

Book Review

Haq, Farhat., *Sharia and the State in Pakistan: Blasphemy Politics*.
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To a casual observer, Pakistan's preoccupation with blasphemy may appear understandable: it is natural, after all, that a state created in the name of religion should be sensitive about anything that impinges upon its religious sensibilities. Interestingly, however, although the offence of blasphemy was introduced in present day India and Pakistan under the British Raj, the interest of the Pakistani state and citizenry in the offence is relatively recent.

The version of the crime of blasphemy presently in force in Pakistan was introduced in the Pakistan Penal Code only in 1986 and started to be enforced in earnest only after the nineties. However, it took another two decades until 2011, when the then Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, was assassinated at the hands of his guard, Mumtaz Qadri, for speaking out against the draconian application of blasphemy laws, that blasphemy entered mainstream discourse. It was at this time that even some of the most ardent supporters of the offence started questioning whether a legal provision that had perhaps been introduced with genuine and noble intentions had become a tool for oppression, lawlessness and religious opportunism.

Farhat Haq's *Sharia and the State in Pakistan: Blasphemy Politics* challenges the simplistic generalisations about the growing significance of blasphemy in Pakistan by focusing on the politics of blasphemy in the country and by comparing it with attitudes towards similar developments elsewhere in the Muslim world.

Haq argues that the perception that the tension between blasphemy laws and freedom of speech represents an inherent conflict between Islamic and western liberal values is misplaced. In support of her argument, she reminds the reader of blasphemy's colonial roots and its introduction by the British colonial authority as a means of defining boundaries of

religious legitimacy for ease of governance. She further argues that this conflation of religious and political authority in colonial times, relegated religion from the realm of spiritual enhancement to a site of suspicion and anxiety and it is this anxiety and suspicion that lies at the heart of the complex politics of blasphemy in Pakistan.

Haq explores the institutional dynamics of blasphemy in Pakistan (and to a lesser extent, in post-colonial Muslim states) in six brief chapters. In successive chapters, she explores the glorification and beatification of those who murdered to avenge blasphemy; examines the legal and political foundations of blasphemy laws; engages with contemporary debates about blasphemy; draws upon recent scholarship on sharia to understand why secularly trained lawyers (as opposed to their Islamic counterparts) insist on the rigid interpretation of sharia and examines the manner in which the Pakistani administrative state attempts to strike a balance between Islam and modern statehood. She concludes by questioning whether, and the extent to which, it may be possible to restore a connection between sharia as an ethical system and modern Muslim politics.

Haq traces the arc of blasphemy in Pakistan by locating Ilm Din at one end and Mumtaz Qadri at the other. She argues that although both men have captured popular imagination as saviours of Islam, their histories are distinct in material respects: whilst Ilm Din had flouted a colonial law in murdering a Hindu who had directly insulted the Prophet Muhammad, Qadri, in murdering a government official, had in fact taken upon himself to implement the law made by a Muslim state, against the state itself.

Haq characterises the two stories not only as assertions of religiosity by the extreme act of murder, but also as affirmations of the very political identity that blasphemy seeks

to define. Whilst she suggests that in colonial times this assertion of political identity may be read as a cry of desperation from a disenfranchised group bound together by religious ties, she does not sufficiently tease out the panorama of possible reasons for Qadri's need to assert his religious/political identity in a Muslim state. Moreover, she touches only fleetingly upon the worrying combination of the distrust of the state and a sense of profound insecurity on the part of the latter even though he belongs to the Muslim majority in a country that claims to derive its legitimacy, indeed its very existence, from Islam.

According to Haq, the politicisation of Islam, especially in the Pakistani context, has led to a turf war between the state (which sees itself as the sole authority for determining the religious and, therefore, the citizenship credentials of individuals) and the myriad Islamic *maslaks* (schools of thought) that operate amongst the people and vie for their allegiance and thereby for political supremacy in the country. Whilst Haq draws extensively and eloquently upon the treatment of Ahmadis at the hands of the Pakistani state to illustrate this argument, her narrative appears tangential to the core issue of blasphemy. This has the effect not only of detracting from the hitherto clear focus on blasphemy but also dilutes the Ahmadi issue which warrants and indeed deserves an independent discussion.

With respect to debates surrounding blasphemy, Haq surveys political events, legal decisions and religious thought to explore what sharia means in contemporary Pakistani politics, what constitutes the offence of dishonouring the prophet and how it may be punished, and the activism that has emerged pursuant to the emergence of legislation for blasphemy. Whilst her discussion of each of these individual themes is very thorough, it would have been interesting to understand more of her perspective on the manner in which these themes interact with and shape each other and particularly as to where the balance of power lies at present. However, instead of delving deeper into this issue, Haq prefers to expand away from blasphemy towards a comparative analysis of Islamic politics in the nation state.

From here on Haq's attention continues to shift away from blasphemy towards a discussion of sharia more generally. While there is a case to make that in order to understand blasphemy, it is important to locate it within the broader politicisation—and in Haq's words, the secularisation—of sharia, Haq makes it only tenuously and leaves it largely to the reader to make the connection. Her discussion on sharia, ranging from the treatment of sex slaves by ISIS, to the history of development of sharia and *fiqh* and the tensions between them, to the codification of sharia in colonial India, while interesting and informative, gives the reader the impression that Haq is casting her net too wide. Her discussion on blasphemy becomes somewhat repetitive and anecdotal at this

stage except for reiterating that the state needs to demonstrate its commitment to the offence of blasphemy to establish its writ and to secure its legitimacy.

The discussion regains some of its focus in Haq's next chapter on what she refers to as 'chasing the Goldilocks moment'. In this chapter she chronicles the tension between governance and religion in Pakistan and the manner in which this tension appears to have gradually resolved in favour of religiosity rather than of secular administration. Haq begins her narrative at the seeming high point of the Ayub regime when the state still displayed the gumption to introduce a more progressive version of sharia. However, she also highlights the curious mix of political expediency and perhaps lack of interest that allowed the state to not merely play into the hands of the regressive mullah but also to co-opt him in a bid for legitimacy. Through a careful examination of archival material, Haq successfully demonstrates how this bid for legitimacy gradually forced the state to acquire an increasingly Islamic veneer albeit one that was (and is) as much rooted in the as it may be in spirituality or the administrative practices of other Islamic countries.

Haq's book succeeds at many levels. She provides a strong analysis of the various conceptions of sharia and the manner in which these have been adopted by Muslim states. She traces the gradual, yet firm spread of sharia in Pakistan to a point where it appears to have overwhelmed the ordinary business of government. She provides anecdotal evidence of her arguments which help contextualise and explain them. She also provides a sharia map of Muslim countries which help the reader understand where Pakistan may be located on the spectrum of Islamisation. For all these reasons the book makes an important contribution to the study not only of blasphemy politics but also sharia politics more generally.

Despite these evident strengths the book leaves the reader with a sense of incompleteness. A palpable gap in the narrative is the absence of a discussion of the politics of the Musharraf and Imran Khan regimes which have contributed to and witnessed an unprecedented mainstreaming of Islam. Another gap is the absence of a strong comparative analysis of the blasphemy regimes and the broader experience of sharia in Pakistan and Indonesia. Haq points out that both are post-colonial states and that has had a considerable influence on their experience of Islamic politics but does not delve deeper into the issue, leaving it to the reader to draw her own conclusions in this regard. Upon finishing the book, the reader is likely to feel that she has learnt a great deal about sharia politics but without gaining a coherent picture of the role, place and future of blasphemy in the Islamisation project. Is it the core or the periphery? Perhaps that is for Haq's next book.