

NOTE

## Blasphemy Law—How Much Religion?

Asghar Ali Engineer writes :

Assassination of Salman Taseer, Governor of the Punjab, Pakistan, has unleashed debate both among conservatives and liberals about justification or otherwise of the blasphemy law in Pakistan. It is totally surprising that the conservatives in Pakistan are demonstrating in favour of the assassin and not only that they are openly saying that those who condemn assassination can also be assassinated.

These conservatives should know that even if law is justified, it is not for anyone to assassinate the breaker of the law. Law ceases to be a law if it is administered by any individual at his/her sweet will without following due process of law or proper legal trial. It clearly shows that law and order situation in Pakistan has almost collapsed and detailing of Malik Mumtaz Husain Qadri, the alleged assassin of Salman Taseer for security of a liberal governor also raises question. Why such a man of conservative views was detailed for his personal security.

It is equally shocking that 500 supposedly moderate clerics publicly threatened those who mourn Salman Taseer's assassination will also meet the same fate and less shocking that when the alleged assassin was taken to the court many lawyers showered flower petals on him. And neither this threat by clerics nor celebration of assassination by, of all the people, a section of legal community, attracts any action from the state. Also, many Islamic scholars were appearing on TV and endorsing the action of the assassin and warning opponents not to condemn assassination. This clearly shows state is completely withdrawn and allowed fanatics to take over.

In fact Zia-ul-Haq brought this law to serve a political purpose. He wanted to please orthodox Ulama in Pakistan to win their support for his dictatorship.

M A Jinnah, whatever his role in creation of Pakistan, no one will accuse him of religious orthodoxy or using Islam for post-Partition politics in Pakistan. He wanted modern, liberal and secular Pakistan. However, real democracy, for various reasons have had no real chance in Pakistan and lesser politicians grossly misused Islam for their political benefits. The first military dictator, Ayub Khan, was fortunately a liberal and secular individual and hence whatever his other sins he did not misuse Islam for political purposes. On the other hand he brought about some reforms like Family Ordinance of 1961 to give relief to women.

Yahya Khan who took over from Ayub Khan through a military coup was hardly bothered about anything serious including governance carried on until Zulfikar Ali Bhutto took over in early seventies. A modernist and played politics in the name of Islamic socialism but resorted to worst kind of religious opportunism. To please Mullahs and buy peace with them, he declared Ahmadiyas as non-Muslim minority and thus buying peace with mullahs cost very dearly to Pakistan.

Though Liyaqat Ali Khan had declared Islam as state religion after death of Jinnah, it was during Bhutto's regime that Islam came to be seriously exploited for political power in Pakistan and Zia who captured power overthrowing Bhutto really declared Pakistan as an 'Islamic State' and it is Zia who introduced blasphemy law which is now grossly misused for even petty personal revenge. Muslims are as much its victims as non-Muslims, particularly Christians. Fifty percent of those accused under this law are Muslims.

Now Pakistan is suffering in various ways due to fundamentalists and mullahs who cannot get elected and form government are seeking their pie in power by provoking religious sentiments and bargaining with those in power. A general atmosphere of intolerance prevails in the Pakistani society. It is difficult to say whether there was any wider political conspiracy behind killing of Salman Taseer or an individual act of the security guard as the alleged assassin claims, it is certainly result of intolerance of other's views. □□□