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Feminists as Cultural 'Assassimators' of Pakistan

By Afiya Shehribano Zia¹

Abstract

Pakistan's annual Aurat March (Women's March) signifies a milestone in the culture of feminist protest, but a tense impasse follows a series of encounters between sexual and religious politics, and this has serious implications for rights-based activism in the Islamic Republic.

Keywords: Piety politics, sexualities, Pakistan, Aurat March, blasphemy

Introduction

The Aurat March movement in Pakistan has been inspired by the global #MeToo movements and is the spontaneous graduation of online call-outs against sexual harassment to full scale street-level protests. Since its debut in several cities across the country in 2018, it has become a cultural signifier for its supporters and critics alike (Saigol and Chaudhry 2020, A.S. Zia 2020a). The provocative slogans and performative activism of these events have attracted misogynist and conservative backlash that have escalated with each successive year. Four years on, the tail-winds of pent up misogynies have now unleashed their full fury on this feminist festival, with a forecast of potentially dangerous consequences. These reveal the sinister palate of Pakistani patriarchy that comprises the collusion of men, military and *mulla* (clerics) politics in the Islamic Republic.

In the days following the 2021 Aurat March events, legal petitions were filed against the organisers in different cities. Some charges were for lesser offenses, like the nationalistic claims that the organisers are 'cultural assassimators,'² but far more malicious attempts included the

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² This petition was filed by the Shuhuda Foundation of the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) against the Islamabad authorities for permitting the Aurat March event to be held in 2021. It argues that the "gangster" organisers and alleged funders are a "third force or class... which Lord Macaulay had planned to introduce [and] has grown up [sic] which is Pakistani in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect. This class is trying to swamp the culture and values of Islam and hence the ideology of Pakistan under the auspices and policy and instructions of West. They have been advised by their imperialist masters that religion i.e. Islam is anti-civilization as in their opinion Westernization or modernization means civilization. Thus under the given policy and agenda they are trying to change the culture of Pakistan by celebrating walks and talks like VALENTINE DAY and AURAT MARCH etc. The religion is being humiliated and ridiculed indirectly by maneuvering campaign against Mullaism, freedom of women's rights."

The petition reasons that the Aurat March threatens the "Muslims of Pakistan [who have] been under the danger of two intellectual and cultural assassimators [sic]. West and Hindus both played a vital role to imbibe the culture, ideas and faith of the generation of Muslims of the subcontinent..."

The judge of the Islamabad High Court did not dismiss the petition but recused himself from hearing it on the grounds that his views on the March were widely known and a wider bench was formed by the next judge.

framing of false charges of blasphemy against some members, despite efforts to peremptorily quash the complaints (Shah 2021). The unfolding of these reactionary hostilities exposed the limits of resistance politics which denies or avoids the core contradictions of the Pakistan state's arterial patriarchies which are, religious politics and military nationalism. The Aurat March organisers' lack of conceptual or political preparation has landed them in a predictable religio-patriarchal trap that could have been avoided, if they had cultivated ideological and strategic clarity in equal measure to their creative performative politics.

Unplanned sex

In 2018, a new wave of younger feminists took their rage against patriarchy, male violence, moral policing of women's bodies, and suppression of sexual choices for women and marginalised genders to the streets of Pakistan. Since then, International Women's Day on March 8th has been reclaimed from what had become a mundane, NGO-led, celebratory, cake-cutting event of former years. There was nothing subtle about the core focus on sexuality in these Aurat March events in the main cities which even included some fringe demands for LGBTQ rights that did not exist on the map of resistance politics prior to these events (*The News* 2019, Khatri 2020). The provocative slogans and performative activism of these marches predictably drew misogynist reaction and conservative backlash in mainstream media, and death threats over unregulated social media platforms (Mohyidin 2019). The sources of patriarchal vitriol included, the disapproving garden variety conservatives, several women's pietist collectives (Minhaj ul Quran 2019, Ali 2020) and even, some embedded foreign 'influencers' sponsored by the state to promote Pakistaniat (Shackle 2020).

Despite these warning signs, the Aurat March organisers showed admirable determination to continue their events the following year but ignored (and sometimes, rubbished) the cautions cited by other feminist collectives on the need to develop a clear ideological position and strategy for dealing with state and religious political opposition. Some younger members were especially defensive about the prognosis that it was only a matter of time before the 'docile agency' (Mahmood 2005) of pietist Muslim women would spill into a politics that would directly challenge feminist activism and agendas (A.S. Zia 2018). This is precisely what happened immediately after the first year's events. Jolted by the feminist audacity to sex the streets and ignite *fitna* (socio-sexual chaos), in 2019, the right-wing and pietist organisations held oppositional marches that were purposefully titled, the 'Haya March' (Modesty March). These pious women are organised, dedicated, and attract many women supporters who would not qualify as 'extremist' or even Islamist. Their commitment defies the argument that it is only the far-right who are chauvinistic, or that it is 'toxic masculinity' that drives misogyny. Sexual freedoms are unanimously perceived as western and in contradiction to Islamic morality and Muslim gender norms.

Between theory and practice

Historically, direct clashes between the religious and the rights-based women's events have been rare, since ideological boundaries have always been mutually respected. For decades, women of the right-wing political parties have observed International Women's Day and participated in United Nations conferences (A.S. Zia 2013). Their events are always clearly thematically framed around the political and social agenda of the religious party or movement – usually on 'the family' and women's roles as dutiful mothers, wives and daughters within the private realm, and in service of Islam.

The rise of a new movement of pietist women has been the subject of a generation of Pakistani postsecular scholars writing in the 'War on Terror' years. They have been influenced by the post 9/11, postsecular turn in the humanities in western academia that is critical of 'liberal-secularism' and has flirted with Islamism as a reassertion of some authentic tradition (see Mufti 2013, Abbas 2014, A.S. Zia 2018). Some of these scholars were convinced by Saba Mahmood's (2005) influential tract that argues for the 'docile agency' of women of mosque movements as an alternative to emancipatory liberal desires, and applied it to movements in Pakistan, such as, the Al-Huda (Iqtidar 2011, Mushtaq 2010, Shaikh 2013). Interestingly, it is not just young Pakistani women but even many men who are very defensive and claim that they get 'triggered' by any critique or disagreement of the works of 'giant scholars' who work on Muslim subjectivities (exclusively in western academia) and who have been critical of the 'hegemony of secularism'. Both sets of scholars are either silent about or extend their criticism to secular resistance movements in Muslim contexts, including feminist ones.³

This academic turn that made a case for a recognition and valuing of the virtuous subjectivities of pietist subjects was even applied to the women disciples of the Jamia Hafsa – the women's madrasa associated with the controversial Lal Masjid in Islamabad and which has ties to jihadist causes and ideologically sympathises with the Taliban, ISIS, and murderers who kill to avenge perceived blasphemy (Babar 2017, A.S Zia 2020). The Shuhuda Foundation of the Lal Masjid (that was subject of a state siege in 2007 for its suspected terrorist links) had attempted to file a case for the ban of the Aurat March (see note i).

Masooda Bano (2012) has urged that the women of Jamia Hafsa associated with the Lal Masjid derived empowerment in their roles as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters as they spread their Islamic learnings, and that this madrasa education and learned piety empowers the girls to deal with material scarcity and cope with peer pressure against observing Valentine's Day and fashion trends. Such sanitised analysis allows such scholars to advocate support for Islamic female leadership as a viable alternative to 'Western feminism.' Several young women who support or participate in the Aurat March and identify as 'radical left feminists' in a bid to distinguish themselves from 'liberal' feminists, have similarly pleaded for understanding the complex relationship between pietist women's bodily practices and interior meanings in order to devise better feminist strategies. In view of the pietist women's affront and opposition to the Aurat March, it is puzzling why this advice to empathise, engage, and be sensitive to pious women's virtuosity was not followed by the younger activists who had pleaded the case of pietist agency -- before or even after, taking to the streets to demand sexual liberties?

The insistence for women's sexual freedoms directly offends the very core of pious women's subjectivities and is the antithetical to the central tenets of modesty and virtuosity

³ See Saba Mahmood's (2008) disdain for "the many heroes of the secular left [and] self-identified liberal Muslim reformers [who] share secular assumptions about enlightened religiosity with the U.S. State Department...." She goes on to explain that "My object of analysis, however, is not their motives and intentions but the discursive assumptions (about knowledge, history, language) that underpin their methods and programs of reform. Do we have to subscribe to a full-fledged theory of shared interests and motives to be able to see the common set of discursive presuppositions that cut across political projects? Might people be politically opposed and still share a set of epistemological and conceptual truths? Could one analyze this convergence critically without being accused of "belittling" the heroes of our stories?" ("Secular Imperatives," *Public Culture* 20:3, pg. 463).

This argument could be equally applicable to those of Pakistan's self-acclaimed left progressives who defended the 'docile agency' of women of the pietist movements in Pakistan.

prescribed for Muslim womanhood. After the second year's March, the backlash was notably vicious across the country. Hussain (2019) observes the irony; "Aurat March slogans were met with howls of outrage, anger, accusations of vulgarity, immodesty and much more and the *'bahaya'* [immodest] slogans of the Minhaj al Quran women's counter-march that calls the Aurat March women *'gali ki kutiya'* [bitches on the streets] accepted as civilised expression."

Some of the provocative posters and slogans stated that, "Our rights are not up for grabs and neither are we," "Girls just wanna have fundamental human rights," "Transwomen are women; shut up!," "Tu kare tou Stud, Mai Karun tou slut" ("If you do it, you're a stud, but if I do it, I'm a slut"), "Safe-street program for women," "Stop being menstrual -phobic", "Consent ki Tasbeeh Rozana Parhen" ("Respect the Rosary of Consent") and "Paratha rolls, not gender roles." The core slogan and poster of "Mera Jisam Meri Marzi," ("My Body My Choice") however, provoked the most reaction and was received as most (sexually) subversive along with, the ones that mocked the domestic roles of good women such as, "Apna khana khud garam karo! ("Heat your food yourself"), "Mujhe kia maaloom tumhara mauza kahaan hai!" ("How should I know where your socks are?"). The organisers staged an Urdu version of the Chilean protest song, "A Rapist in Your Path," that assails rape culture and victim-shaming and pride colours speckled some city marches. The optics and messaging clearly signaled a generational turn and the routine slogans and demands about equality in law, society and health were overshadowed by the bold and colourful shock value of these posters. Moreover, since conservative anxieties are fixated on women, sex and religion, their homing devices found those posters offensive which demanded that men stop sexting women pictures of their genitalia (sexual harassment); to cook their own food and be responsible for domestic work (breaking gender stereotypes); to respect consent to sex even in marriage. This reaction exposed the double standards where men's conduct is not judged as vulgar or inappropriate but if women behave in similar ways, they are considered indecent and sexual deviants. Several feminists demystified the March demands in subsequent writings and events (Zia 2019) but it was clear from the start that the posters and slogans were going to be the litmus test in the tussle for pious propriety over feminist protest politics.

Conservatives, Islamists and pietist organisations guard the cause of female sexual purity closely, and moral policing is essential in maintaining an Islamic sexual and gendered order. Ironically, the Aurat March and those members who profess to be 'radical feminists' have deeply offended the pious sensibilities of believing women more than any secular feminist movement ever has.

Neither were the devout the only offended community. Even the political parties (who the Aurat March organisers decided to remain aloof from), were horrified by this sex talk on the streets. While the liberal-leaning Pakistan People's Party has consistently extended the Aurat Marchers its political support in the wake of abusive online threats, the provincial legislative Assembly of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa passed a resolution demanding an inquiry into the "foreign hands" behind the Aurat March as a plot to undermine Pakistan's social norms (Hayat and Akbar 2019). Members of Prime Minister, Imran Khan's government (2018-2022) accused the March of promoting 'western' values and advised members to modulate their language so as not to offend Muslim sensibilities. Even many older feminists were not convinced of the value of such demands in an ideological vacuum (Dawn 2019).

Generational grievances

Those of us who recruited feminist consciousness in the 1990s, witnessed an older generation of activists of the Women's Action Forum getting tear-gassed and beaten on the streets

for protesting against a military dictatorship and discriminatory Islamic laws, and for demanding secular state laws and policies. State-sponsored backlash and threats – either of death or social-death - is not new to human rights defenders. This is how feminism has been shaped in Pakistan and matured to become a fairly influential political force today. For decades, these activists were framed as anti-Islamic, western or RAW agents, and fired or gate-kept from universities, and lived under death-threats and in some cases, witnessed sister-activists get punished or killed for their resistance to patriarchal powers. But they schooled us on the importance of a stable ideological vision that was committed to changing state institutions and policies and developing strategic engagement with political parties and laws.

There has been no work or dialogue on sexual politics in Pakistan, so it was not surprising that several from the older-generation of liberal progressives were uncomfortable over the impropriety of the sexually explicit language used in the Aurat Marches. For too long, they have fought against the discriminatory zina (adultery) laws and honor crimes under the strategic legal pretense that the victim is always and permanently innocent or framed, as if they never actually violate the Islamic laws prohibiting adultery and fornication (Khan 2006, Jahangir and Jilani 1990). Even when they acknowledged that some women willingly transgress sexual norms, they did not concede the strategic response for the larger demand for sexual freedoms. The privatisation of sexual autonomy has now become an internalised logic within women's rights activism.

For this older generation, and in some lesser metropolitan cities, sexual rights and sex positivity are considered a more limited expression of feminism, and they prioritise economic, social and democratic crises as ideological frames. But they did support the Aurat March and urged the organisers to connect protest marches on sexual freedoms and violence with women's bodily, health, and labour rights. Many remain uncomfortable with public discussions around sexual pleasures, desire, and the politics of sexually explicit language, which they consider sensationalist, even violent and a patriarchal tool.

The 'post'-alities that influence the politics of a younger generation of activists, and the alternative spaces of social media as a political forum have enabled wider spread, creativity and impressive mobilisation tactics, but this has also made collectivism more diffused. This is especially challenging since there are more ideological differences and more 'male allies' directly involved in new waves of women's movements, while the goals are more blurred and buried under disagreements over representation on panels, platforms and performances. Most of all, there is a millennial distrust and distancing from the state that rides on the back of a post-9/11 ambiguity which is convinced that secular political confrontation to Islamism is always 'western'. Many such scholar-activists are convinced that it is only their brand of some unspecified hybrid and fluid formula that can overcome false discursive binaries and rescue Islam simultaneously from Islamophobia and Islamic extremism, all the while observing liberal and secular lifestyles and sexual freedoms themselves. Apparently, the opponents to the Aurat March didn't get this memo.

Internal differences are also quite obvious in the collectives who organise and lead the Aurat Marches in different cities. There is no consensus on the place of religion and how to strategically relate to the state, including with political parties and the legal-judicial system. The Aurat March organising committees in Hyderabad and across Sindh, adhere very clearly to the vision of a secular Marxist feminism and have dealt with religious backlash deftly, defiantly and sometimes, strategically non-confrontationally.

The founder members of the left-associated Women's Democratic Front of Islamabad/Pindi are more ideologically clear but younger members of the Punjab collectives who have studied from western universities tend to be far more ambiguous about the place of women's

pietist subjectivities and even over Islamic feminism, while others remain silent on these issues. They are caught in a double bind now -to deflect the motives of pious women's politics to 'toxic masculinity' is unhelpful – it undermines the pious women's voluntary and un-coerced 'docile agency' theory that they were insisting on for the past decade.

A 'middling' generation attempted to bridge this political distance by encouraging the older feminists to recognise the importance of challenging the sexual order on the one hand, and to encourage the Aurat March organisers to connect their performative activism with legal cases and state policies. Most of all, they urged the need to develop an ideological strategic framework for the rights that Aurat Marchers were demanding. This was critical, since the spirit of the Aurat March clearly transgressed and contradicted the Islamic gendered and sexual orders that define an Islamic Republic. Initially, the younger feminists did not take the critique or warnings well. Several reacted to these as rebuffs and turned to social media to express their resentment against such cautioning with support from the growing phenomenon of online 'male allies'. Four years on, the organisers of the Marches found themselves facing very serious charges, which have affected internal dynamics, as well as having implications regarding strategic methods for the wider women's movement.

Piety turns political

In order to reclaim the public from the 'vulgar' invitation represented in the Aurat March's leading slogan, "Mera Jisam Meri Marzi" (My Body, My Choice), and to rescue Muslim women's collective modesties from such anti-Islamic causes, several pietist organisations led oppositional marches in 2019 under their rebuttal slogan, "Mera jisam Allah ki Marzi" (My Body, Allah's Choice). In 2020, conservative critics of the March actively filed legal cases in an attempt to thwart the events. The Aurat March organisers were compelled to respond to these measures and while they managed to win relief, these judgements were no clear victories. In his order, Chief Justice of the Lahore High Court, Mamoon Rashid Sheikh conceded that "under the law and Constitution of the country, the Aurat March cannot be stopped" but cautioned that the marchers should "refrain from hate speech and immorality" (Bilal 2020). Meanwhile, the Chief Justice of the Islamabad High Court, considered the most liberal of judges, dismissed a petition seeking a ban on the March with the reprimand that the petitioners should introspect on the range of abuses that women suffered in the country but he too, observed that the participants should ensure that 'their conduct was consistent with the norms of decency' (The Express Tribune 2020a). The state may have offered a conciliatory legal verdict, but the moral censure defined the expectant limits of freedoms and propriety related to women's rights.

In 2020, pietist movements were as determined as the Aurat March collectives to advocate their respective causes on the streets. The women of the Jamia Hafsa expressed their resistance by defacing a mural in Islamabad that had been prepared by the Aurat March organisers (Ali 2020). These conscientious objectors led their counter-rally to the Aurat March, which included men and pious veiled women carrying banners, appealing that 'only Islam gives rights to women'. There was some pelting of stones, shoes and sticks at the Aurat Marchers, but these were controlled by law enforcement, averting conflict temporarily.

By 2021, the country's growing political and economic discontent was worsening under pressure of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The Aurat March was determined to not lose momentum even though, there were pending issues on the matter of gaining No Objection Certificates (NOC) from the city authorities. This opened the debate over the viability of feminist protest that could be denied under excuses of impropriety – which is what happened to the Aurat

March event of Islamabad in 2021. Without a NOC, the state easily shrugs responsibility for such events. Brewing also were internal disagreements over symbolism, representation of queer symbols and language, and who could speak for the events. It was clear that there were political, ideological and strategic differences that had developed amongst the Aurat March collectives across the different cities and these were all going to have repercussions.

The chilling effect

Under the Imran Khan 'Riyasat e Medina'⁴ government, a culture of abusive language overpowered the political discourse of Pakistan. In the past, threats to rape and murder women activists, journalists, and even parliamentarians were not uncommon but under Khan's government, these carried impunity because no leader or authority censured or even publicly disapproved of such behaviour (Gul 2020). On the contrary, after the controversies following the 2020 March, PM Khan had chimed in his opinion of the need to 'weed out foreign cultural influences such as those observed in the Aurat March' (Dawn 2020a). The climate of conservatism and censorship was a throwback to the oppressive era of General Zia ul Haq's 'Islamic' dictatorship (1977-1988). Universities issued directives for women to observe the Arabic dress code of the abaya for women students (Ali 2021), and the government sponsored and conferred national awards to the celebrity-singer and loyal Imran Khan supporter, Ali Zafar, even as he was in litigation in a high-profile and contentious case of sexual harassment (Dawn 2020d).

The chilling effects of all these developments and the paternalistic criticism that the Aurat March did not prioritise the 'real' issues of Pakistani women, took its toll on the organisers and supporters. In their 2021 Manifesto, the thematic stress on women's health clearly steers away from any mention of sexual autonomies or freedoms, and the banners of "Mera Jisam Meri Marzi" were not prominently featured at the March. Due to the persistent interrogation from the media about 'offensive' slogans and posters, some organisers offered mitigating interpretations or distanced themselves by reasoning that they cannot control what participants express at the events. They also made efforts to filter participation and media coverage of the event while others denied any allegations of promoting homosexuality.⁵ Despite all these efforts, the critics and opponents were intent on chastising the underlying ethos and 'original sin' of the March, regardless of a non-controversial manifesto of 2021 (Ahmed 2021). Journalists descended at the events to grill the marchers on how they squared their demands with their religious beliefs as Muslim women. A bulk of this coverage betrays sexist anxieties on the part of the reporters and exaggeration of any

⁴ A reference to the social welfare state of Medina in the 7th century.

⁵ Many talk shows and social media programmes fueled the backlash to the Aurat March too, with men and women TV anchors despairing equally about non-binary gender representation at the events. In one programme on Bol TV, anchor Fiza Akbar objected to the "same-sex, gay wala concept" promoted at the Aurat March events and reasons that, gay and lesbian discussion is unacceptable in the Islamic Republic. On the panel was a more experienced feminist activist who attempted to defend this by explaining that the cause was not about homosexuality but 'queer' people who are 'not the same as gays'. The cleric on the panel then complained that he was not being given the opportunity to speak, to which the woman anchor joked that when women are on a panel there is bound to be more noise. Other than the usual moralistic objections to bay-hayae (immodesty), the cleric raised an important argument on the subtext of the March slogan, 'My body, My choice'; he argued that if it requires repeated clarification then it's not simply an innocuous or unambiguous reference to safety from violence, as its defenders now attempt to dilute its inference to sexual freedoms. He questioned other contentious posters, including one which claimed pride for being 'Awara' (drifter) and a 'loafer' and admonished the absurdity of one poster that claimed women's right to sit with their legs apart. Bol News, 8th March. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNNJupVVc4E>.

contradictions or confusion expressed by participants,⁶ but some of the organisers too, were clearly out of their depth or back-pedaling on the more radical tone of the original March (The Express Tribune 2020a).

Confrontation between religious and secular politics are inevitable. It has always been naïve and academic of those who pretend there should not be polarisation or binaries in strategic confrontations. This is delusional. How do you counter the religious right without a plan?

A red flag or herring?

As in previous years, obscenities trended in the aftermath of the 2021 March and the usual distorted and photo-shopped images were circulated on social media. Artwork and slogans were manipulated into pornographic renderings and even blasphemous content. Soon after the events, threats of charges of blasphemy against the organisers of Aurat March began circulating – an offense that carries the death penalty and has incited routine vigilante attacks and murders in the past, including that of the late Governor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, and several scholars and students (HRW 2019).

In Islamabad, the Women's Democratic Front that led the Aurat March was accused of promoting the agenda of the 'anti-Islamic' French state because they have a tricoloured (differently so) flag. A doctored audio that faked a blasphemous voice-over of the original slogans raised by the organisers at the Karachi event was broadcast by some mainstream media channels without verification (Farmer 2021). In Lahore, organisers had to issue a clarification about a multimedia blanket of shame that carried the testimony of sexual abuse of a minor by a religious teacher and which was deliberately misinterpreted to allege that this was mocking the tradition of divine prophetic personalities (Samaa online 2021). Even the militant Tehreeq e Taliban Pakistan - responsible for the murders of hundreds of thousands of citizens - issued its disapproval of the March (The Express Tribune 2021b).

Such deceptive propaganda required pre-determined effort and political motivation. Underlying the anti-March campaign is an interesting twist of logic – the actual Aurat March messages were not offensive enough, it seems, so the pious nationalists decided to create excessive content by doctoring footage, instigating lies and spreading misinformation to smear the event but in the process were actually producing blasphemy themselves. The irony in all of this punitive pietist politics is that this fetishisation of female sexuality, production of erotica, prevalence of male obscenities, and distortions that lead to blasphemy accusation, were the exact premise that feminist “cultural assassins” were protesting. The distorters simply indicted themselves and proved that what the Aurat March women are opposing is a legitimate cause.

Despite efforts to quash the First Information Reports in the aftermath of the Aurat March 2021, an orchestrated campaign of disinformation and pressure has succeeded in at least, two

⁶ There is less print content of such sensationalism but a youtube search reveal countless hours of coverage that are laden with sexual innuendo, lewd references and attempts to belittle March participants. For e.g., “Aurat March 2021 Mein Be Hayai Ka Bazar Garam, Gardan Par Kiss Ke Nishan - Hassaan Hashmi”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cq1YHBGgvAg>.

petitions of blasphemy registered in the High Courts of Peshawar and Sindh. These charges identify the names of some organisers and is a trend that for vigilantes, translates into targets on the backs of the accused.

Sex and secularism: the banes of blasphemy

The Aurat March participants were understandably nervous – some deleted their social media accounts and erased their timelines. Others reportedly considered leaving the country. The attack was blatantly malafide but revealed what activists have been saying for years – that the blasphemy laws are not only weaponised for settling personal or political vendettas through false allegations, but they are tools for those faithful who claim genuine religious injury and offense. Any perceived secular demand can qualify as blasphemy.

Postsecularists insist that blasphemy accusations are always cynical and politically motivated – as if, no one in Pakistan could ever ‘commit blasphemy’ or for that matter, be genuinely offended by the commission of such an offense (but they would consider claims of moral injury by Muslims in western contexts as credible). One view even argues that blasphemy accusations are exercised to enable powerful Muslim mobs to extend the right to protection to dependent minorities. This is contrary to feminist analyses that argue that the intent of those deploying the blasphemy laws is to protect Islam from the offense of minority beliefs (including, the declared-heretic, Ahmediya sect). Yet another speculation is that blasphemy allegations are primarily levelled at minorities and progressives even though, the majority of cases involve other Muslims who are often from the same class or community (NCHR 2018).

For all their academic acrobatics, a younger generation of activists does not advocate for the repeal of the blasphemy laws as a previous generation did within a secular dispensation. At this point, everyone has simply reconciled with the need to diffuse the misuse of the law by amending the procedures to file cases, rather than confronting the rage of those who weaponise it with impunity. Meanwhile, after the 2021 March, confusion and lack of clarity preoccupied the Aurat March organisers, as different feminist collectives rallied on how to respond to the legal charges and the societal backlash.

Banality of binaries

The three obvious antidotes to the patriarchal trinity of military-mullah-men are quite obvious: complete civilian supremacy, institutional and societal secular options, and sexual autonomies for all genders equally. Curative treatment of just one symptom simply activates the brotherly cells into rescue mode. At the outset, the Aurat March collectives were neither invested in the politics of ‘changing the state’, nor did they strategise how to counter religious backlash, despite a history of three decades of feminist struggle built on the bedrock of these principles. The Aurat March members centralised their advocacy for sexual freedoms around male behaviour and patriarchal practices but without addressing the core contradictions of Islamic laws that prohibit these, or by directing their demands for equal legal rights on matters of sexuality. For these reasons, the Aurat March soon found itself stranded ideologically and politically.

Their demands have expanded and been more politicised over the years, but the manifesto still does not specify an ideological framing for its demands – are these to be within Islamic reasonings and limits, or aligned with secular, universal human rights? Are they addressing the state directly, or lobbying the political parties to fulfil the demands? What makes them radical or even different from other more experienced pressure groups? Organisationally, the Aurat March

members of each city follow their own direction but organically, it is neither a political movement, nor a purely celebratory event or performative protest (Saigol and Chaudhry 2020).

The Aurat March may host members from the sexually marginalised communities but the platform has lost its radical edge and is unlikely to be able to foreground the theme of sexual autonomies meaningfully in the future. In 2022, in view of the backlash and falsified blasphemy allegations from the previous year, the organisers of the Aurat Azadi March in Islamabad decided to hold a jalsa (public meeting) in a park instead of a street protest or March. Several older activists in Islamabad felt this amounted to retreat and would be taken as a sign of concession and right-wing vindication, so they hurriedly organised a token street protest. Despite the pledge to the slogan of 'Mera Jisam Meri Marzi' and other provocative and satirical agitprops, the original claim of Aurat March about undisciplined bodies, defiant language and free expression has been successively invalidated over the years, as these have become schooled and policed, evident in the diluted slogans, posters and pragmatic manifesto demands. The external pressures are a constant on every rights-based movement in Pakistan but snarky defensiveness on social media, petulant cancelling of unfavourable analysis, internal differences, and no collective theoretical framing or plan on how to confront religious patriarchy or farms of nationalist trolls, puts this movement at risk of ending up as a collective of cultural mitigators, rather than some radical 'assassimators'.

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