

Pakistan: A nation complicit - Ahmedis: silence in Pakistan

Monday 14 June 2010, by [HUSSAIN Zair](#) (Date first published: 11 June 2010).

We cannot possibly claim, as a country, that we value freedom of speech above all else. If we did so, we would choke on the magnitude of our hypocrisy. When, in human history, has the oppression of a country's own citizens paid dividends to either the oppressed or the oppressors?

In recent times, we as Pakistanis have developed not an immunity, but a resistance to the mental strain of terrorism. This is a tragedy of the times, and a triumph of our spirit. Recently, however, we encountered a new horror, one that I hope we shall never inure ourselves to: shame.

On May 28, some 100 Pakistani citizens became the victims of deranged and blasphemous sociopaths and bled out into holy ground. This was horrific, but not in itself shocking. There will always be the frighteningly insane, the desperately misguided, the irredeemably hateful who will inflict death and horror upon innocent human beings, shatter families and snuff out lives in some service to an "ideal" that makes a mockery of the word itself.

What was shocking was the aftermath; the heartbreaking sound of silence.

As our people vehemently decried Facebook as the root of all human malfeasance and rightly protested the shockingly cavalier attitude of Israel towards international law and the sanctity of human life itself, more than a hundred Pakistanis were brutally murdered upon the soil of their own nation.

Nary a whisper.

We as a people are so quick to take to the streets in protest that it may soon be our official national sport. Where, then, were the wildfire demonstrations against those who wage war on Pakistani citizens; the slogans, screamed with a raw hate reserved for the murderers of innocents; the burning effigies of Taliban leaders?

The victims were Ahmedis.

They were Ahmedis and so, when scores of Pakistanis lay dead and dying, when the inability of our state to protect us was thrown into harshest relief, where there should have been a flood of grief and sympathy from every human heart still capable of sensation, there were sparse smatterings of cold and careful condolences.

One of the most difficult concepts to impress upon the minds of outsiders is that Pakistanis and Muslims are not terrorists; we are the victims of a tiny and fringe group of rabid madmen.

But in these killings, we were complicit.

A banner proclaiming Ahmedis the enemies of Islam has hung, obscenely, right outside the Lahore High Court. Pakistani talk show hosts have made thinly veiled suggestions that members of that community are literally unworthy of life, and were severely punished for their hateful and dangerous

comments with precisely zero consequences.

Recently, the major religious parties declared the attacks to be conspiracies in order to provoke debate about the Ahmedi laws. Allow this to sink in for a moment: legitimate political parties in Pakistan, composed of actual adult politicians, are implicitly accusing the Ahmedis of killing a hundred of their own to further a political agenda.

These gut-wrenching incidents are exceptional only in profile; they fit far too neatly into the context of oppression and contempt that we have been party to.

We cannot possibly claim, as a country, that we value freedom of speech above all else. If we did so, we would choke on the magnitude of our hypocrisy. But whereas we had an eruption of full-throated protests from every corner of the country regarding the Facebook fiasco, there were little more than polite murmurs of “steady on now” when full-blown hate speech incited (and continues to incite) people to violence against our own citizens.

Hate speech is not only a weapon, it is a coward’s weapon, urging the desperate and misguided and insane to commit heinous acts that the speaker himself does not have the stomach to commit.

At a time when militant killers rend daily our national fabric, determined to recreate it in their own nightmare vision, at a time when being a Muslim has become a stigma the world over, at the precise moment that we need all the allies and all the goodwill we can garner, we seem hell-bent on the alienation and eventual destruction of a peaceful community that resides within our borders and has never agitated or taken up arms against our state.

When, in human history, has the oppression of a country’s own citizens paid dividends to either the oppressed or the oppressors?

Once the covenant between the state and its citizens break down, it breaks down for everyone. It will not end with the Ahmedis. A haunting quote from Martin Niemöller rings true in today’s Pakistan:

*“They came first for the Communists,
and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist.*

Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew.

Then they came for me,
and by that time no one was left to speak up.”

To intervene for the Ahmedis is not charity, and it is more than common human decency. It is at its core a policy of self-preservation.

If we allow the Ahmedis to be punished for who they are and what they believe, rather than what they do, we have placed our feet upon a blood-slick slope that leads into a frightening place, a place where nobody is ultimately safe because nobody, ultimately, has rights.

Are you so certain you, your friends, your loved ones, your family will not be next? That you will not have to bury your fallen, ringed by the indifference, suspicion and even hatred of your neighbours?

That you will not have to barricade your doors at night against a street, a city, an entire country hostile to you?

How certain are you?

I am far from the first voice to speak against this shameful affair, and I pray I am not the last. This is less than the smallest thing we can do for the victims of a staggering crime: to say that they are human, and our countrymen, and that our heart is broken for their incalculable loss.

Even if they are not part of the green they are surely part of the white, part of Jinnah's Pakistan, more so by a thousand-fold than those that slaughter our people in cold blood.

The majority of Pakistanis are Muslim. With our sensitivity to the systematic violence and oppression in Kashmir, in Gaza, in Gujarat, in a hundred other places, we should know better than most the injustice of being targeted for what we are and what we believe.

For shame.

Zaair Hussain

P.S.

* From the Daily Times:

Source : http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2010611story_11-6-2010_pg3_4

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