

LSE Government Department

The HotSeat Videocast

Dr Adnan Naseemullah discussing the politics of Pakistan in the wake of the assassination of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer.

Recorded 13/1/2011.

Ariane Sparks : Hi. I'm Ariane Sparks. Welcome to the HotSeat. With us today to discuss the recent assassination of Pakistani political leader, Salman Taseer, is Dr Adnan Naseemullah. Thank you for being with us.

Ariane Sparks : Would you tell us a bit about Salman Taseer and the motivation behind his assassination?

Dr Adnan Naseemullah : Sure, I'd be happy to. Salman Taseer comes from one of the big, elite liberal families in Pakistan. He was actually the nephew of one of Pakistan's most celebrated poets, Fez Ahmed Fez, who was a communist. Taseer went to Government College Lahore, which is an elite institution in Lahore, that was set up by the British and came to London to study chartered accountancy. In the 1960's he got very involved in the populist movement behind Bhutto and the Pakistan People's Party and has remained as a close associate of the leaders of the PPP including the late Benazir Bhutto and the current president, Asif Ali Zardari. He was also a very rich man. He started a group who did business consulting and accountancy; he established a cell phone network that is very popular in the country and also started a newspaper. It's interesting because he is a political leader but he's not been very successful in electoral politics but in 2007 he was appointed in one of the last Musharaff cabinets as the Minister of Industries and after that he was appointed the Governor of Punjab which was the position he held until he died. He's been a very outspoken advocate on liberal causes, especially in terms of religious minorities. He defended the Ahmadis which are a sect that has been persecuted in Pakistan and also religious minorities like Christians. The background for the actual assassination came when Salman Taseer personally intervened and investigated the case of Asia Bibi or Asia Noreen who was a Christian lower-caste woman, or a lower community woman, who was prosecuted under the blasphemy law and sentenced to death. He had said he would take up the case and actually ask the president to provide clemency. In so doing, he also made a statement that the blasphemy law was so-called black law and should be repealed. So when Taseer was visiting a café in Islamabad, one that I know quite well, as he was leaving and entering the car, one of his bodyguards, a man by the name of Malik Mumtaz Qadri, shot him seven times and he died on the way to the hospital. Qadri is interesting because before joining this Punjab elite force that was supposed to take care of VIPs, he comes from a pretty conservative family but within a fairly liberal sect of Islam called the Barelvi so that's a little bit of background.

Ariane Sparks : Thank you. Do you think his assassination highlights the ongoing battle between religious and secular forces in Pakistan?

Dr Adnan Naseemullah : I think it does. One of the saddest things to see, and a number of commentators have mentioned it, is the amount of rhetoric in support of Qadri's actions in the popular, vernacular press and on social networking sites like Facebook. Now, we have no idea how representative that is but that has really worried people. I think it's important to remember that the clash between the secular and religious is really just part of the identity of Pakistan. Pakistan was formed in 1947 in partitioning from India because a number of political leaders felt

that a nation for Muslims will allow for Muslims to reach their full potential in terms of economic development and not be discriminated against in a Hindu-majority country. Now, those leaders mostly envisioned a Pakistan with liberal, constitutionalist values and no discrimination against religion. The Pakistani flag is a quarter-white, three-quarters green to represent, at that point, the 25% minority communities in Pakistan. Now that figure is 4%. What has happened since then is that successive, non-democratic, especially military governments, have used the orthodox Islamic leadership as a source of legitimacy and that has especially peaked in the military regime of the Zia ul-Haq from 1977-1988, in which he established a number of institutions to intervene in social life and to put the Pakistani constitution and Pakistani laws in conformity with a very conservative interpretation of Islam that included establishing the federal sharia court as well as a number of these laws, passed by ordinance not by parliament, including the blasphemy law.

Ariane Sparks : Where do you see the country moving from here? Do you think this will lead to more polarisation?

Dr Adnan Naseemullah : Unfortunately, I think it is. It is one event in a long chain of events including sectarian violence between Sunni and Shiite communities in the country and the occupation of a library in 2007 by women seminarians which led to a shootout in Islamabad in 2007. I think the two things that are worth paying attention to is firstly that the Islamist parties are not particularly popular. In the National Assembly, the National Assembly of Pakistan, there are 340 seats. The Islamist parties hold only seven of them as opposed to the PPP's 124. So it's a case in which Orthodox Islamist parties have been able to take control of the rhetoric around what Pakistan is about and especially to do with the religion without necessarily popular support. And the second thing is the incapacity of the state, and especially the judiciary, to interpret and implement law in accordance with equality and fairness is a real problem. The blasphemy law is a very difficult law as it is based on hearsay, he-said she-said, that someone said something bad about the prophet and that leads to the persecution, particularly of religious minorities in the country. And yet, we don't see the supreme court and the high courts intervening to clean up the prosecutions and interpret the laws in a way that might lead to some more fairness and equity.

Ariane Sparks : Alright, we'll leave it there. Dr Naseemullah, you are off the HotSeat. Thank you for being with us.

Dr Adnan Naseemullah : Thank you very much for having me.

Ariane Sparks : And thank you for being with us. Please tune in next month for our next edition of the HotSeat.