**The age of savagery**

[Kamila Hyat](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/kamila-hyat)

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The blasphemy laws in our country are back in discussion. Allegedly using the laws as cover, two people killed a young man, who had been a student at the National College of Arts a few years ago, at his hostel in Sanda.

According to initial police reports, the heinous murder, in which 32-year-old Qutub Rind was first beaten and tortured and then flung out of a third-floor window, was carried out over a minor dispute concerning the payment of rent. The man’s young son, who was visiting from Sindh, was present on the premises at the time.

Our blasphemy laws have been used in a similar fashion before, with the number of cases growing by the year. Last year, they became the pretext for the lynching of Mashal Khan, a student at the Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan. The true motive for the murder proved to be quite different and involved his efforts to expose the wrongdoing of the university administration.

Similar cases have been reported from across the country. Between 1987 and 2014, 1,300 people were arrested for committing blasphemy. The majority of them were Muslims. Around 60 were killed before their trials began. The laws bring with them a climate of fear; an accusation of blasphemy essentially means there will be little investigation but quick action against the person accused of a crime that few who are sane would choose to commit willingly.

There have been plenty of discussions, multiple times, about the laws itself, the manner in which they have been used and the damage they have caused. This is a law the incoming prime minister of the country has stated he is determined to keep on the books at all costs.

What we do not always comment on is the degree of bestiality that has crept into our society. People are beaten to death or tortured following claims that they have committed blasphemy or some other crime. After all, beating a hapless young man to death in his room is not an act we would expect to see in a society where normal human values still exist. Similarly, we would not expect to see a student dragged out by his peers and beaten before being shot dead.

There are many other instances. In 2014, a young Christian couple was taken away in front of their children, initially locked in a room, and then burnt alive following allegations that they had committed blasphemy. There have been other incidents which are equally horrific. Some years ago, a mob in Karachi killed men accused of theft by torturing them. Similar mob justice has become increasingly common, and as it occurs, we see that the rule of law sinks further down. In fact, it already appears to have virtually vanished.

We need to consider the degree of brutality inherent in all these incidents. Yes, terrible events take place in other countries too. They include serial killings, school shootings and other violent crimes. But the kind of mob madness we have become so familiar with is especially alarming. It creates among people a sense of terror, and as we first saw in the case of Mashal Khan and now Qutub Rind, as well as many others before them, there is a particular justification that can be used by murderers to get away with the most horrendous crimes. We have a new victim in Lahore. His family will never recover from the events that took place. A rent dispute, no matter who was in the right and who was in the wrong, could have been settled in a civilised fashion. The same, of course, is true for all the other victims.

Equally disturbing is the growing sense of inhumanity in our country. During the campaigning of the recently concluded elections, a donkey was beaten to death in the most grotesque fashion by a group of people after the name of a political rival was written on his back. Despite desperate efforts by those who maintain some sense of right or wrong in our society to save the animal, it died. In Bannu, a dog suffered a similar fate after it was wrapped in the flag of a particular party before it was shot and killed.

Just consider the impact of such acts, not just on the animals themselves, but on those who witness this kind of violence. In many cases, the witnesses include children and young people. In fact, young people are behind a large number of mob attacks on fellow human beings. The result has been a rapid lowering in the levels of respect for life and understanding of societal norms in all parts of our country.

The acts of terrible violence we witness again and again against women in the form of honour killings, acid attacks, gang rapes or other crimes are a part of this trend. Over a 1,000 women die each year in Pakistan as a result of honour killings carried out to defend the perceived ‘honour’ of the men in their families. All these strands of violence are tied together by a larger rope. They do not stand in isolation.

Unjust laws, including those which have for years allowed the killers of women to escape without penalty are responsible for this situation. But so is our failure to instil in people a sense of compassion for every other person and, indeed, for every other living being with whom they share their space. This is having a disastrous impact on our country and on the kind of society that is being created. Other trends such as handing out toy guns as gifts to children, most of them boys, simply demonstrates how we are failing our people.

In other words, violence has become acceptable. Humanity, or acts of sensitivity, are too often scorned or sneered at. They are seen as signs of weakness, whereas they are genuine signs of strength. The killing of Qutub Rind needs to be investigated not just as a criminal act but as an event that has affected the whole of society and every member within it.

We should also be alarmed by the fact that so many of our children, from both low-income as well as wealthy houses, are permitted to play violent video games on tablets or in internet cafes. In such a situation, the future cannot look bright. And the bludgeoning to death of Qutub Rind and the manner in which he was hurled to the ground from a height of nearly 30 feet simply exemplifies this.

The writer is a freelance columnist and former newspaper editor.

Email: kamilahyat@hotmail.com