

## Salmaan Taseer – a fighting tribute

Daily Times. 06/01/2011

By Ahmed Rashid

All his life Salmaan Taseer was a fighter for his work, his beliefs and his principles. He was a larger-than-life figure straight out of the Arabian Nights, the Iliad or the Baburnama. He was intensely human, loving, devastatingly handsome, a magnificent writer and speaker (people forget he wrote the first biography of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto), a man of the people who had the common touch but was equally at ease in a drawing room full of hundreds of his elite admirers. He was loved by both men and women and loved his wife and children even more.

He was that rare figure who defended the original principles of the PPP for which hundreds gave their lives in the 1970s and 1980s - democracy, human rights, and consistent opposition to the military and the maulvis having a role in running the state.

But Salmaan Taseer was no angel and he knew it. He was a businessman who made and lost millions of rupees several times over, he was snubbed by Benazir Bhutto in the 1990s for being too ambitious, he was a tough, wily political negotiator, a determined enemy to his political rivals and enemies with a hot temper.

His long running feud with the Sharif brothers, which goes back to the 1980s, was legendary. He won every battle with them because the Sharifs could never get to grips with his complex and larger-than-life personality. Taseer was never the kind of man who would turn the other cheek and countless people in the opposition hated him.

But all these attributes - good and bad - made him an immensely powerful, humane and charismatic politician and a towering human being. Nobody could deny his political charisma and although he was the nephew of Pakistan's greatest poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz and his father was another great poet, nobody could claim that he had an easy time in his youth or lived his early life in luxury. His early life experiences, including seeing his father and uncle go to jail frequently, shaped him in becoming a truly people's man. The rank and file of the PPP loved him because he spoke directly to them, in their idiom and with their concerns at heart. Few politicians in this country have ever been able to do that.

His mourning was typical of what he would have wanted. Every single mourner had a Salmaan story to tell, either funny or sad or poignant or about the pranks he would play on his friends even when he had reached old age. I was a frequent victim of those pranks. If Taseer had been born an Irishman, his life tale and his jokes would have been talked about night after night in the wakes that the Irish hold for the dead.

He died for a principle that he first fought for and went to jail in the early 1980s - the defence of the minorities and amendment to the blasphemy law, which Pakistanis who believe in their century see as a black spot on Pakistan and the basic principles of Islam as a tolerant religion. It is sad that the intolerance shown in the 1980s is still with us in even worse forms than before where murder replaces debate and discussion.

His sense of humour was wicked and proverbial because it combined all the attributes of real humour - wit, sarcasm, irony and also a bellyfull of crude jokes that were more attuned to mohallas than the drawing room. He was the only politician I knew who could make anyone laugh at the drop of a hat, which was no mean feat. Much of this was achieved because he never took himself seriously and had the ability to first of all laugh at himself.

Taseer was brave and fearless and that is the one single memory that we need to take forward if we are to make this country a place that is once again worth living in and not become a people who have surrendered to martial laws and the maulvis. Pakistanis need courage to get through these awful times and Taseer had the courage of lions to see us through these dark days.

Above all - and his enemies and his murderers should note this more than anyone else - Taseer was a patriot who loved his country beyond words. He had the smells, the textures, the food and the culture, the complex ethnic and religious mix at his fingertips. He loved it all and that is what made him a better patriot and lover of this country than all his rivals put together. The Pakistan he fought for was the Pakistan that millions of people today strive for.

He could have abandoned all this many times over, he could have left politics and settled abroad, he could have become an even bigger, richer businessman. Instead, he was asked to play a role in sustaining democracy after the death of his leader Benazir Bhutto and he jumped into the fray, knowing fully well that he was disliked by the establishment for the simple reason that he defended the people. We will miss him like nobody else and we will see if the present government and the rest of us are still able to live up to his ideals and the legacy he has left us.

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