

Instrumentalising blasphemy to institutionalise vigilantism

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Shamelessly defending the assassin and upholding the most contended law, religious parties took to streets, last week. Devoid of in-depth knowledge to the ill-effects and wobbly grounds a person could be charged on; mullahs ignorantly espouse the law as if it is a divine commandment. Not for law, in fact they are rallying for state power, as was expressed by couple of their leaders while speaking to the demonstrators. Their obscurant aim is to impose a worst form of Islamic fascism and wipe out all other faiths, freedoms and festivities from Pakistan.

Ever since the inception of blasphemy laws in 1982 and 1984, the list of victims now runs in thousands, of which Salman Taseer was the most recent one. Though, the number of Muslim sufferers is no smaller than non-Muslims but the latter are particularly targeted for their minority status and vulnerable social standing. Asia Bibi is one such case wherefrom the trail of blood reached out to Taseer, an outspoken voice to remove injustices against minorities. Now covered up with other cause, its geneses are rooted into the institutionalized discrimination against minorities making such accusations far too convenient but resulting in disastrous consequences for the victim and his/her family.

While at work, fellow Muslim women workers refused to accept water from Asia Noreen for she was a non-Muslim. Perhaps AyyubeMassih was provoked by a similar comment upon whose death sentence Bishop John Joseph committed suicide in protest in 1998. The gesture is all too common but a prime indicator of ingrained inequity between the two communities. 'To eat, drink or share pots with a non-Muslim tantamounts to profane one's Islamic faith' is the common social norm. The perception of 'being superior just for being a Muslim' immediately relegates all those who profess otherwise to an inferior status. The duplicity is as deep and wide that conversion to Islam is openly celebrated while those who opt out are apostate, punishable by death. What else could be the hierarchy-of-caste and subhuman treatment, we are quick to categorize others for? Wide spread doctrine of Muslim superiority is the main culprit causing this one and countless other problems. Deplorable enough, much of the humiliation and indignity afflicted upon minorities goes unquestioned. Besides myopic mullahs political acceptability also contributed a lion's share. Way beyond thwarting the intents of defilement, the laws prove instrumental in the hands of extremists to oppress and humiliate non-Muslims. In most of the cases, it is no more than a weapon of vengeance or settling personal vendetta. Land and business rivalry or simply an unsuccessful effort to convert someone towards Islam, are the causes commonly reported.

Despite every effort of human rights activists and certain signals of the sitting government there are no signs of improvement so far. Distinction of faith is tearing the society apart. 2009-10 witnessed momentous upsurge in the hatred and hate-campaigns against minorities. Targeting minorities, terrorism and intimidation are pushing them in a state of fear.

Under the circumstances, along with Christians and Hindus, Ahmadias have become the most persecuted religious minority. After their forced eviction from Islamic fold and involuntary minoritization in 1974 hate mongering assault are constantly on the rise. Only one such attack massacred more than 90 people last year in Lahore. Their day to day ordeal is no less than

tormenting them to death or quit the country. Ill treatment and public humiliation has secured a social sanction. Pressurizing employers to dismiss Ahmadi workers and boycotting their businesses is on to destroy their economic strength. Miscreant mullahs distribute leaflets and put up posters instigating 'the faithful' to kill Qadianis as they are wajib-ul-qatl rather the act is kare-thwab. Calling to Ummah channel, one of the clerics said that 'Qadianis are converting the land of the pure to the land of filth'. Hostile population almost besieges their small community in Rabwa - renamed as Chanabnagar out of their will. Right from identity card to every public document their identity is officially stigmatized, resembling apartheid segregation. Declaring them official outcastes, turned police and public authorities openly prejudiced against them.

Even if they are 'non-Muslims' officially speaking, there is no justification to humiliate fellow human beings, whatsoever. This only speaks volumes about the worst form of religious intolerance, oppression and persecution of minorities. Precisely, what is normal in Pakistan violates all norms of civility and human rights set by UN Charter. In certain situations, it is little short of a genocidal attempt of killing or causing bodily or mental harm and deliberately inflicting conditions of life on a group that can bring about its' physical or cultural destruction in whole or in part (Genocide Convention 1948). Hate speech and racist discrimination is punishable crime under international law. Treating others as untouchable derogates foundations of human dignity.

Certain public officials and religious authorities are guilty of violating the freedom of thought, religion and conscience which is integral part of 'Civil and Political Rights Convention (1966).' Minority rights declaration (1995), of which Pakistan is a signatory, obliges all member states to respect the freedom of thought, conscience and religious belief of minorities living within their jurisdiction. People are free to believe whatever they want to and have every right to change their faith should they decide to do so.

The said laws oblige the state to ensure freedom of thought and protect life, liberty and property of the persons belonging to religious or other minorities. It is also supposed to create conditions for people to profess their faith freely or change as governed by their conscience. The state is responsible to punish those found guilty of violating religious freedom, manage reparations and take measures to compensate the affectees. Human rights draw on inherent equality and dignity of man irrespective of one's religious, social or economic standing. A man is dignified by the virtue of being human. No identity, adopted or ascribed, can confiscate his inborn honour.

Beyond demographics, minoritization distorts the whole fabric of a society. It does not cease to policy response, the original rationale, rather extensively permeates in society. General political assumption of minorities' limited strength unlikely to affect their electoral power is erroneous. It is not the number that matters, rather a strategic goal of social cohesion that is important. The process of division and subdivision once initiated is difficult to roll back. Dichotomization on religious grounds polarizes the country on all policies of national significance. The process itself is theocratization of society, eventually proving disastrous to a democratic polity and national cohesion. Thwarting economic progress and upward social mobility of religious minorities also holds a negative bearing on national economy. Narrowing down religious, cultural and intellectual spaces ended up in our national failure to make progress in any sphere of life.

Scapegoating Pakistani Christians or Hindus for certain acts of a predominantly Hindu or Christian states is a faulty justification for 'people' and 'state' must be seen separately. Secondly, non-Muslim Pakistanis are entirely indigenous and professing a different faith does not affect their allegiance to the land. Like most of the Muslims, they too converted to Christianity or some other faith at a point in history.

Seeing the friction and fault-lines between democracy, human rights and officially sponsored

Islamism is essential for the future of Pakistan. Islamic nationalism, what Pakistan has been striving for, has now taken a turn of religious fanaticism. There are very many reasons to doubt that democratization and national-integrity can ever succeed in the face of dehumanizing certain sections of society. It is hard to make people feel or define themselves as Pakistani first in the context of factionalism and discriminations?

Summing up, we must acknowledge the existence of Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Ahmadias, Zikris, Zoroastrians, Bahais, Bhuddists and several other minorities in Pakistan, each with equal rights and entitlement of citizenship. We must realize the serious rift between national integrity and derogating non-Muslim citizens.

Without accommodating plurality of thought and freedom of expression, hoping for national unity is futile. The toothless bodies of National Commission on Human Rights (NCHR) and National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) need to play their roles in this regard. A public tribunal to report social or official discrimination in academic, public or private spheres is required. But this is not possible unless Pakistan transforms herself into a pluralist and rights-respecting state.

Religious bigotry, discrimination and minoritization undoubtedly lead to violence and disintegration. Separating religion from business of the state, repeatedly emphasised by the founding father, is the panacea of all evils. In spite of subjecting everyone to Islamic regulation, we need to ensure human and citizens rights to all. It is the democratic plurality, inclusion and human rights alone that can guarantee peace, stability and economic progress in the country.

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