



PAKISTAN: CAN SHARIA AND FREEDOM COEXIST?

HAROON ULLAH

Can you name this country?

It is the fifth largest democracy in the world. It has nuclear weapons. And it's home to millions of religious extremists. It is both a leading fighter against and a major supporter of terrorism.

The answer, of course... is Pakistan.

Its unique makeup poses a question that should preoccupy everyone: Can two diametrically opposed forms of society – a free one and one based on religious Sharia Islamic law – exist in one nation?

A very disturbing true story gives us a possible answer.

On January 4, 2011 Salman Taseer, the former governor of Punjab, the nation's most populous province, had lunch with a friend in Kohsar Market, an upscale international series of stores and restaurants. I lived only a few blocks away at the time.

Throughout his career, Taseer was outspoken in his belief that freedom, democracy, and pluralism were inseparable, and that all religious minorities, should be protected. Such ideas, however, are anathema to extremists. As a consequence, over the years, Taseer had received numerous personal death threats. I knew him. I interviewed him. I spent time with him. He showed extraordinary courage by refusing to be silenced.

After lunch, the governor left with his aides and his bodyguards and headed toward his car. A small crowd had gathered and Taseer waved to them as his driver opened up the rear door. Without warning, a member of Taseer's own security detail stepped forward and opened fire with a machine gun not more than ten feet away. Salman Taseer was struck with twenty-six rounds and he died where he fell.

This is how extremists deal with those whom they consider to be a threat – they kill them. But our story doesn't end there. When the assassin, Mumtaz Qadri, entered the criminal courtroom in Islamabad, he was met by cheering crowds who showered him with flowers. The cheering crowds believed that Taseer had deserved to die. To many Pakistanis, he had insulted Islam by advocating democracy and freedom for all Pakistanis, irrespective of their religious views, and by speaking out for the rights of women.

In the following weeks, Pakistan's Islamic parties led marches and demonstrations of upward of forty thousand people honoring Mumtaz Qadri, the assassin, and celebrating Taseer's

death. What was even more disconcerting, was that Pakistan's moderate political leaders remained silent. They issued statements acknowledging Taseer's assassination, but not one stood up and decried the murder of this brave and honorable man. The trial was held and Qadri was found guilty of murder.

But it gets worse.

After the verdict, there was an enormous uproar against the judge, who received so many death threats that the poor man had to go into hiding. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, pressure from extremist groups eventually forced the government to suspend the case indefinitely. In essence, the judge's decision was undone. And at Taseer's funeral, which I attended, organizers were unable to find a single religious leader to preside over the event. The extremists had sent a clear message: anyone who opposes them could be targeted for death anywhere, and at any time. Stories like this are not uncommon in Pakistan.

Despite Western hopes, democracy does not necessarily moderate Islamist party platforms and ideologies.

On the contrary, Islamists can become even more extreme in democratic settings, at least in the short term. Here's why:

Islamist parties are not monolithic. They are diverse and must compete hardest against one another for political power. To increase their appeal to the electorate, each party claims to most authentically represent their religion. This can lead to murder, as the case of Salman Taseer demonstrates.

Ironically, however, this competition among the Islamists is a sort of a blessing. It prevents a unified Islamist front that would make theocracy possible. Democracy survives in Pakistan, in other words, because the Islamists split the vote. This split buys the forces of democracy some time.

But in order for democracy in Pakistan to prevail, the moderates, and that still means the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis, must show the kind of courage that Salman Taseer did. They must stand up to the Islamists, and hold the country together until the flames of religious extremism die out. Right now, the numbers still strongly favor those Pakistanis who believe in Western ideas of pluralism.

Hopefully, those numbers will grow as the inevitable moral and economic failure of extremism becomes clear. Very hopefully.

Because if the extremists prevail, the world's fifth largest democracy will become the world's largest terror state.

I'm Haroon Ullah, adjunct professor at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service