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**The rise and rise of Khadim Rizvi**

By most accounts, the gathering of mourners at Khadim Hussain Rizvi’s funeral was one of the biggest in Lahore’s history. The liberal commentariat was aghast that the historic venue of Iqbal Park, which eighty years ago had heralded a future full of hope, tolerance, progress and inclusivity, ended up being swarmed by devotees of a man who preached hate, bigotry and violence.

Moderate voices were shocked to witness the magnitude of people they considered existed only on the fringes of society. Turns out such extreme beliefs are very much a dominant force in this country and have been for a very long time now. Those who thought otherwise were living in a fool’s paradise.

Khadim Rizvi was not the first and will certainly not be the last religious leader to exploit people’s sentiments in the name of religion. What made him unique was his particular brand of influence. The invective-laden speeches may have been a source of amusement in the form of memes and WhatsApp stickers for smartphone owners. But for the majority, Rizvi’s profanities and dangerous oratory struck a chord and built an immediate connection. Similar to the cult of personality shaped around most populist authoritarianism in the world today, Rizvi’s vitriol resonated with the people, catapulting him overnight into the national limelight.

Perceived linkages with powerful stakeholders in the country certainly aided his rise to prominence. Back in November 2017, for those familiar with the machinations of Pakistan’s politics, it was not difficult to conclude how a previously unknown former auqaf official in the Punjab government could come to command the attention of all mainstream news channels for weeks on end, with a steady stream of abuse flowing towards leading members of the then PML-N government in the centre. The latter’s efforts at dispersing the sit-in resulted in violence and mayhem, with the attendees proving to be remarkably well-equipped and prepared to deal with a portion of the state’s might.

The showdown was effectively brought to an end when the army chief asked ‘both sides’ to show restraint, despite the fact that it was the law-enforcement agencies that suffered major losses, including the death of one police officer.

The protesters eventually left, but not without extracting their pound of flesh; the resignation of the religious affairs minister. An agreement ensuring that no change would be brought in the penal code regarding blasphemy against the Prophet (pbuh) was signed between the government and Rizvi’s TLP, in which the DG ISI was a guarantor. The triumphant troopers were then warmly escorted out of Islamabad, each carrying a thank-you-for-coming-and-sorry-for-your-troubles envelope of cash.

In a historic 2019 ruling, one judge questioned the exact machinations of what has come to be known as the Faizabad sit-in. Never known for its introspection, the state responded by making the judge a target of its ire. Thus, also sending a message to all critical voices to continue toeing the line.

By then, Rizvi’s status as a formidable force had been cemented. His transformation from a prayer leader at a Multan Road mosque to a disruptive influencer and leader of the Barelvi sect stood complete. And the state had successfully managed to unleash its latest poster-boy for mainstream jihadis, with little regard for the repercussions.

In November 2018, when the TLP was back on the streets to protest the release of Aasia Bibi, it went a step too far by inciting violence against the army chief and the three Supreme Court justices who authored the judgment. The state’s swift reprisal on this occasion provided yet another indication that when it comes to maintaining the dignity and honour of the state, some pillars are more equal than others.

Even though Rizvi is dead, his legacy will live on. His son has already been anointed the torch-bearer of the TLP, and the founder’s message will continue to manifest itself. To expect the PTI government to crack down on this kind of extremism would be extreme optimism.

Meanwhile, the country continues to see murders in the name of religion, as the authorities continue to look the other way. A radicalised and conservative polity watches on, its silence betraying its acquiescence.

Years of indoctrination and radicalism have brought us to this point. Along the way, almost every government has deferred and submitted to extremists, made convoluted excuses to justify their actions and in some cases even adopting their rhetoric for politically expedient purposes. It’s a long road back to forbearance – if we ever intend to take it.

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