**Faith conversions**

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The issue of religious conversions in Pakistan is becoming more complex day by day. As soon as I became part of parliament in 2002, I started my efforts to legislate on this sensitive issue. I came to know that many countries have personal laws for minorities. Even the British had introduced separate personal laws for Muslim and Hindu population during their rule. Various Muslim-majority countries are facilitating their non-Muslim citizens in the form of such laws.

At my request, Prime Minister Imran Khan termed this long-standing issue of faith conversions a human rights cause and decided to form a Joint Parliamentary Committee comprising all elected political parties from the Senate and National Assembly, including Federal Minister for Religious Affairs Noorul Haq Qadri.

It was noted that non-Muslim girls under the age of 18 years are being targeted for forced conversion, most of them belonging to the Hindu religion. In most cases, the victim girls have not even been issued identity cards. Minor non-Muslim girls are abducted and tortured for forced marriage. The oppressed girls have no other option but to compromise. I have also raised this question on various platforms.

However, several non-Muslim girls are also converting for the sake of love marriages. Since, there is no formal mechanism for conversion, they have to approach those controversial people who are already involved in facilitating forced conversions. On the other hand, the parents of the girl blame that she is converted against her will. Due to lack of proper knowledge of the situation, the media highlights the issue, followed by a notice by the court. Similarly, the local administration also takes action.

Although my proposed bill is a personal law related to the minorities, even then its every clause was discussed thoroughly by the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII). Finally in March this year the committee passed the bill before its term expired. The bill was sent to the Ministry of Human Rights for further necessary action. This was a great achievement because parliamentarians of both the majority and the minority had agreed to end the issue of forced conversion once and for all.

However, at the time of sending it to the Cabinet and the National Assembly for approval, the situation suddenly changed. The same parliamentary committee, which had completed its constitutional role, was reactivated and the Ministry of Religious Affairs demanded to send the bill back for getting recommendations of the Council of Islamic Ideology. Ironically, no representative from the minority community was invited to the recent meeting to present our point of view.

I had faced a similar situation at the time of presenting the Hindu Marriage Act in parliament. Despite clear orders of the Supreme Court, the bill was passed in 2017 instead of 2014. In these three years, various hurdles were created unnecessarily. Two main points of my proposed bill that the age of marriage for a Hindu girl should not be less than 18 years, and no second marriage should be registered without completing the legal process of divorce, were deleted from the bill.

The state does not even issue national identity cards and driving licences to children under the age of 18. How can a minor be allowed to take the most important decision of his/her life?

Whenever a conversion case emerges, the victim has to appear before the court. If one is converting willingly, he/she should not object to fulfilling legal requirements to appear before the judge. This legal step can also help counter the propaganda against Pakistan.

Marriage is a sacred social duty, but the absence of effective legislation in Pakistan poses serious threats to social harmony, religious freedom, internal peace and human rights. The said bill should be passed with the consensus of all parties.

The writer is a member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council.

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