

Pakistan succumbs to another round of Ahmadiyya-bashing

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Community's exiled leader dismisses hatemongering as diversionary tactic, but consequences of demagoguery are real for country's most persecuted faith group



A young boy battles fatigue during Friday prayers with the exiled Caliph Mirza Masroor Ahmad, the spiritual leader of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, on the grounds of a future mosque in Raunheim, Germany, on 14 April 2017. Photo: Frank Rumpenhorst / DPA

When the son-in-law of the recently-disqualified Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif launched into a venomous diatribe against Pakistan's Ahmadiyya community – the country's most persecuted faith group – last week, dissent in the National Assembly was conspicuous by its absence.

In fact, lawmakers burst into thunderous applause as the retired Captain Muhammad Safdar Awan denounced Ahmadis as a threat to the existence of the country, its constitution, ideology and interests. And they thumped their desks to endorse Sadfar's demand for a ban on the recruitment of Ahmadis to the armed forces, Pakistan's Atomic Energy Commission, and other strategic state institutions, including the judiciary.

He did not stop there, exhorting Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) leaders to move a resolution to have the name of Quaid-i-Azam University's (QAU) physics center changed. The Professor Dr. Abdus Salam Center for Physics was named for the country's first Nobel prize-winner last year, under the [approval of Safdar's father-in-law](#). Abdus Salam happened to be an Ahmadi.

At the same time as Safdar was engaged in parliamentary hatemongering, meanwhile, a judge was busy awarding death sentences to [three members](#) of the Ahmadiyya community in Sheikhpura, Punjab province, for committing alleged blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad.

Four accused – Muhammad Ehsan, Ghulam Ahmed, Mubashir Ahmad and Khalil Ahmad – had in fact been booked under the Pakistan Penal Code’s [draconian blasphemy laws](#) in 2014. Khalil Ahmad was shot and killed – by a teenaged member of the public – while in police custody, on the day the arrests were made.

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Captain Safdar’s plea for a change of name at the physics center does not sit well with QUA students and alumni. One post on the QAU’s Facebook page characterized his demand as “obtuse” and “brainless.” Meanwhile, the Vice Chancellor of the university, Dr Javed Ashraf, said in a statement: “I feel every Pakistani should honor the top intellectuals for their achievements regardless of their caste, color, and creed.”

In terms of Safdar’s demands vis a vis military recruitment, Maj-Gen Asif Ghafoor – who is Director General of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) – said in a television interview that the army’s recruitment process already requires every Muslim officer to file a declaration to the effect that he or she is not an Ahmadi and, furthermore, that he or she believes in the “finality of prophethood.” Other than that, he stressed, the army [does not practice discrimination](#) on the basis of religion, ethnicity or sect.

Ahmadi Muslims [differ somewhat](#) from mainstream Muslims in their interpretation of Muhammad’s prophethood. They are seen as heretics by elements within Islam and have faced persecution throughout their history. In 1974, Pakistan’s parliament declared the Ahmadiyya a non-Muslim minority.

The head of the Ahmadiyya Community – reacting from London, where he lives in exile – said that politicians and religious scholars in Pakistan tend to speak out against his people every so often as a way of diverting attention from “impending difficulties and threats” and to gain popularity. In his Friday sermon, telecast live on Muslim Television Ahmadiyya (MTA), Mirza Masroor Ahmed said: “We do not require a certificate from any government or National Assembly to be a Muslim. We are Muslims and believe in all pillars of faith and consider the Holy Prophet (saw) to be Khatam an-Nabiyyin (last in line of the prophets).”

Safdar’s outburst comes hard on the heels of scathing [attacks by religiopolitical parties](#) over an alteration to the wording on electoral nomination papers in relation to “Khatm-e-Nabuwwat” (the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood). The government hurriedly passed an Election Amendment Bill earlier this month and the change of wording, from “oath” to “declaration,” made a fuss in the country. The law makes it mandatory for every Muslim member of parliament to declare on oath that they believe in Khatm-e-Nabuwwat.

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