

Sovereignty between God and the State: Insulting Muhammad in Contemporary Pakistan

The act of insulting the Prophet Muhammad has often garnered international headlines in recent years. In Pakistan, in the past decade, dozens of alleged Prophet-insulters, including Salman Taseer the then-governor of Punjab, have been murdered for their critique of Muhammad. Despite the riveting and sensationalized media coverage of ‘radical Pakistani Muslims’ supporting these extra-judicial murders, there is a gaping dearth of informed discourse on the religious reasons meticulously cited by Pakistani traditional Muslim scholars (*‘ulama’*) to legitimate such acts. Similarly, the systematically reasoned religious opposition to such views remains virtually undocumented. It is precisely this lacuna that I address in my paper.

This paper highlights the tensions and intellectual disagreements between these two groups and makes a number of distinct contributions. 1) It brings to light the richness of the *‘ulama’* tradition in Pakistan and provides a vital counter to the narrative that Pakistani *‘ulama’* are united in their views on the legitimacy of extra-judicial punishment for insulting Muhammad. 2) My work emphasizes that the disparity between the views of these anti-vigilante-justice *‘ulama’* and the *‘ulama’* celebrating extra-judicial murders of Prophet-insulters results from their drastically different opinions about state sovereignty. 3) Finally, in emphasizing Pakistani *‘ulama’s’* divergent commitments to state sovereignty, my work poses an important challenge to the views of scholars who asserts the incompatibility of the *shari‘a* and the modern state. Departing from such scholars, I emphasize *both arguments and agreements* over sovereignty between the state and the *shari‘a*, i.e. God’s sovereign will as articulated by the *‘ulama’*.