

Sir Salman in the sea of blasphemy

By Irfan Husain,
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The decision to knight Salman Rushdie, announced in Queen Elizabeth II's birthday honours list on 15 June 2007 [1] has provoked a vigorous reaction in Pakistan. As protests continue, they are descending from the genuine to the self-serving. While there no more public demonstrations, politicians are jumping on the bandwagon in an attempt to out-fatwa [2] each other.

Arbab Rahim, the Sindh chief minister, was at least original when he announced he was surrendering [3] the British awards given to his grandfather in 1937, and to his uncle in 1945. Considering that these worthies are no longer with us to voice an opinion, this was gesture of dubious value. In fact, I doubt very much that Tony Blair is greatly troubled by this post-facto, post-mortem rejection of two minor medals the colonial government handed out by the cartload to minor tribal chiefs and feudal landowners. Rahim also urged [4] Benazir Bhutto to similarly renounce the knighthood conferred upon Shahnawaz Bhutto, her grandfather, accusing her of not being sufficiently angered by this "insult to all Muslims".

At the same time, a group of Islamabad traders decided to increase the stakes by announcing a 10-million *rupee* (around 80,000 pounds) reward for Rushdie's decapitation. The leader of this association, Ajmal Baluch [6], also called for a boycott of British goods. A ban on bootlegged Scotch would certainly hit Pakistan's elite very hard.

The book and the brotherhood

Chaudhary Muhammad Afzal Sahi, the speaker of the Punjab assembly [7], went one better than Ijazul Haq, the federal minister for religious affairs, when he said he would personally kill a blasphemer, stating: "I am a Muslim first, and the speaker of the assembly later." Haq had attracted brief worldwide attention by announcing that the Rushdie honour [8] justified a suicide-bombing targeting him. He has since [9] said he was misquoted, no doubt due to his impending visit to Britain.

A more personal attack against the author of *The Satanic Verses* [10] came from Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain [11], president of the ruling Muslim League coalition. Hussain, speaking in the national assembly [12] on 21 June, accused Tony Blair of personally being against Muslims, going on to denounce Rushdie in these words: "Salman Rushdie is a madman. He is a thief and a scoundrel... To award him is an insult to Muslims..." For good measure, he advised Rushdie to drop "Salman" from his name as this was a "sacred name".

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Also in **openDemocracy** on the award of a knighthood to the novelist Salman Rushdie:

Lisa Appignanesi, "Salman Rushdie's honour [5]"
(19 June 2007)

Despite these and other harsh words being bandied about by Muslim politicians, the issue seems to have petered out without any serious street protests or violence. Clearly, it does not resonate strongly among either the mosques or the mobs. One reason is that the Islamic parties are busy trying to pull Pervez Musharraf [13] down through the street protests centring around the chief justice's suspension. They do not want their supporters to be diverted by a non-issue that would be easy for the government to whip up as a diversion at this critical time.

Also, nearly two decades have passed since the appearance of *The Satanic Verses*, and an entire generation has grown up without any idea of what the fuss is all about. The book has been banned in Pakistan for all this time, not that too many people read it when it first appeared, despite its presence on the bestseller list for months.

In fact, one of the curious facts about *The Satanic Verses* is that none of those burning copies in Birmingham and Bombay in 1989 had read it; but neither had most of those defending Rushdie. One critic wrote that this was the most sold, least read book in his lifetime.

Two worlds, two worldviews

Although I am a big fan of Rushdie's work [14], I must confess that I was unable to get beyond a hundred pages of *The Satanic Verses*. As a result, I still haven't read the bits that offended millions of Muslims around the world. But to give readers an idea of why the references to the Prophet Mohammed [14]'s wives caused such a furore, the law in Pakistan demands that his name must be followed by the Qur'anic formula "peace be upon him". A newspaper editor omitting it can be prosecuted under the country's notorious blasphemy laws [15].

A powerful belief in the prophet's goodness is ingrained in Islamic teachings. This is extended to his family as well. So when Rushdie gave women bearing the names of some of the prophet's wives the role of prostitutes in a dream sequence, most Muslims were unwilling to accept his right as a novelist to invent such an offensive narrative. Most believing Muslims, raised as they are in deeply conservative societies where such perceived blasphemy is unthinkable, are convinced that western governments are complicit when they refuse to take action against writers like Rushdie.

In fact, Sir Salman's case is made worse in their view as he was born a Muslim, and appears to have turned against his own faith. In certain interpretations of the Qur'an and the *sharia*, apostasy is punishable by death. To compound the perceived insult to their religion, Muslims now see the author actually being rewarded for his blasphemy and apostasy. This simply confirms their view that the west is against Islam and Muslims.

Indeed, the whole Rushdie episode emphasises once again the deep division between the western, secular, postmodern worldview, and the deeply religious Muslim world where the Qur'an is the literal word of God. When Muslims were incensed in 2006 over the Danish cartoons [15], westerners, long accustomed to seeing their holiest icons being pilloried by

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satirists and cartoonists, simply could not understand where all the anger was coming from. Muslims from Egypt to Indonesia had never seen their beloved prophet being caricatured, and reacted with fury. But Muslims who have spent much of their lives in the west ought to have been able to ignore the cartoons as mildly offensive expressions of a different viewpoint.

Unfortunately, in the post 9/11 world, we are all being forced to take sides. George W Bush's words will live long after he has left the White House: "If you aren't with us, you are against us."

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[7] <http://www.pap.gov.pk/>

[8] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/06/16/nhons116.xml>

[9] <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article1951462.ece>

[10] <http://www.word-power.co.uk/catalogue/0963270702>

[11] <http://www.storyofpakistan.com/person.asp?perid=P086>

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