

Terrorism wanes in Pakistan, but religious fervor threatens national unity

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — By voting last week to revoke an honor bestowed on the first Pakistani to receive a Nobel Prize in science, Pakistan’s National Assembly opted for political expediency in the face of a fast-rising Muslim group that denounces members of the late physicist’s faith as blasphemers.

Abdus Salam, who died in 1996, was a member of the Ahmadiyya minority sect, and no politician was eager to challenge the Muslim group, known as the Movement in Service to the Prophet. So lawmakers decided to take his name off a renowned physics center.

But on Sunday, when a young member of the movement shot and severely wounded Pakistan’s interior minister at a public gathering, there was immediate condemnation across the political spectrum and a flood of horrified comments on social media.

“This menace of hatred will destroy everything,” tweeted former foreign minister Khawaja Asif. “For God’s sake, we have to work together for our country.” In another tweet, Afrasiab Khattak, a retired senator and a human rights activist, warned, “Weaponizing religion is a path to horrible disaster.”

While Pakistani officials claim to have eradicated Islamist extremism and terrorism from their country after years of conflict, a new threat to public order and religious peace has risen in their place. The Movement in Service to the Prophet, which professes the benign agenda of defending Muhammad as the final prophet of Islam, also exhorts followers to violence in that cause and targets members of the



Ahmadiyya minority sect, called Ahmadis, as dangerous heretics.

Ahmadis consider themselves Muslims but have been officially declared non-Muslim by the Pakistani government because they revere a 19th-century prophet as well as the 7th-century Muhammad. The “finality” of Muhammad is a fundamental tenet of Islam, and the Movement in Service to the Prophet has made a national crusade out of defending it.

Neither the legislative resolution against Abdus Salam nor the assassination attempt on Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal was openly supported by officials of the movement. But analysts here said there was no doubt that the group’s emotional fervor, widespread appeal to mainstream Sunni Muslims, demonization of Ahmadis and relentless attacks on political opponents had played a role in both.

And while insulting a long-dead scientist did no actual harm, the close-range attack on Iqbal, who was hospitalized with a gunshot wound in the shoulder, was a terrifying response to his official role in trying to quell a [weeks-long sit-in in November](#) by the movement. The 23-year-old attacker said the idea to kill the minister came to him in a dream.

The protest leaders charged that an election law had been stealthily changed to give more political rights to Ahmadis; officials denied this and apologized. But the [protests persisted](#) until police were sent to quell them and failed. Later, the army was called in to negotiate and agreed to many of the group’s demands.

“When State surrenders before bunch of extremists and political parties try to exploit” religious causes, “then attacks like #AhsanIqbal happen,” newspaper columnist Mubashir Zaidi said in a tweet Monday. “Now the monster is out.”

The attempt on Iqbal’s life also brought a chilling reminder of the 2011 [death of Salman Taseer](#), who was governor of Punjab province. He was killed by his own bodyguard for criticizing the country’s harsh blasphemy laws. The guard was hanged in 2015, but many Muslims viewed him as a martyr to Islam, and the Movement in Service to the Prophet was created around his example.

Pakistan’s uncertain leadership situation has added fuel to the combustible mix of religion and politics as the Muslim-majority nation heads toward national elections later this year. The most bizarre aspect concerns the contradictory roles played by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and his son-in-law, Safdar Awan. Sharif was ousted by the Supreme Court last year after facing corruption charges.

It was Sharif, then a popular premier, who decided 16 months ago [to honor Abdus Salam](#) by naming a physics center at the prestigious Quaid-i-Azam University after him. Human rights groups hailed the gesture as a hopeful turning point in the history of discrimination and violent attacks against Ahmadis in Pakistan.

“The government should be congratulated for correcting a historic injustice,” Pervez Hoodbhoy, a physics professor and rights activist, said at the time. Now, he added, perhaps Pakistan is “ready to move ahead in science, irrespective of faith. It will help soften Pakistan’s image” as “intolerant and terrorist.”

But one of the most outspoken critics of the honor was Awan, the husband of Sharif’s daughter Maryam. Last year, Awan gave a vituperative speech against Ahmadis in Parliament, and he sponsored the



resolution to remove Abdus Salam's name from the building and give the honor instead to 12-century Byzantine astronomer Abu al-Fath Abd al-Rahman al-Khazini.

Some Pakistani commentators said Awan had come under political pressure from the Movement in Service to the Prophet. Others suggested that he was playing a good cop/bad cop role to appease the group and help the sagging fortunes of the Sharif family's political party, the Pakistan Muslim League-N, which will face stiff competition in the upcoming polls.

But the shooting of Iqbal, a well-liked and longtime aide to Sharif and the Muslim League, seemed to eclipse party politics and bring the potential dangers of fomenting religious hatred into sharp national focus. While the Movement in Service to the Prophet has galvanized fervent support from Muslims across the country, the attack has also aroused popular concern that the group may have gone too far.

Among Ahmadis, already accustomed to being ostracized and misunderstood, there is a growing sense that their place in Pakistani society is even more perilous — and that the increasing influence of the Movement in Service to the Prophet is making antagonism to Ahmadis an unprecedented litmus test for millions of mainstream Muslims.

“The fight against Ahmadis has become a struggle for the soul of the country,” Ahmad Usman, a photographer and journalist based in Pakistan, wrote in the online Naya Daur Media. “The good Pakistani and the good Muslim [are] increasingly defined by their hatred of Ahmadis.”

Abdus Salam and others like him “are exactly the kind of heroes Pakistan needs,” Usman added. But when public life is infected by the “virus of hatred, they are not the heroes the country deserves.”

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