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Lack of pluralism and Asian Tiger dreams

COMMENT



IQBAL LATIF

Individuals in multi-cultural societies must uphold cosmopolitan values of tolerance and respect for universal human rights: To bring out the best in our people we should allow them freedom of choice. A liberal society primed for development thrives on respect for the rule of law, listening to competing political claims and protecting fundamental human rights? even of evil people

REALISING THE DREAM OF BECOMING an Asian Tiger requires not only good governance and economic management for which incoming prime minister Shaukat Aziz has shown an ample ability but also abolition of

all diabolical laws canonised in our constitution that have made our country so violence-prone and fragmented.

The myth that policies recognising various cultural identities, protecting minorities' rights, promoting gender equality and encouraging diversity result in fragmentation, conflict, weak development or authoritarian rule stands exposed. Such policies are both viable and necessary. In fact, it is often the oppression of the weakest in the society that leads to tensions.

Human development requires more than basic health and education services, a decent standard of living and political freedom. The state must recognise and accommodate people's cultural identities and they must be free to express these identities without being discriminated against. Individuals in multi-cultural societies must uphold cosmopolitan values of tolerance and respect for universal human rights. To bring out the best in our people we should allow them freedom of choice. A liberal society primed for development thrives on respect for the rule of law, listening to competing political claims and protecting fundamental human rights — even of the evil people.

The lower income segment of Pakistan has paid dearly for our lack of tolerance. But pluralism also has a strong correlation to economic prosperity and well being of the entire populace. Excluding segments of society on account of gender prejudices or ideological differences leads to fragmentation of society and poverty. Poverty, in fact, is a direct outcome of low primary school enrolment and high infant mortality — the hallmarks of a conflict-ridden society. It is only through pluralism and respecting diversity that we can avoid the spectre of mass poverty.

Year after year, Pakistan continues to do poorly on United Nations human development index. The HDI measures, among other factors,

poverty, literacy, education and life expectancy. A poor ranking can be the result equally of bad economic policies and a society's lack of pluralism. A society high on theocracy is bound to end up low on human well-being measured in any reasonable way.

A reversal of Zia-imposed theocratic distortions of the political system, led by the Musharraf-Aziz set up, should help Pakistan do well on the HDI. Slowly, the process of repair has begun.

Cultural freedom is now recognised as a vital human development issue. Rapid economic advance is not possible in a reactionary environment characterised by Hudood laws. Literacy and gender equality have both been victims of the repressive laws. We need to free our women from the clutches of discriminatory laws and ensure that our children enter and finish school.

Including a growing number of people in the social mainstream is key to development. Besides democracy and equitable economic growth, there is need for respecting their ethnicity, religions, and languages. Also needed are multicultural policies that recognise difference, champion diversity and promote cultural freedoms, so that all Pakistan's citizens can choose to speak their language, practice their religion, and participate in shaping their culture — so that they can all choose to be who they are.

While the knowledge revolution that has taken over the world offers opportunities of prosperity and increased wealth formation, there is fear in closed societies that their way of life is threatened. As a result we are witnessing an ideological Puritanism in states like Iran, Pakistan, Sudan and Afghanistan.

It is interesting that the countries considered most liveable in the world (ranking for the year 2003) are regarded by this worldview as nations of infidels. Consider the list:

1. Norway
2. Iceland
3. Sweden
4. Australia
5. Netherlands
6. Belgium
7. United States
8. Canada
9. Japan
10. Switzerland

By comparison the least liveable countries are all (almost) great examples of intolerant societies — many of them Muslim — where dissent is frowned upon. Consider the list:

1. Sierra Leone
2. Niger
3. Burkina Faso
4. Mali
5. Burundi
6. Mozambique
7. Ethiopia
8. Central African Republic
9. Congo, Democratic Republic of the
10. Guinea-Bissau
11. Chad
12. Angola
13. Zambia

Pakistan under Zia and Afghanistan under the Taliban are great examples of how a high "theocracy index" can lead a nation to near disintegration. It is only through multicultural policies recognising differences between groups that historically rooted and socially entrenched injustices can be addressed.

Pakistan has paid a high price for its ideological wars. Perhaps the one positive aspect of its experience can be the realisation that prosperity of a nation is the sum total of trust, respect for life, and tolerance.

Iqbal Latif is an international businessman