

## Pakistan: Student campaigner lynched

Hassan Raza Wed, 03/05/2017 - 09:42

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On April 13, Pakistan saw yet another incident that illustrates the deep rooted crisis within society. Hundreds of students from the Khan Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan, lynched a fellow student who they accused of blasphemy and posting blasphemous posts on social media. Mashal Khan, a 23-year-old journalism student, had taken refuge in the student hostel but was dragged out by the mob, shot, and then brutally tortured to death.

Video footage that was uploaded to social media showed the crowd stoning, him even after his death, while chanting slogans against him. As if that were not enough, the footage also showed that policemen were standing by but took no action to stop this barbarity. There were even reports that some police officers took part in the murderous attack.

Nor was Khan the only victim, two of his friends were also attacked and one of them received critical injuries. It has since become clear that the accusation of blasphemy, for which under existing Pakistani law, the penalty is death, was in any case completely untrue. Police have confirmed, as have reports from his friends, that the management of the University was involved in instigating violence against Khan because of his role in building a campaign against corruption, fee increases and other issues in the University.

Mashal Khan was a Marxist and this was made clear when police and media entered his hostel room in which there were pictures of Karl Marx, Che Guevara and the Baloch nationalist leader, Akber Khan Bugti, who was killed under the dictatorship of Musharraf. There were also slogans on the wall calling for the workers of the world to unite.

Videos and reports of the killing showed that the Islami Jamait Talaba, a student wing of Jamat-e-Islami, led the assault but leaders of the student organisation of the Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf, PTI, led by Imran Khan, and, worst of all, of the student wing of the supposedly secular and progressive Awami National Party, ANP, were also involved in this act of barbarity. It has since become clear that a local alliance has been forged to try to save the criminals who were responsible for the lynching of Mashal Khan and the fact that the ANP is part of this alliance shows its true colours.

It took Imran Khan, whose PTI party rules the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, in which Mardan is located, 18 hours to issue any condemnation of the killing and a further two days for the Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, to condemn it. These condemnations were only made after it became clear from police reports that the blasphemy charges were utterly false and that University management had indeed been involved in the whole episode.

This lynching shows the serious crisis within society and the state itself. It reveals the character of the epoch and the level of repression and anger in Pakistan. It was General Zia ul Huq's military regime that introduced the reactionary blasphemy law into the constitution. After the 11 long, dark years of that regime,

the government of Nawaz Sharif inserted further specifications into the penal code in 1992.

Now, those laws are being used by the state to suppress all criticism by accusing its opponents of blasphemy. In particular, these laws have been used against media bloggers who have criticised the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, military operations, and foreign policy. The state is creating a situation in which critical thinking and dissent is automatically associated with treason and blasphemy.

In recent months, vigilante action has been encouraged by the government and supported by the judiciary. One judge in the Islamabad High Court is notorious on this issue because he himself has been accused of corruption, but his views have also been supported by the Interior Minister. Matters have been made worse by a campaign by the Federal Investigation Agency, FIA, supported by statements from the judiciary and the Interior Ministry, calling on people for support in reporting any blasphemous content on social media. It is this campaign that has borne fruit in the shape of the lynching of Mashal Khan and similar incidents elsewhere.

In the immediate aftermath of this hideous crime, there were demonstrations and rallies throughout the country. Although the numbers were not huge, it is clear that many people are prepared to fight against such barbarism, which is destroying the very fabric of the country.

The only real way to fight against this monster that is threatening us is action within the colleges, universities and workplaces to organise self defence against the rising number of such fascist attacks. We call on all progressive organisations, trade unions and social organisations to convene a national conference to hammer out a joint strategy for a united front on this issue and to organise a day of action against the lynching and the reactionary laws that encouraged it.

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