[Kamila Hyat](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/kamila-hyat)

November 26, 2020

**Changing the landscape of thought**

The leader of the Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan, Maulana Khadim Hussain Rizvi, left just as quickly as he had arrived on the political scene. His death on Thursday left many surprised and created a few hours of commotion, especially when news began to come through that he had not died after all. His death was confirmed, though and his funeral in Lahore was attended last week by tens of thousands of people – with authorities making no effort to halt it even at a time when opposition groups are being warned rallies and sit-ins will not be permitted to avoid the spread of Covid-19.

Khadim Hussain Rizvi, succeeded by his son, was born in Attock and educated at various madressahs in the area. He had largely stayed away from politics until 2016 when the death sentence meted out to Mumtaz Qadri, the man who had killed then Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer, some years before galvanized him into action. His sit-in at Faizabad in Islamabad-Rawalpindi created a major furore in the capital and eventually led to a compromise reached between him and the government under which, according to reports, essentially all the TLP demands were met. The image of money being handed out to people gathered for the dharna added to the controversy.

Perhaps we will never learn the true answer to these questions. Khadim Hussain Rizvi, a powerful orator in Punjabi, who did not hesitate from using abusive language, made himself a popular figure in a culture where vernacular language is enjoyed and seen as a source of both entertainment and humour. His protests in 2019 over the release of Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman accused of blasphemy, also led to a large number of followers taking to the streets.

But there was a different aspect to Khadim Hussain Rizvi's sudden rise and the manner in which he conducted his politics. As a Barelvi leader, he broke away from the tradition in which Deobandi leaders held the largest power in religious circles as far as street protests and similar action went. Indeed, he had said that he wished to take power back from the Deobandis and the Ahle-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat, formerly the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan.

His views though were hardline and political interests undisguised. Certainly, he was moving towards these goals with the TLP emerging as the fourth largest party in Punjab during the 2018 election. He had campaigned himself, and his followers claimed a number of key seats both during this election, and during previous by-elections where they backed independents before the party was registered with the Election Commission of Pakistan. Essentially, the TLP took away from the PML-N vote, even in Nawaz Sharif's hometown of Lahore.

The Rizvi element in politics did threaten the possibility of a feud breaking out between Sunni sects. This was obviously a terrifying thought. We have seen the ravages caused by sectarian violence in the country. The idea of Sunni groups beginning a kind of internal war is horrifying. Beyond this, Rizvi also changed thinking, making it far more acceptable to attack Ahmadis and other minority groups as well as women with extreme venom. The fact that his party gained so many votes in a general election of course means that many went along with these views and were perhaps influenced by the TLP in adopting their position on such issues.

This is obviously bad news for a country which badly needs tolerance and a step towards accepting all sects and different schools of opinion. Rizvi made it clear that he was not willing to do so. The conjecture that there were forces that backed him added to his power and certainly the street power he commanded was sizable. His most recent dharna in Islamabad a few days back, directed against the French government, led to the government accepting most of his demands, as had happened in the past. But most of all, he added to the growing right-wing sentiment in a country which has gradually moved in this direction since the 1980s when General Ziaul Haq brought religion into mainstream politics.

Indeed, this had begun to happen even before Zia, with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto bringing in specific laws. The Rizvi phenomenon also pointed out the extent to which people are willing to follow a particular style of politicking and, more notably, a particular mindset. This mindset will not go away with the sudden death of Rizvi. It will linger on and stay with us. What can be done to combat it is extremely uncertain. Already, it has changed the landscape of a country which till the 1970s was seen as a progressive nation moving towards change.

Today, it is no longer the same. On social media, even innocuous comments are deemed to be either the act of traitors or blasphemers. People like Junaid Hafeez, in jail on charges of blasphemy, are an example of this mindset. Some time back we heard of a student killing a teacher for allowing a function that would have allowed girls and boys studying at the educational institution to mingle. The student felt this went against Islam, and that the professor deserved to die. Such thinking is extremely dangerous.

This is the state we now live in. It is a state which brings with it fear, growing orthodoxy and growing disquiet among minority groups, women and others who directly face the wrath of people like Rizvi. He certainly minced no words in making his opinions clear. The language used offended some, but it was enjoyed by others. This has opened up the doors for others to follow the same path. They are likely to do so over the coming years. And the mindset adopted by Rizvi will not go away now or in the very near future.

The writer is a freelance columnist and former newspaper editor.

Email: kamilahyat@hotmail.com