

## Ahmed Rashid's lament for a troubled Pakistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

Lahore, Pakistan— Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan after the partition of India in 1947, would not recognize his legacy today: A country built on democratic, constitutional principles is now beset by multiple crises and besieged by a growing chorus of fundamentalist Islamic leaders who are wooing the public to overthrow the government and impose an Islamic state. Most Pakistanis are not extremists, but they remain silent.

One child of Jinnah's legacy was Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab province who was executed by his elite police bodyguard this month.

Another is me. Mr. Taseer and I were both born not long after the birth of Pakistan itself, and grew up together in Lahore. His children went to school with my children, and they also became good friends. He went into politics and I became a writer, but in our separate and distinct ways, we both upheld the spirit of Jinnah's vision and message.

Jinnah was a liberal, consensual, inspired Muslim who categorically and repeatedly stated that Pakistan would be a state for Muslims to pursue their religion and culture, but never an Islamic state. He welcomed all minorities to live and worship in freedom.

That was the kind of vision needed for a new country that was multicultural and multi-ethnic, one that had been the seat of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. That was the Pakistan we grew up in, in the 1960s and 1970s. But that Pakistan is now rapidly being lost.

Mr. Taseer and I saw that country bent by war with India in 1971, by martial laws, by failed democracy and by growing poverty. We saw our leaders, military and civilian, becoming less visionary and more corrupt.

One factor today is a controversial blasphemy bill, which is so loosely worded that it makes it relatively easy to convict anyone - especially Hindus and Christians, who count for less than 3 per cent of the country's total population of 170 million.

Mr. Taseer supported proposed amendments to the bill. After his killing by police officer Malik Mumtaz Qadri - who was praised and garlanded by crowds when he appeared in court - the extremists' next target could be the woman who first tabled those amendments in Parliament last year.

Sherry Rehman, 50, the former information minister for the government coalition headed by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), is a vivacious intellectual powerhouse. She will not budge from her stance. When intelligence agencies asked her to leave the country after Mr. Taseer's death because they feared they could not protect her, she refused.

"I have skeleton security, but I don't want to leave the country and will stay as long as it's physically possible," Ms. Rehman says. "I have work to do here."

She says she is receiving death threats every two hours even though she is restricted to her house in Karachi. And given the manner of Mr. Taseer's death, it's hard to say what police protection means.

When Ms. Rehman introduced the amendment last year, she says, there was a lot of support for discussion, even among opposition parties - although none supported revoking the bill. Now, nobody wants even to mention the bill, let alone amend it.

Some fearful PPP ministers have been urging her to withdraw her proposals, as the extremists are demanding. She has refused: "The space for those who believe in Jinnah's Pakistan has shrunk considerably. We need to take that space back."

When Ms. Rehman set up a think tank in the private sector last year to carry out research on social issues such as blasphemy and women's rights, she called it the Jinnah Institute.

Like Mr. Taseer, she has been moved by the case of Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five who has been sentenced to death under the blasphemy law for allegedly insulting Islam. Mr. Taseer had asked President Asif Ali Zardari to pardon her, and that irked the fundamentalists.

Christians and Hindus are among the poorest members of society in Pakistan, and today they are under severe threat. Earlier this month, even Pope Benedict XVI asked Pakistan to scrap the blasphemy law, saying "it is clear that it serves as a pretext for acts of injustice and violence against religious minorities."

The government wants to cut off any further debate. But the fundamentalist movement - which now includes about 24 parties and groups and a growing section of urban, educated, middle-class Pakistanis, including lawyers and businessmen - is using the issue to rally for the overthrow of the government.

Shades of Iran, 1979

Some commentators compare the situation to pre-revolutionary Iran: When the state there surrendered all responsibility, the militants took over institutions and the revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini took place. There is no Khomeini yet in Pakistan, but that could be just a matter of time.

As in Iran, the real problem is not the strength of the fundamentalists, but the chronic weakness of the state and its leaders' aversion to risk. As in Iran, the status quo for the vast majority of people is unyielding poverty, joblessness and lack of education due to corrupt politicians who do not pay taxes.

Also as in Iran, there is growing anti-Americanism because of the continuing war in Afghanistan, which many Pakistanis blame for the country's problems.

Thus, the fundamentalists are tapping into much deeper, longer-built-up veins of public discontent than blasphemy.

Meanwhile, under pressure from the opposition parties, Mr. Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani have deferred an International Monetary Fund plan for tax reforms.

That has jeopardized an \$11-billion (U.S.) IMF loan and billions of dollars worth of loans and development aid from other global lending institutions and governments.

Inflation is soaring as the state bank prints trillions of rupees to pay for current expenditures.

Meanwhile, real control of national security and foreign policy lies with the army - something Jinnah never envisaged - the net result of the four military coups that left Pakistan under military rule for half of its existence.

Despite national poverty, the army continues to spend enormous sums building up its arsenal of nuclear weapons to keep India off balance, and has one of the largest intelligence services in the world.

Mr. Taseer's killing raises profound questions for the army as well: Can security forces be trusted not to go after their senior commanders when an elite police officer has just gunned down one of the highest officials in the land? Is Pakistan's nuclear-weapons program, which is said to employ more than 100,000 people, safe in the hands of the security services, despite intensive screening of employees?

So far, Pakistan's top-down, American-trained army command has been intensely loyal and dedicated, even after severe defeats at the hands of the Indian army. There is less certainty about the personnel.

There has been resistance and a few desertions by soldiers who have refused to fight against the Pakistani Taliban, maintaining that the army was being forced to fight America's war.

Many fear that widespread sympathy already exists within the army's lower ranks for some of the fundamentalists' demands. Pakistanis have closely noted that General Ashfaq Kayani, the powerful army chief, sent no public message of condolence to the Taseer family.

Western diplomats and Pakistani officials say army generals are fearful of a backlash from their forces if they seem to favour the victim over the popular assassin.

And so, again as in Iran, it's clear that the Pakistani army will not confront the fundamentalists if their movement grows larger, enlisting the people who are sitting on the fence. Generals and politicians wait for each other to take a tougher stance, but it looks increasingly unlikely: Both are overwhelmed by events beyond their control.

The Islamic parties note the dithering at the top and increase the pressure with demonstrations on a daily basis, demanding that the government publicly refute any amendments to the blasphemy bill.

Mr. Taseer is dead, and I do not want to see the country of my youth buried in the same way. He was an eternal optimist, confident that things would change and that essentially you could have a political dialogue with anyone. His killer certainly did not believe that.

That's where we differed: I've long been downbeat on the chances of the political elite in Pakistan doing the right thing by its people.

Today, it is more important than ever that the West act wisely and help Pakistanis regain Jinnah's vision. The country needs financial and political help to keep democracy on track and rescue it from an economic meltdown.

At the same time, the international community needs to tell Pakistan's political and military elite to get its act together. There is too much at stake if the country fails.

Source: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/asia-pacific/ahmed-rashids-lament-for-a-troubled-pakistan/article1879373>

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