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Pakistan: murder of the Governor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer

► European Parliament resolution of 20 January 2011 on Pakistan, in particular the murder of Governor Salmaan Taseer

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its previous resolutions on human rights and democracy in Pakistan, in particular those of 20 May 2010 and 12 July, 25 October and 15 November 2007,
 - having regard to its resolution of 16 December 2010 on the Annual Report on Human Rights in the World 2009 and the European Union's policy on the matter (2010/2202(INI))⁽¹⁾,
 - having regard to the Council conclusions of 16 November 2009 on freedom of religion or belief, in which the Council emphasises the strategic importance of this freedom and of countering religious intolerance,
 - having regard to the EU-Pakistan Joint Statement of 4 June 2010, in which both sides reaffirmed their determination jointly to address regional and global security issues, to promote respect for human rights, and to cooperate to strengthen Pakistan's democratic government and institutions further,
 - having regard to the declaration by its President of 19 November 2010 on the death sentence imposed on Asia Bibi,
 - having regard to the statement of 4 January 2011 by the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, on the murder of Governor Salmaan Taseer and to her statement of 12 November 2010 on a death penalty case in Pakistan,
 - having regard to Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR),
 - having regard to the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion and Belief,
 - having regard to Rule 122(5) of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas Salmaan Taseer, Governor of the province of Punjab, was one of the most vocal and visible critics of Pakistan's blasphemy laws and of their misuse by extremist groups in cases such as that involving Asia Bibi, the Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy under Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code,
- B. whereas on 4 January 2011 Salmaan Taseer was assassinated in Islamabad by one of his own security guards, Malik Mumtaz Hussein Qadri, who disagreed with Taseer's opposition to Pakistan's blasphemy laws,
- C. whereas none of the other security guards who witnessed Governor Taseer's assassination made any attempt to stop the murderer; whereas the murderer was cheered and supported by hundreds of lawyers when he appeared in court and tens of thousands of demonstrators marched in the streets of Karachi to show their approval of his actions; and whereas a leading Imam has reportedly issued a fatwa against Sherry Rehman, a former Pakistani minister, reformist politician and well-known journalist, identifying her as the next target for murder,
- D. whereas following the tragic event a broad alliance of the country's clergy, represented by Jamaate Ahle Sunnat Pakistan, an organisation that speaks on behalf of the moderate Barelvi sect, issued a statement

condoning the murder of Governor Taseer and lionising his assassin, saying that 'no Muslim should attend the funeral or even try to pray for Salmaan Taseer or even express any kind of regret or sympathy over the incident' and demanding that no Muslim should offer funeral prayers, nor any religious cleric perform the funeral of the assassinated governor,

E. whereas the 'Fundamental Rights' chapter of the 1973 Pakistan Constitution guarantees 'freedom to profess religion and manage religious institutions' (Article 20), equality of all citizens (Article 25) and the 'legitimate rights and interests of minorities' (Article 26),

F. whereas on 25 December 2009 President Asif Ali Zardari reiterated the pledge made by the Pakistan People's Party to uphold the right of all minorities to be treated as equal citizens,

G. whereas the legal provisions known as the 'blasphemy laws', introduced in 1982 and 1986, undermine the fundamental religious and minority rights granted by the Constitution, are misused by extremist groups and those wishing to settle personal scores, and have led to an increase in violence against members of religious minorities and against citizens who dare to raise their voices to criticise injustice,

H. whereas the vast majority of people accused under the blasphemy laws are Muslim, but accusations against individuals from minority faiths can trigger disproportionate violence against their community as a whole,

I. whereas on 30 December 2010 the Pakistan Government publicly reneged on its manifesto commitment to review discriminatory laws, announcing in a policy statement that it had no intention of repealing or amending the blasphemy laws,

J. whereas the murder of Governor Taseer raises security concerns for judges who hear blasphemy cases, given that Pakistan's lower court judges have already been pressured by Muslim extremists and even higher court judges might be reluctant to hand down unbiased rulings in religious persecution cases for fear of terrorist attacks against their lives,

K. whereas since Governor Taseer's assassination moderate voices, religious minorities and human rights defenders have felt increasingly insecure,

L. whereas Article 3(5) of the Treaty on European Union states that the promotion of democracy and respect for human rights and civil liberties are fundamental principles and aims of the European Union and constitute common ground for its relations with third countries; whereas EU trade and development assistance is conditional on respect for human rights and minority rights,

1. Strongly condemns the brutal murder of Salmaan Taseer, Governor of Pakistan's Punjab province, on 4 January 2011 at a market in Islamabad, commends his courage and moral strength in taking a stance in favour of religious tolerance and humane treatment of the disempowered, despite the polarised political climate in Pakistan, and extends its condolences to the victim's family and to the people of Pakistan;

2. Urges the Pakistan authorities to conduct a thorough investigation into all aspects of the murder and bring all the perpetrators of this crime rapidly to justice, in keeping with the strict rule of law;

3. Notes that many human rights groups criticised the lack of support for Governor Taseer's courageous stands from Pakistan's leaders - whether politicians or members of the military - and expresses its consternation and great concern at the amount of popular support, even among the legal profession, for religious intolerance and outright murder manifested in the demonstrations and public backing for the killer; calls on the Pakistan Government not to allow moderate voices in the country to be silenced by extremists;

4. Is deeply concerned that sections of the military, the judiciary and the political class would tacitly or even openly support the appeasement of political and religious extremists in Pakistan;

5. Expresses its concern at the fact that the murderer of Governor Taseer in Islamabad was a policeman from the governor's own protection unit; calls on the Pakistan Government to rid the Pakistani security forces of Islamic extremist elements and to ensure that the security forces abide by the constitution and the rule of law;

6. Expresses its support for all measures taken by the Pakistan Government in the fight against the spread of violent extremism;

7. Is concerned that the Pakistani blasphemy laws, which were publicly opposed by the late Governor Taseer, are

still being used to persecute religious denominations, including Christians such as Asia Bibi, the mother of five children, who has been sentenced to death;

8. Calls on the Pakistani authorities immediately to release Asia Bibi and to take measures to guarantee the safety of her family, who have had to go into hiding; calls on President Zardari to use his constitutional authority to pardon her following conclusion of the appeal lodged on her behalf;

9. Deplores the fact that the two largest religious political parties in Pakistan have declared that Salmaan Taseer deserved to be killed for his views, thus further inciting fear and appeasing both political and religious terrorism and crime;

10. Is concerned that free speech, including on the Internet, may be curtailed in Pakistan following Governor Taseer's assassination, as religious scholars from the Jamaat e-Ahl e-Sunnat Pakistan are openly stating that 'supporters are equally as guilty as one who committed blasphemy', adding that 'politicians, the media and others should learn a lesson from this exemplary death';

11. Welcomes the condemnation of the murder by significant sections of the Pakistani press and notes the action taken by the Pakistani media regulator against certain television stations in response to aspects of their coverage of the event;

12. Supports the call from senior Pakistani journalists for an examination of the role of the media in providing a platform for fringe preachers and other extremists who had openly threatened Taseer and other like-minded public figures;

13. Expresses its deep concern that the blasphemy laws – which can carry the death sentence in Pakistan and are often used to justify censorship, criminalisation, persecution and, in certain cases, the murder of members of political, racial and religious minorities – are open to forms of misuse that affect people of all faiths in Pakistan;

14. Reiterates its call to the Pakistan Government to carry out a thoroughgoing review of the blasphemy laws and their current application, including the mandatory death penalty or life imprisonment prescribed by Section 295 C of the Pakistan Penal Code, which prescribes a mandatory death penalty for anyone found guilty of blasphemy against the Prophet Mohammed, with a view to implementing amendments;

15. Commends in particular the efforts of Shahbaz Bhatti, the Minister for Minorities, who has introduced a bill seeking the abolition of the death penalty for the crime of blasphemy; looks to the Pakistani authorities to do their utmost to protect the lives of all who are threatened by Islamist radicals for their secular or divergent views, especially lawyers, judges and human rights activists defending the rule of law;

16. Expects the Pakistan Government to take all necessary measures to guarantee the safety of all judges in Pakistan, allowing them to fulfil their constitutional role without fear of intimidation, violence or harassment;

17. Views positively the signing by Pakistan of the instruments of ratification of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention against Torture (CAT); calls on the Pakistan Government to withdraw the reservations on these two agreements and to guarantee freedom of belief as enshrined in the UN Covenant, providing protection for their citizens in order to enable them to practise their faith freely;

18. Calls on the Pakistan Government to guarantee the human rights of minorities as laid down in the Constitution and the UDHR, in particular Article 18 thereof, which stipulates that 'everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion';

19. Supports all initiatives aimed at promoting dialogue and mutual respect among communities; calls on the political and religious authorities in Pakistan to promote tolerance and to take initiatives against hatred and violent extremism;

20. Urges the Pakistan Government to implement the proposed reforms of the education system and to regulate and inspect madrasas; invites the Pakistani authorities to remove all propaganda promoting hatred, religious superiority and defamation of religion from the textbooks approved by the national curriculum department of the Ministry of Education;

21. Calls on the European External Action Service to include the issue of religious tolerance in society in its political dialogue with Pakistan, this matter being of central importance to the long-term fight against religious extremism;

22. Calls on the Member States and the Commission to continue to provide financial support for human rights

organisations and defenders and to outline practical measures to support the civil-society movement in Pakistan against the blasphemy laws and other discriminatory legislation;

23. Urges the European External Action Service to insist that the Pakistan Government uphold the democracy and human rights clause enshrined in the Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan; calls on the Commission to present a report on the implementation of the Cooperation Agreement and the democracy and human rights clause;

24. Calls on European External Action Service to support the Pakistan Government in developing its Ministry for Human Rights and in establishing a meaningful, independent and authoritative National Human Rights Commission;

25. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, and the Government and Parliament of Pakistan.