



WHY DID A TRUSTED BODYGUARD TURN FANATICAL ASSASSIN?

By murdering the politician he was supposed to protect, Mumtaz Qadri has become a hero for Islamists, reports **Omar Waraich**

It isn't difficult to find the house of Pakistan's most famous killer. At every corner in this maze of packed streets, shopkeepers and street vendors cheerfully gesture directions to the birthplace of Mumtaz Qadri, the police bodyguard who pumped 27 bullets into Salmaan Taseer, the Governor of Punjab, for his opposition to the country's blasphemy laws. A mere month ago, Qadri was little known even in this modest neighbourhood. Now, he is chillingly vaunted as a hero of Islam in much of Pakistan.

Nowhere is his newly discovered status plainer than outside the crowded, 32-room, multi-storey compound where Qadri lived before his arrest with his wife, three month old son, and

70 other relatives. Vast billboards are mounted on the side, depicting him as a holy warrior astride a white horse, between images of Islam's two holiest sites, in Mecca and Medina. A string of banners are festooned over the narrow street, paying tributes to his "bravery" and "greatness". One poster declares the 26-year-old "the Prophet's policeman".

In a small office near the family's home, Qadri's brothers receive a flurry of guests. Some arrive beaming, offering congratulations. Others solemnly embrace the men, reassure them that their brother will soon be released. The office belongs to Qadri's eldest brother, Dilpazeer Awan, a squat, unsmiling man.

"We were proud of our brother; we are proud of our brother, and we will remain proud of our brother," says



Salmaan Taseer, the Governor of Punjab was shot 27 times by Qadri

Awan, with his arms tightly crossed. "Not just us, but the entire Islamic world is proud of him." Since the assassination, the family's fortunes have soared. Hardline groups have showered them with gifts and cash. The Sunni Tehreek, a militant group spawned by the so-called moderate

Barelvi sect, has given them a million rupees (£ 7,400). Another group holds thousands-strong rallies, hailing Qadri's crime.

The family insists Qadri didn't even whisper his murderous intent. "I had no idea what was going to happen," says Awan. "I was astonished to see Mumtaz's face on TV." Qadri, the youngest of six brothers and four sisters, apparently never discussed Taseer or his opposition to the law. "We're not political people," Awan says. Ironically, the family traditionally voted for Taseer's Pakistan People's Party, before shifting allegiances to Sheikh Rasheed, a local cigar-chomping military favourite.

Awan says: "Qadri was very committed to religion, from a young age." On Fridays, he worshipped at the Masjid-e-Amna, where he fell under the sway of a young charismatic preacher, Hanif Qureshi, whose face adorns billboards next to Qadri's. Briefly snatched by the police, he's now free on bail.

It was after absorbing Qureshi's sermons, the police say, that Qadri was inspired to act. The preacher's DVDs are freely available in the area, for 40p. "The punishment for blasphemy is death!" he bellows in one. In others, he bursts into animated song, chanting praises of the prophet, with a teeth-baring smile, as the tail of his black turban flaps about. But this is no fundamentalist. He fiercely rows with hardliners from the rival Deobandi and Wahabi sects. The Taliban have attacked the Sufi shrines he reveres.

Blasphemy, however, is a deep concern. It's the one issue on which a formidable array of religious groups – from the Shia to pro-Taliban types, who find it impossible to pray together and are partial to violent clashes – have found a common cause. Taseer's opposition to the blasphemy laws,



Mumtaz Qadri, left, sits in a police van after his arrest. Above, his relatives look on as Islamists demonstrate their support for him EPA

which fuel the persecution of Pakistan's minorities, was twisted and cast as an act of blasphemy.

Many blame Pakistan's sensationalist news channels for blurring the distinction and whipping up hostility towards Taseer. Chief among the accused is Meher Bokhari, a volatile political talk-show host famed for her high-decibel interrogation style. In December, she interviewed Taseer. Even by Bokhari's standards, the hostility was striking.

"It's said that you're doing this for point scoring," she asked. Minutes later, she flourishes a fatwa denouncing Taseer, deferentially quoting from it. The day of Taseer's funeral, Bokhari opened her show by comparing Qadri to a Muslim "hero" from the 1920s, who killed a Hindu man for publishing a blasphemous book.

Bokhari denies any wrongdoing, and insists she was presenting facts. Taseer's family feel otherwise. The first show, says daughter Shehrbano Taseer, was "plain incitement to murder". The second, she says, was a "senseless condonation" of it. Bokhari again is no fundamentalist. She doesn't cover her hair, dresses in western clothing and has vociferously denounced the Taliban.

Those willing to speak out against Taseer's assassination are a forlorn minority, most visibly drawn from a well-heeled English-speaking backgrounds, or remnants of the Pakistani left. Mainstream Pakistan has largely slipped into quiet assent. The government has distanced itself from Taseer's position, with a parade of ministers now breathlessly vowing not to touch the law.

Part of the explanation lies in religious guilt. "Articulating love for the

Prophet is a way people purge their guilt," says analyst Mosharraf Zaidi. Some is to do with a cultural ambivalence, where people are easy with western influence until it is perceived to cross a red line. Like

Bokhari, many perceive efforts to reform the law as western-inspired.

What would Qadri's brothers do if they came across someone accused of blasphemy? I gingerly ask. Would they too resort to murder? "Are you a Muslim?" four of them angrily leap to demand. Yes. "Then, what would you do?" they demand in chorus, led by the second youngest, who speaks for the first time. He is a policeman, and his name is, Muhammad Taseer. Any alleged crime is matter for the courts, surely. "No!" says, Awan. "Allah and his prophet are enough for him!"