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By Tania Siddiqi
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Pakistan: Brutal lynching of Priyantha Kumara

Sialkot, Pakistan — Last week a mob tortured and then lit Priyantha Kumara on fire. Kumara, a Sri Lankan, was a factory manager in Pakistan and was murdered outside of the factory in which he worked. In the aftermath of this horrific lynching, mob participants informed media outlets that they were compelled to murder Kumara because he had engaged in blasphemous behavior.



Priyantha Kumara. Credit: EU Today

Kumara's alleged "crime" was removing propaganda in support of Tehreek-e-Labbaik-Pakistan (TLP), an ultraright political party in Pakistan, from the factory's building.

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The brutal lynching of Kumara is not an isolated incident. Instead, it is a part of a much larger and systemic campaign that seeks to vilify and harm minority communities in Pakistan.

Initially, blasphemy laws were enacted during British colonial rule. After the Partition of India in 1947, the newly formed government of Pakistan chose to incorporate blasphemy laws into its constitution. In 1974, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government enacted a constitutional amendment that declared the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community as non-Muslim.

Between 1980 and 1986, the fascist ruler General Zia-ul-Haq "further strengthened the laws, adding five new clauses all specific to Islam and criminalizing offenses such as defiling the Holy Quran, insulting Islam's Prophet or using 'derogatory' language against certain religious figures." (Al Jazeera, Sept. 21, 2020)

Intensifying blasphemy laws has led to a rise in right-wing groups that aim to eliminate minority communities. TLP was formed in 2015, and one of its primary objectives is to ensure that blasphemy laws remain in place. This group has engaged in horrendously violent acts against people who they believe are engaging in blasphemous behavior.

In 2018 after spending eight years on death row, Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman, was acquitted of her blasphemy conviction. TLP members asserted that regardless of the supreme court's decision, their members would kill her. (The Guardian, Jan. 29, 2019) After her acquittal, Asia Bibi's lawyer suggested she leave the country immediately, because he was unsure whether she would be alive by the end of the night.

Although TLP was outlawed in 2020, Pakistan's current dominant political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) lifted the ban in November. (People's Dispatch, Nov. 7) In an article for "Dawn," Umair Javed, a professor at Lahore University of Management Sciences, stated that PTI is willing to give in to TLP's ideologies, because TLP "is tied to the same supposed heartland that provides the greatest numbers and legitimacy to the state." (Dawn, Nov. 1) If the PTI turns on TLP, it would be catastrophic for its political party.

PTI's commitment to serving TLP's interests is evident in their responses to the lynching of Priyantha Kumara. In his official statement, Prime Minister Imran Khan characterized the torture and murder of Kumara as a "vigilante attack." (Imran Khan, Twitter, Dec. 3) His message suggests that the mob's actions were lawful, but the law was enforced by people who did not have authority to do so. Lynching people for allegedly blasphemous conduct is legal, but only if it is carried out by the state.

Pervez Khattak, the Minister of Defense and a member of PTI, stated that mob participants simply acted out of religious passion and immaturity, which is connected to their youth. In other words, he claims that their actions are commonplace and understandable. (Mona Ahmad, Twitter, Dec. 5)

It is clear that fascism in Pakistan mirrors fascism in the United States. The same justifications used by white supremacists to encourage and explain away white-supremacist terror is the same reasoning used to rationalize the brutal murder of minorities in Pakistan. Workers around the world must unite — build a workers' world!

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