

Canadian Pakistanis on Jews, Gays and Pesh Imams

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Recently, when sitting with friends and other Pakistanis at a gathering in Montreal, Canada a heated debate started over Jewish conspiracies against Islam and Pakistan. The Pakistanis were quite interested in talking politics, particularly in the context of USA, Afghanistan, and the past history of Islamic rulers, who have been blessed with unwritten hagiographies glorifying their remarkable rule.

Sitting in a well furnished drawing room, framed with calligraphy and numerous photos of holy places in Saudi Arabia, I learnt from loud and animated voices that Jews do not want Pakistan to prosper, as it is the only country created in the name of Islam. I put forward my questions in return to their numerous conspiracy theories, and to every question replies bounced back in anger. The conspiracies ran from Jews having infiltrated the political party of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and thus preventing actions against the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), a political party dominant in Karachi, to the MQM itself being run by Jews, to Nawaz Sharif increasing inflation on the dictates of the powerful international Jewry. Even the drone attacks striking Pakistan apparently stem from bad Jewish intentions.

After listening to a barrage of conspiracies and diatribe against Jews, we went for dinner. They took me to Schwartz's, where the word 'Kosher' was displayed, and ordered beefburgers. Not knowing the meaning of 'kosher', I asked if the burger was 'halal', which was affirmed in chorus. I then asked whether the shop belonged to a Muslim, to which they replied 'no, it is a famous Jewish food chain, and kosher means halal'.

This was very surprising to me, considering that for at least three hours I had heard about the numerous conspiracies of Jews against the Muslims of the world. In an irritated tone, I said that this selling of halal food also sounded like a Jewish conspiracy. Much laughter echoed in the burger shop, and one person advised, "Oh Baseer, do not look for conspiracies in everything. Leave this bad habit."

Prior to my visit, I had the impression that since a large number of Pakistanis had migrated to different parts of Canada, I would be able to listen to views different from what the Pakistani media and political parties generally force upon the local population. However, I found that the majority of Pakistanis in Canada were even more conservative than those living in Pakistan.

Through the numerous discussions I had, I learnt that the three most important concerns for most Pakistanis in Canada and the USA are: 1) Jews (every bad thing in Pakistan has a Jew behind it) 2) Ahmadis, and 3) the rights of gays and lesbians.

There are a good—and growing—number of mosques in North America. Many fundamentalist Muslim leaders have thus found a good place to settle and feel at home, encouraging Pakistani expatriates to contribute to the cause of jihad and for the implementation of shariah in the country. One Pesh Imam (a person leading prayers at a mosque) was invited to conduct a wedding ceremony in accordance with Islamic ways. He did, however he took a long time to deliver his speech, which I don't think is part of any Islamic tradition. The speech was full of dictates on how a bride is to follow her husband's instructions and how the husband has every right in this regard.

The Pesh Imam went on to state that any type of relationship between the bride and groom prior to marriage is un-Islamic (haram). His clear message was that if they had a love affair and met publicly, it was all haram. Titters and hushed laughter rippled back from the audience, as everyone was aware of the couple's long love affair. The Pesh Imam was a good friend of the bride's father.

In another meeting with friends and some Pakistanis in Toronto, jihad became the subject of discussion. The discussion began from the basis of jihad in the madressas (Muslim seminaries), their curriculum, to the hate messages against opposite sects of Islam, to the production of suicide attackers, and, of course, the sexual abuse of children in these seminaries. The discussants were much more interested in talking about the sexual abuse of budding Muslim fundamentalists or the homosexual stories of Muslim/mosque leaders. Some shared their experiences of youth where they were eye witness to young, poverty-ridden students being groped and molested by their madressa teachers.

Everybody was very excited to exchange such stories and jokes. Suddenly, a pious Muslim said that in his absence, a gay person came and delivered a lecture about Islam in his mosque. He was very angry when he found out, and being a management committee member of the mosque, he ordered the cleaning of the mosque. Silence gripped our joyful discussion. Everyone felt he did something wrong, and tried hard to change the topic, as the mood had soured.

I broke the silence by asking why—since the Pesh Imam was present at that time—they had not stopped the gay person. There was no clear answer, save that it was not wanted that the mosque become a battleground. My next question was very irritating to the group, about the purity of Pesh Imams, as they are educated from Madressas, where, as already discussed, homosexuality is common.

Again, I was made a target, with everyone explaining the positions of their own mosques and their Pesh Imams, but not refuting my allegation that Pesh Imams were from madressas, and not quite refuting how these Pesh Imams would have been spared such acts of molestation and sexual abuse when they were recruited at a young age. One friend, in a very angry voice, questioned that, 'you mean we are offering prayers behind gay people and that gays are leading our five prayers everyday?'

I simply replied that according to their stories and evidence, it is apparent that madressas are producing most Pesh Imams and that there is an endemic practice of child sexual abuse in the madressa, and that, therefore, there must be some truth behind the assertion that in a sizeable number of mosques Pesh Imams were abused as children and / or gay themselves. It also stood to reason to question whether our prayers were justified if we were following them in prayer five times a day.

The participants finally said to me, "Baseer, be positive. You always see the dark aspect of things."

Harsh remarks were uttered against me, such as 'infidel', 'apostate', and 'communist'. Some labeled me a blasphemer and declared me as Wajib Ul Qatal (liable to be murdered). Thanks to Allah, they could not go through with the act as I was in Canada, where there is a strong rule of law, freedom of speech, and the state provides protection and security to every citizen.

All in all I thoroughly enjoyed my visit and met many interesting and intelligent people. Sometimes when people leave their homes for a foreign land they quickly give up their cultural heritage, but this was not the case with the vast majority of Pakistanis that I met. I could not help but feel however, that their belief that the Jews were behind all the evils of the world was somewhat misplaced. There was also a degree of hypocrisy in their attitude towards homosexuals, especially considering the very real possibility that many of their Imams could be gay. It was also sad and troubling for me to learn that Canadian mosques were being used, as they are in Pakistan, to raise money for jihad, which I saw as a betrayal of the country that had given them a home.