Caving in

B Y M A H E E N U S M A N I | 2/14/2020

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| LAST month, Pakistani clerics were finally united on a single platform: in opposition over a film they had not seen. Following outcry from the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan, the government announced that the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) would review director Sarmad Khoosat`s Zindagi Tamasha along with a member of the same far-right group from which 86 members were handed 55-year prison sentences by an antiterrorism court. But now the remaining members have been put to good use as preachers of public morality.  The review, scheduled for Feb 3, did not take place, and both the government and CII have remained silent since. Incidentally, Zindagi Tamasha had twice been cleared by the Central Board of Film Censors and two provincial boards. But what was not visible to distinguished members of society as well as to the jury of South Korea`s prestigious Busan International Film Festival, who conferred an award on it was immediately apparent to the clerics after watching a two-minute trailer on YouTube.  `Blasphemy,` they proclaimed.  The release of Zindagi Tamasha was promptly halted because, according to the critics, it would not be good form to release a film portraying an `anti-Islam narrative`. The beleaguered director pleaded on social media that the film only shows a religious man with shades of grey. `[The film is] an empathetic and heartfelt story ... He is a human being portrayed through a very humane eye.  But the critics refused to back down, logic (which makes an appearance only on select occasions) not being the way to assuage their outrage. When children are assaulted and murdered by madressah clerics, it is not deemed worthy of protest because it does not hurt their sentiments. As for the CII, its erudition might finally be put to good use, since, in the past, it has deliberated on issues such as underage marriages, whether co-education is halal, and if female judges should be obliged to wear the nigab.  Meanwhile, Federal Minister for Science and Technology Fawad Chaudhry called on Netflix and Amazon to invest in Pakistani content. Such incidents are undoubtedly part of our confidence-building measures to attract these streaming giants to make gritty dramas.  Since time immemorial, writers and artists have reflected on the society they live in.  Outraged by the Nazi bombing of a Basque town during the Spanish Civil War on the orders of Gen Franco, Pablo Picasso painted `Guernica` in 1937. Despite only being exhibite d in Spain in 1981 after the end of Franco`s authoritarian rule, as desired by Picasso, this masterpiece has become a symbol of genocide committed during war.Saadat Hasan Manto wrote of the hard truths of society and the horrors that Partition wreaked. His hard-hitting stories were deemed vulgar, although he insisted he was just depicting the ugliness he saw around him.  The son of a garbage collector, French director Ladj Ly, recently made a film that portrays the misery of the immigrant suburbs, the banlieues, in which he grew up.  The film`s title, Les Misérables, is a nod to Victor Hugo`s 1862 magnum opus, which was partly set in the same harsh suburb of Montfermeil where Ly`s drama is filmed. Ly says: `You can see that misery is still present in the same place today. I believe in the power of cinema as a tool to challenge politics and bring about real lasting changes.  In the preface to his book, Hugo wrote: `Social problems go beyond frontiers.  Humankind`s wounds ... do not stop at the blue and red lines drawn on maps. Wherever men go in ignorance or despair, wherever women sell themselves for bread, whereverSaadat Hasan Manto wrote of the hard truths of society and the horrors that Partition wreaked. His hard-hitting stories were deemed vulgar, although he insisted he was just depicting the ugliness he saw around him.  The son of a garbage collector, French director Ladj Ly, recently made a film that portrays the misery of the immigrant suburbs, the banlieues, in which he grew up.  The film`s title, Les Misérables, is a nod to Victor Hugo`s 1862 magnum opus, which was partly set in the same harsh suburb of Montfermeil where Ly`s drama is filmed. Ly says: `You can see that misery is still present in the same place today. I believe in the power of cinema as a tool to challenge politics and bring about real lasting changes.  In the preface to his book, Hugo wrote: `Social problems go beyond frontiers.  Humankind`s wounds ... do not stop at the blue and red lines drawn on maps. Wherever men go in ignorance or despair, wherever women sell themselves for bread, whereverchildren lack a book to learn from or a warm hearth, Les Misérables knocks at the door and says: `Open up, I am here for you` While Hugo`s novel was banned by the Catholic Church and included in its Index Librorum Prohibitorum, Ly`s film hasbeen critically acclaimed, won the jury prize at Cannes, and spurred President Macron to take action to stem the rot in the banlieues.  Unfortunately, Pakistan continues to have a knee-jerk relationship with bans. A committee of the Punjab Assembly has banned The First Muslim and After the Prophet by Lesley Hazleton. Mohammed Hanif`s A Case of Exploding Mangoes was harmless when it was available in English and Arabic for over a decade, but is deemed harmful for public consumption now that it has been translated into Urdu.  When France submitted Les Misérables as its entry for best international feature film at this year`s Oscars, Ly said: `It is a movie that represents France.Irepresent French cinema now.` Meanwhile, in Pakistan, Khoosat is facing death threats and has been reduced to pleading that he is a good Muslim and a true believer. Now it is up to the clerics whether they believe him.  ThewriteristheauthorofTheMercuria| Mr Bhutto and Other Stories.  Twitter: @MaheenUsmani |