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Issue Brief

Tehrik Labaik Pakistan and the Politics of the Religious Right

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Summary

The Tehrik Labaik Pakistan (TLP), in a very short time, has emerged as one of the strongest neo-fundamentalist, radical organisations. To become politically successful, the TLP needs to expand beyond its one-point agenda limited to blasphemy issues to include other socio-economic issues. The politics of the TLP variety, however, relies more on emotion rather than rationality. The half-hearted ban imposed on the TLP by the Pakistan government in the wake of the violence committed by the organisation in April 2021, it seems, is based more on immediate law and order priorities rather than on constraining its toxic, religion-based politics. The ban will not defang the religious radicalism that forms the TLPs core strength.

The Tehrik Labaik Pakistan (TLP), in a very short time, has emerged as one of the strongest neo-fundamentalist radical organisations. The TLP was the fifth largest party in the national elections held in July 2018. Several factors contributed to its rise. Most notable of them was the leadership provided by Allama Khadim Rizvi, the firebrand leader who used the blasphemy issue to mobilise people.

After his death in November 2020, his son and the current chief of the TLP, Saad Rizvi, is trying to find a toe-hold in right-wing politics. The government imposed a ban on his organisation on April 15, 2021 under the Anti-terrorism Act of 1997, in the wake of violence committed by its cadres demanding the expulsion of the French Ambassador, over France defending the publication of the cartoon of Prophet Mohammad.

While the controversy dates back to October 2020, Rizvi had called off a strike last year after the government had assured him of action against the French Ambassador. When his demands were not met, his organisation resorted to violence, resulting in the April 2021 ban. The government, however, after imposing the ban, a few days later introduced a resolution in the National Assembly to expel the French diplomats. The TLP celebrated this as a major victory.

The past several years have seen a decline in the fortunes of established religious political parties in Pakistan and the rise of neo-fundamentalist, street-savvy parties. The TLP gained attention when it participated in the 2016 protests along with other religious organisations against the hanging of Mumtaz Qadri, the bodyguard of the then Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, who was killed by Qadri in January 2011. Taseer's crime was that he had described the blasphemy law as a 'black law' and demanded its repeal, while supporting Aasia Bibi's appeal for mercy, who was convicted in a blasphemy case.¹

Later, even the Religious Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, who opposed the blasphemy law, was killed in Islamabad in March 2011. Forty religious parties and organisations formed the Tehrik Tahaffuz Namoos Risalat (TNR), which translates to 'Protecting the Prophet's Sanctity', to protest against Qadri's conviction and demanded immediate dismissal of the judge in Rawalpindi, Justice Pervez Ali Shah, who delivered the verdict. Later, this judge fled the country.

The deification of Qadri and the fact that even lawyers showered rose petals on him when he was produced in a court in Islamabad, reflected how the issue of blasphemy can inflame public passions.² Thousands gathered for Qadri's funeral while Taseer's family struggled to arrange a Maulvi to read his funeral prayer. Perhaps what was ironic was the fact that the then Minister for Religious Affairs, Pir Muhammad Amin Ul Hasnat Shah, in a statement described Qadri as a martyr and urged people to

¹ "[Salman Taseer Meets Aasia Bibi](#)", YouTube, March 27, 2012.

² AP, "[Lawyers shower roses for governor's killer](#)", *The Dawn*, January 5, 2011.

participate peacefully in his funeral.³ Five hundred clerics from Jamat Ahle Sunnat supported the killing of Taseer.

The TNR came into existence after Sherry Rehman, Member of National Assembly belonging to the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), introduced a bill in November 2010 seeking changes in the awarding of the death penalty in the contentious blasphemy law. She stated that her intention was that, "people be given a chance to prove their innocence like in all laws, and that cases be tried at the Higher courts, that penalties be given according to the Quran ..."⁴ Later, the PPP clarified that the bill had been withdrawn following protests, even though Rahman clarified that the bill was a private member bill and was not even admitted for discussion by the Speaker.

History of Blasphemy Law

The death penalty was added to the blasphemy law by inserting Clause C to Section 295 of the Pakistan Penal code on October 5, 1986, by the Pakistani parliament. This was the era of the Zia-ul-Haq-initiated Islamisation drive and not surprisingly, the clerics succeeded. It was during Zia's regime between 1980 and 1986 that five amendments were introduced to the blasphemy law.⁵

Though the law prescribed both death penalty and life imprisonment, it was in 1990 that the death sentence was made compulsory. The Federal Sharia Court in October 1990 decided that "the penalty for contempt of the Holy Prophet (omitting any prophet) is death and nothing else."⁶ It asked the government to make necessary amendments to the words 'or punishment for life' in Section 295-C, giving a deadline of April 30, 1991. The government did not appeal against the decision of the Federal Sharia Court nor was a law passed to change 295-C.

Therefore, for anyone allegedly committing blasphemy, the judiciary has two choices – to award the death sentence or to free that person, rejecting the charges of blasphemy. Given the sensitivity, in many cases, the death sentence is awarded. Perhaps, the irony is that those who are awarded the death sentence by the judiciary should consider themselves lucky, as the other alternative is mob justice before the police intervenes – as happened in Gojra in 2009, or the accused can be killed inside court premises – as was the case when a blasphemy-accused was killed in the high-security court complex in Peshawar in July 2020.⁷ The lawyers and the Peshawar police took selfies with the killer, indicating to the larger malice that has afflicted the Pakistani society.

³ Jon Boon, "[Thousands at funeral of Pakistani executed for murdering governor](#)", *The Guardian*, March 1, 2016.

⁴ Zia Khan, "[Blasphemy law amendment: Sherry Rehman to withdraw bill, says PM](#)", *Express Tribune*, February 3, 2011.

⁵ Asad Ahmed, "[A brief history of the anti-blasphemy laws](#)", *The Herald*, October 31, 2018.

⁶ Amnesty International, "[Use and Abuse of the Blasphemy Laws](#)", July 1, 1994.

⁷ Sirajudin, "[Blasphemy accused gunned down inside courtroom at Peshawar Judicial Complex](#)", *The Dawn*, July 29, 2020.

In 1994, Benazir Bhutto's regime introduced two amendments to prevent misuse of the blasphemy law. Under the provisions of the amendment, the police could only register a case after a competent court had ascertained and confirmed that there was enough evidence to warrant such a registration. Secondly, anyone making false allegations would be liable to severe punishment of a ten-year prison term. The conviction rate under this law for bringing false allegations is very rare. The court has never convicted anyone and in some cases it has even freed the accused. Imran Khan, during the 2018 election campaign, stated that he will not allow any amendment to Article 295 C.⁸

Politics of Blasphemy Law in Pakistan

It needs to be noted that there are political and economic factors that underpin blasphemy cases in Pakistan. According to a study by the Centre for Social Justice, between 1997 and 2020, "1,855 people have been accused under offences related to religion – mostly under Sections 295-B and C to 298-C of the Pakistan Penal Code".⁹ In 2020, 200 people had been accused, out of which 75 were Muslims. The same study also points out that 75 persons had been murdered extra judicially in circumstances involving an allegation of blasphemy, some even had no clue about why they were being killed. Seven were killed in police custody or by policemen. Those murdered included 39 Muslims, 23 Christians, nine Ahmadis two Hindus and two persons whose religious identity was not known."¹⁰

In many cases, it was found that the accused were illiterate and yet they were blamed for writing and sending blasphemous text messages. The cases of Manzoor, Rehmat Masih and Salamat Masih, unlettered Christians who were accused of scribbling blasphemous content on a wall of a mosque, is a grim reminder of the misuse of this law. Though Salamat Masih and Rehmat Masih had their death sentence revoked by Justice Arif Iqbal Hussain Bhatti and Justice Chaudhry Khurshid Ahmad of the Lahore High Court in 1995, a country-wide strike was called by the Milli Yakjehti Council to protest against this acquittal.

Judges are also not spared for dispensing a fair trial, as was the case with Justice Arif Iqbal who was killed in his chamber by a fanatic after he had freed the blasphemy accused. Prior to that, a Hafiz-e-Quran and practitioner of indigenous medicine, Dr Sajjad Farooq, was stoned to death by a mob instigated by the local cleric for blasphemy in 1994. Professor Attaur Rehman Saqib, the principal of Fehm-i-Quran Institute was killed in 2002. Samuel Masih, another blasphemy accused, was

⁸ Memphis Barker, "[Imran Khan criticised for defence of Pakistan blasphemy laws](#)", *The Guardian*, July 09, 2018.

⁹ Peter Jacob, "[A Position Paper on Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan, Rescuing the Innocent Captives](#)", *Centre for Social Justice*, September 2019. Among these, 720 were Muslim, 516 Ahmadi, 238 Christian, and 31 were Hindu while the religious identity of 44 individuals could not be ascertained.

¹⁰ Ibid.

attacked in 2004 with a hammer by a policeman who was guarding him in prison, to avenge the alleged blasphemous act committed by him.¹¹

The violence at Gojra in 2009 and the incident of a Christian couple who were burnt alive in Kot Radha Kishan in November 2014, the case of Mashal Khan, a young student who was killed in 2017, the killing of a Bank Manager in Punjab's Kushab due to personal animosity and its cover-up as a case of blasphemy by the guard who shot him, are only few instances. Supporting anyone who has allegedly committed blasphemy as Salman Taseer did, can be regarded as a blasphemous act. But killing someone after accusing him of blasphemy can earn a person laurels and shows how such thinking has percolated the society that sanctions such cold-blooded murder.

Most of the allegations are brought to settle personal scores.¹² In some cases, even students have brought blasphemy charges against their teachers. In February 2021, three people were sentenced to death for uploading blasphemous material in social media. A Shia person, Taimur Raza, was sentenced to death in Bhawalpur on similar charges. A Hindu principal in Ghotki, Sindh was accused of blasphemy by his student. Blasphemy accusation was also brought against 'Aurat march' in Peshawar where a judge in Peshawar city ordered investigation into the matter. In April 2021, two Christian nurses were accused of committing blasphemy and charged with removing a sticker that consisted of Islamic verses from the hospital wall by another nurse who allegedly had professional jealousy with the Christian nurses.

TLP Takes the Lead

TLP made its mark in demanding the release of Mumtaz Qadri in 2016. However, its big ticket entry came in 2017. In the Election Reforms Amendment Bill 2017, a modification purportedly made in the election oath omitted the mandatory clause of accepting finality of prophethood by candidates wishing to contest elections. Sections 7B and 7C of the Conduct of General Elections Order, which relates to the status of Ahmadis as voters, was earlier passed in 2002.¹³ On October 5, 2017, the Sharif government, citing clerical mistake, restored the Khatm-e-Nabowat oath to the original Act. The TLP by then had demonstrated its strength when it received six percent votes in the Lahore by-elections in September 2017.

By then, however, the little known organisation, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah led by Khadim Hussain Rizvi, took the lead and in 2017 organised the Faizabad sit-in to protest against the change made to the electoral oath. He was soon joined by

¹¹ "[High-profile blasphemy cases in the last 63 years](#)", *The Dawn*, December 8, 2010.

¹² For details on various blasphemy cases from 1990 to 2012, see, "[Timeline: Accused under the Blasphemy Law](#)", *The Dawn*, September 19, 2012.

¹³ Section 7B says that the status of Ahmadis remains as stated in the Constitution of Pakistan, while section 7C states that if an enrolled voter's belief in the finality of Prophet Muhammad's prophethood is contended, they shall have to sign a declaration stating so, failing which their 'name shall be deleted from the joint electoral rolls and added to a supplementary list of voters in the same electoral area as non-Muslim'. Inamullah Khattak and Nadir Guramani, "[NA passes bill to restore Khatm-i-Nabooat declaration to original form in Elections Act 2017](#)", *The Dawn*, October 5, 2017.

groups like the Tehreek-e-Khatm-e-Nabuwat and Sunni Tehreek. The PML-N which was in a weak position politically following the disqualification of Nawaz Sharif did not have the political strength to confront them.

The government's attempt to call the Army to restore order was rejected by the Army which cited the 2017 Supreme Court judgement on aid to civil authorities that imposed restrictions on the use of firearms. The Army also conveyed that the government has not used the police optimally and the Rangers are available to the government to bring order.¹⁴

The Army, however, did mediate to make the TLP vacate the Faizabad interchange which it had occupied for 20 days. The six-point agreement reached between the protestors and government had Maj. Gen. Faiz Hameed of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) as a guarantor. Punjab Rangers Director General (DG) Azhar Naveed Hayat was seen distributing envelopes containing Rs 1000 ostensibly to cover the travel cost of the protestors. The Supreme Court took up the issue *suo motu* on November 21, 2017 and directed the armed forces to "initiate action against the personnel under their command who are found to have violated their oath".¹⁵

The TLP's protest against Aasia Bibi's release on October 30, 2018 and the decision of other like-minded organisations like the Jamaat ud Dawa (JUD) and Jamiat Ulema-e Islam (JUI) to join the protest meant that these organisations with their support base do not mind the TLP taking the lead. TLP supporters withdrew after they reached an agreement with the government that they would allow the TLP to appeal against Aasia Bibi's verdict and she would not be allowed to leave the country and all the protesters who were arrested would be released. Though Khadim Rizvi and his supporters were arrested for causing damage to public property and creating chaos and charges of sedition was imposed, he was released on bail.

TLPs Rise and the Politics of the Right

There are debates on what the TLP's rise means for the politics of the right. Many scholars allude to the fact that religious political parties do not have the electoral strength and only draw 4-6 per cent of the votes. Perhaps the only time the religious political parties showed their electoral strength was when the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) was elected to govern in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and won 59 seats in the National Assembly in the 2002 election.

Several factors were responsible for the MMA's win in the 2002 Musharraf-engineered election. The MMA successfully used platforms like mosques and madrassas for political activities when there was a ban on political activities by political parties. The government accepted the degree awarded by the madrassas as

¹⁴ Sardar Sikander, "[Faizabad crackdown: We can't use force against our own people, says COAS](#)", *Express Tribune*, November 26, 2017.

¹⁵ "[Faizabad sit-in: SC directs govt, LEAs, and intelligence agencies to operate within mandate](#)", *The Dawn*, February 6, 2019.

one of the essential qualification requirements to contest elections. The MMA also received support from the establishment to keep other political parties like the Pakistan Muslim League (N) and the PPP at bay.

In 2008, however, the MMA had a poor show both due to the anti-incumbency factor and bickering within its constituent units, as indeed the decision of the Jammat-e-Islami not to contest the election. The MMA is a shadow of its former self currently and the important constituents of the conglomerate, the Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat-ul-Ulema Pakistan, are not on the same page on many issues, including over the leadership of this group.

In this context, the TLP's rise is significant. It is not about their electoral strength but more about the influence they exert which is much larger than their electoral strength. Their success in mainstreaming their agenda and putting pressure on the government to protect their radical Islamic agenda is noteworthy. This is proved by the fact that while the TLP is banned, the government has introduced a bill to discuss the expulsion of the French Ambassador.

Pakistan has seen the emergence of neo-radicals who have rejected the politics of the traditional religious political parties. Though groups like the Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have rejected electoral politics, the TLP is keen to contest. The TLP which contested the 2018 national election as a separate political entity received 4.23 per cent of the vote, ending as the fifth-largest party, even though it did not win any seats. In 14 National Assembly seats in Lahore, it finished as the third-largest party. In Karachi, it received 12 per cent of the votes. In the by-elections for a Karachi constituency held on April 29, 2021, the TLP finished third, much ahead of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI), which was placed at the fifth position. The PPP candidate won this by-election.

Interestingly, this reveals the urban base of the TLP which epitomises Berelvi politics. Saad Rizvi's statement that the "change in the social profile of our followers has taken even us by surprise" is noteworthy.¹⁶ The mainstreaming of religious political parties has the blessing of the military establishment which thinks it can control these parties who have street power but not much electoral presence compared to the popular political parties, the PML-N and the PPP.

Some scholars argue that there is a difference between religious political parties aligned to the Alhe Hadith school of thought that are supposed to be more radical compared to the Alhe Sunnat school of thought that is identified with the Berelvi sect.¹⁷ Over a period of time, the activities of these groups reveal that militancy has become the lynchpin in their show of strength and both are equally radical, if not more.

¹⁶ Kalbe Ali, "[TLP's ambition to enter mainstream nears realisation](#)", *The Dawn*, January 5, 2021.

¹⁷ Farhan Hanif Siddiqi, "[Pakistani Elections: The Radical Religious Right in Pakistan's electoral Politics](#)", *South Asian Voices*, July 3, 2018.

Is Saad Rizvi's politics different from that of his father? The recent protest demanding the expulsion of the French Ambassador, underlines the fact that Khadim Rizvi's successor and son, Hafiz Saad Rizvi, has inherited his father's 'inflammatory rhetoric'. Though he is only 26, the blockade organised by the TLP in Islamabad on April 12 indicates that violence remains a major instrument of the TLP to pressure the government. Four policemen were killed in the violence and 11 policemen and a SHO were abducted by the TLP and later released after negotiations.

Perhaps Saad Rizvi is in a hurry to leave his mark in politics as several other ulemas, mainly Pir Afzal Qadri, were against his appointment, given his young age.¹⁸ Pir Afzal Qadri had shaped the TLP's agenda after the protest against Mumtaz Qadri's death sentence petered off. Muhammad Afzal Qadri, who is the Bareilvi Ameer of Aalimi Tanzim AhleSunnat, was the deputy under Khadim Rizvi till his resignation from the TLP.

Will the Ban Constrain the TLP?

One has seen in the past that a ban on any radical organisation has not helped. There are several other steps that the state needs to take. It needs to stop the source of funding, keep a close watch on the leadership and dismantle its support base. The TLP's politics is centred on the issue of 'blasphemy'. In 2018, it had demanded the expulsion of the Dutch Ambassador after cartoons of Prophet Mohammad appeared in Dutch newspapers.

It appears that while the TLP has not confined its activities just to protests against blasphemy in Pakistan, it wants to emerge as a champion for the cause of blasphemy. The emotional appeal of blasphemy that arouses popular anger has the capacity to encourage more people to take the law into their hands, as they believe that the court will free the blasphemers as was the case with Aasia Bibi.¹⁹

While the TLP is banned under the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997, the government has taken prompt action to satisfy the group. Herein lies the strength of the TLP. The supporters of the TLP who were engaged in violence and attacked the police station on April 18 demanding the release of Saad Rizvi, have been freed. After the government agreed to accept its demand to table a resolution in the National Assembly to debate the expulsion of French Ambassador, the TLP called off its nationwide strike.

The TLP is also a manifestation of Berelvi assertion wanting to prove that they can take up issues that are important to the Muslims, like the Deobandis. Though the Deobandis are generally favoured as foot soldiers of Islam, the Berelvis have proven

¹⁸ Umair Jamal, "[Infighting in Pakistan's Right-Wing TLP Following Death of Leader](#)", *The Diplomat*, November 27, 2020.

¹⁹ One of the students in Bhawalpur did not hesitate to kill a teacher who he believed was encouraging mixing of both genders by arranging a welcome party for the newcomers. Mohammad Imran, "[Bahawalpur student stabs professor to death over 'anti-Islam' remarks](#)", *The Dawn*, March 20, 2019.

that they cannot stay behind. Initially, the Berelvi School was more inclined to protect its faith and wanted representation and government patronisation.²⁰

In fact, the government projected the Berelvis as a moderate Islamic group and sought their help to project a moderate view of Islam. But events have proven that they are not far behind in instrumentalising violence. The Berelvi School attaches importance to the veneration of Prophet Muhammad and believes that a true Muslim is an “Ashiq-e-Rasool” (One who loves the Prophet). Therefore, anything that is considered disparaging to the Prophet is considered an act of blasphemy.

Since the blasphemy issue touches a raw nerve among the believers, the TLP will continue with its one-point agenda. To become politically successful, it needs to expand its agenda to other socio-economic issues. But politics of the TLP variety relies more on emotion than rationality. The half-hearted ban imposed on the TLP is based on the law and order perspective than on its toxic politics. The ban will not defang the radicalism that forms its core strength.

²⁰ For details see Ashok K. Behuria, “Sects within Sect: The Case of Deobandi–Barelvi Encounter in Pakistan”, *Strategic Analysis*, 32(1), January 2008, pp.74-76.

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