

# Protecting Pakistan's image on human rights

THE INTERNATIONAL REPORT ON Religious Freedom issued by the US State Department has not been discussed in Pakistan this year the way it was in the previous years. This is also true of comparisons to the part of the report on India. It may be that the worsening situation in Iraq occupied minds.

A mention in this report about Hindu extremists being funded by some American Hindu groups must have attracted attention in India this year due to the changed political scene.

In Pakistan, the official rebuttal came from President Gen Pervez Musharraf himself. Addressing a conference on Interfaith Dialogue in Islamabad on September 16, he reiterated a conventional defensive response to the report, (issued every year). The 'rejection' of the report — punctuated by a loud 'absolutely' — was argued as:

- a) state was not hostile to religious freedom or minorities;
- b) 'Islamic world' was angry about how the Muslims were being perceived by the West and America; and
- c) people of different faiths were living in harmony in Pakistan.

President Pervez Musharraf also said that the terrorist attacks on minorities happened during a certain period (US attacks on Afghanistan). However, he admitted in his speech that blasphemy laws needed a review to check their misuse. In the same breath he defended the deeni madaris as useful for the cause of education and promised jobs in the army to madrasa graduates.

In fact the standard 20-page report (available at US government's website) goes little beyond what has already been said in the previous years (reports for the years 1996, 1997, 2000 and 2003). Annual surveys are doomed

## VIEW



PETER JACOB

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in any case to sound repetitive when ground realities fail to change.

This year's report starts with a three-page description of Pakistan's demography according to religions, using old as well as new assessments of population, areas of concentration of religious minorities and an account of their better-known places of worship etc.

Section II is about the status of religious freedom. It explains the legal and policy

framework in the country, citing various laws and policies that negatively affect religious minorities i.e. discriminatory provisions in the Constitution of Pakistan and the substantive law (Hudood Ordinances, Qisas and Diyat Ordinance, Sharia Act etc). The report takes cognisance of the issue of applying Islamic law to non-Muslims, education policy, registration of votes according to religious affiliation and a required declaration denouncing the founder of the Ahmadi faith.

Despite this, the report stops short of an observation that the constitutional and legal framework, discriminates against non-Muslim citizens in principle and policy. It also does not confirm the analysis that it is difficult in such a framework to imagine religious freedom.

The report speaks at length about the difficulties faced by the Ahmadi community as well as the hostile attitude of some sections towards Zikri and Shia communities. It cites specific incidents of human rights violations that have become routine and remain unattended.

Various policy issues and incidents during the period under report have been discussed under the subtitles Restrictions on Freedom of Religion and Abuse of Religious Freedom.

Overall, the 2004 report is a fairly comprehensive description of the state of affairs in Pakistan on the subject of religious freedom, including the positive aspects e.g. constitutional safeguards do exist, the communities are allowed to maintain links with coreligionists abroad and there is no official ban on conversion. Of course, official reports always lack clear recommendations to address the situation, ostensibly due to sensitivities of inter-state relations.

Besides informing the US policymakers and the world audience, situation reports like

this carry some reciprocal benefits e.g. while the report brings valuable and ready information on specific countries it also brings an opportunity for the American administration and people to improve their policies. Societies need to look around in order to gain insights for dealing with situation at home.

In a world of extensive exchange of information shying away from the realities cannot help. Local organisations in Pakistan are also engaged in some very good annual surveys and situation reports. The reports should also observe how the research is heeded.

Human rights activists in Pakistan have been asking for more precise findings, vocal criticism and objective recommendations in international commentaries. The *State of Democracy in Pakistan* report issued by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) on September 4, 2004 is a reference point. The HRCP has challenged the Commonwealth decision regarding restoration of Pakistan's membership on the basis that democracy had yet to be restored.

The Human Rights Watch report in June this year was categorical about the situation at Okara military farms. It helped alleviate a bit the sufferings of those concerned.

The successive administrations in Pakistan have turned a deaf ear to such reports. A typical response is apologetic and pointing a finger elsewhere in the world, especially India. Given that the present government wants a new image for Pakistan and has declared enlightened moderation its policy, the attitude of denying facts should change. Self-righteousness lends no wisdom. A society can purify itself only by taking criticism seriously.

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