

## Regarding Doctor Shahid Masood and a Few Ramblings on Pakistani Media

By: Ayesha Ijaz Khan

I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Shahid Masood in October 2001, shortly after the 9/11 attacks on The World Trade Centre, and coincidentally, just as ARY had started its London operations. PJ Mir already had his own show and Shahid Masood, it appeared to me, was vying for one.

The topic almost routinely under discussion in those inaugural weeks was understandably 9/11. I was asked to contribute as a guest panellist. Since I was a US-trained lawyer, I would be commenting on the legal ramifications of handing Osama over to US authorities. It seems like a pointless conversation now, but way back in the autumn of 2001, Pakistan was trying its level best to use its influence with and impress upon the Taliban the wisdom in handing Osama over and sparing the entire population of Afghanistan, northern areas of Pakistan and eventually the people of Iraq the misery of US wrath.

The panel discussion had four guests. Myself, Sherry Rehman (who had not at that point announced her political ambitions although the underlying signs were unambiguous), Dr. Shahid Masood and a fourth gentleman whose name I unfortunately do not remember so let's just call him Mr. X. Clearly, Mr. X and I were the nobodies on the panel; Sherry and Dr. Shahid the stars. Who could have predicted then that seven years on Sherry would be our Information Minister and Dr. Shahid her PTV Chairman!

The show ran unfocused. Electronic media was just starting out and there was much confusion. Dr. Shahid was not initially meant to be a guest on the panel as he was "in house" but I soon realized that he filled in whenever a guest cancelled at the last minute. I am not sure whose place he was taking that day, but it soon became clear that the good doctor was ready and willing to talk about anything under the sun. So he was "an expert" on anthrax that October day.

As the show progressed, Mr. X and I got little air time for it was survival of the loudest. I, somewhat soft-spoken, was cut off in mid-sentence by Sherry, hoping that PJ would intervene and let me have my full say, but no such luck. Sherry carried on unabated till she found her match in Dr. Shahid. PJ posed the anthrax question, which Dr. Shahid dismissed instantly and carried on talking about what he wanted to talk about, the conspiracy against Muslims. Mr. X, forgive me for not remembering his name, described himself as a British Muslim and in his pre and post-program conversations seemed more distressed about the Turkish hijab-clad women who were denied admission into university than he was up to speed with Pakistan's potential role in the war on terror. Mid-way through the program, PJ decided that none of his guests were up to the mark and so he called Lord Nazir and proceeded to talk about Kashmir.

In 2001, it was not fashionable to seek legal opinions on television shows so I had to wait till after the show to say what I wanted to say. Mr. X had left as soon as the show ended, annoyed, I think. But Dr. Shahid and Sherry lingered on, as did I, waiting for my ride to make it to the inconveniently located Acton studio. It was then that I discovered that Dr. Shahid was not a Ph.D. as I thought he may have been, but a medical doctor. Later, I discovered that all the doctors in our media are medical doctors and not Ph.D.s as they may want us to believe, whether it is Aamir Liaquat or Shaista Wahidi or of course Shahid Masood. Why would one want to retain the doctor title when one is not treating patients but a working journalist is beyond me, but I suppose its all part of leaving the right impression, or perhaps better said in Urdu, *aks dalna*.

Sherry had left the studio and I was still waiting for my ride. As I waited, Dr. Shahid and I continued our conversation. Dr. Shahid, I realized quickly from speaking to him, had an extremely right-wing bent of mind. The conversation drifted to Partition, and then Jinnah, to which I heard the most bizarre remark from Dr. Shahid. "Jinnah was a Parsi," he said. Not that I think there is anything wrong with the Zoroastrian faith, but Dr. Shahid was clearly misinformed and I felt I must set him straight.

"Jinnah was a Muslim. He married a Parsi woman, but he was Muslim," I told him matter-of-factly.

"No, Jinnah was a Parsi, I think," Dr. Shahid still doubted my knowledge, and possibly his own.

“Jinnah was born in an Isamili household,” I told him, thinking perhaps that Dr. Shahid may be confusing one minority group for another, odd as it sounds, “but, as an adult, chose to espouse mainstream Islam.” Dr. Shahid appeared confused at my statement and did not respond but looked on disbelievingly. Shortly after that, I left the studio but found it very difficult to fathom that Jinnah, whose name appears in the greatest Muslim leaders of all time, who created a homeland for millions of Muslims, would be mistaken as a non-Muslim by anyone, leave alone a Pakistani. I had met Pakistanis before who belittled Jinnah’s contribution or doubted his wisdom but never before had I met a Pakistani who actually thought that he was not Muslim. Dr. Shahid sure was special.

Short as our interaction was, I never forgot Dr. Shahid’s words and was hence never able to take him seriously. When he got his own show on ARY, I found it little different from Bill O’Reilly’s The O’Reilly Factor on FOX News. He was good at only one thing—sensationalizing issues, most often in the context of Islam versus the West or religious Muslims versus secular Muslims. Certainly there are issues in both those areas, but Dr. Shahid’s shows, barring occasional exceptions, lacked cogent analysis or appropriate cross-questioning, and played only to peoples’ emotions. I was therefore quite surprised when GEO took him on in a senior capacity. But I suppose sensationalism works and ratings attest to it.

In any case, when after a relatively short stint at GEO, Dr. Shahid has (literally) arrived at PTV, I am not in the least bit surprised that Dr. Shahid took the job but do wonder if the government knows what they have gotten themselves into. Previous PTV chairpersons were at least well-read individuals who knew Pakistan’s history empirically. Of course PTV has always towed the government line but many PTV-groomed journalists have cleverly and intelligently pushed limits to get closer to the truth. I am afraid that Dr. Shahid is not motivated by this journalistic ethos and his very opinionated (*meray mutabiq*) and almost jingoistic style is bound to clash with the government’s sooner or later, and for all the wrong reasons.

PTV has trained some of Pakistan’s best journalists, people like Talat Hussain of Aaj TV, and so many others. In spite of the fact that PTV’s approach was biased and skewed, it still had some visionary leadership that promoted learning and was meritorious enough to throw up talent that was later poached by the private channels. But with Dr. Shahid, objectivity and competence may no longer matter at all as it will be my way (*meray muttabiq*) or the highway.

Looking at it another way, in the past, for those Pakistanis interested in making their mark through electronic media there was no option but to go the PTV route. Therefore, by and large, those who opted for PTV were not doing so out of any loyalty to the establishment, but because that was the only outlet for their career aspirations. But today, with a mushrooming of private channels, choosing to go the PTV route, at least in as senior a capacity as Dr. Shahid’s, raises serious red flags with respect to his intentions and credibility.

In the run-up to his PTV offer, Dr. Shahid did a series on army generals who had held important portfolios but were now keen to speak out against the regime. The idea was a good one, for anyone who believes in transparency must acknowledge that the ways of the military and their post-retirement affiliations often go un-scrutinized. Yet, Dr. Shahid it appears was not interested in seeking the truth but only concerned with the spin, ensuring that he got the guests on his show only because he failed to cross-question them about their own potentially dubious roles in the past. By only showing one side of these critical matters that deserve the utmost scrutiny and objectivity, Dr. Shahid sent the right message to the establishment: I am danger man, court me or fear me.

His approach was structured to achieve the maximum personal gain for himself, not for his viewers. And in that he has been highly successful. His salary, variously quoted at Rs. 700,000 to Rs. 1,000,000 a month may be well deserved if the journalist in question is exceptionally good and working at a private network, but for PTV to pay that kind of money on taxpayers’ expense at a time when poverty worldwide and specifically in Pakistan is reaching new heights is in extremely poor taste. There is little doubt in my mind that this money, which rightfully belongs to the citizens of Pakistan, is being used to fund a man known for his ability to spin whose job it will be to work against the interests of the very people who are forced to fund him. The silver lining to all this is that it may not matter as much because the private media has come

a long way. With competent journalists like Talat Hussain, Kashif Abassi, Nusrat Javed and Mushtaq Minhas around, perhaps the damage that Dr. Shahid can inflict may yet be contained.