

Blasphemy, Protests and the Politics of Patronage in Pakistan

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Protests over the acquittal of a woman who had been accused of blasphemy brought a number of cities in Pakistan to a standstill. These protests ended when the government signed an agreement with the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, a hardline Islamic movement. The agreement demonstrates that the movement enjoys support within the Pakistani establishment.

On 30 October 2018, protestors brought much of Pakistan to a standstill. The Supreme Court had acquitted Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who had been accused of blasphemy and sentenced to death in 2010. For four days, thousands of protestors blocked intersections in various cities, burnt shops and forced schools and government institutions to shut down.

The protests were spearheaded by the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a recently established Islamic political movement arising out of the [Barelvi school of Islam](#), which this author recently wrote about. Its leadership openly declared that the murder of Asia Bibi and the Supreme Court judges would be *wajib-ul-qatal* (legitimate killing). The TLP leaders even went to the extent of [calling on military personnel](#) to mutiny against its ‘un-Islamic leadership’. Following in the footsteps of the TLP, a number of other Islamic movements announced that they would launch public protests.

In a televised address to the nation hours after the protests broke out, Prime Minister Imran Khan issued a strong warning that the state would take firm action against anyone indulging in or threatening violence. Yet, on 2 November 2018, the Pakistani government signed an agreement with the TLP in which the government agreed to prevent Asia Bibi from leaving the country and not opposing a review petition against the Supreme Court’s judgement. The government further agreed to release all protestors who had been arrested.

This agreement was signed by two senior members of the TLP and the Federal Minister for Religious Affairs, Noor-ul-Haq Qadri, and the Law Minister of Punjab, Raja Basharat, on behalf of the government. Shortly before the agreement was signed, the chief spokesperson for the Pakistani military, Major General Asif Ghafoor, had [stated](#) that a member of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan’s leading intelligence agency, was playing a role in facilitating the negotiation.

The fact that the TLP was brought to the negotiating table raises questions over the role of the establishment in facilitating its rise. That the establishment chose to negotiate with the TLP and no other religious movement is telling in itself. A number of other Islamic movements were also part of the protests. The Jamaat-e-Islami, an established Islamist movement and political party, for example, actively participated in the protests but was not a party to the agreement. Indeed, the agreement served to provide the TLP with a face-saving solution. By calling for a mutiny and openly threatening violence, the TLP had

ratcheted the rhetoric to a dangerous level. It also seemed to have lost the support of important religious leaders. For instance, the influential religious figure Samiul Haq is said to have [expressed displeasure](#) over the statements being made by the TLP leaders. Incidentally, Haq was assassinated while the protests were ongoing.

The government's choice to backtrack on its threat to take action against the TLP protesters demonstrates that the movement continues to enjoy support within the establishment. Indeed, patronage from the state and the military has itself played a role in enabling the rise of the TLP.

The TLP first came into the limelight in 2017 when it organised a three-week long *dharna* (sit-in) which crippled Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. The *dharna* was launched in opposition to a change in electoral forms that was deemed to water down an assertion of one's believe in the finality of the prophecy of Muhammad. While the government of the day argued that this change in wording had been the result of a clerical error, the TLP asserted that it infringed upon the honour of Muhammad and reflected a desire to legitimise the Ahmadiyya who are deemed to be blasphemous movement. This *dharna* ended not with a security crackdown but rather with a signed agreement between the government and the TLP. The agreement was brokered by the military and an official from the ISI had signed on as a guarantor.

Confronted by the rise of Taliban-inspired militancy in Pakistan, the state and military have extended official patronage to movements that they believe will be able to delegitimise the religious discourse that the militants draw upon. Traditionally, the Pakistani establishment provided patronage to Deobandi organisations and figures. The Barelvis, who constitute the majority in Pakistan, were not a political force to contend with. However, the fact that the Taliban militants adhere to the Deobandi strand of Islam led to a reorientation of patronage towards Barelvi organisations like the TLP. The added significance of the TLP lies in the fact that it emerged as the fourth largest single party in Pakistan in vote share in the 2018 elections. It received more electoral support than any of the established religious parties.

Although Pakistani cities are returning to normalcy, the agreement between the government and the TLP is only a temporary solution. The review of the Supreme Court's verdict is not expected to be a lengthy affair and the TLP leadership has already stated that its battle to ensure that Asia Bibi is persecuted is not over. It remains to be seen how the military will respond when the TLP returns to the streets.

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