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Pakistan: Eleven miners killed in sectarian attack buried following week of protests

Eleven coal miners from Pakistan's Shiite Hazara minority were brutally killed in a sectarian attack Sunday, January 3.

The latest atrocity against this oppressed minority triggered protests in Quetta and Karachi, while the families of the miners refused to bury their dead for an entire week. They demanded that Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan meet with them and end Islamabad's indifference towards widespread violence against the Hazara.

In a demonstration of pent-up frustration and anger, the Hazara protesters in Quetta kept the miners' coffins on a highway despite the Muslim tradition of burial within 24 hours. Following week-long continuous protests amid bitterly cold temperatures, the miners' funerals were held on Saturday after Prime Minister Imran Khan agreed to meet the protesters the same day.



People attend the funeral prayer of coal mine workers who were killed by gunmen near the Mach coal field in Quetta, Pakistan, Saturday, Jan. 9, 2021. (AP Photo/Arshad Butt)
The heinous crime took place in Mach, a mining town about 30 miles southeast of Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan. In the early hours of January 3, gunmen woke up sleeping

miners in a shared residence room near a coal mine, identified and separated the Shiite Hazara workers among them, blindfolded and tied their hands and feet, then slit their throats and shot them. Six died on the scene, while the others succumbed before they could reach a local hospital.

The Islamic State has claimed responsibility for the barbaric attack, which was aimed at terrorizing the Shiite Hazara community and intimidating other minorities in Pakistan.

However, they are far from the only culprits. If sectarian attacks on minorities, some of which have claimed the lives of scores, even hundreds, of people including women and children, are a regular occurrence in Pakistan, it is due to the longstanding promotion of communal animosity and Islamist reaction by the country's venal ruling elite. Moreover, this is inextricably bound up with Pakistan's reactionary partnership with US imperialism.

The Hazaras are an impoverished and persecuted minority in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. In Balochistan, because of repeated deadly attacks they are largely forced to reside in two fortified ghettos in Quetta.

The miners' killings predictably became the occasion for routine condemnations of Islamist terrorism by the political establishment in Islamabad. Khan condemned it as "yet another cowardly inhumane act of terrorism," in a Twitter message. Balochistan Chief Minister Jam Kamal Khan received numerous angry complaints after he posted a crudely crafted message, consisting of only a few words, which condemned the incident, but denied any responsibility for the state's failure to protect the Hazara. Many of those who responded demanded that he step down.

On Friday, while the protesters were continuing to blockade the highway and refusing to bury their dead, Imran Khan issued a testy warning to the protesters not to "blackmail" him.

In response to Khan's arrogant remarks, Amna Bibi, who lost both her son and brother in the attack, told Al Jazeera, "We are only calling him to come here and look at our martyrs' bodies so he can understand that every year we have more martyrs. That's the only reason. Because we voted for him, this is our right,"

When Khan arrived in Quetta on Saturday, family members and community leaders complained to him about their precarious existence, living under constant threat of attack. "This time you will see that it is different," Khan assured them. He promised his government would "look after" the impacted families and provide security to the community.

Those responsible for previous attacks have hardly faced any consequences. In this case, as in many others, no arrests have been made. In May 2018, Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa promised enhanced security for Hazara in Quetta. Bajwa was attempting to appease protests that continued for five consecutive days following a series of targeted killings of Hazara. However, neither targeted killings, nor large-scale attacks ceased. In April 2019, for example, 20 people were killed and 48 injured in Quetta in a bomb attack targeting Hazara.

Leaders of the two main opposition parties, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), also issued pro forma condemnations of the miners' murder. In addition, they exploited Khan's "blackmail" remark to claim that a government headed by their parties would be different. In reality, the PPP and PML-N are long-standing representatives of Pakistan's bourgeoisie, having held office for multiple terms prior to Khan's Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI) coming to power in 2018. They have a long record of promoting and conniving with communalist forces and are staunch supporters of the partnership between the military and Washington, and thus share responsibility for the plight of the Hazara and other minorities in the country.

A report by the National Commission for Human Rights in Pakistan in 2018 revealed that 509 Hazara were killed and 627 injured in sectarian attacks between January 2012 and December 2017. The PML-N and PPP's newfound concerns for Hazara can only be

understood in the context of their ongoing efforts to force Khan to step down and call new elections.

Khan himself is a right-wing Islamist. He has been a champion of Pakistan's draconian blasphemy laws and supported the disenfranchisement of the several-million-strong Ahmadi religious minority. Soon after assuming office, his government bowed to violent protests led by the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) against the overturning of the death sentence imposed on Asia Bibi, an impoverished Catholic woman, for blasphemy. The government appealed the ruling to the country's highest court.

The TLP, tacitly supported by the military, successfully secured the resignation of the previous PML-N government's minister for law and justice, Zahid Hamid, after he attempted to amend the religious oath taken by election candidates.

Balochistan is occupied by the military as part of its brutal repression of Balochi separatist nationalist militias. Any opposition to its domination is met with enforced disappearances, torture and extra-judicial killings. However, the Islamist fundamentalists have been able to carry out attacks, including in Quetta.

The widely read English-language daily *Dawn* in its editorial on January 5 observed that "the state has long abandoned" the Shiite Hazara. Seeking to explain their plight, the editorial noted, "In a cynically calculated move, it [the state] decided to turn a blind eye to violent extremists' depredations against the [Hazara] community in the province as long as these murderous groups also served to counter the Baloch insurgency that began during [General Pervez] Musharraf's regime."

While *Dawn* was compelled to acknowledge the criminal indifference of Islamabad towards the fate of the Shiite Hazara and its equally criminal security policies, the editorial nevertheless covered up Islamabad's chief responsibility for the flaring up of sectarian violence in the country. This process is inseparable from its reactionary partnership with US imperialism.

On Sunday, Khan sought to shift responsibility for the attack on the miners away from the Pakistani elite and its promotion of sectarianism and Islamic reaction. Instead, he pointed the finger of blame at Pakistan's arch-rival India. Boosted by its ever-deepening "global strategic partnership with Washington, New Delhi has intensified military pressure on Pakistan in recent years, including twice mounting provocative "surgical strikes" inside Pakistan.

Khan said that the "opinion" of his government and Pakistan's security agencies is that "India is backing" the Islamic State. He claimed he had received intelligence as long ago as last March demonstrating that India wants to "inflame sectarianism" in Pakistan.

The Pakistani bourgeoisie has always sought to gain financial benefits and geopolitical influence by serving imperialist interests, while at the same time fostering communalism and religious fundamentalism to divert popular anger over its inability to meet the basic needs of the working class and toilers into reactionary channels. This pedigree is rooted in Pakistan's very creation in 1947 as an explicitly Muslim state though the communal division of South Asia.

The coming to power of the US-backed dictator Zia-ul-Haq in 1977 marked a turning point, as he shifted politics sharply to the right during the 1980s under his policy of "Islamization" and, at Washington's behest, extended logistical and political support to the Islamist Mujahideen in Afghanistan. This turn right rested on the foundation laid by the PPP government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Its 1973 constitution had granted significant concessions to the religious right, such as the declaration of the Ahmadis as non-Muslims, making the Muslim Sabbath a holiday, and outlawing alcohol.

A servile tool of US imperialism, Zia made Pakistan the linchpin of Washington and Riyadh's efforts to nurture and arm the Mujahideen to fight the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan. Not only did this result in the spawning of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, but also,

under Islamabad's patronage, in the growth of Islamist fundamentalist networks and militia within Pakistan, which were subsequently used as pawns in its geo-political maneuvers and to push politics domestically far to the right. The Islamists served as a bulwark against worker opposition to privatization and other pro-market reforms, and they were mobilized to attack the rights of women and push through the draconian, anti-minority "blasphemy" laws.

The US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan beginning in October 2001, together with Pakistan's launching of war in the semi-autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the northwest border with Afghanistan, had an explosive impact on simmering sectarian tensions. Like the US and its allies in Afghanistan, the Pakistani state used carpet-bombing, colonial-style collective punishments, kidnappings and extra-judicial killings to suppress pro-Taliban elements, while US forces terrorized the people of FATA with its own Predator-drone war.

Islamist fundamentalists sought revenge by turning their weapons on minorities, especially Shiite Hazara and Christians. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan emerged in FATA as a product of these wars and continues to fight the Pakistan military to this day. It has mounted some of the bloodiest attacks on minorities.

Sectarian tensions in Balochistan intensified when its geo-strategic importance was significantly boosted by the launch of the US\$60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, centered around the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar. Balochi nationalist militants, oriented to gaining the support of US imperialism and the Indian bourgeoisie for their reactionary struggle to create a separate Balochi state, have also mounted violent attacks on Pashtun workers and other non-Balochi residents in Balochistan.

The slain Hazara workers shared a brutal working regime with tens of thousands of miners and equally oppressed workers across Balochistan. Mach alone is estimated to be home to 10,000 to 20,000 mine workers, including many children forced to work in the mines due to abject poverty. According to a February 2020 *Guardian* report, an adult worker makes about US\$6.75 a day while a child makes only US\$2.50. The mines are notorious for safety violations. One hundred to two hundred miners die in accidents across Pakistan every year.

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