

## **BLOODY DAY IN PAKISTAN IN THE NAME OF LOVE FOR THE PROPHET**

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The excerpt of the film “Innocence of Muslims” that was broadcasted on *Youtube* at the beginning of September provoked an outburst of anger across the Arab-Muslim world. Starting out in Egypt and Libya, this movement brought hundreds of thousands of demonstrators out into the streets of Casablanca, Tunis, Kabul and Jakarta. The most affected country was however Pakistan. Extremely violent riots left around twenty dead and several hundreds wounded. They also resulted in the destruction of dozens of official buildings, shops, bank branches, movie theatres, gas stations and vehicles. The government even decreed Friday September 21 as a national holiday dubbed “Ishq-e-Rasool Day”, in the hope of avoiding excesses by allowing the population to peacefully celebrate its “love for the Prophet”. Beyond the issues of blasphemy or of the clash of civilizations, these events shed a new light on the structural problem of political violence and the inability of the government to provide an adequate response.

As a demonstration of country’s ambiguities in the face of violence, one should note that some influential political leaders publicly hailed the mobilization of the people during Ishq-e-Rasool Day. The Secretary General of the Assembly of Islamic Clergy (Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam), Maulana Fazal-ur-Rahman, who is also a channel between the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) of President Ali Zardari and the Islamist movements, congratulated the nation for the success of the demonstrations. Ghulam Ahmad Bilour, the Federal Railways minister and an influential member of the National Awami Party in Peshawar, offered a reward of 100,000 dollars to anyone who killed the producer of the “Innocence of Muslims”. Although the government distanced itself from these statements, they attest the incestuous relations between leading politicians and the most extremist circles of the Pakistani society.

### **An endemic problem of the Pakistani society**

Sectarian and political violence, as well as rioting, are part of everyday life of all major Pakistani cities. In this context, it is not surprising that the most damaging consequences of Ishq-e-Rasool Day were recorded in Karachi, Sindh province’s capital and financial powerhouse of the country. On average, there have been 122 violent demonstrations each year in Karachi since 1988 and more than 1,700 persons have been victims of targeted assassinations there since the beginning of 2012. The merciless war fought by political parties allied to criminal gangs for controlling sensitive neighborhoods explains this chronic instability. In addition, the city’s delicate ethnic, religious, economic and political balances have been upset by the influx of tens of thousands of Pashto refugees driven by flooding and war to flee the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

The government, which promised to “ensure peace in Karachi at any cost”, blames this violence on Taliban terrorists who are said to have infiltrated among Pashto refugees. The deterioration of the socio-economic situation and the modification of the city’s ethnic and religious structures have indeed strengthened Islamist parties, who played a primordial role in the last wave of violence. Despite the fierce statements of President Zardari and of former Interior Minister Rehman Malik, authorities have shown their total inability to manage a city riddled by poverty and corruption. On the contrary, the government has always chosen to give in to the most demands, in particular by strengthening blasphemy laws that have already led to many excesses against the Christian and Shiite minorities of the country.

### **Uncontrollable outburst of anger against the United States**

This pre-existing climate of violence explains the outcome of Karachi riots. Incidents however also took place in the rest of the country, including in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, where some Islamist parties called upon their supporters to take part in mass gatherings over insults against the Prophet. Aware of the risks posed to American diplomatic representations, economic interests and citizens residing in the country, the U.S. embassy purchased advertising on local television stations. Unfortunately, images of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton condemning the “blasphemous film” with subtitles in Urdu were not sufficient to restore the image of the United States in the minds of the majority of Pakistanis.

In Libya, the assassination of Ambassador Chris Stevens by an Islamist militia aroused the anger of a population which remained favorably disposed toward the United States after the fall of the Gaddafi regime. In Pakistan, “Innocence of Muslims” appeared while the anti-American feeling had swept irrepressibly across society. Relations between Islamabad and Washington have steadily deteriorated since 2008 and the intensification of the drone strikes in the FATA. The United States criticizes the lack of effort by their uncomfortable ally in the fight against terrorism, while Pakistan in turn accuses the United States of systematically violating its national sovereignty. The strikes carried out in isolated villages and the subsequent civilian losses have also heightened the feeling of hostility towards America.

The slightest pretext was thus sufficient to set off an uncontrollable outburst of violence. Given that the country has been undergoing a very serious political crisis ever since the Supreme Court removed Prime Minister Yousouf Raza Gillani from his post in June 2012, the government lacked minimum credibility to avoid such explosion. On the contrary, appeals to demonstrate peacefully were perceived as an admission of weakness toward the United States. With an image seriously damaged by successive corruption scandals and by the catastrophic social and economic situation, the government is still perceived as a vassal of the Washington by the great majority of the population. In this context, the “Day of love for the Prophet” was received by the extremist movements as an open invitation to pour out their hatred for the West, and, above all, to show publicly their influence on society outside any democratic processes.