

INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS

The embrace of insanity

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The nexus between state identity and religion is always a dangerous link. When citizens are massacred and abused on the status of their religious identity, then the slide into bestiality is no longer a heartbeat away. It is firmly among us. At this point only unmitigated public outrage and a matching state response puts us back in the league of the civilized and therefore, human.

The massacre of Ahmadis in Lahore is not the first event to have exposed fault lines in the crafting of a national identity in Pakistan. The Christian pogrom at Gojra in 2009 where the police provided impunity to the attackers, instead of protection to the victims, did just the same. Equally disturbing is the level and scale of ambiguity from several political parties on the action that governments need to take to protect their citizens.

Of course many voices were raised at the brutal attack on May 28, but a religious party actually had the audacity to exhort minorities to live within their implicitly secondary status in Pakistan. Eleven of them condemned the Punjab leadership for declaring solidarity with the Ahmadis, in an act of state contrition. The parliament rallied eventually to voice their condemnation, but even among the heartland of non-denominational parties from Punjab the reluctance exposed the rot at the heart of the promise. One public official from Punjab actually said on a live public transmission that he could not even remove the banners inciting hate against the Ahmadis. We cannot handle the repercussions of that, he openly confessed. Several politicians from across the political divide held their peace as many retained links to extremist and sectarian parties for their votes, mainly again from Punjab.

This admission of state inability to punish minority-haters is no small event. It reinforces the belief that like the murderers at Gojra, the Ahmadi-killers too will remain unpunished. It tears the mask from the conceit that in Pakistan, despite its contested identity, the government will at least strive to adhere to some of the fundamental rights of equal citizenship enshrined in the Constitution to all minorities.

Of course these notional equalities too were brought into challenge by the 18th Constitutional Amendment, which despite its welcome thrust at restoring many entitlements, including the right for minorities to worship "freely" reversed some critical ones, by creating an obligation to be Muslim to be president or prime minister. This clearly states that according to the Constitution now, the right to represent Pakistan in its top elected offices can only go to Muslims. Will we one day only allow a particular sect of Muslims to represent Pakistan? Because if we continue on these lines, that is the next logical step on a slippery slope of concessions that began with the Objectives Resolution. No one should be surprised that Shia doctors are the target of another grisly round of planned exterminations in Karachi.

There can be no right to worship "freely", if a community is made to carry its denomination on its sleeve, like a star of David in Nazi Germany. To qualify for a Pakistani passport, that ultimate marker of citizenship, all Pakistanis have to sign a disclaimer confirming each person's commitment to condemn the Ahmadis, and this continues even today. Other than the anti-Ahmadiya Ordinance passed in 1984, which has not been allowed to lapse, the Zia government took several steps to marginalize and persecute this largely educated community. In order to forswear their citizenship, Pakistan has forgone its only Nobel prize-winning laureate, Professor Abdus Salaam, who accepted his physics prize in national dress. Vicious anti-Ahmadiya propaganda was inculcated in classrooms, and there have been many episodes since then, when Ahmadi students were beaten, tortured and hounded on false charges of blasphemy under the black laws introduced in 1986. The list is long and shameful.

Violence gains velocity in an atmosphere of impunity. Quite simply, in the absence of state action, there is little opposition to the narrative that always shifts the debate off-centre from the rights of Pakistani citizens. On all the television channels, religious leaders pop up to cite the primacy of religious law, undeterred and possibly spurred on by the fact that there is no one single codified Islamic law, to subvert the polar axis of the discourse to a privatized view of justice. The rights of citizens as guaranteed under the Constitution get left far behind, while the counter-narrative from civil society and isolated political voices based on recourse in the Constitution, remains un-buttressed by support from the state.

Inertia at a time when moral and political choices have to be made amounts to complicity with turpitude. The government has a unique opportunity to begin incremental reversals of this embrace of insanity. The Constitution, battered as it is, protects minorities very explicitly. While it can certainly do more, even a token adherence to a slew of clauses, particularly Article 20, which allows "each citizen to have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion" can go a long way in shutting down vitriol against citizens who peacefully worship according to their faith. The courts too can and should use these provisions to take suo moto notice of such outrages in the name of religiosity. So far the superior courts have remained silent on the flagrant violation of the Constitution.

In order to confront this political Islamist lobby it would be useful to remind all concerned that in Islam the core idea of justice is seen as the highest moral path to practical proximity to God. As for minorities specifically, the government can exhort detractors by iterating the words and deeds of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) when he says: "Beware! If anyone dare oppress a member of a minority or has usurped his or her rights, or tortured, or took away something forcibly, I will fight on behalf of the minority against the Muslim on the day of Judgement." (Sunaan-I-Abu Dawood).

The government can start by following up on the review of the Blasphemy Laws promised last year. If the debate is given priority, this parliament will provide the majority needed, and it must act fast to block reactionary hangovers from past governments to challenge the emerging national consensus against extremism and terrorism. There can be no equivocation on the truth that militancy, extremism and terrorism are explicitly connected in Pakistan. We wilfully embrace insanity if we provide impunity for persecution of our minorities, if we pamper militancy on the one hand, and denounce it on another. If the provincial budget of the Punjab government grants money to banned terrorist outfits, even if it is to their charitable wings, then we are truly embracing insanity. Because this is no political leader using extremist votes to buy power. This is institutionalized support to the same outfits we have banned.

Such actions will empower the very forces the Pakistan government and army is engaged in fighting at a very heavy cost. It is a negation of the tremendous sacrifice we as a nation are making, of 3000 people killed in the name of terrorism since last year, of the children still living in refugee camps in their own country, of the fear that stalks our streets after thousands of bombs detonate in reprisals to state operations against militants. It is a negation of the democratic, humane identity of Pakistan.

Our post-colonial state identity may be ambiguous, but it is precisely this space that can be used as an opportunity to steer our fragile nation-hood in another direction.

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