

# Islamism and Pakistan: What Pakistan can learn from its Arab Allies

Faran Jeffery



Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیرورزم

Following the Pakistani Supreme Court's decision on Aasia Bibi 'blasphemy' case, Pakistani Islamists are once again in the news. Like last year, when Pakistani Islamists rioted across the country and damaged property worth billions, this year too they were given a free hand by the government of Pakistan to wreak havoc all over the country. Like last year, when Islamists incited violence against elected officials, they were allowed to spew venom against state institutions, the PM, the Army Chief and the judges this year too. Last year their excuse was a 'secret' amendment relating to 'blasphemy' law made by the civil government. This year their excuse was the Supreme Court's decision on Aasia Bibi. One must be able to see beyond these excuses and think rationally: Are these Islamist leaders, who claim they can die for their Prophet, really worried about Islam?

If one looks closely, the realization will dawn that no, they don't. For example, take Maulana Fazl ur Rehman. During the Musharraf era post-9/11, when the mullah was condemning America in his statements, he was actually simultaneously holding meetings with the Americans in the U.S. embassy in Pakistan. Like most Islamist leaders in Pakistan, Mullah Fazl ur Rehman doesn't care about Islam as much as he cares about himself. Take Maulana Khadim Rizvi. After hearing his abusive words, who thinks that this guy is in love with the Islamic Prophet? No sane person thinks that. But despite that, he has succeeded in gaining thousands of followers, because, like other Islamist leaders, he realized that selling religion is the best business in a country like Pakistan. Beyond the excuses the Islamists use of riot and incite violence lies their very petty goal of gaining political power.

It is this thirst for political power that compels these Islamist leaders to make a mockery of the rule of law. Consider this for a moment: Two different Pakistani governments have so far signed documents of surrender with Maulana Khadim Rizvi and his colleagues. Just imagine for a moment how powerful Maulana Khadim, who is paralyzed and uses a wheelchair himself, must be feeling. More importantly, imagine how powerful his followers now think he must be. He will attempt to use this power to influence important government decisions in the future. So, he has essentially reversed the tables: instead of the government influencing decisions of the Islamists, it is the Islamists who are aiming to influence the government's decisions. And this is a major problem not just for Pakistan but for the international community as well.

Officials from Pakistan's ruling party PTI, who were quick to condemn the previous PMLN-led government last year when it signed an agreement with Islamists, didn't take long to surrender before Islamists, but not before a bombastic speech by the PM Imran Khan, who then immediately flew to China on a pre-planned visit from where he instructed his ministers to negotiate with Islamists. Many criticized PM Khan for leaving Pakistan at a time of instability and especially at a time when everyone from elected officials to judges were being targeted by Islamists in public speeches. Islamists announced a bounty on the three judges who announced the verdict on Aasia Bibi and called PM Khan to step down, accusing him of being a 'Jewish agent'. But one may ask, would it have made any difference if PM Khan was in Pakistan? What could he have done from Pakistan that he couldn't do from China? After all, you don't need to be in Pakistan to surrender.

At this point many will claim that Pakistani government did not surrender before the Islamists. That is preposterously untrue. Pakistani government surrendered the moment it decided to let the Islamists wreak havoc all over the country, destroying public property and inciting violence. While the police calmly watched Islamists destroy property, the same police is quick to use water cannons and baton charge against teachers and doctors whenever they come out to protest non-violently. Another surrender came when the PTI-led government decided to negotiate with Islamists before making any arrests, effectively negotiating from the position of weakness. And while several arrests have been made since the agreement between Islamists and the government, they will likely backfire because Islamists will see this as backstabbing by a government they already don't trust. The top leadership of Islamists who provoked their followers to take to the streets are still free. Arresting some of their followers while sparing the top leaders makes no sense whatsoever because these followers, in their own words, are ready to 'die for Prophet'. The real problem is not these followers but the people who radicalized them.

Some may ask, what should have been done then? It's very simple. Pakistani government should have rounded up all the top Islamist leaders involved in inciting violence and only then initiated arrests of their followers, if needed. Pakistani Islamists are very coordinated but that coordination usually works from top to bottom. Taking out the leaders from the picture would have left their followers clueless, who wouldn't have dared to cause as much damage as they did.

Last year, it was mostly just Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) that took to the streets but this year TLP wasn't alone. They were joined by people from Jamaat-ud-Dawaa, Ahle Wal Sunnat Jamaat (ASWJ), Jamaat-e-Islami, Jamiat Ullema Islam (F) and (S), and others. So, it is futile to see this as just a TLP problem. Indeed, this is an Islamist problem that Pakistan is facing, and it looks like Pakistan's judiciary has been left all alone to fight off these evil forces. Pakistan's military spokesperson was quick to raise his hands, saying that this isn't the military's problem and the military shouldn't be dragged into every matter. While he does have a point, the problem is that military dragged itself into this when it decided to distribute taxpayer money among Islamists in front of the camera last year.

While I know military distributed that money among Islamists on the orders of the government (it was meant to send Islamists away, many of whom didn't have fare rent), I think the military showed hypocrisy when it didn't offer any real support for the judiciary or even for its own Chief General Bajwa in the face of grave threats. In the near past, we remember all too well the statements military gave in support of the rule of law when disgraced former PM Nawaz Sharif was facing corruption cases in the Supreme Court. Military spokesperson as well as the current army chief are on the record - more than once - explicitly saying that the military stands with the rule of law. That show of support was missing this time. Few noticed it, even fewer wondered why. The answer may have something to do with the fact that Islamists have infiltrated every single institution in Pakistan like a cancer takes over a body before completely destroying its host. This shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone since in the past, we have seen Jihadists - Adnan Rasheed to name one - being caught from the ranks of the Pakistani military.

There is legit support for Islamist views within the Pakistani military, whose spokesperson saw no issue with publicly proclaiming just last year that he is a fundamentalist. There was legitimate fear among the military command that many officers and soldiers are sympathetic to the cause of Islamists, who were calling on soldiers to start a mutiny. Besides that, some Pakistani military and civilian leaders have historically always tried to woo the most destructive elements in the Pakistani society while alienating non-violent progressive elements. This has been at least consistently true since General Zia's era and becomes evidently clear by Pakistan's policy on Aafia Siddiqui, who Pakistan, along with Al-Qaeda and ISIS, wants immediately freed. It is this same instinct to woo Islamists that partially made Pakistani military sheepishly stand in the corner while shrugging its shoulders as judges were being abused by Islamists. Perhaps the military doesn't realise that the opinion among young, educated Pakistanis is turning fast against the military because of such bad policies and the time isn't very far when they would need to groom more foreigners like Cynthia Ritchie, who would introduce their talking points into the mainstream while having no stakes in Pakistan, because no educated Pakistani would be willing to do that. Pakistan's civilian government didn't set any new precedent either. As in the past, government institutions were reluctant to come out in support of the government and the Council of Islamic Ideology, which is funded by the government, even went rogue on this issue.

We have seen what Pakistani courts are capable of when they took the corrupt former PM Nawaz Sharif to task over the Panama Papers scandal. More recently, we saw how brave are Pakistan's present judges when they announced their verdict based on justice in the Aasia Bibi case. Pakistan's judiciary is perhaps the only institution in Pakistan that is delivering some amazing results. Almost all other institutions, including the military, are all talk and no action. While Pakistani courts deserve enough praise, we must remember that the military is answerable not just to the civilian government but also to the Supreme Court. Therefore, I hope that Pakistan's brave judges will inquire from the military where was it when the Army chief was being declared 'Qadiani' (derogatory term used by Islamists for Ahmadis) and bounties were being placed on serving judges. If the military thinks it is responsible for Pakistan's national security, which it most definitely is, then it must also address issues like this one since they are directly connected with Pakistan's national security. Islamist-backed instability in Pakistan will not only tarnish military's narrative on terrorism but will also internationally raise questions on Pakistan's nuclear program. The fact that Aasia Bibi's lawyer was forced to take asylum in The Netherlands, a country that was recently condemned by Pakistan over a cartoon contest that never happened, doesn't help Pakistan's case either. If anything, it acts as a counter-force to the calls made by PM Khan for overseas Pakistanis and foreigners to invest in Pakistan. After all, who wants to invest in a country that cannot keep one man and one woman safe?

It is high time for Pakistani leaders to realise that patriotism has nothing to do with religion and so they must pick a side: either you can save Islam (which doesn't need any saving) or you can save Pakistan (which does need a lot of saving). Over the last few decades, Pakistani civil and military leaders have tried to woo Islamists into supporting the state while alienating progressive and educated forces in the country. The only problem is, Islamists will turn to the state faster than a fat kid turns on the cake the moment they realise that the state or its rulers are not the kind of 'Islamic' they want them to be, because their support is for state's Islamism, not for the state itself.

Islamists are not only bad for law and order but they also directly negatively impact the economy. Consider this for a moment: While Islamists have destroyed billions worth of property in just a couple of days, most of these Islamists are terrible members of the society. Most of these Islamists spent a good portion of their life in madrassas and won't economically contribute anything positive to the country, while causing the most damage. And it's not like Pakistani leaders are not concerned about the threat these uneducated Islamists pose to the country. Indeed, Pakistan's Army Chief General Bajwa raised serious questions over the role of madrassas and the impact on the economy by madrasa students just last year, something that I publicly praised at the time. But he almost immediately faced backlash from Islamists over those statements and he has been publicly quiet on the issue ever since.

Over the last decade, Pakistan's Arab allies have learned all too well that keeping Islamists under control is absolutely crucial for stability. While most of these Arab countries are not democracies, the concept of rioting is unthinkable in most of these Arab countries. Rioting against the government in Saudi Arabia is akin to treason. While these measures may be harsh for a democracy for Pakistan, there is a serious need for Pakistan to adopt some less harsh measures, like making all Islamist groups in Pakistan directly answerable to the government, appointing government-registered imams in mosques, banning foreign funding for Islamic Centers, and more. This is something ITCT's international team of experts specialises in and as the Deputy Director I can say that, if approached, we would be open to providing Pakistani government a detailed proposal on how to bring Islamists and extremist groups under stricter checks. While I simply do not agree with using religion for politics, I also realise that banning Islamism is not conceivable in Pakistan at this point, so for Pakistan the next best thing is controlling Islamism. The Islamists must be made to realise that if they want to live in Pakistan, there are certain set of rules that they must always abide by, and ignoring those rules could result in serious penalties. If left unchecked, Islamists will keep on taking more and more space until the time comes when the international community seriously starts contemplating what to do if there's an Islamist takeover in Pakistan.

Photo: The Times