 2019). After the verdict came, AI called it "a gross miscarriage of justice" and described it as "extremely disappointing and surprising" (BBC News, 21 December 2019).

According to *Al Jazeera*, several people have been "extra-judicially killed" in Pakistan in connection with blasphemy allegations since 1990 and many still languished in jails for quite a long period. For instance, Wajeeh-ul-Hassan spent nearly half of his life in jails. Hassan was convicted of committing blasphemy way back in 2002, and he was sentenced to death by a Lahore court in 2002 when he was 25. Now he has spent more than 19 years in jail with no hope of getting released. The report also showed that many cases do not even reach courts, and such cases often ended up with 'extra-judicial' killings (*Al Jazeera*, 21 February 2020).

Almost a decade back, Pakistan's blasphemy law had shot into global media attention when Salman Taseer, former Governor of Punjab, visited Asia Bibi—a Christian woman—who was sentenced to death by a court for allegedly committing blasphemy. Taseer's visit was to declare solidarity with her. After his visit he felt that the provisions in Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) regarding blasphemy were too bad and therefore he called it a 'Black Law.' Taseer's comments eventually resulted in his death on 4 January 2011 when his own attendant killed him in Islamabad. However, after several years, the Supreme Court annulled Asia Bibi's conviction in 2018. But her release saw thousands of Islamists in Pakistan protesting against her acquittal (*The News*

*International*, 1 November 2018). There were similar incidents reported during this time—most of them were against Christian minorities (CRSS 2014). The mob attack in the Joseph Colony of Christian community in Lahore in March 2013 was a major incident when a spat between two friends ended up in blasphemy charges, which eventually led to destroying as many as 150 houses of poor Christians in the area. There were several such blasphemy-related cases and incidents in the following years (*The Dawn*, 19 December 2015; *The Dawn*, 20 June 2019).

### **Draconian amendments to PPC under General Zia**

The blasphemy laws in Pakistan emerged mostly from Sections 295 and 298 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC). The provisions incorporated essentially embody amendments made of the British-Indian Penal Code of 1860 pertaining to religious offences that were applicable to all religions. It was in 1927 that Section 295-A was added to the Indian Penal Code in the wake of communal tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities. After independence in 1947, Pakistan maintained the Penal Code inherited from the British colonial office. However, during 1947-1977, there were only ten reported judgments that were related to offences against religion. Meanwhile the Pakistani state had to deal with issues related to religious and ethnic minorities (Seethi 2015; Seethi 2019). The problem of Ahmadis continued to be a critical issue since the riots perpetrated against them in 1953 (Pakistan 1954). Successive governments did not consider their basic democratic rights even under the popular rule. For instance, in 1974, during Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's rule, the National Assembly amended the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973, to declare that any person "who does not believe in the absolute and unqualified finality of The Prophethood of Muhammad (Peace be upon him), the last of the Prophets or claims to be a Prophet, in any sense of the word or of any description whatsoever, after Muhammad

(Peace be upon him), or recognizes such a claimant as a Prophet or religious reformer, is not a Muslim for the purposes of the Constitution or law.” Following the second Constitutional amendment, the Ahmadiyya community, who considered themselves as a sect within Islam, were specifically branded as a “non-Muslim religious minority community” (International Commission of Jurists 2015:9). Yet, they were perpetually harassed in Pakistan and even the basic rights of a minority community have been denied all these years.

While a popular government (under Bhutto) did this draconian amendment to disempower the Ahmadis, it was during the military rule of General Zia, in the 1980s, that these ruthless provisions were further incorporated into the PPC. In 1991 Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif introduced the mandatory death penalty for blasphemy after the National Assembly failed to step in to reject the death penalty upheld by the Federal Sharia Court in 1990. According to Section 295-B of PPC (Defiling, etc., of Holy Qur'an), “Whoever wilfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Qur'an or of an extract therefrom or uses it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life.” As per Section 295(C) - use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet- “Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine” (Pakistan 1860). Section 298-A (Use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of holy personages) says that “Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of any wife (*Ummul Mumineen*), or members of the family (*Ahle-bait*), of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him), or any of the righteous Caliphs (*Khulafa-e-Rashideen*) or companions (*Sahaaba*) of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) shall

be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years, or with fine, or with both.” While Section 298-B pertains to punishment for the “misuse of epithets, descriptions and titles, etc., reserved for certain holy personages or place,” Section 298-C prescribes punishment for person of Quadiani group (Ahmadis,) etc., “calling himself a Muslim or preaching or propagating his faith” (Ibid). According to Pakistan's Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2004, offences relating to Section 295C of the PPC, which prohibits derogatory remarks against the Prophet Muhammad (Pakistan 1860), must be investigated by a police officer at the level of superintendent or above (Pakistan 2005).

It may be noted that before the Zia military regime (1977-1988), there was no provision in the PPC specifying punishment for blasphemy. According to *The News International* report, there were only ten blasphemy cases heard in court in the 58 years between 1927 and 1985, but since 1986, particularly after the amendments to the PPC, there were more than 4,000 cases, citing the data gathered by different non-governmental organisations working on the issue. As per the information brought together by the Lahore-based Centre for Social Justice, not less than 1,472 people were charged under the blasphemy laws during 1987-2016. Curiously, majority of the accused were Muslims (730) while there were 501 Ahmadis, 205 Christians and 26 Hindus (*The News International*, 1 November 2018).

Way back in 2012, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers found that the blasphemy laws “serve the vested interests of extremist religious groups and are not only contrary to the Constitution of Pakistan, but also to international human rights norms, in particular those relating to non-discrimination and freedom of expression and opinion” (UN 2012: 13). The Special Rapporteur also recommended that “Pakistan should repeal or amend the blasphemy laws in accordance with its human rights obligations.”



Moreover, it was further clarified that “the mandatory imposition of the death penalty, which is prescribed under section 295-C, is prohibited under international human rights law.” The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) opined that all institutions of the Pakistani State—the executive, the parliament, and members of the judiciary—“have effectively abdicated their responsibilities under human rights law when people are accused of committing blasphemy, knowingly leaving them either at the mercy of mobs and organized extremist religious groups or facing trials that are fundamentally unfair” (International Commission of Jurists 2015: 6). According to the ICJ report,

Individuals accused of blasphemy continue to be vulnerable even after formally coming within the ambit of the criminal justice system. In many cases, blasphemy accused awaiting trial or serving sentences following convictions have been assaulted while held in custody and authorities have failed to protect them. Some have even been killed. In a few cases, police officials themselves have reportedly been the perpetrators. Individuals who are prosecuted for blasphemy are also routinely denied fair trial guarantees: blasphemy-related proceedings are unduly protracted; prior to trial accused persons are frequently unduly denied bail and are held in custody for extended periods of time awaiting trial; and while detained, they are often held in solitary confinement for prolonged periods (Ibid: 7).

Human rights groups and religious and ethnic minorities within and outside Pakistan continued to demand repeal of the draconian anti-blasphemy regulations which have been repeatedly misused to target minorities and all voices of dissent, but the successive governments remained apathetic. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in its *Annual Report 2020* noted that the “systematic enforcement of blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, and authorities’ failure to address forced conversions of religious minorities—including Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs—to Islam, severely restricted freedom of religion or belief.” On many occasions, the senior U.S. officials highlighted Pakistan’s religious freedom

violations in their interactions with the government agencies. The *Annual Report 2020* stated that several ongoing trials linked with blasphemy charges saw prolonged delays as cases were shifted between judges. Besides, as the *Report* says, “these laws create a culture of impunity for violent attacks following accusations.” The murder of Professor Khalid Hameed in March 2019 by a student over alleged ‘anti-Islamic’ comments is a case in point. Mobs attacked and burned Hindu shops and houses of worship in Sind following incidents related to accusations of blasphemy. Another mob attack on the Christian community was reported from Punjab. In yet another incident, as many as 200 Christian families in Karachi were forced to flee their homes following mob attacks, after a fake blasphemy accusation was put up against some Christian women. The USCIRF further pointed out that the Ahmadi Muslims, whose faith has been criminalized, became targets of relentless “persecution from authorities as well as societal harassment due to their beliefs, with both the authorities and mobs targeting their houses of worship” (USCIRF 2020: 32-33).

### **Blasphemy laws and attacks**

Historically, the laws that criminalize blasphemy have been on the statute books of many countries for centuries. This was quite discernible in countries where Semitic religions held sway. Scholars argue that blasphemy laws were part of both Judaism and Christianity, much before Islam emerged in the seventh century (Levy 1995; Sanders 1990; Webster 1990). In the modern era, this assumed new dimensions with ruling classes resorting to tactics that would sustain their regime interests and legitimacy. According to a study recorded by the U.S. Congress, many countries in Western Europe still maintain blasphemy and related laws. In some countries they are never implemented, but “there have been prosecutions in recent years in Austria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Switzerland, and Turkey.” In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, “laws prohibiting proselytization or insulting religion are

prevalent.” Some of the recent cases are noted in the study from the experiences of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (The U.S. Congress 2017).

Most countries in West Asia and North Africa have stringent laws prohibiting abusive or offensive remarks and actions against Islam or religion generally. Many of them have lately enacted and sharpened such laws, including in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and the West Bank. Sub-Saharan African countries having such laws prohibiting blasphemy, proselytization, or similar conduct are Comoros, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritania, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe albeit their enforcement was not widely reported. In South Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan have blasphemy laws that are vigorously enforced. India’s Penal Code retains the provisions of the British Indian Penal Code (1860) that has a blasphemy law that reportedly “is used by all of India’s faith groups when their religious sensibilities are hurt” (Ibid). Bangladesh also has regulations along these lines, but not to the extent of granting death penalty for blasphemy. However, in 2013, hundreds of thousands of people staged protests in Dhaka demanding that the government introduce an anti-blasphemy law that would make provision for death penalty for those who insult Islam. The Islamist organisation *Jamaat-e-Islami* was in the forefront calling for a new blasphemy law with a death penalty (*Al Jazeera* 7 April 2013). But prime minister Sheikh Hasina said that no such law was necessary because the existing laws were enough to handle such cases (it may be recalled that the Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen had to escape from her country in 1994 following Islamists’ fatwa against her for “casting aspersions on Islam” in her novel *Lajja*).

Countries in Southeast Asia such as Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar have blasphemy-related laws that are in place. Other

countries with such laws in the region, as well as in East Asia and the Pacific, include Laos, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Japan and New Zealand. There are only a few countries in Latin America and the Caribbean which have blasphemy laws. Canada has a blasphemy law in North America, but it is not enforced (The U.S. Congress 2017).

The world also witnessed attacks and fatwas on writers and media personnel in the recent past on charges of blasphemy. Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* had triggered mass protests across the world. In the wake of the publication of the novel in 1989, the spiritual and political leader of Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini, issued a fatwa (for death penalty) against Rushdie. Besides, Iran also offered a reward of several million dollars for the assassination of Rushdie. Rushdie had to go underground and, since then, lived under the protection of British security (Levy 1993). There were many other incidents associated with the Rushdie affair. The Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses* was stabbed to death in 1991. The Italian translator of the novel was also attacked, but he somehow survived. Similarly, the Norwegian publisher of Rushdie's work also suffered serious injuries in a firing. The attack on the office of French satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo*, in early 2015, resulted in the death of a dozen people. The incident happened following the publication of a cartoon on Prophet Muhammad (Trench 2016). There were similar attacks on magazine and newspaper offices in Europe. The publication of drawings of Prophet Muhammad in a Denmark newspaper resulted in similar attacks. Since then the International Blasphemy Rights Day (30 September) is held every year to show solidarity with those who oppose draconian laws and social prohibitions against free expression, to support the right to challenge prevailing religious beliefs without fear of violence, arrest, or persecution.

## Is there really a blasphemy law in Islam?

There are contesting versions about 'laws' that prescribe punishment (including death penalty) for insulting Islam or the Prophet Muhammad. The Quran and Sunnah are the fundamental sources of Islamic laws, but they have been subject to different interpretations by various schools of Islamic theology over centuries. Islamic jurisprudence involves hermeneutical engagements of the Quranic text and contexts. According to learnt Islamic scholars, the Quran embodies several allegories, metaphors as well as ambiguities that need interpretations based on appropriate principles of justice, fairness and virtues of a good life. In fact, there are no references to blasphemy in the Quran. It did not appear anywhere in the history of Islamic jurisprudence. There are many instances in the Quran when disbelievers went on deriding and teasing Prophet Muhammad. Yet, there is no specific command for punishing those who ridiculed him. Rather the Quran asks Muhammad to leave the punishment to God for such acts of insults and derogatory remarks. The Quran also tells believers to invoke God's mercy and grace for the Prophet.

Those who agree that Islamic traditions have laws for blasphemy since its beginning will argue that such laws are based on the Sunnah (sayings and practices) of the Prophet. They bring in the instance of a Jewish woman who was believed to have been killed for writing provocative poems against the Prophet and Islam. There is no authenticity for this story that tells that the Prophet 'praised the man' who killed her. However, there is another version which says that the Jewish woman was actually killed for sedition for breaking the covenant signed in Medina, and not for any blasphemous comments. It may be remembered that whenever the Prophet was in Mecca, it was not quite unusual for the people to abuse and show disrespect or dishonour him for his radical measures. In the emerging context of setting up an

Islamic state, it was natural that there were too many adversaries for the Prophet. Yet, he remained unmoved and showed tremendous patience. The Quran itself provides a number of such instances.

The Surah 21:41 reads,

"Mocked were (many) apostles before thee; but their scoffers were hemmed in by the thing that they mocked" (*Al-Anbiyaa* – translation by Yusuf Ali).

The Surah 38:4 says,

"So, they wonder that a Warner has come to them from among themselves! and the Unbelievers say, "This is a sorcerer telling lies!" (*Sad* – translation by Yusuf Ali).

In spite of such attacks and ridicules, the Quran (Surah 73:10), in fact, advises the Prophet to "have patience with what they say and leave them with noble (dignity)" (*Al-Muzzammil* translation by Yusuf Ali).

The Surah 5:13 reads:

"But because of their breach of their Covenant We cursed them and made their hearts grow hard: they change the words from their (right) places and forget a good part of the Message that was sent them nor wilt thou cease to find them barring a few ever bent on (new) deceits: but forgive them and overlook (their misdeeds): for Allah loveth those who are kind" (*Al-Maida*, translation by Yusuf Ali).

The Surah 25:63 is rather categorical:

"And the servants of (Allah) Most Gracious are those who walk on the earth in humility and when the ignorant address them they say "Peace!" (*Al-Furqan* translation by Yusuf Ali).

The most oft-quoted Surah (2: 256) runs like this: “Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error; whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things (*Al-Baqara* translation by Yusuf Ali).

The ‘texts’ of Islamic jurisprudence cannot ignore such instances of compassion, humility and patience displayed by the Prophet during his time. Ziauddin Sardar, a writer and commentator on Islam, argued that blasphemy laws have no basis in the Quran and that “there are better ways than demanding death sentences to show love and respect for the Prophet” (Sardar 1995). Asghar Ali Engineer, another scholar on Islam, says that the Prophet was “so spiritual that he would never indulge in seeking revenge for personal insult.” He was “a model human being to be followed by others” (Engineer 2011). He cites an instance of a Jewish women who used to insult the Prophet by throwing garbage on him whenever he passed her house. But the Prophet never sought to punish her. One day, when the woman did not turn up with garbage, the Prophet asked why she did not. When heard that she fell ill, the Prophet straightaway went to see her. The woman felt ashamed of herself by misbehaving with such a person and immediately embraced Islam. Engineer says that to “avenge an insult is not a sign of religiosity but betrays worst human instincts” (Ibid).

It may be noted that in the next two centuries after Prophet Mohammad, there was hardly anything like a blasphemy law. It was during the Abbasid rule, in the beginning of the ninth century, that the notion of blasphemy began to gain some acceptance, particularly in the context of rebellion against Islam and the state. Plausibly, the idea assumed new dimensions in the background of legitimising the political power of the ruling dispensations. When a military general like Zia-ul-Haq introduced blasphemy law in Pakistan, it all became clear that the purpose was only to legitimise his authoritarian regime

under the garb of an ‘Islamic state.’ Gen Zia also acquiesced to the agenda of orthodox ulama in Pakistan with a view to making inroads into the society through his military dictatorship (Kennedy 1996; Seethi 2019). The situation has not changed since then, even after the transition to democracy.

In sum, Pakistan’s blasphemy laws put across a big question mark regarding its own Islamic credentials as well as its international legal obligations. The deep state in Pakistan has hardly any respect for protection for freedom of religion or belief, freedom of opinion and expression, equality before the law, the prevention of discrimination and, above all, ensuring a fair trial rights. The blasphemy laws have obvious repercussions for religious and ethnic minorities in the country, and segue into the situation of religious intolerance, fundamentalism and Islamic radicalism. Even as Islamabad has come under the international pressure of countering terrorism and religious extremism, the question is whether the deep state will allow the political forces and the civil society in the country to revisit the draconian blasphemy laws, in their present mode, and rescind or drastically revise all infractions related to religion in line with its international human rights obligations.

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