**[Intolerance & populism](https://www.dawn.com/news/1690910/intolerance-populism)**

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AS if closing secondary schools for girls was not enough, the Afghan Taliban issued another order for women to don the head-to-toe burqa when leaving their homes, else they would be forced to stay home permanently. In other words, women have been commanded to restrict their movements.

The Taliban may want to give the impression that they have imposed restrictions as per Sharia injunctions but, arguably, a majority of Islamic scholars think otherwise. Severe restrictions have also reportedly been clamped on mediapersons, teachers and those who have worked for the previous government in Afghanistan, while targeted killings and terrorist attacks on civilians continue.

Incidents of lynching and torture of both Muslims and adherents of other faiths have been reported recently in India on the suspicion of cow slaughter and other ‘violations’ of norms set by the RSS that wants to enforce its Hindutva brand. The harassment of journalists and intellectuals is regularly reported from various parts of India. People belonging to different faiths feel insecure, and have little space to express their views publicly. Severe insecurity surrounds the observance of their cultural and religious rites.

Last month, a Pakistani-origin mob violated the sanctity of Masjid-i-Nabawi by chanting nasty slogans against visiting officials of the new government. Scathing verbal and physical attacks on political opponents, journalists, artists, writers, analysts and even sportspersons in markets, in the media and on social media, the incessant levelling of false blasphemy charges against personal rivals and political opponents, using religion as a tool to further political interests, and the mantra of ‘foreign conspiracy’ have made the sociopolitical environment more toxic.

Certain regional trends have led to a combustible situation.

Extremism in Afghanistan, populism in India and extremist-populism in Pakistan, as these examples show, have combined to produce a lethal form of instability in the region.

Some patterns are evident. There is chronic intolerance of diverse views; the beliefs and practices of various cultures and faiths are not accommodated; there is no acceptance of gender equality; and little acknowledgement of different political and religious identities. Fascist tendencies make up the present sociopolitical and cultural fabric of Afghanistan, India and Pakistan, if not the entire South Asian region. Instead of presenting road maps for economic development, political efficacy of institutions and efficient social service delivery, policymaking and governance, the political narratives in these countries have begun to revolve around slogans which arouse aggressive feelings and extremist sentiments against political opponents. Hence bigotry, extremism and populism have become a lethal combination that is disrupting social norms and political stability.

South Asia, which is home to numerous cultures, ethnicities, languages and faiths, and that has produced geniuses and reformers, now sees intolerant views against gender, religion, ethnic identities and diverse opinions. Why have the lands where Buddha, Maulana Rumi, Bulleh Shah, Rehman Baba, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, Sachal Sarmast, Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi and Bacha Khan were born reached a point where multiple intellectual traditions are abhorred? It is alarming that, instead of subsiding, the trends of intolerance, bigotry, extremism and fascism are on the rise.

Complex economic, social, political, strategic and cultural policymaking and psychological factors need to be analysed and remedial measures that have been suggested by experts installed before intolerance is normalised, if it hasn’t already been.

The political structures that have created ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’ and ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ divides have, in effect, led to polarisation and a severe sense of deprivation. Lack of equitable representation in state and government structures and the unequal distribution of wealth have created structural marginalisation. The predominance of neoliberal economic policies has given rise to huge disparities. A combination of such factors has led to a sense of insecurity that breeds intolerance, bigotry and populism.

The implementation of policies based on extremist versions of religion, authoritarianism and sectarianism in order to achieve strategic objectives, and a dissipating support base for mainstream political parties, have immersed a generation in absolutism and otherisation, depriving it of critical consciousness. The use of media and curricula for the purpose has magnified the effect, thus leaving large sections of the population, especially the youth, with little or no political consciousness.

It goes without saying that it is the responsibility of state institutions, the political leadership, the intelligentsia, academia, religious scholars, the media, CSOs, teachers and writers to reverse this situation.

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