

# NOREF Report

## Crucial reform of Pakistan's blasphemy laws remains a distant dream

Sana Majeed McMillion

### Executive summary

Pakistan's blasphemy laws have been at the centre of a fierce debate, especially after the assassination of the Punjab governor, Salman Taseer, in 2011. Pakistani society has been exposed to a potent and toxic mix of religious nationalism since the 1980s and consequently is divided along ideological fault lines that exacerbate the existing economic disparities. The media are also fragmented, catering only to their particular niches. This report takes a closer look at the role of the news media in the debate about blasphemy law reform in the aftermath of Taseer's assassination, and attempts to assess public sentiment regarding this debate.

Key findings of the media analysis indicate that the media reflect the fragmentation of Pakistani society, and that, while key issues such as the steady rise of extremism in the country and the ruling and military elite's support for religious

nationalism were identified by some newspapers, the debate over blasphemy law reform was lost in competing narratives.

To assess public sentiment regarding the debate on the assassination and blasphemy law reform, surveys were carried out among students at two universities in Lahore to test the hypothesis that the upper-middle class and the rich are comparatively liberal and progressive in their political and religious thinking compared to the middle or lower-middle classes. This hypothesis was partially verified in terms of the data gathered.

More than a year after Taseer's assassination, Pakistan remains deeply divided and the much-needed reform of the blasphemy laws remains sidelined, but if civil society and the media play a constructive role, there is hope to at least start the reform process.

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The assassination of the Punjab governor, Salman Taseer, on January 4th marked an ominous start of the year 2011 for Pakistan. The raucously polemical debate in the country on freedom of speech and the blasphemy laws is not divorced from the contemporary international context in terms of this particular subject. International debate on the way in which freedom of speech can be used to defend hate speech has intensified, particularly after the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* took the fateful decision to publish the controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. The assassination of Salman Taseer as a result of his courageous opposition to the country's draconian blasphemy laws highlights the dire need for openness in Pakistan. However, other incidents, such as the shooting of Arizona congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in the U.S., emphasise the paradox that too much freedom of speech may well be exploited by extremists to foment hatred or incite violence.

## Historical and sociopolitical background

Free speech is very restricted in Pakistan, as documented by Mezzera and Sial.<sup>1</sup> Apart from structural and normative problems, Article 19 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan severely restricts freedom of speech, particularly through its blasphemy clause.<sup>2</sup> The blasphemy laws<sup>3</sup> in Pakistan were primarily introduced under British rule,<sup>4</sup> but were later made much more stringent by the military dictator Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s. Originally meant to curb hate speech, the laws after Zia's amendments have chiefly been used for the pursuit of grudges against

the socially and economically downtrodden, are highly discriminatory toward religious minorities, and are vague in their definition of what actually constitutes blasphemy. These blasphemy laws have been subjected to strong criticism by many independent international human rights organisations.<sup>5</sup> From 1927 to 1985, prior to the amendment of the blasphemy laws, only ten cases related to blasphemy were reportedly heard in court. However, after the amendments were introduced approximately 4,000 cases have been handled in the courts.<sup>6</sup> Even though those convicted of blasphemy may receive the death penalty, so far there have not been any executions of those found guilty by the state. However, Islamist vigilantes have killed many whom they consider to have been guilty of blasphemy.<sup>7</sup>

For decades the ruling elite has openly peddled religious nationalism to garner support among the people and acquire political clout, at the cost of ignoring the social and economic problems of the country. Currently, Pakistan's economy is in tatters<sup>8</sup> and the society faces terror attacks and armed conflicts, perceived by many Pakistanis as a response to a war against Islam being fought on behalf of the U.S. This perception has been a catalyst for a good number of Pakistanis who have been at the receiving end of a potent and toxic mix of religious nationalism for years, inspiring them to take up extreme positions over religious matters rather than speaking out on sociopolitical problems. In 2011, fearing the electorate, the government chose to abandon the blasphemy law reform process, and even the army, the most powerful institution in the country, failed to issue a single statement in response to the assassination of Governor Taseer.<sup>9</sup>

1 Marco Mezzera & Safdar Sial, "Media and governance in Pakistan: a controversial yet essential relationship", Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2010, <http://www.initiativeforpeacebuilding.eu/pdf/pakistanOct.pdf>.

2 Article 19 reads: "Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, and there shall be freedom of the press, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, [commission of], or incitement to an offence", <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/part2.ch1.html>.

3 For the complete text of the blasphemy laws from the 1860 Penal Code, see Annex 1.

4 Ikram Sehgal, "The blasphemy law", *The News International*, January 13th 2011, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=25285&Cat=9&dt=1/13/2011>.

5 See the reports by the UN Human Rights Council, <http://un.op.org/fr/node/2814>, and Amnesty International, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,AMNESTY,,PAK,,4f06ad372,0.html>.

6 Fatima Rizvi, "History of Pakistan's blasphemy law", 2011, <http://fatima-rizvi.livejournal.com/88247.html>.

7 Shehribano Taseer, "Rose petals for a killer", *Newsweek*, January 16th 2011, <http://www.newsweek.com/2011/01/16/rose-petals-for-a-killer.html>.

8 There have been massive price increases; severe gas, electricity and fuel shortages; and 15% inflation, while the stoppage of a vital International Monetary Fund loan will likely make the economic situation worse. For more, see Ahmed Rashid, "Pakistan's very unhappy new year", January 4th 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12110235>.

9 Ahmed Rashid, "In the wake of Taseer's murder, moderate Pakistanis must speak out", January 8th 2011, *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jan/08/ahmed-rashid-taseer-pakistan-precipice?INTCMP=SRCH>.

State patronage of religious conservatism and nationalism has also divided the society along socioeconomic lines. This report argues that because of better educational opportunities, the upper-middle class and the rich tend to be progressive and liberal. However, the middle and lower-middle classes tend to be religiously conservative, because the public schools offer a curriculum infused with religious nationalism.<sup>10</sup> The fairly new and thriving media industry has at times played a positive role; however, it has also been responsible for sensationalising events and pursuing ratings more than journalistic standards. For instance, a prominent televangelist proclaimed that members of the Ahmadiyya group, a heterodox sect in Pakistan, deserved to be killed ("*wajib-ul-qatal*") in his programme on a popular TV channel. This led to the killing of two prominent members of the Ahmadiyya community in Karachi.<sup>11</sup>

The report selects the January 2011 assassination of the Punjab governor, Salman Taseer, as a point of departure and has two objectives:

- 1 to look into the coverage of blasphemy laws in the Pakistani print media in a two-week (January 5th-11th 2011) period after Salman Taseer's assassination; and
- 2 to gauge the reaction of university students to and their opinion on blasphemy law reform with the help of a survey.

This two-pronged approach will help to ascertain the quality of the debate that took place in the aftermath of this tragic assassination and the nature of fragmentation in the Pakistani polity. Firstly, three English and three Urdu newspapers were selected based on their editorial leanings. *Dawn*, *The News* and *The Nation* were the selected English dailies, while the *Daily Jang*, *Nawa-i-Waqt* and the *Daily Express* constituted the Urdu sample. Editorials and opinion pieces from these newspapers were chosen to deconstruct the debate in the chosen print media. Secondly, for the purpose of analysing public perceptions of the

blasphemy laws and the disparity in public opinion resulting from socioeconomic differences, surveys were conducted at two universities: the University of the Punjab, a state-run institution, and the Lahore University of Management Sciences, a private institution. The former receives students from all parts of Pakistan, albeit with middle- and lower-middle-class rural and urban backgrounds. Students from the latter hail from the mostly urbanised, higher echelons of society.

## Part I: deconstructing the newspapers' narrative

*The News*, which is a part of the Jang Group of Newspapers, the country's largest media group, is left of centre, whereas its sister Urdu daily, the *Daily Jang*, is right of centre. The Urdu daily *Niwa-e-Waqt* and its sister English newspaper, *The Nation*, are widely perceived to lean to the right and act as self-proclaimed defenders of Pakistan's ideology. Part of the Dawn Group, *Dawn* is the most widely circulated English daily and is known to be liberal/progressive. Lastly, the *Daily Express*, an Urdu newspaper published by the business-oriented Century Publication Group, can be considered centrist, since it gives equal space to conservative and left-leaning columnists.<sup>12</sup> It is fair to say that newspapers in Pakistan are focused on their niche, with each newspaper reflecting a particular ideological perspective and catering to readers with a similar perspective. It makes for good business for media groups to appeal to and keep their readers. The disadvantage is not only that the media sector remains fragmented, but that public opinion and society also remain divided.<sup>13</sup> This seems to correspond with the way in which the selected newspapers covered the Taseer assassination, and the subsequent disparity in public opinion regarding free speech and blasphemy law reform.

The assassination of Salman Taseer serves as a reminder of the daunting challenges facing Pakistan, particularly the prevalent intolerance and rising extremism. The media, as explained earlier, have not been able to direct the

<sup>10</sup> Maheen Usmani, "The ideology of thought control in Pakistan", *Dawn*, January 8th 2011, <http://dawn.com/2011/08/01/the-ideology-of-thought-control/>.

<sup>11</sup> Sadeef Kully, "Plight of the Pakistani Ahmedi: a timeline", *Dawn*, October 6th 2010, <http://blog.dawn.com/2010/06/10/plight-of-the-pakistani-ahmedi-a-timeline/>.

<sup>12</sup> Mezzera & Safdar, "Media and governance in Pakistan", 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Pakistan Media Watch, "Fragmented media, fragmented nation", February 4th 2012, <http://pakistanmediawatch.com/2012/02/04/fragmented-media-fragmented-nation/>.

discourse to any positive outcome. In the aftermath of the assassination it became clear how the divisive nature of the media discourse sharpens the ideological divides in society. To mitigate this dilemma, one option, perhaps, would be that editors from the established media empires should form an ethical committee to address the ideological differences confronting Pakistani society so as to begin a process of reconciliation. These ideological differences were rife in the media discourse of the selected newspapers, some examples of which are given below.

### ***Reaction to the assassination: blaming-the-victim syndrome***

*Dawn* was the only newspaper that categorically condemned the assassination. The rest of the sample newspapers, while condemning the murder and considering it a poignant reminder of Pakistan's problem of extremism, nonetheless saw the governor's stance as problematic. The lack of will to categorically condemn Taseer's assassination shows the extent to which debate over religious matters is skewed in the media. *The Nation* and *Niwa-e-Waqt* went as far as to attack the assassinated governor for being "belligerent" and categorised his support for alleged blasphemer Aasia Bibi<sup>14</sup> as "ironic"<sup>15</sup> in that it ignored a plethora of other critical national issues.

### ***Acknowledging the elephant in the room: the absence of an appropriate remedy***

With the exception of *The Nation* and *Niwa-e-Waqt*, the rest of the newspapers focused entirely on the burgeoning extremism and prevalent intolerance in the country. This is an encouraging sign. However, Pakistan faces immense security challenges because of extremism and religious intolerance. Not only do minorities feel extremely threatened, but sectarian violence within the main religious denomination has also claimed

many lives. In the debate about the blasphemy laws that followed Taseer's assassination there was once again an over-reliance on Islamic theology to make a case either for or against the blasphemy laws rather than any use of reconciliatory and humanitarian discourse. Even a conservative columnist from the *Daily Express* openly admitted that he carefully chooses words when writing about matters of religion, so as to not provoke his readers.<sup>16</sup> This articulates the disparity and fragmentation in Pakistani society, where the fault lines are not between conservatives and liberals, but actually between the ultra-orthodox and a grouping of conservatives and liberals.

### ***Debate over blasphemy law reform: lost in competing narratives***

According to independent observers, Pakistan's blasphemy laws are highly discriminatory, restrict the basic freedoms of religion and expression, and contravene the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These laws are vague, have weak evidentiary standards and carry a mandatory death penalty for the offence covered in Article 295C. Furthermore, there is overwhelming evidence that accusations of blasphemy are made under dubious circumstances. Despite this, the discourse remained divided over the reform debate. Some columnists argued for abrogation of the laws, while others wanted changes in the form of strong penalties against bearing false witness, so as to prevent miscarriages of justice. Liberal writers argued for the separation of the state and religion as the only solution to contain extremism. The Urdu newspapers in the sample used religion as a central theme of the debate. For instance, the *Daily Express* used a religiously laced lexicon to make a case against the blasphemy laws, in contrast to *Niwa-e-Waqt*. Furthermore, some *Niwa-e-Waqt* columnists openly peddled conspiracy theories suggesting that non-governmental organisations with a secular agenda and backed by the U.S. and other

<sup>14</sup> Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman, is on death row for her alleged blasphemy, and Salman Taseer stood up for her.

<sup>15</sup> Haider Mehdi, "The anatomy of violence", *The Nation*, January 9th 2011, <http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/columns/09-Jan-2011/The-anatomy-of-violence>.

<sup>16</sup> Javed Chaudhary, "Serious matters", *Daily Express*, January 9th 2011, [http://express.com.pk/epaper/PoPupwindow.aspx?newsID=1101140499&Issue=NP\\_LHE&Date=20110109](http://express.com.pk/epaper/PoPupwindow.aspx?newsID=1101140499&Issue=NP_LHE&Date=20110109).

Western countries were conspiring to de-Islamise Pakistan.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Political and judicial inaction: state machinery accused of capitulation to extremists***

*The Nation* and *Niwa-e-Waqt* accused the government led by the People's Party of political and judicial inaction, turning a blind eye to the bigger picture. *The News* and its Urdu counterpart, the *Daily Jang*, as well as *Dawn* and the *Daily Express* outlined the following litany of charges of inaction, particularly against the government and judiciary:

- a Political wrangling and scandals have absorbed the government's resources to deal with extremism. The irresponsible behaviour of politicians was condemned, particularly the statement by the interior minister, Rehman Malik, that he "would kill anyone who commits blasphemy",<sup>18</sup> which was characterised as an extraordinary case of subversion of the law by a government official.
- b The judicial system has been a dismal failure: judges have delivered a guilty verdict out of "fear for their lives"<sup>19</sup> in cases related to blasphemy charges, while many of the accused involved in terrorism cases have been set free.
- c Some opinion pieces shed light on the structural problems prevalent in Pakistani society. These include the lack of will to follow and enforce the rule of law by the people and state; the class divide, which exacerbates the ideological divide, because the rich can afford better education;<sup>20</sup> and attitudes that do not critically question patriarchal traditions, thus capitulating to extremists and hindering any blasphemy law reform initiative.

### ***Challenging the religious-nationalist narrative of the security state***

*The News*, the *Daily Express* and *Dawn* provided the most detailed deconstruction of the religious nationalism espoused by the security and political establishment over the years. The following reasons were given to explain why the religious-nationalist paradigm had become entrenched in society:

- a state patronage of extremist groups and the exploitation of religion for political gains;
- b tampering with history and the law in the name of religion, the visible effect of which is oppression of the vulnerable, particularly women and minorities;
- c indoctrination through the school curriculum to favour a myopic worldview; and
- d the encouraging of overt and not-so-overt messages of hatred and aggression against the "other" relayed through the media.

In order to make progress, calls were made to abolish the country's "educational apartheid", which is "creating deep schisms within society";<sup>21</sup> to re-evaluate the Objectives Resolution (1949)<sup>22</sup> (and the legacy of General Zia-ul-Haq from the 1980s);<sup>23</sup> and to end the fixation with India. This was described best in a *The News* column as follows: "The raging cleric, frothing at the mouth, is thus not the problem. He is merely a symptom of something larger. Pakistan's problem is the delusional general and the incompetent politician and as long as this is not fixed, the holy armies of bigotry will remain on the march."<sup>24</sup> In comparison, only one column from *The Nation* mentioned in

21 Shafqat Mehmood, "A nation divided", *The News*, July 1st 2011, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=24373&Cat=9&dt=1/7/2011>

22 The Objectives Resolution was passed in 1949 and laid down the nature of the Constitution of Pakistan as Islamic. It is purported to be the justification to introduce more clauses of an Islamic nature into the Constitution.

23 In 1977 General Zia-ul-Haq deposed the democratically elected government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in a coup d'état. To legitimise his control, particularly after he received support from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia for jihad in Afghanistan, he began a process of Islamisation in Pakistan. The blasphemy laws in their current form were promulgated under Zia. Many sectarian militant groups and political Islamist parties were given funding and supported to weaken leftist groups and there was a systematic campaign of violence against leftists. Many were killed, while some went into exile, leaving a political vacuum that was filled by Islamists and their fiery brand of Islamism.

24 Ayaz Amir, "Clerics on the march", *The News*, January 14th 2011, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-9-25496-Clerics-on-the-march>.

17 S. M. Kabir Gillani, "The love of Prophet Mohammad is the objective of our life", *Niwa-e-Waqt*, January 18th 2011, <http://www.nawai-waqt.com.pk/E-Paper/Lahore/2011-01-18/page-10>; A. Mohammad Niazi, "Pope is not worthy of papal designation", *Niwa-e-Waqt*, January 13th 2011, <http://www.nawai-waqt.com.pk/E-Paper/Lahore/2011-01-13/page-2>.

18 Sadnand Dhume, "Confronting the myth of 'modern Pakistan'", *The Pakistan Update*, March 8th 2011, <http://www.thepakistanupdate.com/tag/ppp/>.

19 *The News*, "Fear and trial", January 8th 2011, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=24559&Cat=8&dt=1/8/2011>.

20 Shafqat Mehmood, "Are we a divided nation?", *Daily Jang*, January 8th 2011, <http://jang.com.pk/jang/jan2011-daily/08-01-2011/col3.htm>.

passing the “religious intolerance sown by Ziaul Haq”.<sup>25</sup> Neither the *Daily Jang* nor *Niwa-e-Waqt* offered any commentary on religious nationalism.

### ***The media's role marred by chasing ratings and sensationalism***

Not much attention was spent on the role of the media by the selected newspapers. *The News* and *Dawn* criticised the mad chase for ratings that led newspapers to provide a platform for extremist ideology and indulge in sensationalism. *Dawn* condemned the opportunity provided to two religious clerics who announced a reward for the murder of Aasia Bibi and termed it “extraordinarily irresponsible” and an “abject abandonment of media ethics”.<sup>26</sup> The *Daily Jang* held that it is not only the politicians, but also the media that have been pressured into bowing to extremists. A column in the *Daily Express* offered a sobering reality for Pakistanis: “You know that you have serious extremism problems when Saudi papers can refer to Salman Taseer as a martyr and the Pakistani media will dare not do that” and further reported a startling incident of a media outlet that interviewed a Taliban spokesperson after a suicide attack and gave him 20 minutes to explain that killing women and children is justified for a higher cause. At the end of the interview the female anchor appallingly thanked the Taliban spokesperson and said, “God willing, he will be invited to speak to the media again”.<sup>27</sup>

### ***The spectre of Western double standards: a handy ploy to obscure national challenges***

Opinion pieces printed in *Niwa-e-Waqt* were quite elaborate in their criticism of what they alleged were Western double standards. Western activists were accused of championing

Aasia Bibi at the expense of Aafia Siddiqui.<sup>28</sup> Hillary Clinton, the U.S. secretary of state, was reprimanded for admonishing Pakistan to show patience and tolerance, while American bombs kill and maim innocent civilians, including women and children. However, the most acrid criticism was directed against Pope Benedict XVI after he made a statement calling for the abrogation of Pakistan's blasphemy laws. One columnist wrote: “He has proven to be an ally of the US, Europe and enemies of Islam. He has failed to stand up for the victims of the war on terror [and the U.S. detention camp at] Guantanamo and has failed to condemn violence against Christians in India.”<sup>29</sup> A famous televangelist and columnist for the *Daily Express* addressed what he thought constituted both Western and Pakistani double standards. He alleged: “many who supported Qadri [Salman Taseer's assassin] do not object to the crime he committed; at the same time the elite class in Pakistan that came out to denounce Taseer's killing fails to take a stand against Aafia. And now we have Pope Benedict XVI, who kept silent over the sexual abuse of kids by the priests, wanting to instruct Pakistan what to do with its laws.”<sup>30</sup>

To conclude, the discussion in the selected newspapers was a reflection of their ideological leanings and was indicative of the polemical nature of the media debate. The English newspapers, with the exception of *The Nation*, extensively addressed the problem of the rise of extremism and how to bring about reform in the blasphemy laws. Urdu newspapers heavily cloaked the debate with religious glorification and there was a battle of words not only between conservative and liberal writers, but also among conservative columnists. Conflicting ideas were presented: some argued for preserving the blasphemy laws, while others either wanted changes in the laws or called for their abrogation. *The Nation* and *Niwa-e-Waqt* openly peddled conspiracy theories and in response to a flood of international criticism went

25 Talat Azim, “Chaos and confusion”, *The Nation*, January 8th 2011, <http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/columns/08-Jan-2011/Chaos-and-confusion>.

26 *Dawn*, “The cancer within”, January 5th 2011, <http://dawn.com/2011/01/05/the-cancer-within-2/>.

27 Rauf Kalasara, “The tale of the downfall of a nation”, *Daily Express*, January 9th 2011, [http://express.com.pk/epaper/PoPupwindow.aspx?newsID=1101140503&Issue=NP\\_LHE&Date=20110109](http://express.com.pk/epaper/PoPupwindow.aspx?newsID=1101140503&Issue=NP_LHE&Date=20110109).

28 Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani citizen, is currently serving a life sentence in the U.S. for her alleged assault on her interrogators. This case and that of Aasia Bibi in Pakistan are taken up by nationalists and liberals, respectively. In this ideological divide, both sides accuse each other of selectiveness. Liberals accuse nationalists of standing up for the rights on Aafia at the expense of Aasia, and vice versa.

29 Niazi, “Pope is not worthy of papal designation”, 2011.

30 Amir Liaqat, “For the sake of Mohammad's name”, *Daily Express*, January 14th 2011, [http://express.com.pk/epaper/PoPupwindow.aspx?newsID=1101144589&Issue=NP\\_LHE&Date=20110114](http://express.com.pk/epaper/PoPupwindow.aspx?newsID=1101144589&Issue=NP_LHE&Date=20110114).

into attack mode to defend Pakistan, particularly in response to Pope Benedict’s statement.

## Part II: survey findings

The second part of this report is based on surveys conducted among students to get a sense of public sentiment regarding the blasphemy laws and their reform. Despite their limited statistical value, the survey findings give an interesting picture of public discourse and sentiments on the subject. Two surveys were carried out at two universities, the University of the Punjab (PU) and the Lahore University of Management Sciences (Lums).<sup>31</sup> Because of the sensitive nature of the subject matter, in a disclaimer students were given the option to leave questions blank that they deemed too sensitive for them to answer. Some questions related to blasphemy were left unanswered; however, interestingly enough, most students openly gave their opinion on these matters. The students that completed the questionnaire in both universities were between the ages of 18 and 25 and were further classified according to their gender and social background of being either rural or urban.

Table 1 represents the sample in terms of its socioeconomic status and gender.

**Table 1: Socioeconomic status and gender of the sample**

University	Total respondents	Gender	Respective total respondents	Urban	Rural
Lums	59	Female	35	33	2
		Male	24	22	2
PU	69	Female	36	31	5
		Male	33	23	11

The results from the survey make for interesting reading and contain some anomalies that shed light on the diversity of public opinion in Pakistan. It should be mentioned that there was no large noticeable difference of opinion among students from rural or urban backgrounds. Therefore, analysis of the data is more along class lines in

terms of being part of the bourgeoisie, the middle class or the lower-middle class.<sup>32</sup>

Most of the students polled were aware of the blasphemy laws, with the exception of 15 female students from PU, who constituted a noticeable minority. Furthermore, most of the students followed the news coverage in the aftermath of the assassination of Salman Taseer. An overwhelming majority in the sample were not satisfied with the role of the media and considered that the electronic media in Pakistan fared better in comparison to the print media. This seems odd, as most analysts contend that the print media, despite catering to their respective niches, are rather more aware of journalistic ethics and standards, primarily because they have been operating in the country for decades and are considered the most outspoken in the region of South Asia.<sup>33</sup> Conversely, the electronic media are fairly new and focus mostly on ratings, and as a result rely on sensationalism at the expense of journalistic ethics.

Most students from Lums thought that the media were irresponsible to hail the killer as a hero and failed to properly inform public opinion regarding blasphemy law reform. Some students had conservative views and had not followed the media coverage, such as a Lums male student who said, “I believe whatever happened was worth it. Being a part of a Muslim community and knowing the fact that our Prophet (PBUH) had the greatest personality on this planet and is an ideal model to follow, so no one should say anything against him. If the media degraded the governor, it was definitely a good job.” PU students also gave a variety of reasons why the media had played a negative role in their eyes. Some criticised the hold of fundamentalists over the media that prevented open criticism of the blasphemy laws, while others thought that the media had made a hero out of Taseer under the influence of the government.

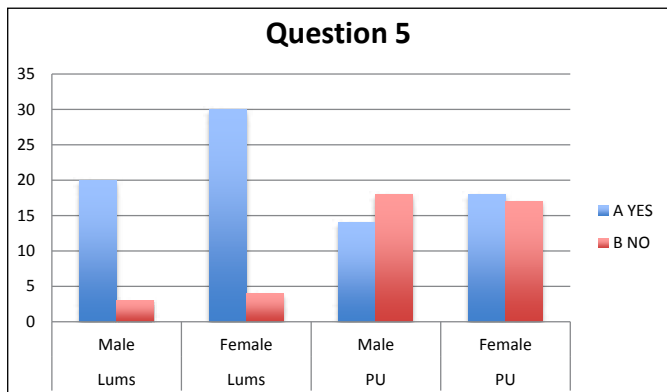
One of the important propositions of this report, as outlined above, is that the socioeconomic divide in the country also translates into an ideological

<sup>31</sup> A sample questionnaire, along with the results in the form of graphs, is presented in Annex 2.

<sup>32</sup> Being from a rural background in Pakistan does not automatically mean that one is from the lower-middle class or is poor. For instance, most agricultural landowners and their scions (particularly the feudalists) are highly educated and quite rich.

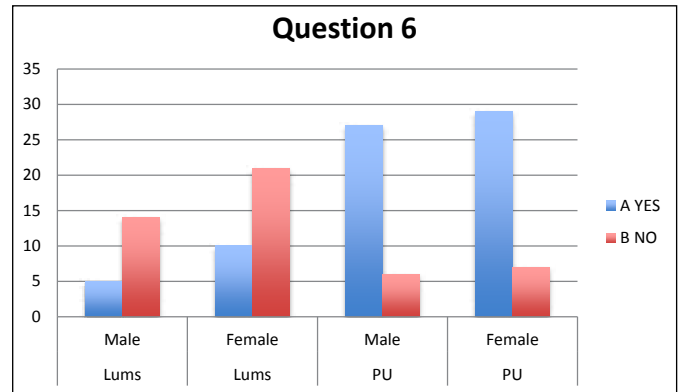
<sup>33</sup> Mezzer & Safdar, “Media and governance in Pakistan”, 2010.

divide and that the media, by focusing on their respective niches, exacerbate the problem of fragmented opinion. This central proposition or thesis was reinforced by the results from Questions 5 and 6. Condemnation of the assassination was stronger from Lums than PU students, among whom opinion was pretty much divided. The graph showing the results for Question 5 also shows comparatively more women condemning the assassination than the men in the sample, despite a solid majority of male students from Lums that condemned the assassination. One possible explanation could be that women living in a patriarchal society seem to be more attuned to and cognisant of the country’s social and religious problems, because the hold of patriarchy not only extends to the social realm, but also to matters of religion. This, however, is mere speculation, and without the benefit of an opinion question or a focus group, it would be hard to elicit a proper explanation. Nonetheless, women, particularly from the lower-middle classes, face a system of discrimination that limits their basic civil liberties, e.g. to marry whom they like, while they face sexual harassment or worse violence should they dare to speak their minds.

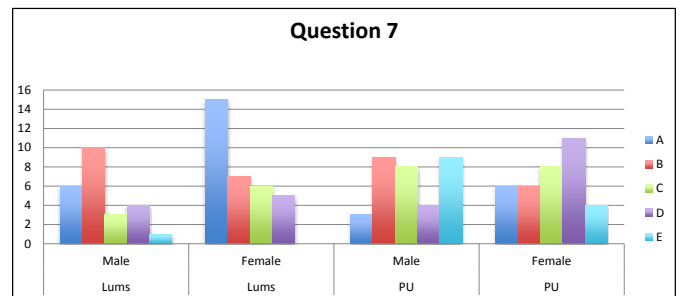


**Question 5:** Do you condemn the assassination of Punjab governor Salman Taseer?

However, the clear difference in the ideological divide between students at Lums and PU is evident from the data for Questions 6 and 7. It is clear from the results from Question 6 that an appreciable number of Lums students held that Salman Taseer was not guilty of blasphemy, in comparison to the students from PU who found his statement blasphemous.



**Question 6:** Do you think that Punjab governor Salman Taseer committed blasphemy by referring to the blasphemy law as a “black law” and by maintaining that “The blasphemy law is not a God-made law. It’s a man-made law. It was made by General Ziaul Haq and the portion about giving a death sentence was put in by Nawaz Sharif. So it’s a law which gives an excuse to extremists and reactionaries to target weak people and minorities” (published in *The Express Tribune*, January 5th 2011).

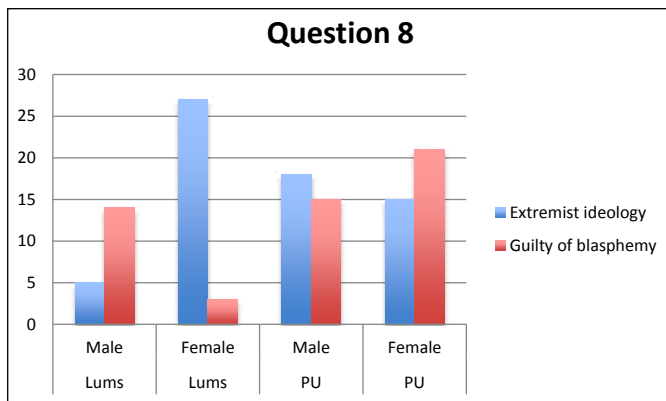


**Question 7:** How would you categorise the support within Pakistani society for the killer of the Punjab governor with regard to the ethical development of Pakistani society?  
**A.** Extremely disturbing  
**B.** Disturbing  
**C.** Undecided  
**D.** Favourable  
**E.** Extremely favourable

Results from Question 7 also substantiate the central proposition of the thesis insofar as more students from Lums viewed the support for the killer in the Pakistan society as disturbing or extremely disturbing. Views among the PU students appeared to be split, as a majority of the female students found the support for the killer favourable, as opposed to the male students who considered the support disturbing and extremely favourable in similar numbers. More female students from PU condemned the assassination of the governor; however, the results from Question 7

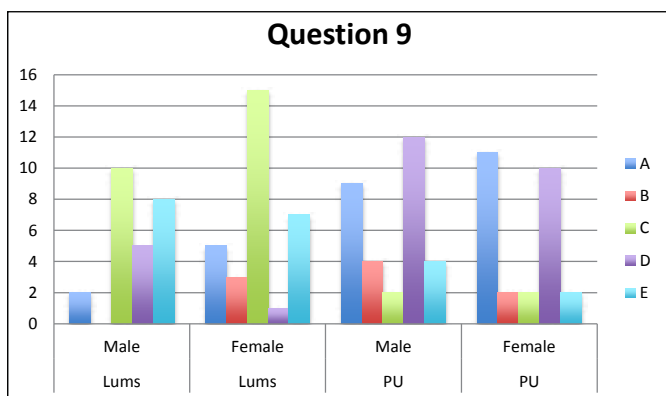


show a contradiction because here they rank the support extended to the assassin as favourable to the ethical development of Pakistani society. There were also anomalies in the data that ran counter to the central proposition of the report. This was highlighted by the results from Question 8, which brought some interesting contradictions to the fore. Previously, more male students from Lums held that Taseer was not guilty of blasphemy; however, this was contradicted by the data for Question 8, as it can be seen that the majority of the male Lums students saw blasphemy as a reason for his assassination.



**Question 8:** What do you think was the key reason for the assassination of the Punjab governor?

Answers to Question 9 by the PU students brought to the fore another contradiction, particularly in the case of female students. Previously, the female students ranked the support for the killer in society as favourable, but for this particular question the results show that they considered, among other things, the incarceration and conviction of the killer as worthy of approval.



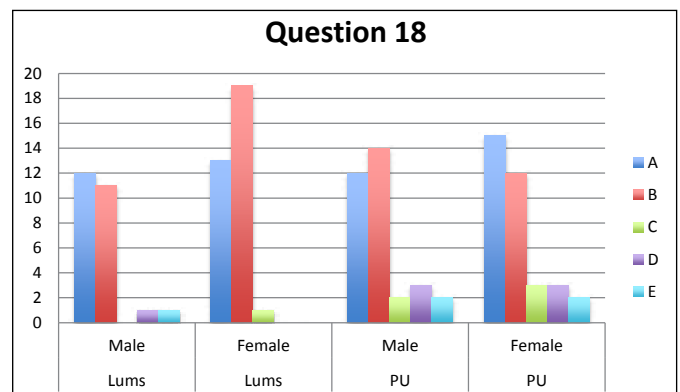
**Question 9:** What developments were worthy of approval in the aftermath of the assassination?

**A.** Role of the media

- B.** Role of civil society
- C.** Incarceration and conviction of the killer
- D.** All of the above
- E.** None of the above

There was general agreement that Islamic theology justifies blasphemy laws. This notwithstanding, more Lums students conceded that Pakistan's blasphemy laws do not represent the true essence of Islam. In comparison, there was overwhelming agreement among PU students that Pakistan's blasphemy laws reflect the true spirit of Islam. Hence, more from Lums favoured a change in these laws compared to the PU students, who were split in their opinion once more. Some wanted reform, some remained undecided and some did not want any change. This is strange, given that PU students (along with Lums students) were of the view that the blasphemy laws are indeed misused. One would imagine that there would be strong calls for change, given that PU students were aware of the misuse of these laws. It is hard to pinpoint the reason for this incongruity, but it may well be the fragmented nature of the media debate on reform of the blasphemy laws.

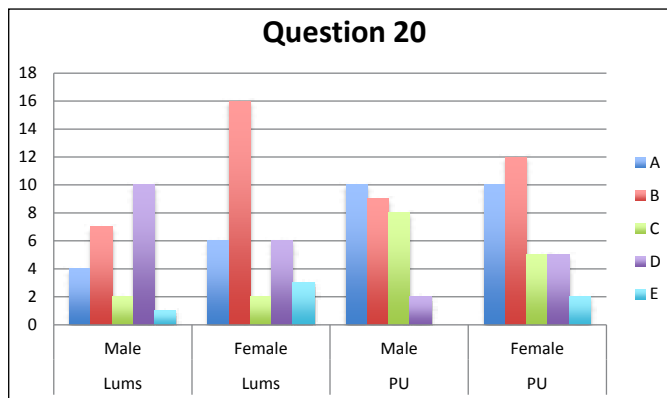
When it came to questions of a political nature, there was agreement among all the polled students, e.g. a larger portion considered freedom of speech to be an integral part of a free and democratic society, albeit with certain limitations.



**Question 18:** Would you agree that freedom of speech is an integral part of a free and democratic society?

- A.** Strongly agree
- B.** Agree
- C.** Undecided
- D.** Disagree
- E.** Strongly disagree

Students from Lums and PU proposed similar limitations to freedom of speech in matters of national security, defamation, extremist propaganda, hate speech and the slander of all religious figures. On this subject one female student from Lums articulated best the feeling among students: “freedom of speech allows one to express one’s own beliefs without fear of condemnation and prosecution. Every individual should have the right to state what they believe in, whether they be Muslim, atheist, Sunni or Ahmedi. As long as freedom of speech is not abused to verbally attack or degrade other people’s beliefs, I do not see why it should be as severely limited as it is in Pakistan.”



**Question 20:** What is your opinion of the following view: Because there is a sense of hopelessness towards the country's political, economic and security problems, people in Pakistan tend to react strongly in discussions and matters of religion.

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Undecided
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree

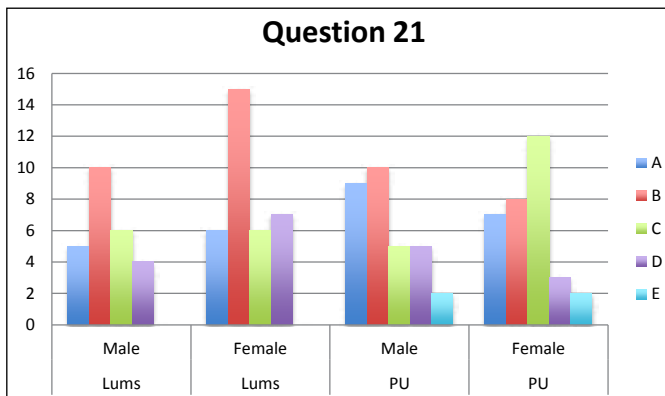
Students from both universities gave detailed answers to explain the reasons that in their opinion explained the reactionary mindset and made for such vigorous discussion (Question 20). Students from Lums ranked attachment to religion as the main reason for holding strong sentiments and displaying violent reaction. A male student from Lums explained it in the following terms: “because they see religion and following religious ideals a source of salvation in the world and hereafter, they have completely given up hope for any good in the world and seek obedience to religious duties as their only way for

success.” Illiteracy and extremist brainwashing were also stated as the root causes of a reactionary mindset. Another student explained the influence of extremist brainwashing: “it is widely believed that Pakistan was made in the name of Islam and that is why people overreact as they think that the very reason for which Pakistan was made has been nullified.” Some listed class difference as breeding resentment, and one student described it in the following terms: “I agree [with] the Marxian view that religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature. When things are terrible in other spheres, people turn to religion for justice.”

Similarly, students from PU also considered strong affiliation to religion as a main reason that triggers a reactionary mindset among Pakistanis. Additional explanations included absence of the rule of law and that Pakistanis in general are emotional people. PU students also discussed class difference, lack of education, and unemployment as causing bitterness and hopelessness, e.g. in terms of the class and education divide, “[the] fragmented education system makes worse the problem of class differences. Elites are given better education, but proletariats are afforded with radical education. Only a fair education system will change the course.” Another student explained it thus: “[the] whole society is divided, [the] rich are getting richer and [the] poor are more and more exploited by the rich. Poverty and underdevelopment are creating impatience in the people and they get emotional eas[il]y.” However, the most apt explanation capturing the popular view in the country was given by a student as follows: “[the] tendency of people to react strongly is because of three reasons: (a) the U turn of policies taken by Musharraf after 9/11 and adopting pro-U.S. policies, (b) killing and devastation in Pakistan and Afghanistan by the U.S., NATO forces and elsewhere in [the] Muslim world, and (c) [the] culture of obscenity promoted by the media in Pakistan.”

The last question brought almost unanimous agreement among all the students that there was a need to replace the narrative of religious nationalism and break the hold of the security and political elite on the flow of information, with the exception of some female students from PU,

who remained undecided. One student perhaps best sums the feelings of those who answered this question negatively: "Freedom of speech is a mere distraction."



**Question 21:** Do you think Pakistanis need a renewed and rigorous commitment to freedom of speech in order to break the mindset of religious nationalism and break the hold of the security and political elite on the flow of information?

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Undecided
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree

The nature of the questions asked effectively divided the survey into two halves. The first half dealt with the assassination and reactions to it, while the second half focused on the blasphemy laws and the wider political problems facing the country. Overall, female students from Lums proved to be the most liberal, followed by their male counterparts. Because of the many contradictions expressed particularly in the answers of PU students, they in essence represented the disparity of opinion in the nation as a whole. It can be argued that people feel less inclined to question religion or matters pertaining to religion when they have been at the receiving end of a potent dose of religious nationalism for decades. Political dissent, however, has a strong tradition in the country. This was also reflected in the answers from the second half of the questionnaire that dealt with political issues. Most of the students favoured freedom of speech as an integral part of society and key to breaking the narrative of religious nationalism that prevents the state from addressing pressing social and economic problems. The data from

the questionnaire shows that there are two ideological blocs, with the well-to-do tending to be liberal, and the middle and lower-middle class not having a uniform ideological position, which may vary from being conservative in religious matters to being liberal or right wing on political issues.

In conclusion, more than a year after the assassination of Salman Taseer, Pakistan remains a deeply divided country and the much-needed reform of the blasphemy laws, let alone their abrogation, remains a distant dream. The media, as usual, remained divided and failed to steer the debate on the assassination in the right direction. The coverage proved to be the most divisive in the Urdu newspapers, with the exception of the *Daily Express*. It should be noted that most people in Pakistan read Urdu newspapers, and their style of journalism, which is often laced with glorification of Islam and regards Pakistan as its last citadel, is a cause for concern. Journalistic ethics are thus sacrificed for a myopic worldview that is being disseminated in a country where the adult literacy rate is 56%<sup>34</sup> and knowledge of religion is mostly limited to the memorisation of Koranic verses. The students polled for this report exhibited compelling signs of accepting the worldview exemplified by the media, even those from Lums. However, it would be a fair assessment, in terms of the data gathered, that it is hard to categorise public opinion on matters of a political nature. But in religious matters the argument can be made that middle- and lower-middle-class Pakistani's are comparatively conservative vis-à-vis the well-to-do.

In opposition to the socialist mandate of the Bhutto government of the 1970s, Islamists focused on petty class differences. The bourgeoisie were depicted in the media as social deviants, permanently drunk on whisky and vodka, and going to nightclubs. This "moral panic" led to attacks on nightclubs and liquor stores, thus sidelining the monopoly of the feudalists, capitalists, the bureaucracy and the military, all of whom are responsible for the economic and political exploitation that is endemic in

34 Statistics according to the UN Children's Fund, [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/pakistan\\_pakistan\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/pakistan_pakistan_statistics.html).

Pakistan.<sup>35</sup> The current form of the “moral panic” is to preserve the nation’s Islamic identity in the face of an onslaught of Western culture. It has divided Pakistani society along many fault lines, pitting not just conservative against liberals, but the ultra-orthodox against conservatives and liberals. The threat of violence has severely restricted freedom of speech and minority rights. Because of the missionary nature of Islamic parties, cases of forced conversions of minorities have increased.<sup>36</sup> Therefore it seems of urgent importance to document the far-reaching adverse

impact of Islamisation in Pakistan. For instance, it would be interesting to see how security in general and the rights of minorities in particular have changed since the late 1970s, when the process of Islamisation, initiated by the Bhutto government and perfected by the Zia regime, began. The role of the media in this should not be underestimated: this report shows that the lack of journalistic standards and the dissemination of conflicting ideas have led to the failure to reform Pakistan’s blasphemy laws.

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35 Nadeem F. Paracha, “Projecting the bizarre”, *Dawn*, June 6th 2010, <http://dawn.com/2012/06/10/smokers-corner-projecting-the-bizarre/>.

36 *Dawn*, “Forced conversions hike Pakistani minorities’ fears”, March 28th 2012, <http://dawn.com/2012/03/28/forced-conversions-hike-pakistan-minorities-fears/>.

## Annex 1

### Complete text of the Articles of the Pakistan Penal Code of 1860 dealing with blasphemy<sup>37</sup>

#### Article 295B

##### Defiling, etc., of Holy Qur'an:

Whoever wilfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Qur'an or of an extract therefrom or uses it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life.

#### Article 295C

##### Use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet:

Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to [a] fine.

#### Article 298A

##### Use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of holy personages:

Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of any wife (Ummul Mumineen), or members of the family (Ahle-bait), of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him), or any of the righteous Caliphs (Khulafa-e-Rashideen) or companions (Sahaaba) of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years, or with [a] fine, or with both.

#### Article 298B

##### Misuse of epithets, descriptions and titles, etc., reserved for certain holy personages or places:

(1) Any person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves 'Ahmadis' or by any other name who by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation[)]-

- (a) refers to or addresses, any person, other than a Caliph or companion of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as "Ameer-ul-Mumineen", "Khalifatul-Mumineen", "Khalifa-tul-Muslimeen", "Sahaabi" or "Razi Allah Anho";
- (b) refers to, or addresses, any person, other than a wife of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as "Ummul-Mumineen";
- (c) refers to, or addresses, any person, other than a member of the family "Ahle-bait" of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as "Ahle-bait"; or
- (d) refers to, or names, or calls, his place of worship a "Masjid"; shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years, and shall also be liable to [a] fine.

(2) Any person of the Qadiani group or Lahori group (who call themselves "Ahmadis" or by any other name) who by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation refers to the mode or form of call to prayers followed by his faith as "Azan", or recites Azan as used by the Muslims, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years, and shall also be liable to [a] fine.

#### Article 298C

##### Person of Qadiani group, etc., calling himself a Muslim or preaching or propagating his faith:

Any person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves 'Ahmadis' or by any other name), who directly or indirectly, poses himself as a Muslim, or calls, or refers to, his faith as Islam, or preaches or propagates his faith, or invites others to accept his faith, by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations, or in any manner whatsoever outrages the religious feelings of Muslims shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years and shall also be liable to [a] fine.

<sup>37</sup> Text from <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/1860/actXL-Vof1860.html>.

**Annex 2**

**Survey of public opinion in Pakistan about the blasphemy laws and the assassination of Punjab governor Salman Taseer**

**Disclaimer:**

The information gathered with the help of this questionnaire is exclusively for academic purposes and does not constitute any formal basis for change in the blasphemy laws of the Constitution of Pakistan. The purpose of this study is only to get a sense of public opinion regarding the events related to the assassination of Punjab governor Salman Taseer and the subsequent debate about the blasphemy laws that ensued in the Pakistani media, to ascertain their role. Furthermore, should you feel uncomfortable about answering any of the listed questions, please leave them blank. The study and the researcher are strongly committed to the confidentiality of the respondents. Therefore, for the purpose of this particular study, only the following information is required:

**Gender:**

**Age:**

**Name of your university:**

**Background:**

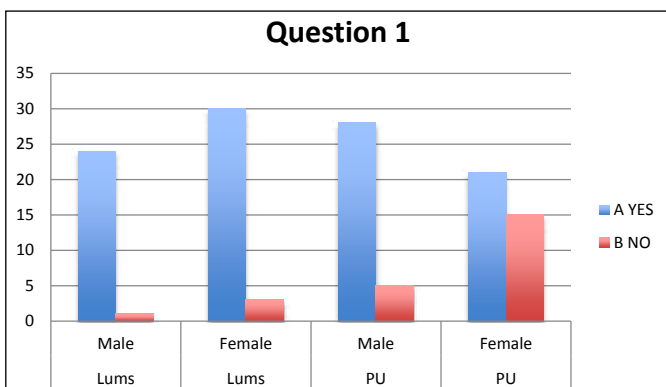
**A. Rural**

**B. Urban**

**1. Are you aware of the blasphemy laws in the Constitution of Pakistan?**

**A. Yes**

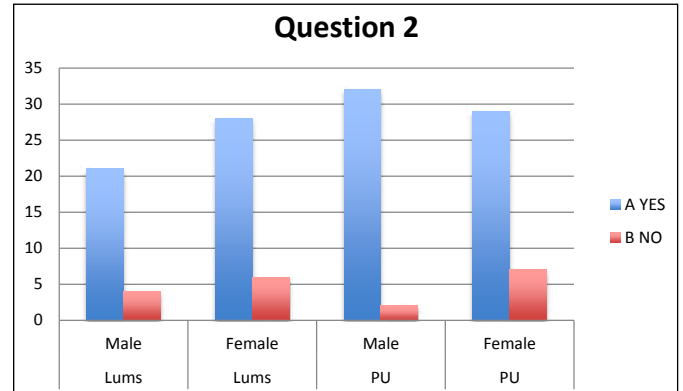
**B. No**



**2. Did you follow the news coverage of the assassination of Punjab governor Salman Taseer and the subsequent debate about the blasphemy laws in the Pakistani media?**

**A. Yes**

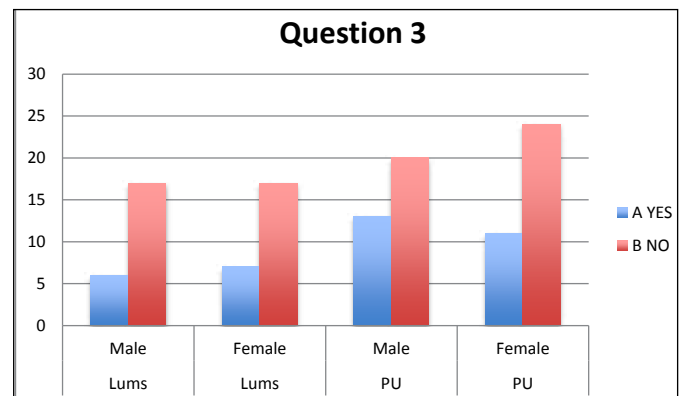
**B. No**



**3. In your opinion, did the Pakistani media do a good job of improving public opinion in the aftermath of the assassination of Punjab governor Salman Taseer and the debate on blasphemy laws that ensued thereafter?**

**A. Yes**

**B. No**

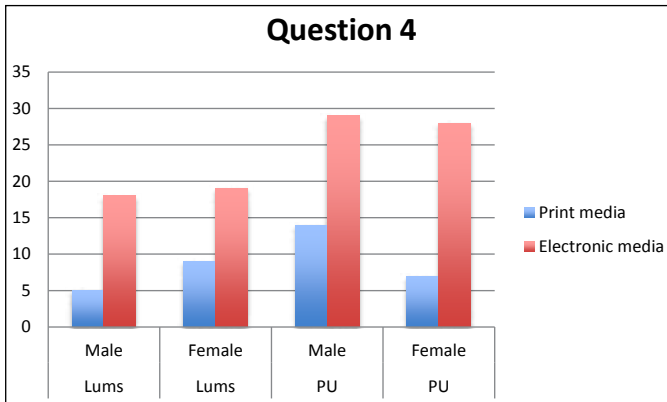


**3a. How, in your opinion, did the media play a positive role in the debate about freedom of speech and blasphemy laws? (Answer if you replied with an A.)**

**3b. What, in your opinion, constituted the negative impact by the media in the debate about freedom of speech and the blasphemy laws? (Answer if you replied with a B.)**

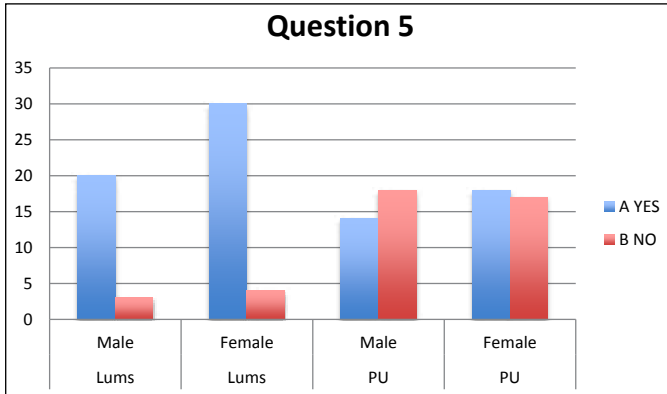
4. Which form of media in Pakistan played a better role in shaping public opinion with regard to the assassination of Punjab governor Salman Taseer and the debate on the blasphemy laws?

- A. Print media (newspapers)
- B. Electronic media (TV channels)



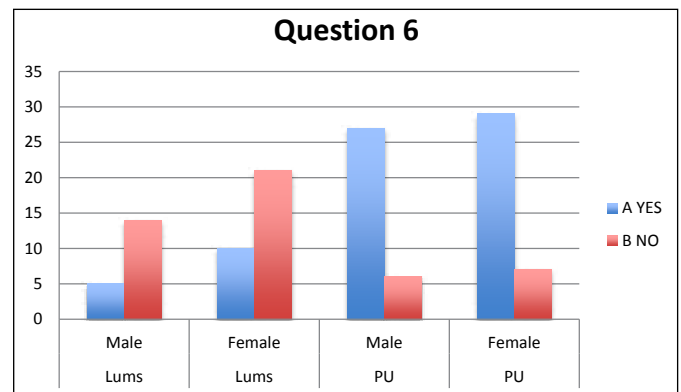
5. Do you condemn the assassination of Punjab governor Salman Taseer?

- A. Yes
- B. No



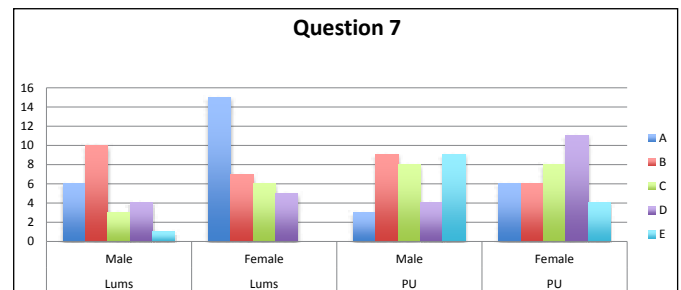
6. Do you think that Punjab governor Salman Taseer committed blasphemy by referring to the blasphemy law as a “black law” and by maintaining that “The blasphemy law is not a God-made law. It’s a man-made law. It was made by General Ziaul Haq and the portion about giving a death sentence was put in by Nawaz Sharif. So it’s a law which gives an excuse to extremists and reactionaries to target weak people and minorities” (published in *The Express Tribune*, January 5th 2011).

- A. Yes
- B. No



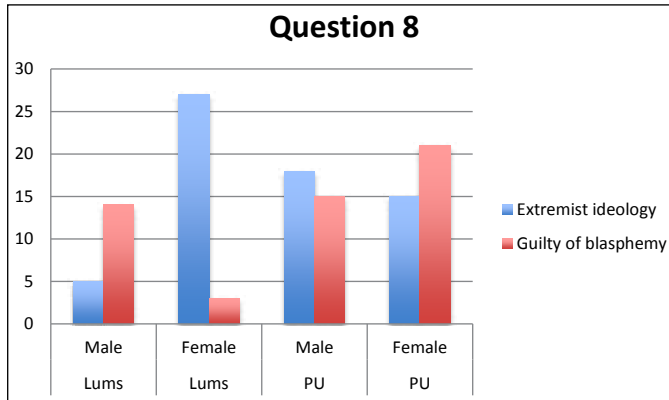
7. How would you categorise the support within Pakistani society for the killer of the Punjab governor with regard to the ethical development of Pakistani society?

- A. Extremely disturbing
- B. Disturbing
- C. Undecided
- D. Favourable
- E. Extremely favourable



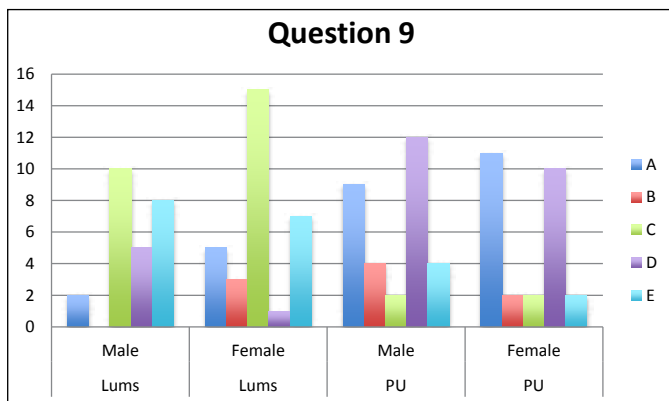
8. What do you think was the key reason for the assassination of the Punjab governor?

- A. Extremist ideology and intolerance
- B. Punjab governor guilty of blasphemy



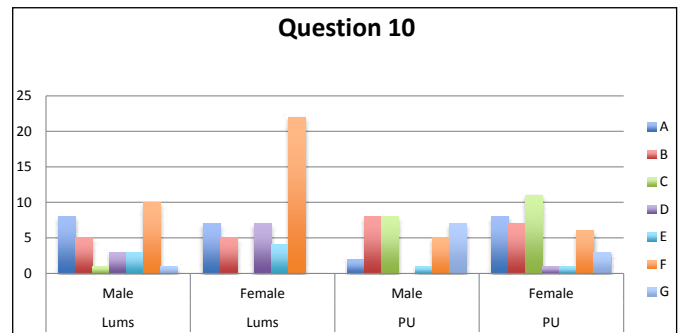
9. What developments were worthy of approval in the aftermath of the assassination?

- A. Role of the media
- B. Role of civil society
- C. Incarceration and conviction of the killer
- D. All of the above
- E. None of the above



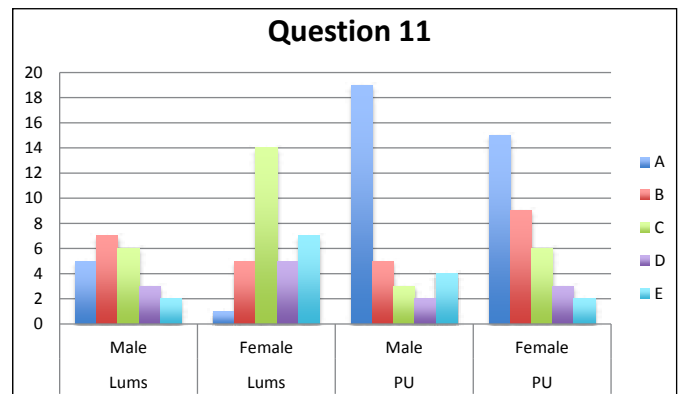
10. What developments, in your opinion, were worth condemning in the aftermath of the assassination?

- A. Rallies to celebrate the death of the Punjab governor
- B. Praise for the killer
- C. Political wrangling and scandals inhibiting efforts to tackle extremism and reform the blasphemy laws
- D. Lawyers' support for the killer
- E. Clerics' calls for the death of all blasphemers and Aasia Bibi imprisoned on charges of blasphemy
- F. All of the above
- G. None of the above



11. Do you think that, based on Islamic theology, blasphemy laws are justified?

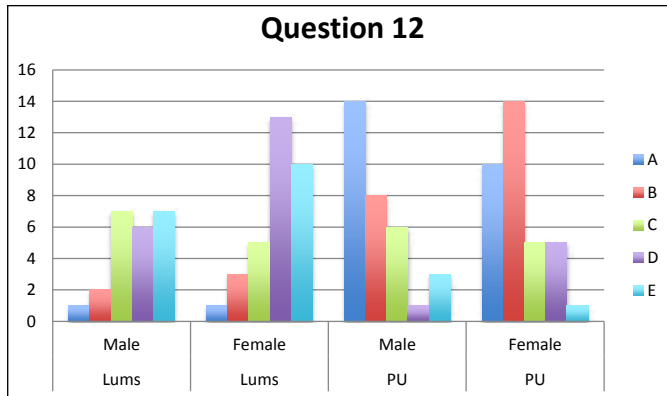
- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Undecided
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree





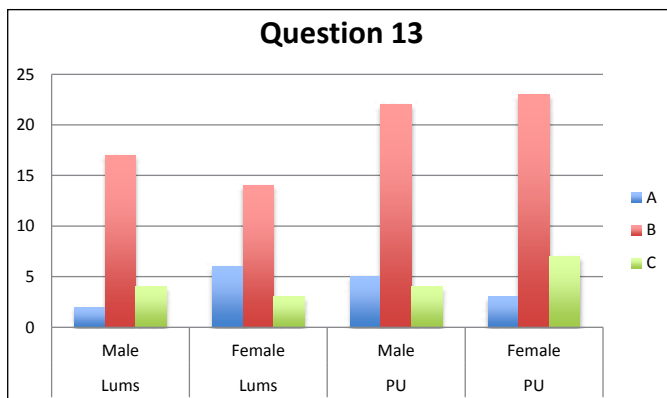
**12.** Do you think that the blasphemy laws, as part of the Constitution of Pakistan, represent the true essence of Islam, and thus do you approve of the laws?

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Undecided
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree



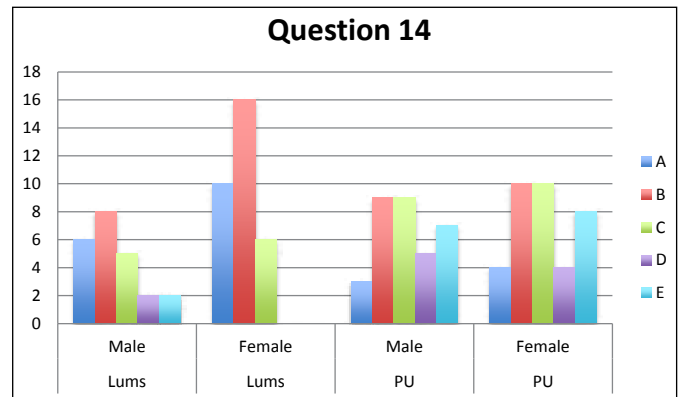
**13.** What, in your opinion, is the origin of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan?

- A. British Raj
- B. Government of Pakistan
- C. All of the above



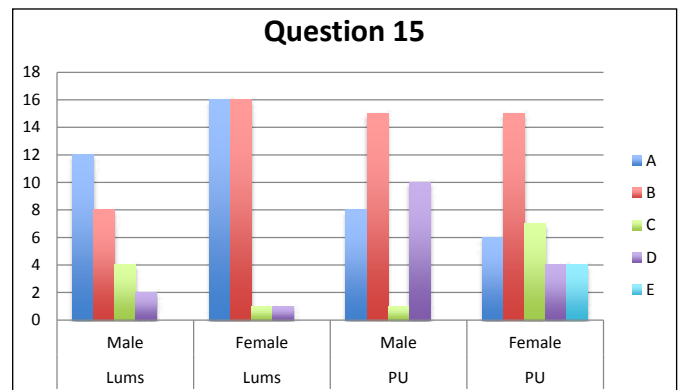
**14.** Would you consider the blasphemy laws in Pakistan as man made and thus subject to change?

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Undecided
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree



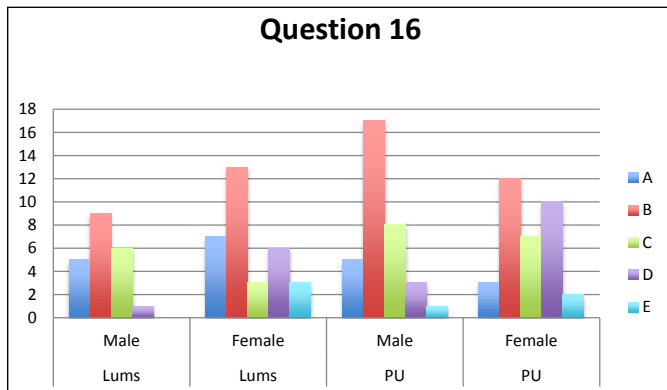
**15.** Would you hold that the blasphemy laws in Pakistan are misused?

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Undecided
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree



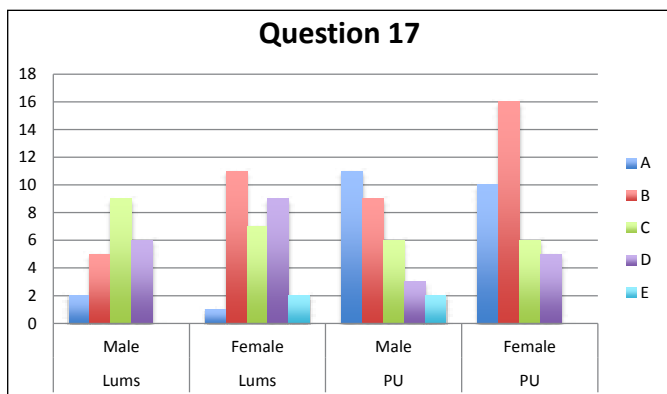
16. Would you agree that in Pakistan the culture of reverence towards religious figures is substantial and well founded?

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Undecided
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree



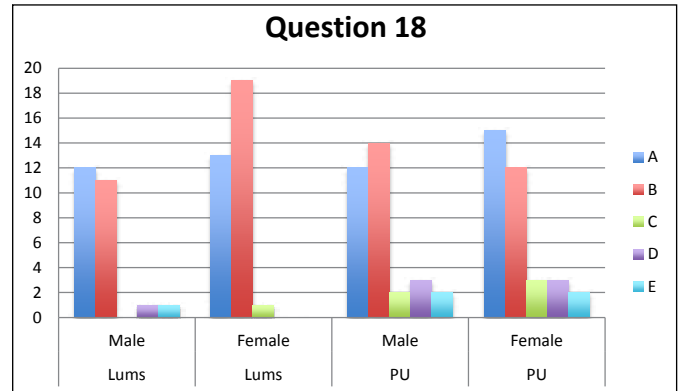
17. Do you think that, given the culture of reverence towards religious figures in Pakistan, there is a need for blasphemy laws?

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Undecided
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree



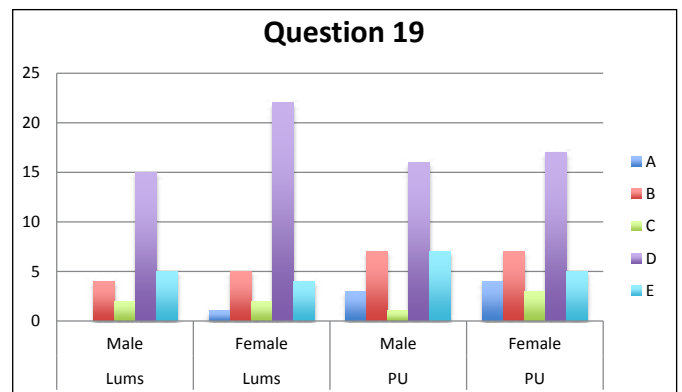
18. Would you agree that freedom of speech is an integral part of a free and democratic society?

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Undecided
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree



19. Would you agree that freedom of speech should have no limitations?

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Undecided
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree

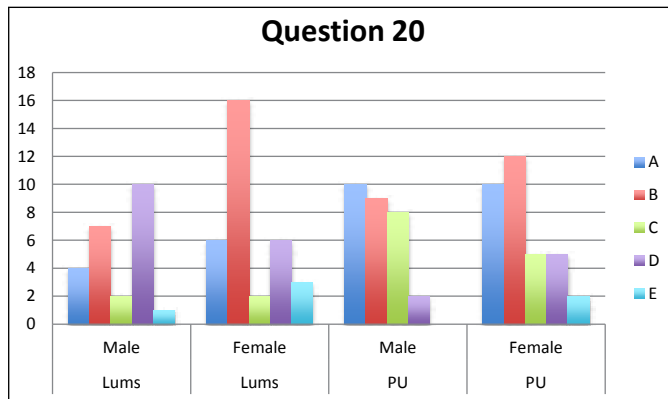


19a. What is the advantage of having no limitations on freedom of speech in a country? (Answer only if you replied with A. or B.)

19b. What kind of limitations to freedom of speech do you think are ethical in a democratic and free society? (Answer if you replied with D. or E.)

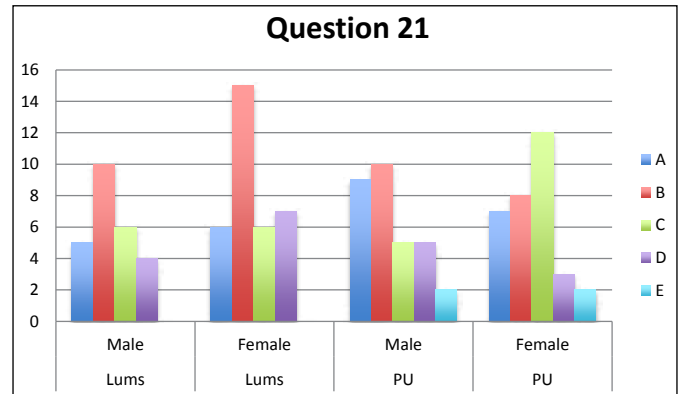
**20.** What is your opinion of the following view: Because there is a sense of hopelessness towards the country's political, economic and security problems, people in Pakistan tend to react strongly in discussions and matters of religion.

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Undecided
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree



**21.** Do you think Pakistanis need a renewed and rigorous commitment to freedom of speech in order to break the mindset of religious nationalism and break the hold of the security and political elite on the flow of information?

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Undecided
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly disagree



**20a.** If you answered **A.** or **B.**, what, in your opinion, is the reason for the reactionary mindset?

**20b.** If you answered **D.** or **E.**, please explain further.