



Disturbing Surge in Blasphemy-related Violence

In a span of few weeks, multiple incidents of violence relating to blasphemy occurred in Pakistan in November and early December. On Nov 18, police arrested and charged four men for blasphemy after they clashed with a local Muslim cleric over the latter's refusal to make a funeral announcement for a Christian man from his mosque's loudspeaker. The men were accused of 'denigrating the imam, disrespecting the mosque, and insulting Islam' in the town of Khodi Khushal Singh near Lahore. The incident was discussed on the social media, with some users claiming the accused were Christians. However, media reported the accused to be Muslims.



Ten days after the Lahore incident, an enraged Muslim mob attacked and torched a police station in Charsadda, demanding a mentally deranged man accused of desecrating the Quran to be handed over to them for lynching. For safety reasons, the accused was reportedly shifted to some undisclosed location by the police. A picture of the accused in police custody circulated on social media. The incident drew both condemnation and support on the Pakistani social media. Journalists sharing the news on Twitter received criticism, condemnation, and outright abuse from religious radicals.

Mubashir Zaidi, Naila Inayat, and other journalists were accused of hypocrisy for calling the accused a 'mentally deranged' and 'mentally ill' person. One vigilantism supporter asked why the 'mentally deranged' people always burn the holy Quran and not commit other crimes such as "killing a judge or policeman". Another user with

TLP chief on his profile picture questioned if Afia Siddiqui would ever be given the benefit of being called *mentally ill* and released.

However, a large number of social media users also condemned the torching of the police station. Some users from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa distanced themselves from the incident, saying that what happened in Charsadda was not 'Pakhtunkhwa culture'. Another deplored that "we have learned nothing from the Mashal Khan lynching incident". One user said it was not the accused but the mob which suffered from mental illness. Likewise, another person called the incident a '*vibrant Jehadocracy*'. Users also blamed Prime Minister Imran Khan for supporting religious extremism, and the lynch mob was called '*blood thirsty*'.



Mubashir Zaidi
@Xadeejournalist

A mob put Mandani police station on fire in Tangi tensile of Charsadda KP demanding to handover an alleged mentally deranged person accused of desecration of Holy Quran. Police has shifted the accused to another location [#blasphemy](#)



0:48 72.3K views



Kashif N Chaudhry
@KashifMD

Pakistan's [#Charsadda](#) police station set on fire by Sunni extremist mob demanding mentally ill man accused of alleged "blasphemy" (allegedly burning a page with a Quranic verse inscribed on it) be handed over for mob lynching. Madness!! via [@Rabail26](#)



2:19 11.3K views

From Rabia Mehmood - رابيا

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The Anti-Ahmadi Hate Speech

Online hate speech against the Ahmadi community continued without much check from the authorities in November. Religious extremists used strongly abusive language against the religious figures, beliefs, and rituals of the Ahmadis. Disparaging sobriquets like *corrupt*, *dajjal*, *thug*, *cunning*, and *insane* etc. were ascribed to the founder of Ahmadi faith. The anti-Ahmadi hate campaign was mostly led by TLP activists, followers, or sympathizers as many of those targeting the Ahmadis had pictures of TLP kingpins on their social media profiles. Some users accused the Ahmadis of dodging the legal system and registering themselves as Muslims in order to avail the Hajj pilgrimage to Makkah.

The Pakistani blogger and social media activist Ahmad Waqas Goraya, self-exiled to the Netherlands, was also accused of helping Ahmadis resettle in Europe. The Ahmadis are the rebels of the constitution and as such boycotting them socially is the first sign of a Muslim's love for the Prophet, a TLP activist tweeted. A particular user dismissed the Ahmadi faith as a 'sedition', adding that Islam sanctioned the killing of its followers.

Legally, hate speech is a cognizable crime under the Pakistani Penal Code, and entails a prison term of up to five years. However, the state has had a dubious approach to countering hate speech, and monitoring speech in general on the internet. While the authorities have been demonstrably efficient in surveilling and identifying political dissent and criticism of certain state institution, they have been unable – or mostly probably unwilling – to clamp down on hate speech that targets vulnerable social groups and often leads to hate crimes and violence. The country is already on the US list of countries of particular concerns with regard to religious freedom, yet there is little sign of Pakistan being interested in improving its image or reputation.

Demonizing Shias

Like the Ahmadis, the Shia Muslims were the favorite target of online hate speech by Sunni extremists in the reporting month. Shia religious beliefs were likened to those of Ahmadis, and the community was called a puppet of the Iranian state. Most of the anti-Shia social media activists were apparently members or activists of *Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat* (formerly Sipah-e-Sahaba). Hateful social media posts attempted to *otherize* the Shias by associating them with Iran. A post on Twitter read that from the assassination of Farooq-e-Azam (Second Caliph Hazrat Umer) to the assassination of Azam Tariq (Sipah-e-Sahaba kingpin), the culprits were either Iranian or associated with a certain faith (Shia).

Similarly, another Twitter post by an ASWJ activist said that Iran had no problem as long as the Americans were in Afghanistan, but now that the Taliban – the true sons of Afghan soil – have captured Afghanistan, Iran is feeling a pain. It further read that the local goons of the Iranian state are conspiring to stir chaos in Pakistan, but their machinations will be dusted. Post castigating the Shias as *kafir* also proliferated on social media under an ASWJ-led trend '*Difa-e-Sahaba Promotion*'. A Shia cleric, Zafar Qomi, was subjected to online threat and abuse by ASWJ and TLP activists for registering a complaint with Islamabad police against a Sunni cleric. Qomi was called '*Iranian agent*' and '*pimp*' on Twitter. In hateful social media posts, the Shias were frequently referred to as '*rafizi*' which roughly means rejectionist or deserter of faith. A user claimed the Shias did not believe in the Quran.

The Women Rally & the Media Blackout

Women figured prominently on the Pakistani social media in November with the women protest rally in Gwadar drawing significant attention and support. In late November, reports of people rallying for their basic rights in the port city started emerging on the social media. The protest was attended by an overwhelming number of Baloch women, soon turning it into women protest rally for rights. This unusual mass gathering was largely blacked out by the national media, leaving the social media as the primary platform for the protestors to disseminate their demands.

Many social media users across the country expressed support for the protestors and demanded of the government to address their grievances. People condemned the mainstream media and women rights activists for their silence on the issue. One of the users called the media '*a slave of the corporate sector*', saying that at a time when the Baloch women were demanding their rights from the 'establishment' and 'tribal lords', the media was silent. Another one said that a cat falling in a drain in Punjab would get more media attention than thousands of women rallying for their fundamental rights in Balochistan.

People also hailed the Baloch women for their role in demanding their basic rights, saying that women have always stood shoulder to shoulder with their men against enemies. A post on Twitter read that the women rally in Gwadar is a clear message that the Baloch refuse to allow the plundering of their coasts and resources.

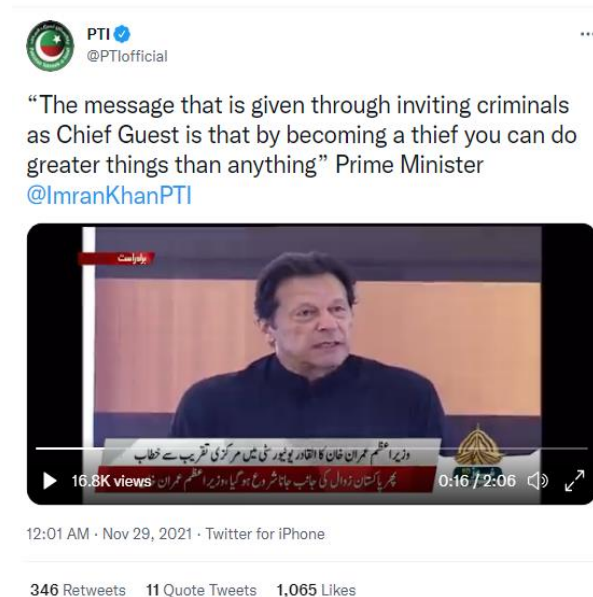
On the other hand, however, misogyny was also on display on the social media particularly among the users of rival political parties. In the tit-for-tat social media war among proponents and opponents of the

government, the women were a key victim. Photoshopped pictures of woman politicians along with vulgar captions made rounds on the Twitter. Fake semi-nude photos of PMLN leader Maryam Nawaz, purportedly showing her as a *'prostitute'* were shared and retweeted by fake and anonymous accounts.

The vulgarity and ruthlessness of the online abuse can be gauged from the fact that even the elder and dead women of the Sharif family were not spared. A particularly strongly worded Twitter post disparaged the Sharifs in the following terms: *"Nawaz Sharif's mother was a prostitute in a brothel in Amritsar (India). She was bought in rupees 7000 and brought to Pakistan by Mian Muhammad Sharif"*. Similarly, in recent past, a Twitter trend *'Pakpattan ki randi'* (the prostitute of Pakpattan – an allusion to the First Lady i.e. PM Imran's wife) was pushed for several days in Pakistan, purportedly by PMLN supporters. PM Imran's ex-wife Reham Khan who often criticizes the PTI regime was also called a *'prostitute'* on social media.

The Government's Discomfort with Free Speech

The Asma Jahangir Conference on Nov 21 in Lahore laid bare the state's discomfort with and fear of free speech. During the conference, the internet services in the area were suspended by unspecified state entities to prevent former PM Nawaz Sharif from speaking at the event via a video call. Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry later said the government did not order the internet blackout. However, the invitation of the former prime minister as chief guest to the conference did not sit well with the PTI government. On Nov 29, PTI official Twitter handle shared Imran Khan's speech in which he censured the Asma Jahangir conference for inviting what he called criminals and thieves as chief guests – a reference



to Nawaz Sharif. In a similar way, the information minister accused the conference of receiving foreign funding and promoting partisan agenda. The conference organizers, however, rejected the allegations and later the European Union also stepped in to back the conference.

However, the criticism by PTI leaders and allegations of partisanship triggered a wave of online abuse directed at those supporting the conference. The abuse also did not spare late Asma Jahangir. She was referred to insultingly, for instance, *'corrupt'*, *'witch'*, *'bitch'*, *'tout of corrupt mafia'*, *'filth'*, *'criminals advocate'* and *'pro India'* etc. Renowned journalist Asma Sherazi who tweeted in support of the Asma Jahangir Conference was called *'rent a journalist'*, *'prostitute'*, and *'sarkari haajan'*. An apparently fake

social media account threatened Sherazi with a fate similar to those of the self-exiled dissidents such as Waqas Goraya etc. A picture of Goraya and other critics was shared on the Twitter in which they were called *'swine'*. PM Imran Khan's special assistant Raouf Hasan also posted a cartoon on Twitter, showing journalists as corrupt.



Raof Hasan
@RaofHasan



Haha...

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