**Do not Try to Escape**

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Last year, during the Covid crisis, the Standing Committee on Religious Affairs and Interfaith was planning to reject the minorities’ protection bill in Pakistan. In the same year, one of the UK local authorities, Waltham Forest, granted permission to nine mosques to broadcast “Azaan” on the loudspeakers as mosques were closed due to the pandemic and Muslims were unable to pray communally during Ramadan. It was a hugely encouraging decision that casts light on why Britain is so proud to be a very tolerant society in every way, and it is against the law to discriminate against anyone because of their race, nationality, or religion.

This is also exemplified by the fact that religion is no longer that fundamental in Britain. Starting points are only democracy, respect and tolerance, individual liberty and the rule of law. Therefore, freedom of religion and the principle of equality play an important role; answering the questions of both legislative reforms and governance in a state. I was reading about ethnic minorities in Britain last weekend and discovered that the proportion of children’s books featuring minority ethnic characters have almost quadrupled in the last four years. Similarly, a Department for Education spokesperson recently said:

“The knowledge-rich curriculum in our schools offers pupils the opportunity to study significant figures from black and ethnic minority backgrounds and the contributions they have made to the nation, as well as helping them understand our shared history with countries from across the world. Yet the government thinks it needs more time and funds to do more for students belonging to ethnic minorities.”

If you really want to know what just freedom of speech, religion or human rights looks like, don’t start with the official speeches or political campaigns. Ask those who need it most.

In contrast, the PTI government’s grand vision for Single National Curriculum (SNC) has tarnished the values of diversity, cohesion and inclusiveness. Under the SNC, which has already been brought into force for children in Grades 1-5, students are now required to undergo even more Islamic religious teaching in compulsory subjects. This is enforced regardless of their religion or belief, and despite the fact that Article 22 of the Pakistani Constitution asserts: “No person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction, or take part in any religious ceremony, or attend religious worship, if such instruction, ceremony or worship relates to a religion other than his own.” I confess to being astonished at the extent, speed, and nature of this ethical car crash.

What I make out of this is very simple and precise, if we see the world through the lens of power and control, you will find much misery. If you look through the lens of ideology, you will find much to be happy and appreciative about this.

For years, I have been watching Britain leading its Muslim community and other religious minorities into a new age of progression and prosperity. However, it is bad enough when countries break into their eternal responsibility and mistreat people – but it gets worse when they fail to make the rules that we really need to protect vulnerable quarters of society. And that’s what I felt deep when the Ministry of Religious Affairs opposed the anti-forced conversion bill last month by tearing up all parliamentary standards to shut the gates that will never lead to freedom – only to pain. This is a reckless, irresponsible policy choice and is dark in many ways.

Craving for change whilst living in the era of dreamers, hardliners, and talkers is a joke, isn’t it? They all want us to think of forced conversions of minority girls and widespread religious persecution as just a fiction story, and at the government end as something that could be indefinitely postponed. It also means that together they are set to diminish minorities’ rights, freedom, and voices.

Such heartbreaking stories from Pakistan put forward that the government is crossing a new level of incompetence in terms of how we intend to protect the rights of different faith groups. Of course, this is not only a problem for today: it is a dress rehearsal for how Pakistan is likely to deal with the effects of the religious freedom crisis in years to come. What is required, instead of promises and beyond talk, is a plan to introduce legislative measures to end forced conversions and laws to reduce disparities, along with policies that recognise the reality of the minority situation.

If you really want to know what just freedom of speech, religion or human rights looks like, don’t start with the official speeches or political campaigns. Ideally, don’t even ask me. Ask those who need it most. Ask Mayra Shahbaz, an underage Christian girl who was kidnapped at gunpoint, shackled, gang-raped and forced to marry a man 30 years her senior. Ask the mother of Shahbaz Bhatti, an advocate of minority’s rights who was shot dead in daylight. Mr Bhatti predicted his own death while burying his father. It is, of course, bigger grief that we cannot imagine for an elderly mother who lost a piece of her heart.

Ask, if you can, the family of Salman Taseer, a human rights defender, who was shot repeatedly at close range by his security guard for defending women’s rights and supporting voiceless minorities. His life teaches us every wish, every dream, every idea, every promise comes to existence only through blood, sweat and sacrifice. Do we really have the moral courage to ask Shehryar how it feels like losing a wonderful dad or to ask Shehrbano how much she misses the smile of her father? Perhaps, we can’t ask or even change our disturbing and painful history, but we can certainly change the future to serve democracy and cause.

In recent years, religious freedom has become a justified talking point, albeit one that remains chronically neglected in terms of legislative reforms and structural change in Pakistan. Today’s minority’s cynicism about politics not only extends to PTI but extends to all other parties. So yes, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the standing committee on Religious Affairs of Pakistan are in the habit of seeing things through the lens of power and influence to clamp minorities with the clear and wide message: “do not try to escape” the ordeal chamber.

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