Akhtar Soomro, Reuters

The Murder of Amjad Sabri

How the death of a Sufi singer lays bare Pakistan's violent contradictions.

By **Alhan Fakhr**

> "Mein kabr andheri mein ghabraoon ga jab tanha
> Imdad meri karnay aa jana Rasool Allah"
>
> ("In my dark grave, when I am afraid and alone
> Come to my aid, O Prophet of Allah.")

On June 22, 2016, Amjad Sabri, a revered Pakistani Qawwali singer, was gunned down in the city of Karachi.

In hindsight, it is tragically ironic that the verse above was among the last Sabri sang before his assassination. His performance, which aired less than 12 hours before he was killed, was part of a Ramadan program. The *ghazal* Sabri performed, called “O Sabz Gunbad Walay” (“O you of the green dome”), is a plea to the Prophet of Islam and God for mercy in the hereafter. True to Sufi tradition, the *ghazal* contains no direct reference to the performer’s faith or beliefs – it is meant to be for everyone who believes in the power of God. It is a message of salvation, if not peace – one that can help, and certainly not harm.

While Sabri’s life was dedicated to peace and unity, his death was predictably divisive in a nation notorious for its numerous fissures. Two months after the assassination, Pakistani media reported that he had been gunned down on the orders of a political party worker for failing to pay extortion fees. Five months after Sabri’s murder, the Counter-Terrorism Department arrested two members of the anti-Shia Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in Karachi, alleging that they assassinated Sabri for his religious denomination. The arrests contradicted the Pakistani Taliban’s initial claim of responsibility for the attack.

Sabri’s murder leaves Pakistanis clueless about who to trust. The military establishment targets political parties in Karachi, even as the political parties accuse the military of fueling internal conflict. All the while, civil society raises questions about Pakistan’s draconian blasphemy laws, which Sabri was accused of violating.

But despite this confusion, ultimately it does not matter who killed Amjad Sabri. All pillars of the state – government, opposition parties, law enforcement agencies, and the military – are in some way complicit in generating an environment of fear. This environment is fueled by poorly thought-out short-term policies and sustained through silence and collective apathy. The tragedy of Sabri’s assassination demonstrates how violence in Pakistan has reached a point where no pillar of the state can be deemed trustworthy or effective.

Anatomy of an Assassination

To understand why Sabri was killed, one must understand not only the man himself, but also the seething cauldron of Karachi, the city that he called home, and his deeply divided country.

Amjad Sabri boasted a rich pedigree from one of South Asia's acclaimed Sufi singing families. The Sufi school of Islam – to which Sabri adhered – rejects sectarianism and is premised upon establishing a spiritual connection with Allah. Raza Rumi, a Pakistani journalist who has resided in the United States since narrowly escaping an assassination attempt by a Taliban-affiliated group in the city of Lahore on March 28, 2014, says, "Sufism represents a plural, liberal version of Islam, and its proponents [the qawwals] question orthodoxy through their singing."

Given the sharp departure this represents from the Pakistani Taliban's Sunni version of Islam, Sufi Muslims are a constant target for terrorists. "Ever since 2006 – in the past decade alone – at least 40 Sufi shrines have been targeted," notes Rumi. In February 2017, one of the more recent attacks, an ISIS suicide attack on a Sufi shrine in Sehwan, Sindh province, claimed the lives of 88 people.

In 2014, the Islamabad High Court issued a notice for blasphemy against Sabri and Geo TV after Sabri sang a *qawwali* centered on the marriage of Fatima and Ali (the Prophet Muhammad's daughter and son-in-law) on air. The accusers who had filed a petition against the television station claimed that the mere act of singing about the Prophet's family members constituted blasphemy. In a nation where Sunni Islam has been systematically sown into the moral fabric of the state, the blasphemy charges were severely damaging for Sabri.

Beyond the blasphemy charges, Sabri's ethnicity made him an easy target. Sabri was born to an ethnic Mohajir family on December 23, 1970. A group of Urdu-speaking migrants originally from India, the Mohajirs form the base for the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), a Pakistani political party largely concentrated in Karachi. As of March 2016, the MQM's claim to be the sole representatives of the Urdu-speaking community was challenged by the newly

created Pak Sar Zameen Party (PSP). Founded by former MQM politicians, the PSP claims to be a reformed version of the MQM.

Some say Sabri was caught between the MQM and the PSP in their ongoing political battle. According to Badar Alam, the editor of the Pakistani magazine *Herald*, "The MQM and the Pak Sar-Zameen Party are currently in the midst of a turf war and both were vying for Amjad's support. Perhaps, preferring one party over the other might have been a contributing factor in Amjad's death."

The MQM has a notorious history of orchestrating violent protests in Karachi. In the view of many, the MQM uses violence to impose its authority on Karachi, reminding potential defectors of the fate they might succumb to if they choose to no longer support the MQM. Ikram Sehgal, a former Pakistani army officer and defense analyst goes as far as to directly accuse the MQM of Sabri's murder, stating: "Who else is to gain if Karachi spirals out of control?"

Sehgal's view is bolstered by the story of Imran Siddiqui. According to Pakistani news reports, on July 24, Siddiqui, an MQM worker, was arrested in a raid during a search for Sabri's murderer. Though the police did not confirm the arrest, they also did not deny it, when questioned by media outlets. Leaked reports suggest he confessed to killing Sabri and cooperated in naming associates involved in the murder. On August 29, 2016, Samaa TV announced that MQM's Liaquatabad sector chief Shahzad Mullah was arrested and "shifted to an undisclosed location for interrogations." Mullah was accused of demanding extortion money from Sabri, who allegedly failed to make the payment.

Karachi, being both the economic and criminal capital of Pakistan, has long served as a safe haven for criminal gangs and militant groups alike. These militant groups include the Taliban, who claimed responsibility for Sabri's murder. In September 2013, the Pakistani Army through its paramilitary force, the Sindh Rangers, launched a military operation to eliminate organized crime and militant groups in Karachi. The operation is still ongoing.

Alam, the *Herald* editor, said, "The Rangers' stay in Karachi is subject to permission by the provincial government [of Sindh] …

and according to a conspiracy theory this permission expired on June 14, 2016."

Sabri was murdered on June 22, eight days after the permission allegedly expired.

A rise in street crime in Karachi was noted by the Citizens-Police Liaison Committee (CPLC), an organization in Karachi that specifically tracks crimes in the city. The CPLC said that there was a marked rise in mobile phone and motorbike thefts in the first ten days of Ramadan, which began the evening of June 6, 2016. Notable incidents of even more serious crimes occurred after the alleged expiration of the Sindh Rangers' permission, including the assassination of an Ahmadi doctor in his clinic on June 20; the June 21 abduction of the Sindh Chief Justice's son, Syed Awais Shah, near a supermarket; and the June 22 killing of Sabri, who was gunned down on the streets of the primarily Mohajir Liaquatabad area of Karachi.

Such incidents may lend credibility to the theory that the military intentionally allows crime in the city to spike in the period surrounding the provincial government's reauthorization of the military operation. Such a spike, according to this theory, would pressure the Sindh provincial government, led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), to re-approve military authorization in Karachi. Officially, both the PPP and MQM remain opposed to the military presence in Karachi, as the operation has led to the kidnappings of several PPP and MQM party workers.

No political party, terrorist organization, or even the military itself, can be exempted from being investigated for Sabri's murder. Those that know Karachi well acknowledge the range of possible perpetrators. Commenting on Amjad Sabri's assassination, Pakistani journalist Cyril Almeida said, "In the cauldron of Karachi, ethnic, sectarian, criminal, political and Islamist militant possibilities are all options."

Sabri's death reinforces the institutional fragmentation destabilizing Pakistan from within. As civil rights activist Jibran Nasir put it, "It does not matter who killed [Amjad Sabri]. What matters is that any individual can walk on the streets bearing

arms, can shoot you in broad daylight, and then ride off on his bike… No pillar or organ of the state [or society] has the moral high ground. ”

To assume that militants alone contribute to such lawlessness is simply delusional.

Rise of the Soft Target

Sabri's assassination is part of a recent wave of high-profile targeted killings in Karachi. Nafisa Shah, a prominent PPP legislator from Sindh, said she is “reminded of [the assassination of] Sabeen Mahmud, who was providing a space for ideas and dialogue on contested issues in the T2F café, and [of] Parween Rehman, who worked for housing for the poor in a dangerous area controlled by the land mafia.” Despite better security thanks to the ongoing military operation, Karachi continues to be a killing field for civil society workers, journalists, and celebrities, among many others.

Almeida argues: “If [this attack was] militant, the pattern could be a familiar one: as it becomes more difficult to target security installations or military personnel (because of defensive measures taken), militants turn to so-called softer targets.”

For Sehgal, attacking softer targets constitutes “classic guerrilla tactics,” because it generates the greatest amount of noise from the smallest level of effort. Indeed, Sabri’s death made headlines across Pakistan and beyond.

However, Sabri’s murder cannot solely be attributed to his soft-target status. As Almeida says, “Indiscriminate mass casualty attacks in places like bazaars tend to create a public backlash, so Sabri-type killings achieve the purpose of indicating a continuing war without alienating the whole population.”

Sabri’s death may well be a sharp reminder from Islamist militants that despite being degraded thanks to Pakistani military offensives, they are far from eradicated.

The notion of a “soft target,” however, needs to be understood in the broader context of the Pakistani state. Those being killed in Pakistan today are not only members of minority communities

such as the Shia, Baloch, Ahmadis, or Christians. Any individual who does not conform to the mainstream Sunni narrative – a narrative heavily propagated by the state – essentially becomes an easy target.

The responses of Pakistani society writ-large to the plague of attacks against minority groups and others are important to highlight. Mourning the deaths of 132 school children killed in Peshawar in 2014, yet turning a blind eye to the ongoing campaigns of violence against Shias, Christians, and Ahmadis is hypocrisy.

The state's actions are inconsistent and laced with hypocrisy as well. Launching a full-fledged counterterror operation in Karachi while simultaneously providing safe havens to militants hundreds of miles away in Quetta is contradictory policymaking, at best.

Nafisa Shah, being cognizant of these realities, explained: "In Pakistan, vigilantism and militancy is thriving on scapegoating the very people who want to make a difference, speak up for rights and justice, [and] take on the state intelligently for provision of services. It includes, besides politicians, especially from the left and liberal parties, Shia, women, minorities, and now civil society, lawyers, artists, writers, [and] activists."

In effect, the threat posed to softer targets is a consequence of the unequal treatment of human life in Pakistan. Collective silence in the face of oppression makes exceptions out of individuals like Sabri, Mahmud, and Rehman, whose work transcended religion and ethnicity. Indeed, apathy and silence have become norms in Pakistan. Anyone who dares to raise a voice and works to change the status quo represents an exception. For Nasir, the civil rights activist, the sad reality of today's Pakistan is that "Amjad's death is terrorizing us but countless other deaths across the country do not; everyday someone dies in [Pakistan] and we don't give a damn."

Not in the Name of Allah

Despite the Taliban accepting responsibility for the attack on Sabri, there are some who outright reject the militants' claim. According to reporter Abid Hussain, Sabri was "a nobody for the Taliban," in great part because he never said anything about the group. By

contrast, some Pakistani celebrities go on television to actively criticize and denounce Islamic militants. Television host Amir Liaquat Hussain has questioned the religiosity of the Taliban for nearly a decade. Sabri did not spend his time bashing the Taliban.

Hussain is reminded of the murder of Sardar Saron Singh, a Sikh minority member of the provincial assembly who was shot dead in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on April 23, 2016. Initially, the Taliban claimed responsibility for his assassination, but it was later confirmed to be the result of a political feud.

“The Taliban in the aftermath of the [Zarb-e-Azb] military operation crave attention,” explains Hussain. In this sense, Sabri’s murder may have created the perfect opportunity for the group to regain lost air time by claiming responsibility for an attack that it did not actually carry out.

Karachi and Its Discontents

In September 2013, as mentioned above, the Pakistani Army initiated a long-awaited anti-crime operation in Karachi. The military has been immensely successful at reducing street crime, but has failed to completely weed out the various criminal gangs, religious militants, and political affiliates responsible for various forms of crime in the city. Indeed, after a three-year operation, dissidents continue to be butchered in the streets and crime can resume within moments of the military loosening its control in Karachi’s most dangerous localities.

According to London-based Wasay Jalil, the MQM “are the stakeholders of Karachi.” Jalil, himself a member of MQM’s communications committee, contends that “the MQM hold[s] 85 percent of Karachi’s mandate because we hold 17 out of the 20 National Assembly seats for Karachi.” In the view of the MQM’s rivals, such an overwhelming mandate is a consequence of the control the MQM imposes on the electorate through its criminal gang and land mafia affiliates. Asad Umar, the chairman of the policy council for another Pakistani political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), contends that such “criminals have cover from political parties.”

The parties Umar is implicitly referring to are the PPP, in addition to the MQM. While the MQM claims to be the voice of Karachi, the PPP asserts itself as the caretaker of Sindh, the province in which Karachi is situated. According to Jalil, the former interior minister in the PPP provincial government in Sindh, Zulfiqar Mirza, formed "the People's Aman Committee [People's Peace Committee] also known as Lyari gangsters." Headed by Uzair Baloch, the Lyari gangsters were responsible for organized crime and gang wars in Karachi. Their reign of terror ended as a result of the military's anti-crime operation, which eventually led to the arrest of Baloch in January 2016. Based on this evidence, *Herald* editor Alam argues that the PPP and the MQM collectively represented "the actors who once calibrated violence in Karachi." However, due to the recent military operation, "law and order in Karachi is now calibrated by only one player."

That player, according to Alam, is the military.

With these matters in mind, we should place Sabri's murder in the context of Karachi's political conflicts. In the words of reporter Abid Hussain, "Amjad Sabri was a known MQM person."

Echoing Hussain's assertion, Jalil explained, "Amjad was in serious trouble. He was being harassed by the parachute Pak Sar Zameen Party (PSP) – run by Mustafa Kamal and his men – who were expelled from the MQM."

According to Jalil, Sabri allegedly declined the PSP's request to perform at their iftar event which was held on June 25 – three days after Sabri's murder. (PSP's Mustafa Kamal did not respond to requests for comment.)

While the MQM was quick to blame their new rivals for the assassination, the PPP and the military were equally quick to launch a media campaign against the MQM. The chief minister of Sindh indirectly referred to the MQM by pointing to "actors creating the law and order situation in Karachi."

Hussain says that "Pakistani TV channels were running tickers quoting Director General [of the] Sindh Rangers, [Major General] Bilal Akbar, who reiterated that Sabri was killed in Liaquatabad, an area primarily occupied by MQM supporters."

Even though the provincial government of Sindh under the PPP ordered the military to intensify its operation in the aftermath of Sabri's assassination, both the PPP and the MQM remain against the military's conduct of the operation. Military action threatens the base of both parties – the MQM and the PPP – for whom the city of Karachi is critical electorally.

Factoring in all this context, Sabri's murder leads to several alarming conclusions.

First, it establishes that the military – despite attempting to have a monopoly over force in Karachi – cannot control changing patterns in militancy in the city. One journalist, speaking off the record for reasons of safety, speculated that the Rangers are oblivious to the unknown threats that continue to destabilize Karachi.

Second, Sabri's murder reinforces how ongoing political wars for control over Karachi turn individuals into pawns, with their deaths leveraged to regain political control. This is evidenced by the arrest of MQM's Liaquatabad sector chief Shahzad Mullah on August 29, 2016. Mullah was arrested on the grounds of having ordered Sabri's murder because of the singer's failure to pay extortion fees to the MQM.

Moving on from the political, it is also essential to analyze the Rangers' conduct of the military operation in Karachi. Journalist Cyril Almeida contends, "Karachi is a problem that cannot be solved by any operation, military or police. All an operation does is create the space for civil governance and law enforcement to progressively deliver. In the case of Karachi, the military establishment is effectively at war with the political party that dominates the provincial capital, MQM, and the one that rules in the province, Sindh. So long term, the contradiction is apparent."

The current operation, according to *Dawn*, has led to the arrest of 3,000 criminals, 246 terrorists, 30 kidnappers, and 10 extortionists. While the military asserts that crime has declined by 60 percent, the PPP and the MQM claim that it has come at the cost of their political workers. According to Jalil, the current operation has led to 155 missing MQM workers, and 60 killed in extrajudicial assassinations. Meanwhile, Nafisa Shah of the PPP believes that the

military operation “has become mixed with political victimization, as we have seen labor leaders, activists, and politicians also arrested and put on 90 day remands.”

As a consequence of the deadlock resulting from the fight for political control of Karachi, national treasures like Sabri become appealing targets.

“There isn’t anything new in this,” says the PTI’s Umar. Highlighting the MQM’s hypocritical stance on the Rangers, Umar adds, “The MQM repeatedly asked for the army to come into Karachi and now that the military is there, it makes for great politics to target the military.”

As the Rangers and political parties continue to lock horns, unknown militant forces remain successful in spreading fear. Cautioning against the recent trends in militancy, which target civil society activists, lawyers, journalists, and artists, Alam warns that “security forces don’t know what to expect.” He explains, “Sabri’s murder does not fit any traditional definitions of violence: political, Islamist, sectarian, gangs, etc.”

For Alam, none of the actors in Karachi benefit from Sabri’s assassination. Assuming that to be the case, he contends, “Violence which the state has been trying to suppress has now changed. It is now manifesting itself in unknowable and unknown ways.”

Like Alam, Hussain also believes the military operation to be a solution in the short term, but damaging in the long term. Particularly after Sabri’s murder, “peace does not feel permanent; there is fear that everything can explode anytime.”

Selective Inaction and Persecution of the Other

In November 2016, almost five months on from Sabri’s murder, the Counter-Terrorism Department arrested two suspects with conclusive ties to the anti-Shia Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. The suspects are accused of conducting 28 attacks against military personnel and Shia Muslims, including Sabri.

There is a level of hypocrisy attached to Pakistan's counterterrorism policy. Anti-state militant groups such as the Pakistani Taliban are targeted ferociously, yet sectarian and anti-

India extremists like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Lashkar-e-Taiba are selectively targeted and often offered safe havens, in exchange for political support. Nasir, the activist, asserts that political parties are directly associated with nefarious actors. He argues that the PPP made the Aman Committee, the MQM has its own set of linked target killers, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) has its own land grabbers, and the PTI sits in conference with the Sipah-e-Sahaba. All political parties, Nasir contends, have agreements with banned outfits. Ultimately, he concludes, someone is bound to have knowledge of where these groups are trained and receive their weapons from. For Nasir, everyone knows what's happening, but no one is true to the nation.

These dark relationships between religious outfits, Pakistani political parties, and the military establishment have deep historical roots. According to Farahnaz Ispahani, a former member of Pakistan's National Assembly, the religious right began courting Pakistan's founding political party, the Muslim League, before the death of its leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah in September 1948. The roots of Pakistan's minority problem harken back to that long-ago period as well. "Under the Objectives Resolution of 1949," Ispahani says, "minorities were meant to be treated equally, but within the prism of Islam." The Objectives Resolution produced the contradiction at the heart of Pakistan's minority problem: the same state that deemed all citizens equal, also divided them by establishing Islam as the state religion.

How can all citizens be equal, if everyone does not follow the state's religion? How does the state recognize all individuals as equal, if it only allows Muslims to be the head of state?

For Ispahani and Rumi, these tensions caused an unfair convergence between Pakistani and Muslim identities. This in turn led to a very obvious divide between Muslims and non-Muslims while simultaneously triggering a battle for who was "Muslim enough" between Muslim sects. As history bears witness, the first sect to be "otherized" in Pakistan were the Ahmadis, who were declared non-Muslims in an amendment made to the constitution in 1974, under the PPP government. This move came after the PPP,

led by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, forged an alliance with the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami to form a coalition government. Through this constitutional amendment, Pakistan formally became a Sunni Muslim state.

And yet the persecution of minorities does not solely occur for political reasons. Ispahani and Rumi argued its deeply economic as well. Accusing a minority population of blasphemy becomes a convenient excuse for driving a minority settlement off their land. The Gojra and Youhanabad incidents in Punjab province are prominent examples. Both incidents involved Christians being accused of blasphemy, inciting Muslim neighbors to burn entire Christian neighborhoods and settlements down. Commenting on the slippery slope emerging from the abuse of the blasphemy laws, Ispahani says, “For those who do not live within the rules of the majority and are not in the tiny circle of Sunni Muslim male Pakistan, death is inevitable.”

Those from within the majority who seek to defend the vulnerable are not safe either. On January 4, 2011, Governor Salmaan Taseer of Punjab province was assassinated by his own bodyguard for defending a Christian woman falsely convicted of blasphemy.

What is really meant by this “tiny circle” of male, Sunni Pakistanis? According to Rumi, it is created through a combination of legal and informal policies. The blasphemy laws are the greatest legal tool for oppression of the “other.” For Rumi, “despite being legislated during General Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamic military regime, it was not until Nawaz Sharif’s first democratic government in the 90s that the blasphemy laws were strengthened.”

According to a source working for the reform of blasphemy laws in Pakistan, who wished to remain anonymous for reasons of safety, “The Sipah-e-Sahaba gained seats in the National Assembly in the 1990s, during which they attempted to punish insulting not only the Prophet and his family, but also his companions, by death. Obviously, this was a provision targeted at the Shia population.” The source added: “Even though the law did not pass in its desired form, people involved in the conversation included Nawaz Sharif [then the prime minister of Pakistan], Shahbaz Sharif [the chief

minister of Punjab], Israr Ahmad, and Azam Tariq of the SSP, among others."

Of course, until recently, the Sharif brothers occupied government separately in Islamabad and Lahore. In late July, the Pakistani Supreme Court dismissed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif over corruption allegations stemming from the Panama Papers leak last year and barred him from public office for a decade. Shahbaz Sharif was subsequently named leader of the PML-N and is expected to take over the prime ministership in mid-September.

Sehgal, the defense analyst and former army officer, contends that the PML-N "does not want the military to touch the groups in Punjab." This province, being Pakistan's most populous, represents the core voter base for the PML-N. Inferring from Sehgal's argument, cracking down on Punjab-based groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi(LeJ) and Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP), both of which attack minorities throughout Pakistan, could generate blowback and instability in the PML-N's bastion.

However, *Herald* editor Badar Alam claims that recently the PML-N has transformed its policies. According to Alam, the PML-N following the 2014 Peshawar school massacre and the 2016 Lahore park blast has launched several military operations against the SSP and the LeJ in Punjab.

"In the last one and a half years, approximately 600 LeJ militants have been killed," he says.

With that being said, Alam also believes that the government, in accordance with the military, remains reluctant to act against militant groups supporting the Afghan Taliban and groups responsible for attacks in India-occupied Kashmir. Bearing that in mind, Alam still maintains that action against militants radicalizing at the grassroots remains "very, very selective."

Based on such evidence, one can recognize how draconian blasphemy laws and government complicity generate an environment of fear, which makes minority individuals like Sabri easy prey. In the words of Nafisa Shah, the PPP legislator from Sindh, "The term 'blasphemy,' just like the term 'honor,' are

appropriations by perpetrators of violence to give them the moral power for legitimating violence."

A reformer who chose to remain anonymous says, "Sabri could be accused of blasphemy under Article 298 (a), which pertains to the companions of the Prophet. This provision is specifically targeted toward Shia Muslims who refer to the Prophet's companions."

As noted earlier, the case registered against Geo TV for blasphemy centered on a the station's broadcast of Sabri performing a qawwali about the Prophet's daughter Fatima and cousin Ali. According to Rumi, the case was registered in the aftermath of journalist Hamid Mir's public feud with the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Agency. On his show, Mir accused the ISI of kidnapping journalist Saleem Shahzad. He made these revelations after Shahzad was kidnapped and later found dead in Lahore with signs of torture on his body. Shahzad, renowned for his investigative reports, was reportedly working on exposing links between the ISI and al-Qaeda. For Rumi, as a consequence, the ISI, in an attempt to punish Geo TV for Hamid Mir's revelations, registered a case against the channel and Sabri for blasphemy. "Another classic example of abuse of the law by the state," he concludes.

The blasphemy charge most certainly contributed to Sabri's death.

Lingering Questions

A year after Sabri's murder, it is worth deliberating on the future of a Pakistan engulfed by fear and distrust. According to Ispahani, the late Benazir Bhutto, reflecting in the days before her death, had observed that "earlier, for people like us, there were jails, but now there is only death."

Many have died, and many will continue to die, but the need to transform the status quo has never been more pressing. A society that can produce gems like Amjad Sabri, Salman Taseer, Sabeen Mahmud, and countless other unsung heroes is worth defending, protecting, and ultimately saving.

Back in 2011, former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, referring to Pakistan's reluctance to weed out radicalism, warned:

“You can’t keep snakes in your backyard and expect them to only bite the neighbor. You know, eventually those snakes are going to turn on whoever has them in the backyard.”

Five years on, Clinton’s words of caution continue to resonate.

Ominously, today we cannot identify the snake or predict who it is going to bite. Many are bitten by the snake and we don’t even hear about it. Indeed, prominent victims like Sabri gain extensive media attention; lesser known victims die practically anonymously. Yet no victim, regardless of his or her level of prominence or station in life, deserves to die in this way – bitten by their own society.

For Pakistan, the way forward can only begin through citizens more actively questioning state policies and both politicians and the military establishment realizing that selective action against militancy should be cast aside as a solution of the past.

The Author

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