**[Humanity & the mob](https://www.dawn.com/news/1662962/humanity-the-mob)**

[Aasim Sajjad Akhtar](https://www.dawn.com/authors/3/aasim-sajjad-akhtar)Published December 10, 2021

The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

WELL into the third decade of the 21st century, we slide inexorably towards mob rule. The [lynching](https://www.dawn.com/news/1661878/ghastly-murder-of-lankan-man-in-sialkot-shames-nation) of a Sri Lankan factory manager in Sialkot was swiftly followed by an episode in Faisalabad where women suspected of petty crime were [stripped and dragged](https://www.dawn.com/news/1662450) through the streets. Every day a new such incident comes to light, as we vacillate between outrage and numbness according to the whims of the news cycle.

What is mob rule? Without exonerating the ordinary men (and sometimes women) who become part of the proverbial mob, we can only really understand it by identifying the underlying cultural, economic and political factors which produce it.

Enough has been written and said about the systematic weaponisation of religion by the state in the aftermath of the Sialkot lynching that I need not go over the same ground here. Ideological indoctrination, and the fact that religious militancy is patronised by the militarised state apparatus and rewarded in society at large are major explanations for rise of the mob.

**Editorial:** [*The lynching in Sialkot seems to be a watershed moment*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1662748/a-watershed-moment)

So is the long history of patriarchal domination, and the deployment of sexual violence to sustain systemic male domination. When structural and physical violence is normalised by the household, the jirga, the religious clergy and then the formal institutions of the state, it is perfectly logical that punishments are meted out to women, girls and transpeople in the name of ‘justice’.

On the International Day of Human Rights, introspection is needed.

But the growing power of the mob in the current conjuncture forces us to confront additional factors, both domestic and beyond. On the International Day of Human Rights, there is, I submit, much introspection required about the means and methods through which many well-meaning and brave segments of society speak up for and defend ‘human rights’.

To begin with, we must accept that redressing systemic exploitation and oppression in society demands concrete political collectivities. Over the past decade or so, the forces of right-wing reaction have been strengthened in most countries around the world, many even having won governmental power through ‘democratic’ means. We must come to terms with the reality that right-wing ideology and ‘free market’ forces have made tremendous gains in the 30 years after the end of the Cold War during which human rights discourses have apparently been mainstreamed around the world.

**Read more:** [*Lessons from the Sialkot tragedy*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1662547/lessons-from-the-sialkot-tragedy)

In other words, while domestic and international convenants as well as high-profile conferences would suggest a consensus on ‘human rights’, facts on the ground suggest that at least as many people in society are moved by exclusionary, hateful and violent principles — and, most importantly, mobilise collectively towards these ends.

Pakistan’s current regime is not the only one that not only tolerates and even perpetuates mob rule — as evidenced most recently by the statement made by the defence minister after the Sialkot lynching. Lynchings are an everyday practice in Modi’s India; Brazil under Bolsanaro reads like a storybook of proto-fascism; and barely a year since Donald Trump left the White House it is apparent that Trumpism as a political ideology is as potent as ever in America.

Which is to say that politics around the world is little more than a race to the bottom. I certainly do not discount the exceptions to this rule — the recent electoral victory for the left in Peru and Honduras stand out, as does the [incredible farmers’ movement](https://www.dawn.com/news/1659023) in India. But these are, nevertheless, exceptions. Mob rule, especially in the brutalised peripheries of the world-system, is generally on the up.

Of course, modern fascism — the most well-known instance of rule of the mob — was born in Europe after World War II. It took root within the dying embers of socialist movements in Italy and Germany whose primary social base was the working class. Yet it was the same working class that became the foot soldiers of fascism.

If anti-immigrant sentiment, Islamophobia and other forms of xenophobia are today once again resurgent in Western Europe, North America as well as the white settler colonies of Australasia and southern Africa, then it is in the world’s most populous and youthful regions of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa that the politics of hate is taking its acutest form.

The postcolonial state will not cut the right wing down to size, discontinue its tryst with neoliberal economics or save the natural environment from ruin. Do not expect our ruling class to develop the vision or the will to arrest the material and ideological processes through which more and more alienated and brutalised working people will be drawn to the mob.

If slogans around ‘human rights’ are to become more rather than less meaningful in times to come, it will be because an alternative political vision and organisation to match gains popular support within those whose very humanity hangs in the balance.

*The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.*

*Published in Dawn, December 10th, 2021*