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Abstract

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Keywords: Blasphemy, Politics, Pakistan

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Keywords:

[Blasphemy](#), [Politics](#), [Pakistan](#)

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Introduction

The word 'Blasphemy' mainly refers to injurious speech which hurts the sentiments of people. These sentiments mainly occur to be religious in nature, however, it is not necessary. In a society that happens to be heterogeneous in terms of religious beliefs, blasphemy can be a major source of conflict and could seriously imperil law and order situations. Thus, to avoid the conflict many countries around the world have penalized blasphemy. With 32 countries, the Muslim world constitutes the bulk of these countries that have penalized blasphemy (Masud et al., 2021). One of the countries in this regard is Pakistan where blasphemy in general and particularly in the honor of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is a serious crime. The offense of blasphemy

in the honor of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) carries the death penalty under section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code. Moreover, blasphemy against the Quran carries a life sentence under section 295-B of the Penal Code. In the wake of these capital punishments blasphemy has become a sensitive issue in Pakistan.

Due to the sensitive nature of blasphemy, it has often been misused by individuals to settle personal scores and for other vested interests by accusing individuals of committing blasphemy that often resulted in severe consequences for the accused. Not only it is used for settling personal vendettas, but it is also used for politics by the mainstream political parties for galvanizing their voters. The 2018 general elections in Pakistan serve as an illustrating example in this regard.



The issue of blasphemy has been increasingly used in the 2018 general elections. During the elections, various political parties employed the issue of blasphemy to galvanize their voter bases and secure electoral victories. Interestingly, the parties include from the center-left Pakistan People Party (PPP) to the far-right parties such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). This paper aims to explore the use of blasphemy in the electoral politics of Pakistan by focusing on the electoral campaign and strategies of major political parties such as PPP, PTI, and most importantly TLP.

Blasphemy and Politics in Pakistan

The concept of Blasphemy and politics enjoy a close relationship. Blasphemy as described by Abdullah Saeed, a distinguished professor at the University of Melbourne, is as much a political issue as it is a theological one (Masud et al., 2021b). The said description underlines the relationship of blasphemy with politics. The relationship between the two was so ingrained that in the classical and later on in the medieval periods, Blasphemy was often recognized as an offense against the state.

Though the nature of the relationship has changed, the relationship remained intact, in contemporary times, especially in countries where religion still plays a central role in public life. Consider Pakistan for that matter. Blasphemy in general and in particular in the honor of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is a very sensitive issue in Pakistan. Many factors are contributing to the growing sensitivity around the issue of Blasphemy in Pakistan the primary factor is the country's controversial blasphemy laws in general and its section 295-C in particular.

Following the partition of the Indian subcontinent, the newly created state of Pakistan adopted the British Indian Penal Code which was introduced by the British in 1860. The section of offenses pertaining to religion in the said Penal Code remained largely unaltered until the 1980s. Following his accession to the throne in July 1977, Zia-ul-Haq, a military dictator, introduced several modifications to the Pakistan Penal Code, particularly in the section concerning religious transgressions, as part of his broader agenda of Islamization. The alterations were implemented via a series of Presidential Ordinances and legislative enactments passed by the parliament (Osama Siddique & Zahra Hayat, 2008)

Of all these changes the most important and consequential one was section 295-C. The said section has criminalized the insult of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) through derogatory remarks with the death penalty and also a fine (Umair, 2020). Unlike the other sections related to religious offenses that were infused into the penal code through presidential ordinances, section 295-C was introduced in the penal code after a bill related to the said section was introduced and subsequently passed by the Parliament in 1986 ("10 Things You Need to Know about Pakistan's Blasphemy Law," 2016)

The case of Section 295-C is interesting and merits attention. The said section, in particular, has sensitized the issue of Blasphemy (Jayaram, 2019) and in turn, has incentivized the political actors to use it for political gains. The causal link between the passage of section 295-C and the growing sensitivity of the issue of Blasphemy can be gauged from the fact that before the passage of the said law, a total of ten cases related to Blasphemy were registered. However, after the law was passed in 1986, the number of cases pertaining to Blasphemy became rapidly increased. According to one estimate, between 1986 and 2017, a total of 1500 Blasphemy cases have been registered. (Ahmed, 2018) It is mainly to do with the impression section 295-C is imparting apropos of the offense of Blasphemy against the Prophet.

In 1991 a petition was filed with the Federal *Shariah* Court by Muhammad Ismail Qureshi. In the said petition, Qureshi demanded that the provision of life imprisonment as a punishment for Blasphemer, under section 295-C, should be repealed as it is against the injunction of Islam. The only punishment for Blasphemer in Islam, argued by Ismail Qureshi, in the petition concerned, is death (Ahmad, 2018). The Federal *Shariah* Court, on its part, in its verdict on the said petition upheld the petition and declared that the only punishment for Blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is death and nothing else. Moreover, the court also declared that there is an *Ijma* (consensus of religious scholars) that Blasphemy is a *Hadd* offense that is unpardonable (Haider, 2018). In the Islamic discourse, the word *Hadd* is reserved for certain fixed punishments that have been clearly mentioned in the Qur'an and which would be meted out exactly in the same manner as laid down in the Qur'an (Rahman, 1965). This triad that blasphemy is a *Hadd*

offense and that death is the sole penalty for such an offense, along with the claim that there exists a consensus (Ijma) among Islamic scholars on this matter, has effectively rendered section 295-C inviolable.

Thus, owing to the fact that a large number of people can be mobilized potentially on the matter, blasphemy has become a recurring theme in Pakistani politics, exploited by diverse political actors regardless of their ideological orientations. An intriguing instance in this context pertains to the Pakistan People's Party, a political party that presents itself as a secular party with a forward-thinking perspective.

In the December 2021 by-election for the national assembly seat of NA-133, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) candidate, Aslam Gill, incorporated the issue of blasphemy and the sanctity of Prophet Muhammad into his campaign strategy. His campaign posters prominently displayed the slogan "Labbaik ya Rasool Allah" (I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God), alongside an image of the party's founder, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. The slogan was further accompanied by the words "Mujahid Khatm-e-Nabuwat" (soldier for the finality of prophethood).

Figure 1



Source: The picture was uploaded by a social media user on X (formerly Twitter) (M. Jibran Nasir PS [@MjibranNasir], 2022).

It is noteworthy that PPP is not alone in this regard as Pakistan's other mainstream political parties such as Pakistan Tehreek Insaf, have also repeatedly used

the issue of Blasphemy and *Namoos-e-Risalat* to garner votes. In the 2018 general elections, a number of PTI candidates made the issue of Blasphemy central to their electoral campaign. This was evident from the campaign posters of PTI candidates often featuring words related to blasphemy and the sanctity of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). For example, one such poster in the constituency of Dr. Yasmin Rashid, the former provincial health minister of Punjab, carried the words, 'ay Muslmano Jago aur PTI ko vote de kar insaf karo. Kia aap Ashiq-e-Rasool Mumtaz Qadri ko phansi dene walo ko vote de kar Allah ko kia jawab do ge' (O Muslims, wake up and vote for PTI. What answer will you give to Allah on the day of judgment if you vote for those who executed Ashiq Rasool, Mumtaz Qadri?)

Figure 2



Source: (Masab, 2018)

Other candidates from the party, such as the late Amir Liaqat Hussain also used the same issue in his election campaign. Campaign posters describing him in words such as *Muhaffiz Khatam-e-Nabuwwat* (guardian of the finality of prophethood) and *Safeer-e-Namoos-e-Risalat* (ambassador to the sanctity of Prophet Muhammad) were hung from poles across his constituency. Last but not least the former interior minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmad has also used the issue of blasphemy and the sanctity of the Prophet for his electoral campaign in the 2018 general elections as evident from his election posters below. Though these parties have politicized the issue of Blasphemy for electoral politics, one party,

which significantly raised the bar for others in this regard was Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan.

Figure 3



Source: (Javid, 2021)

Figure 4



Source: (Masab, 2018)

Tlp and Blasphemy

In the following paragraphs, we will mainly focus on examining how the TLP is employing the issue of Blasphemy in its electoral politics, with particular attention paid to the party's slogans, manifesto, and major events. We shall begin with the slogans and work our way to the rest.

Slogans Used by Tlp

To get an insight into the politics of any political party, one should recourse to the slogans used by the political party concerned, to mobilize its followers

and general masses. The same method shall be applied to TLP to get an insight into its politics. As already been discussed, TLP is using the issue of blasphemy for politics, and the slogans used in the gatherings and political rallies of the TLP bear testimony to the said assertion. The major slogans, which can be considered as a rallying cry of the TLP, are all centered on the issue of blasphemy. These slogans shall be discussed number-wise in a bit of detail.

Slogan 01 مَنْ سَبَّ نَبِيًّا فَاقْتُلُوهُ

The phrase 'مَنْ سَبَّ نَبِيًّا فَاقْتُلُوهُ' "Whosoever insult the Prophet, kill him", is one of the hallmark slogans of the Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan. The leadership of TLP is repeatedly using the phrase on the pulpits of the mosques and in the political rallies to galvanize its followers. Based upon the said slogan, party anthems have been made which are easily available on social media. One such anthem, 'Man Sabba Nabiyā Faqtulu', has been shared from the official YouTube channel of the late Khadim Hussain Rizvi (Best New Tarana 2021 TLP Official, 2021). The initial few lines of the anthem particularly illustrate respect for how the party is using the said slogan to tap the emotions of the people attached to the issue of Blasphemy. The lines under discussion are

عشاق سنو فرمان نبی

من سب نبیا فقتلوه

گستاخ نبی کی ایک سزا

سرتن سے جدا

Translation:

O lovers! Listen to the prophet who said

Kill, whoever insults the Prophet

There is only one punishment for the Blasphemer of Prophet

A head separated from the body

It is worth mentioning that time and again, the TLP leadership has presented the concerned slogan as a genuine Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad. This assertion, in turn, has lent credence to the slogan and has proved effective in mobilizing the people. Though the Hadith has been narrated in certain books of the Hadiths such as *Al-Muajam-e-Sagheer* by Imam Tabarani, it couldn't find a place in any of the books of *Sihah-al-Sittah*, the six most authentic

books of the Hadith collections in Sunni tradition owing to its status as *Daeef* or weak Hadith.

Slogan 02 لبيك يا رسول الله

The next slogan which is often heard in the rallies and gatherings of Tehreek Labbaik with particular hand gestures is لبيك يا رسول الله the literal translation "O Messenger of Allah! we are present." Similar to the preceding slogan, this chant serves as a prominent feature in many party anthems (*ALLAH Ne Alame Islam Ka Bayania Bana Diya MAN SABBA NABIYAN FAQTOLO HO*, 2020). While the slogan may appear unrelated to the issue of blasphemy at first glance, it is, in fact, intricately linked to it. This was revealed to the author by Farooq-ul-Hassan Qadri, a member of the central *Shura* committee of TLP through an informal discussion at a local mosque. While commenting on the meaning of the slogan, Farooq revealed that the slogan implies that "O the Messenger of Allah! whenever someone dares to hurt your honor with Blasphemy, we will be present with our lives and properties to protect your honor." (F.-H. Qadri, personal communication, 2022)

SLOGAN 03: تاجدار ختم نبوت زنده آباد

Rarely there would be a speech of the TLP leadership that is devoid of the slogan تاجدار ختم نبوت زنده آباد "Long live the King of the finality of Prophethood." Khatam-e-Nabuwat refers to a doctrine according to which the chain of prophethood has ended with the Prophet Muhammad. He is the last of the prophets and there shall be no Prophet until the day of judgment. And those who think contrary to the said doctrine are committing Blasphemy that needs to be dealt with iron-hand according to the followers of Tehreek Labbaik. The TLP cadre perceived themselves as the custodian of the doctrine of finality of Prophet Muhammad. Also, the majority of the party's rallies and conferences are named after the said slogan such as the *Tajdar-e-Khatam-e-Nabuwat Conference*.

TLP's Election Campaign and the Issue of Blasphemy

Beyond the slogans, the issue of Blasphemy was actively incorporated into the election campaign of the TLP. The phenomenon became evident for the first time in the by-election of NA 120. In September

2017, after the disqualification of Nawaz Sharif, a by-election was held on NA 120. For the first time, TLP also took part in elections and fielded its candidate, Sheikh Azhar Hussain Rizvi (Nasir, 2017). Not only did it field the candidate, but also conducted a vigorous election campaign that mainly revolved around the issue of Blasphemy. The prime target of the campaign was PML-N which it seeks to discredit with Mumtaz Qadri's episode.

For instance, while addressing a rally, that was held in NA 120 ahead of the by-election, Khadim Rizvi stated that "while casting a vote, do not forget, they are the ones (referring to the PML-N leadership) who executed Mumtaz Qadri" (Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi Official, 2018). The same thing was repeated by Rizvi in response to a question in an interview with journalist Nasrullah Malik, where the latter asked: "Why PML-N is the prime target of TLP?" To this Khadim replied, "We don't have anything personal against the PML-N, we are against the PML-N because they executed Mumtaz Qadri who was a true lover of the Prophet" (Neo News, 2017).

Politicizing the issue of Blasphemy for political gains ultimately paid dividends for TLP. In the by-elections, its candidate garnered 7130 votes and secured the third position (Ghani, 2018). Where the result surprised many, it further incentivized the TLP to use the issue of Blasphemy as a battle cry in the 2018 general elections.

2018 General Elections: TLP Harnessed Blasphemy as A Rallying Cry

In the 2018 general elections, to the surprise of many, TLP fielded 150 candidates for National Assembly seats from all over Pakistan. The number of candidates was only lower than the number of candidates of the three mainstream political parties namely PML-N, PTI, and PPP (Geo News, 2018). In Punjab alone, TLP fielded 103 candidates for 117 seats of the National Assembly and another 230 candidates for a total of 297 provincial seats (Wasim, 2018).

Tlp's Manifesto and the Centrality of the Issue of Blasphemy

After fielding such a large number of candidates, TLP undertook an active election campaign for the general elections which again revolved around the

issues of blasphemy and the sanctity of the Prophet, especially after it had proven its efficacy in the by-elections (Asif Shahzad, [2017](#)). The centrality of the issue of blasphemy in TLP's election strategy was evident from the party's manifesto that was unveiled on the eve of the general elections.

Two out of the first three points of the manifesto were related to the notion of blasphemy. Consider point two of the party's manifesto which reads, the state shall protect the honor and esteem of the Holy Prophet (SAW) against any kind of blasphemy. Similarly, point three of the Manifesto stated that arrangements shall be made by the state to protect the doctrine of the finality of Prophet Muhammad. (*TLP Manifesto*, [n.d.](#)) While commenting on the party's manifesto Rizvi himself noted that we have a very distinct manifesto from other religious parties. We will work tirelessly to create such a Pakistan where there will be no compromise [emphasis added] on the sanctity of Prophet Muhammad and no compromise on the issues pertaining to Blasphemy. (*Holland Important Message Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi 2018*, [2018](#))

Speeches, Sit-Ins, Protests, and Rallies on the Issue of Blasphemy

Beyond the party's manifesto, the centrality of the issue of blasphemy in TLP's election campaign was also evident from the speeches of the party's leadership. In one such speech, Khadim Hussain Rizvi explicitly stated that "preserving the honor and sanctity of Prophet Muhammad is key to the progress of Pakistan. Thus, upon ascending to the power we will do everything in our capacity to guard it" (Allama Abdul Satar Asim & Zaigham Rasool Qadri, [2020](#)).

Moreover, while other parties were organizing rallies, and sit-ins on issues such as inflation, unemployment, corruption, and misgovernance, TLP was organizing it on the issue of blasphemy and *Namoos-e-Risalat* to galvanize its followers for the elections. Consider the 21-day sit-in of TLP at Faizabad in November 2017.

Faizabad Dharna 2017

In November 2017, a countrywide protest was organized by TLP with its center focused on the *Faizabad* interchange where a sit-in was arranged. The protest came in the wake of a proposed change

in the oath pertaining to the finality of Prophet Muhammad in the Election Bill 2017 that was put forth by the then-law minister Zahid Hamid (Yasin, [2017](#)). The proposed change in the oath was 'I declare' from previously 'I declare on oath,' that I believe in the finality of Prophet Muhammad (Tanoli, [2017](#)).

Though the change was regarded as an outcome of a clerical error and was soon rectified by the then-ruling party by restoring the original words, the leadership of TLP was not ready to buy the argument (Bhatti, [2017](#)). "It was not a clerical error," stated Khadim Hussain Rizvi eloquently while addressing a gathering, "rather it was a pre-planned conspiracy against the sanctity of Prophet and against the doctrine of finality of Prophet Muhammad" (Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi Official, [2017](#)). The proposed change was regarded as blasphemy by the key representatives of TLP, and death threats were issued to Zahid Hamid. Consequently, his house came under attack (Mehdi, [2017](#)).

The sit-in continued for nearly three weeks amidst various episodes of clashes between the protestors and law enforcement agencies that resulted in several casualties on both sides. However, the protest came to an end after a six-point agreement, brokered by the army, was signed between the leadership of TLP and the government officials ("Text of Agreement Signed with Protesters," [2017](#)) As a result of the agreement, Zahid Hamid steps down as a federal law minister. TLP on its part assured the government that no *fatwa* (a religious decree) will be issued against the former law minister (Wasim & Azeem, [2017](#)).

The agreement was hailed as a great victory by the TLP in its strive to protect the honor of Prophet Muhammad against any kind of Blasphemy. Right after the Faizabad sit-in ended, in an interview with the media officials, Rizvi stated that his party had been victorious in "preserving the honor" of the Prophet and in preventing the evil forces from degrading the Prophet's standing under the constitution and the law of the country (Islam Pakistan Aur Awam, [2021](#)). It is pertinent to mention that the *Faizabad* sit-in played a major role in catapulting the TLP as a major political force on the political horizon of the country with the issue of Blasphemy as its rallying cry. The sit-in was mainly aimed at mobilizing the party voters by setting momentum, for the general elections.

Tajdar-E-Khatm-E-Nabuwat Conference 2018

After the Faizabad sit-in, on 4th January 2018, on the 7th anniversary of Salman Taseer's killing at the hands of Mumtaz Qadri, TLP organized the *Tajdar-e-Khatm-e-Nabuwat* Conference at Liaqat Bagh Rawalpindi. The conference was more of a political rally in which the party leadership was laying out the manifesto of the party, in which Blasphemy occupied a central stage. For instance, while commenting on the political future of Pakistan, Khadim Rizvi explicitly stated that "*wo jo Ghazi Mumtaz ne goliyan mari thi us gustakh ko, yahi Pakistan ka matlab hai aur yahi Pakistan ka dastoor hoga jab Labbaik walo ki Hakumat aayge*" [What Ghazi Mumtaz did by firing bullets at that blasphemer, this is the true meaning of Pakistan, and this will be the way of Pakistan when TLP ascended to the throne] ("*Tajdar-e-Khatm-e-Nabuwat Conference Liaqat Bagh Speech Ameer-Ul-Mujahideen Hafiz Khadim Hussain Rizvi,*" 2018)

Also, in the same conference, the leadership of TLP depicted the party as a distinct political party that only worked to preserve the honor of the Prophet against any kind of Blasphemy. Dr. Shafique Amini's speech, who is a senior member of TLP's central *shura*, was key in this regard. He stated that "in this age of perfidy where people are coming out for different causes and different political parties, TLP has provided you a platform where you can come out and contribute to the cause of preserving the sanctity of Prophet Muhammad." Besides, he also made a promise to the participants that together with TLP, in any circumstance, they will protect the honor of the Prophet (*Tajdar-e-Nabuwat Conference Liaqat Bagh Speech Doctor Muhammad Shafiq Ameen Qadri,* 2018).

In the same manner, Farooq-ul-Hassan Qadri, another member of TLP's central *shura* in his speech cautioned the participants that, when they enter the polling station, they should remember that Prophet Muhammad is watching them and not Zardari, Imran, or Nawaz Sharif for that matter. While making a case for a vote, he further stated that no doubt those who vote for Allah and his messenger will seek salvation both in this world and the hereafter (*Tajdar-e-Khatm-e-Nabuwat Conference*

Liaqat Bagh Speech Allama Farooq Ul Hassan Qadri, 2018).

Election Results

In stark similarity with the results of the 2017 by-elections, this time too, tapping the political capital attached to the issue of Blasphemy delivered results for the TLP. Though the party did not secure any seat in the National Assembly, it secured two seats in the provincial assembly of Sindh (Yousafzai, 2018). Moreover, it also left its mark on the election results in many ways.

First, in terms of votes polled for the NA seats, in Punjab, TLP emerged as the third largest party by securing 1.8 million votes, which constitutes roughly 5.6 percent of the total votes polled. These figures were huge as compared to the votes of other more established parties such as the Pakistan People's Party and MMA (a coalition of religious parties) which could only secure 5.4 and 1.33 percent votes respectively (Sabat et al., 2020). Similarly, in countrywide statistics, TLP emerged as the fifth-largest political party by securing 2.2 million votes from all over the country in the general elections (Yousafzai, 2018).

Secondly, unlike other religio-political parties, TLP also dented the votes of other parties such as PML-N and PTI. As per one research, in Punjab, TLP had divided votes on at least 20 seats of the National Assembly (Jafari & Abbasi, 2018).

Post-2018 General Elections

TLP, encouraged by the fact that its narrative gained traction among the masses as reflected by the results of the general election, pressed even harder on the issue of Blasphemy in the post-election phase. After the elections, TLP continued agitations, marches, and sit-ins on issues pertaining to Blasphemy and *Namoos-e-Risalat*. Some of these key events are as follows:

Dutch Cartoon Controversy 2018

In June 2018, Geert Wilders, a far-right Dutch politician, well known for his Islamophobic views announced holding a competition of cartoons featuring the Prophet Muhammad ("Dutch Anti-Islam Party to Hold Prophet Mohammad Cartoon Competition," 2018) Since drawing pictures, cartoons, or caricatures of Prophet Muhammad is

forbidden in Islam because of 'Aniconism' (Soğancı, 2004), the announcement evoked a reaction from Muslims worldwide. ("Dutch Anti-Islam Party to Hold Prophet Mohammad Cartoon Competition," 2018). However, in Pakistan, the strongest reaction came from *Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan* which widely perceived the announcement as Blasphemous.

As soon as the announcement was made, Khadim Rizvi threatened the government with a long march, if it did not take proper measures to address the issue. For instance, in a video message on the issue, Khadim Rizvi demanded from the government that in case the Dutch authorities did not cancel the competition, the government shall have to expel the Dutch ambassador from the country, shall have to recall its own ambassador from the Netherlands, and shall have to sever diplomatic ties with Netherland. He further argued, that if the government didn't comply with these demands, TLP would march on Islamabad (*Holland Important Message Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi 2018, 2018*).

In August, the competition was called off by Wilder citing security reasons for the cancellation. Consequently, TLP also canceled its March, however, it took full credit for the cancellation of the competition and portrayed it as the achievement of the party. While calling off the march, Rizvi stated "Our goal has been achieved, thank God." Furthermore, he also thanked the party workers for coming out "for such a great cause" (Aamir Shah, 2018). Though the cancellation of the march provided a sigh of relief to the government but it proved to be very brief.

The Acquittal of Aasia Noreen 2018

Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman, defending who cost Salman Taseer a life, was acquitted by a three-member bench of the Supreme Court of Pakistan in October 2018. Aasia was on death row for nearly eight years on Blasphemy charges. However, in its 56 pages detailed judgment, the apex court established that the case was premised on the pieces of evidence that were insubstantial and though she confessed to her crime, the confession was made under duress and in front of a crowd that threatened to kill her (*Mst. Aasia Bibi Versus The State etc, 2018*).

Soon after the judgment, Islamists took to the streets to protest the verdict of the Supreme Court.

Nearly all the religious parties, including *Jamaat-e-Islami*, JUI-F, JUP, and *Jamat-ud-Dawah* condemned the acquittal of Aasia Bibi (Iftikhar Alam, 2018). However, the fierce reaction came from *Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan* which organized country-wide protests in some of the important cities of the country including Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Multan. As a result of these protests, major highways were choked and the country was literally brought to a standstill ("TLP Chokes Country by Protesting against Asia Bibi Acquittal," 2018).

Not only the protests were organized but the higher officials of the state were threatened openly by the leadership of TLP. Pir Afzal Qadri, one of the co-founders and patron-in-chief of the TLP had declared the judges of the Supreme Court, who exonerated Asia Noreen, as *Wajib-ul-Qatal* and called for their heads. Moreover, he also called for the overthrow of the government and the army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa (*Pakistani Clerics Who Opposed Asia Bibi's Blasphemy Acquittal Get Bail, 2019*).

The protest that continued for three days and which literally plunged the country into chaos ended after the government succumbed to the pressure and struck another deal with the leadership of TLP (Bilal, 2018). In the newly signed agreement, major concessions were made to the TLP. For instance, the government was bound to make sure that Aasia Bibi did not leave the country until a review petition, that would challenge the acquittal, was filed in the Supreme Court. Besides, the government also agreed to release a number of TLP workers who were incarcerated during the protests ("Asia Bibi," 2018).

In a sudden tweak of events, a few days after reaching a deal with the TLP, the government leaped into action by beginning a massive crackdown against the workers of the party. As per one report over 5000 party workers were arrested in the crackdown ("TLP Protests," 2018). Not only the workers but the party leaders, notably Khadim Rizvi and Pir Afzal Qadri were also put behind bars on the charges of terrorism and treason (Abrar, 2018). The crackdown was the first instance, since the formation of *Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan*, that the government took decisive action against the party. In the wake of the crackdown, TLP workers went underground, and many more deserted the party. Soon it seems that TLP had all but vanished from the

political horizon of the country. Though Khadim Rizvi and Pir Afzal Qadri were released later, the party was in disarray (Bilal, [2019](#)). However, the retreat proved to be a tactical retreat, as TLP will once again reassert itself on the political scene of the country by utilizing the issue of Blasphemy towards the end of 2020.

Charlie Hebdo's Episode

In November 2020, the leadership of TLP once again gave a call for a long march to Islamabad. The march, this time was prompted by the republication of Prophet's caricatures in a famous French magazine. A month earlier, in September, Charlie Hebdo, a renowned satirical magazine republished the caricatures of Prophet Muhammad which it had earlier published in 2015. Back then, the publications sparked an attack on the office of the magazine situated in Paris which claimed the lives of 12 persons (Onishi, [2020](#)). This time, the reaction to the publication was no different. A teenager, Abdoullakh Anzorov killed his teacher Samuel Paty after the later shown the caricatures in his class (Bahar Makooi, [2021](#)).

After the incident, while giving an interview with Al-Jazeera, French President Macron supported the publication of caricatures by Charlie Hebdo by invoking the right to freedom of expression (*Macron Says He Understands Muslims' Shock over Prophet Cartoons*, [2020](#)). The publications and the French government's explicit support of the concerned publications evoked a harsh response from the Muslim world. In Pakistan, the strongest reaction, again, came from TLP, the self-proclaimed custodians of the honor of the Prophet ("Pakistan," 2020). On 7 November, TLP arranged a rally in Karachi on the issue and demanded that the government should declare Jihad against France for publishing blasphemous caricatures, expel the French ambassador from the country, sever ties with France, and completely boycott French products. In the same rally TLP also announced that if their demands were not, it would launch a long march to the capital (Saad Rasool, [2021](#)).

In mid-November, TLP supporters started the *Tahaffuz Namoos-e-Risalat* March toward Islamabad. After sporadic episodes of clashes between police authorities and the TLP supporters, the latter finally reached *Faizabad* interchange,

where they set up a camp for a sit-in. However, unlike three years ago, they were not here for too long this time. Within a time span of two days, another agreement was added to a series of agreements signed earlier between the TLP and the government authorities. In the agreement the government conceded that within three months it would take the matter of expulsion of the French ambassador to Parliament, it will refrain from appointing its ambassador to France, and will set free all the detained workers of TLP (Azeem, [2020](#)).

On 19 November, a few days after the sit-in ended, Khadim Rizvi died. His sudden death was marred by various speculations including that he did not die of a natural death and he had been murdered ("Ex-DG ISI's Son Raises Suspicions about Khadim Hussain Rizvi's Death," [2020](#)). However, these speculations were put to rest, after his son Saad Hussain Rizvi, and TLP officials confirmed that Khadim died of natural death as he had a breathing problem and fever for the last few days (Imran Gabol, [2020](#)). Khadim Rizvi was succeeded by his elder son Saad Hussain Rizvi who was elected by 18-the member central *shura* of the party. The other two contenders for the party leadership were Dr. Shafique Amini and Allam Farooq-ul-Hassan Qadri (Allama Abdul Satar Asim & Zaigham Rasool Qadri, 2020).

At the *chillum* of Khadim Rizvi, organized in January 2021, Saad Rizvi, the new leader of TLP, while seeking legitimacy for his role as a head of the party, reminded the government in a fiery style that as per the agreement signed in November, it had time until February to fulfill the agreement (*Allama Saad Rizvi Latest Speech in Allama Khadim Rizvi Chehlum*, [2021](#)). However, when the demands were not met in February, Saad extended the deadline until April and threatened a countrywide protest if the issue of expulsion of the French ambassador was not taken to the Parliament. In April, to preempt the possible protest from TLP, Saad Rizvi was arrested and a general crackdown began on the TLP workers. Moreover, TLP was also banned under the anti-terrorism law of the country ("Government Bans TLP under Anti-Terrorism Law," [2021](#)).

The crackdown triggered a countrywide protest from TLP which claimed the lives of 4 policemen and several protestors. The protest, however, came to an end after another agreement was signed between the 'banned TLP' and the government,

under which the latter agreed to table a resolution seeking the expulsion of the French ambassador from the country in parliament (Sareen, 2021). On the next day government tabled a resolution in the parliament for debating the issue of the expulsion of the French ambassador which resulted in the formation of a special committee after disagreement arose between the government and the opposition over the said resolution (Wasim, 2021). After tabling the resolution, the issue once again into limbo.

In October 2021, TLP workers once again started a march toward Islamabad seeking the expulsion of the French ambassador and the release of its leader Saad Rizvi who was in prison since April. After clashes between the authorities and TLP supporters, as was widely anticipated, a deal was signed to end the stalemate. As per the deal, the government agreed to renounce the ban on the TLP. In return, TLP agreed to step back from its demand for the expulsion of the French ambassador (*TLP Withdraws Demand of French Envoy's Expulsion after Successful Negotiations with Govt*, 2021). In November 2021, the government lifted the ban on Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan and also released its leader, Saad Rizvi from prison (Gabol, 2021).

Politicizing the Issues for Electoral Gains

The key events that have been discussed at a greater length in the above lines should not be understood as mere instances of agitation on the part of TLP, rather, as one scholar has aptly put it, they were concerted efforts, aimed at multiplying the votes in the upcoming local body elections and subsequently in the general election. To put it simply, these events, of which the notion of Blasphemy was a central part, are used by TLP to discredit its political rivals in the election campaigns.

The author himself witnessed the phenomenon by attending a conference that was organized by TLP as a part of its election campaign for the local body elections of Islamabad. The conference was arranged in a local masjid of *Bara Kahu*, Islamabad, the hometown of Mumtaz Qadri. A member of TLP's central *shura* committee, Farooq-ul-Hassan Qadri was the chief speaker. Farooq started his address by greeting the attendants with words, "*Asslam Alekum*, the brave neighbors of Ghazi Mumtaz." The greeting set the tone of his speech. Following the greeting, he unleashed a tirade against the

mainstream political parties for being soft on Blasphemy and dishonest with *Namoos-e-Risalat*. To put it in his words,

While casting a vote, do not get overwhelmed by these lofty infrastructure projects. Remember, they are the ones who overlooked the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, they are the ones who tried to alter the law pertaining to *Khatam-e-Nabuwat*, and they are the ones who freed the Blasphemer Aasia Noreen. They lack the spine to stand against the countries that commit blasphemy in honor of the Prophet (referring to the Charlie Hebdo cartoon controversy). Also remember that while casting a vote, the Prophet will be watching you, so raise your hand and pledge that this time vote will only be for the sanctity of the Prophet.

Conclusion

The purpose of narrating and describing the various elements and aspects of the electoral strategies of these parties and primarily of TLP is to show how these parties have used the issue of blasphemy for electoral politics. In the subsequent paragraphs, we shall focus on why the issue of blasphemy has been used in the first place. The phenomenon shall be explained with the help of a concept.

To elaborate, the slogans, sit-ins, and various issues revolving around the notion of blasphemy that was used by these parties as a part of their election strategy were not mere random choices, rather, they were well-calculated measures aimed at targeting specific audiences having predilections and biases towards a specific issue, which in this case happens to be the issue of blasphemy.

The parties opted for this issue, keeping in view some of the basic concepts and fundamentals of electoral politics and election campaigns. For instance, one of the key fundamentals in this regard has been explained by Andrew J. Morse in his research article *The Effect of Popular Opinion on Campaign slogans- an illustration*. Contrary to the dominant discourse that puts an emphasis on the charisma and influence of the leader in directing the mood of the electorates, influencing the election strategy of a political party, and affecting the results of an election, Morse believed that it's the preferences of the common masses and their predilections that influenced and determine the

contents of the election strategy of a particular political party in any given election. (Morse, 1949).

To put it in his own words, "The impact that public opinion has on the election campaign of a party is far greater than the impact of that election campaign on electorates" (Morse, 1949). By making Morse's concept central to the analysis, one can infer that parties strategically choose issues that resonate deeply with the public. This is particularly evident in

the case of blasphemy in Pakistan, an issue that holds significant emotional and religious weight for the majority of Pakistanis. In a country where 97 percent of the population is Muslim, blasphemy is a topic that can mobilize nearly every citizen. Hence, political parties use this issue to galvanize support and influence the electorate, knowing, that it will resonate profoundly with the majority of countrymen.

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