**Muted Christmas Echoes the Heartache of Christians**

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It is true that Christmas isn’t really on my radar. I chose not to send Christmas cards to my Christian colleagues and friends this year. But, I got a card from an old friend today with a note, which said: “At Christmas, all roads lead to hope.”

What good can come from this calendar year, which has unwrapped so many horrific atrocities of frequent attacks on faith communities, including religiously motivated violence stained by the worst kind of political leadership: lies, monstrous egos, and lurches from one approach to another, and reckless policy choices?

It’s all so obvious that this year has brought fresh wounds with additional pain. It fills me with concern.

In this perfect storm of government ignorance, an ineffective justice system and an anaemic rule of law, we all need some hope. Essentially, this translates to the government’s strategy for restoring religious freedom failing.

A report published this year by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) found that Christians in Pakistan face the highest levels of persecution. Meanwhile, the pandemic of forced conversion and marriages has placed many Christian girls at risk, which casts light on how the entire system has failed to address this profound social emergency. An emergency, which is tipping off minority girls into premature graves of torment, suffering, and grief, but their heart beats in a world that forgets to love.

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On July 14, 2022, the International Federation for Human Rights and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan revealed how fundamentally fragile Pakistan’s human rights are in their joint submission for Pakistan’s fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) which is to take place in 2023.

The revelation of the submission remains deeply shameful and signals that justice is not truly seen to be done. And the current situation is producing a “left-out generation” of religious minorities who may never recover from the scars. Consequently, it is hard to imagine how minority communities have been subject to multiple strands of marginality due to the government’s inability to promote and protect human rights. The UPR’s submission also established that the National Commission for Minorities had serious flaws and no statutory powers.

Given all that, Pakistan received 289 recommendations, of which the government only accepted 168, rejecting the other 117. In addition, four of those were rejected during the previous UPR cycle. Many of the recommendations accepted by the government have not been implemented or have only been partially implemented.

Through foreign eyes, and in the view of many of its citizens, Pakistan cannot afford to ignore these recommendations. Many experts are saying that the future of Pakistan is at stake in the fight for restoring respect for religion and basic human rights.

In the summer of political turmoil, a sliding door of choices of politicians has landed Christians here cold, weary and dismayed. Afraid of what the future holds for religious minorities in Pakistan, particularly after 30,000 jobs in the government sector reserved for minorities remain vacant for years: do minorities matter in today’s Pakistan?

If you feel physically breathless at the current state of minority rights in Pakistan that’s just an ineffective justice system sucking all of the oxygen. As a result, the use of deceitful accusations and aggression as a deliberate strategy – almost a weapon – not just to destroy human respect but also to intimidate faith communities has become very common in Pakistan.

Over decades the government and state machinery has not only failed to protect religious minorities from abuses by non-state actors and religiously inspired extremists but also failed to rehabilitate victims of religious aggression and deliver justice.

To this list you can add the grieving families of arson attacks in Joseph Colony, Shanti Nager, Gojra and Sangla Hill are still yearning for justice. Yet, the system’s alienation urges them to learn to live. The persecuted Christians encounter unfathomable difficulties, yet they persist and find hope in their faith. For many, Christmas is a reminder of how much has been lost because of their faith and what remains at stake.

Similarly, the church properties, Christian schools, hospitals even graveyards have not been spared, regular incidents of land grabbing and graves being vandalised have become everyday tragedies, which hardly make an appearance in the mainstream press.

This experience is distinguished and has multiplied my tiredness by a thousand: a country whose hyper-nationalism, dysfunctional system and administrative incompetence have combined not only to produce a crisis of epic proportions but also brought shame to the country.

As we pause during the Christmas season to be grateful for our many blessings, we also ought to remember Christians who have served Pakistan in nation-building.

Despite the widespread hostility and discrimination, the services of Christians in the armed forces, civil services and the fields of medicine, teaching and judiciary are second to none. The commendable role of Group Captain Cecil Chaudhry, Wing Commander Mervyn Leslie Middlecoat, Squadron Leader Peter Christy and Maj Gen. Noel Israel Khokhar opened a new chapter in the history of Pakistan with their bravery and patriotism.

In the judiciary, how can we forget the services of Justice Alvin Bobby, Robert Cornelius and Johnson Bernard, who served the nation exceptionally? Similarly, Dr James Shera, Sister Ruth Lewis, Nadab Gill, Miss Nicole and Dr Peter Johnson David played a vital role.

Pakistan is a country that cherishes its iconic civilisation and traditions but is unfortunately not ready to assent to the minority’s protection and anti-forced conversion bills or to establish a fully independent National Commission for Minorities. This only adds to my anxieties.

It still feels like a huge section of Pakistan’s public isn’t listening. Under a government that constantly trumpets the idea of an enlightened Pakistan, the focus to establish a tolerant society is scarily narrow.

The government needs to understand, when Pakistan doesn’t keep their promises to religious minorities, it doesn’t just send a message to minorities, and it is also noticed by allies all over the world.

To conclude, this article seeks to remind the government to feel the heartache of Christians and other faith communities in light of the promise made by our founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah on 11th August 1947, to unmute the muted Christmas.

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