[**Lessons from the Sialkot tragedy**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1662547/lessons-from-the-sialkot-tragedy)

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THE attackers were all young. Many of those who watched the gruesome spectacle were teenagers. No one showed any sense of shock at the bestiality that was taking place. Several were busy filming the ghastly scene rather approvingly. There was not even a feeble voice of protest when the attackers set on fire the body of the dead Sri Lankan factory manager.

What happened in Sialkot [last week](https://www.dawn.com/news/1661878/ghastly-murder-of-lankan-man-in-sialkot-shames-nation) demonstrates the radicalisation of a society that condones violence in the name of faith. The crowd that had gathered seemed immune to the grisly nature of the crime. The fury of the attackers was frightening. Some of them might be punished but it is the impunity for rising religiously inspired violent extremism that will keep producing tragedies like Sialkot.

**Read more:** [*We do not have the right to be shocked at the Sialkot incident*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1662149/sialkot-no-surprise)

It may have been a most horrific incident but the country has been increasingly witnessing killings in the name of faith. The issue of blasphemy comes in handy for zealots and criminals. The state’s policy of appeasement and in some cases using religion out of political expediency has contributed hugely to the rise of violent extremism.

It’s the weaponisation of faith that has been the main reason for the spread of such brutality in society. The attackers and the mob in Sialkot were not driven by their youthfulness and emotions, as our defence minister wants us to believe. Pervez Khattak’s [appalling remarks](https://www.dawn.com/news/1662109) show the mindset that dominates our political culture. He may have sounded extremely crude but that is how many in government and outside rationalise criminality in the name of faith.

What happened in Sialkot was just a trailer of the horror that awaits us.

Our youth has been growing up watching murderers like Mumtaz Qadri being hailed as a great Muslim hero. His larger-than-life portraits are seen in marketplaces. Lawyers and even a retired high court judge were among those supporting him during his trial. Hundreds of thousands of people attended his funeral and his grave in Islamabad’s suburbs has been turned into a shrine.

How can one forget a PTI provincial minister visiting Qadri’s grave? The video of him paying homage to the man who killed the Punjab governor went viral on social media. There appears to have been no questioning of this act by the party leadership. The defence minister’s comments represent the same mindset. There may be many others in the ruling party ranks with the same views on such violent incidents.

A few years ago, the country had witnessed the [gruesome murder](https://www.dawn.com/news/1326729) of a young university student by his classmates on campus. Falsely accused of blasphemy, Mashal Khan was beaten and shot to death because of his views. Even some university administration members were accused of inciting the students.

The courts freed many of the suspects. Their release was celebrated. The shock over the grisly incident soon vanished. Meanwhile, there is hardly any talk about how a [Christian couple](https://www.dawn.com/news/1142386/christian-couple-beaten-to-death-for-desecrating-quran-police) was thrown alive into a furnace on baseless charges of blasphemy.

This year, a temple was vandalised after allegations of a seminary being desecrated by a Hindu child. Just a few days before the Sialkot lynching, a mob [set on fire a police station](https://www.dawn.com/news/1660770) in Charsadda for sheltering a mentally disturbed man suspected of committing blasphemy. The mob wanted to burn him alive. Many other cases of violence against the Ahmadi community go unreported.

This culture of violence and rising religious intolerance cannot be attributed to emotions running high among young people. Religious extremism is entrenched so deeply that it threatens to rip apart the entire social fabric. Downplaying the seriousness of this societal disease will lead to greater disaster.

The Sialkot incident took place soon after the government surrendered to an extremist group that justifies violence in the name of faith. The capitulation happened after the TLP destroyed public property and allegedly killed policemen. Shockingly, a senior PTI leader [went to greet the TLP leader](https://www.dawn.com/news/1659209) after his release from detention. This shows the confusion within the ranks of the ruling party over the issue of how to deal with extremist groups.

Such a weak-kneed approach by the government towards extremism allows incidents like the Sialkot tragedy to happen. Apparently, some among the attackers were inspired by the extremist group. Reportedly, there were also chants of TLP slogans after the lynching. It’s a frightening situation indeed.

Now with the mainstreaming of the group, the danger of youth, particularly those less educated and coming from marginalised ranks, turning to extremism is growing. A weak state, unable to stop the spread of a retrogressive mindset has turned the country into a breeding ground for violent extremism. What happened in Sialkot was just a trailer of the horror that awaits us.

Notwithstanding its pledge to punish the perpetrators of the crime, the government doesn’t seem willing to address the main issue of radicalisation that results in incidents like the Sialkot tragedy. While he tweeted his condemnation of the incident the prime minister has not said much about the threat of religious extremism. One expected the prime minister and other senior government leaders to take the issue more seriously.

**Read more:** [*Swift punishments are essential in cases like Sialkot lynching but will they be enough?*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1662400/planning-for-a-nation)

The prime minister claims to lead the global campaign against Islamophobia in the West. But he has failed to learn from the response of the prime ministers of Canada and New Zealand to the attacks on Muslims in their countries. Many more Muslims and non-Muslims become victim to retrogressive interpretations of faith that give rise to intolerance in this country.

It would be better if the prime minister focused on fighting extremism at home rather than taking the cause outside. The prime minister who is so fond of addressing the nation on every issue is not very vocal on the most serious threat to national cohesion and security. His own increasing emphasis on religiosity is disturbing. It has added to the problem. There is an urgent need to build a national narrative on fighting this menace before it is too late. The country will have to pay a huge cost for more Sialkot-type violence.

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