

## In the wake of Taseer's murder, moderate Pakistanis must speak out

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By Ahmed Rashid

Salmaan Taseer's murder is likely to have wider and more cataclysmic consequences than even the murder of his renowned leader, Benazir Bhutto, three years ago. Everyone mourned Bhutto - even her political enemies - because she was a woman, illustrious and a possible solution to what were, even then, seen as Pakistan's insurmountable problems.

Taseer's death has unleashed the mad dogs of hell, inspiring the minority of fanatics to go to any lengths to destroy the democratic, secular and moderate Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

We Pakistanis are at the edge of a precipice and as a consequence the stability of the entire region is at risk.

The all-powerful army refuses to issue a single comment of support for the government or Taseer's family; the Pakistan People's Party government is paralysed and making concession after concession to the extremists and the political opposition; civil society has largely gone into hiding and anyone connected with defining Islamic principles (lawyers, judges, scholars, mullahs) refuses to stand up and be counted.

The state of the nation is such that not a single registered mullah in the city of Lahore with its 13 million people was willing to read Taseer's funeral prayers, because they were too scared to do so.

Five hundred lawyers have signed up to defend Taseer's killer Mumtaz Qadri, but Taseer's wife cannot find a single criminal lawyer to prosecute him. It is hard to see which judge is even likely to pursue the case to its obvious conclusion.

Meanwhile Qadri is making YouTube videos from jail of himself singing Islamic hymns and over 70 pages on Facebook have appeared in his support (and thankfully been pulled down rapidly by Facebook Inc).

Pakistan is pivotal to global security not just because it is a nuclear armed state in a condition of almost permanent conflict with its neighbour India. (Imagine the consequences of another Mumbai massacre around now and imagine the Indian reaction.) A stable Pakistan is pivotal to peace in Afghanistan, the Middle East and the west's dealings with Iran. Yet its borders with South Asia, Central Asia and the Arabian Gulf are not just a matter of geo-politics.

Although the Gulf Arabs may have provided the cash, it has been Pakistani militants who have been the harbingers and sustainers of Islamic militancy in this region. Al-Qaida could never have survived after 2001, nor spread its wings to Yemen and Somalia, without the unstinting support, sanctuaries and sacrifice offered by Pakistani militant groups.

Unchecked for the past 10 years, partly due to the connivance of various Pakistani actors including the military and partly due to the failures of the west to stabilize Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine or deal with Iran, Pakistan's militants now have what they consider to be an opportunity of coming out of the shadows and challenging the legitimacy of an entire state and even encouraging its collapse.

The real fear amongst Pakistan and its neighbours is not the strength of the militants who remain a small minority and vastly unpopular, but the weakness of the state that is opposing them. The government is faced with a burgeoning economic crisis with massive price increases, 15% inflation and severe gas, electricity and fuel shortages.

A vital International Monetary Fund loan has been suspended due to the failure of the political elite to carry out economic reforms.

There is a spiralling political crisis (although the government patched up with its enemies over the weekend sufficiently so as not to be immediately dismissed). There is a half a million strong army that insists that its main enemy is India not extremism even as it fears that the militants may have entered its own hallowed portals. All this is grist for the militants' mill offering opportunities for success.

There is nobody to save Pakistan except Pakistanis, and it is we and our civil organisations and institutions who have to be strengthened and supported while we and the west have to convince the army to stop fighting proxy wars with India and Afghanistan and get down to helping push back the wave of extremism. It's a tall order but nothing less will do.

*Ahmed Rashid is the author of "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia" and "Descent Into Chaos."*