

# Pakistan's capitulation to extremists sets a dangerous precedent

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*Pakistan's government, military and opposition parties have given in to the demands of a fundamentalist mob. Basit Mahmood says this is a blow to those who wish to remain true to the secular vision of Pakistan's founder.*

"You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the state."

Those were the words of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, whose secular vision for Pakistan has just received its final nail in the coffin.

Pakistan's government, military and opposition parties have capitulated to a campaign spearheaded by a religious cleric named Khadim Husain Rizvi, leader of the hard line Tehrik-e-Labaik Pakistan party. Rizvi has previously praised Mumtaz Qadri, the bodyguard of the governor of Punjab province who gunned down his own boss, for daring to challenge the blasphemy laws that are routinely used to persecute religious minorities in Pakistan. He has also paid tribute to Tanveer Ahmed, a man convicted over the sectarian killing of Glasgow shopkeeper Asad Shah.

The latest turmoil occurred after a change in the wording of an electoral oath for lawmakers, which in the eyes of the protestors had been done to appease religious minorities. In spite of the government issuing an immediate reversal, religious hardliners sensed their opportunity to further extend and entrench their influence in a state already grappling with religious extremism and one where politicians and civil society are under constant attack by hard-line groups.

The frenzied mobs attacked the houses of politicians, demanded the resignation of the law minister and got what they wanted. The army that often likes to portray itself as a neutral arbiter between the government and ordinary Pakistanis, showed once more its lacklustre approach for dealing with religious hardliners in the country. Instead of following the orders of the executive, the role assigned to it by the constitution, it decided to appoint itself mediator and helped broker the deal that saw Zahid Hamid, Pakistan's law minister, resign.

Those (including opposition parties) who supported such calls, either out of pure self-interest or because they genuinely believe in the ideal of establishing a theocracy in Pakistan, should learn from the lessons of the past. Those who create and unleash monsters may not be able to control them. Despite the government giving in to demands, the protests continued, with some demanding the resignation of the entire government. Where will it end?

The implications that will follow from caving in to demands made by hard-line religious clerics are both dangerous and far reaching. For this event signals the end of the supremacy of the constitution and parliament in Pakistan. It means that unaccountable religious clerics will be able to make demands of the state with impunity and hold it to ransom, buoyed by their recent successes.

It is a blow to those who wish to remain true to the original vision of the founding father of Pakistan, a country based on secular values, religious freedom, the rule of law and tolerance. That a nation that is very much at the centre of the fight against extremism and religious intolerance, and one that has paid the heaviest of prices, should then surrender in the face of those who wish to push their hard-line interpretations into the mainstream is all the more insulting.

The only way out of this desperate situation is to implement the vision of Muhammad Ali Jinnah. He, as most great visionaries do, foresaw the troubles ahead given Pakistan's distinct ethnic and religious diversity, and wished for a secular Pakistan, in which religion and state were to be kept entirely separate. His untimely death allowed for civilian and military rulers who, in the absence of a national identity, have advanced their own competing visions of the state ever since. Religious groups along with civilian and military governments have sought to repackage Jinnah as an Islamic leader in order to increase support and legitimacy amongst Pakistani society and to match their anti-India rhetoric. It's about time however that Pakistan's political establishment stood up to the religious right and restored Pakistan to the secular state its founder intended it to be, without whom there would have been no independence movement.

The UK government should also use its influence with Pakistan to demand more be done to tackle religious intolerance, and make any future aid dependent on concrete measures taken to this effect. For now Pakistan has set a dangerous precedent, and who knows where it will end?

## **Basit Mahmood**

Basit Mahmood is a freelance writer published on Independent Voices, the Huffington Post and elsewhere. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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