**Mob Justice Unacceptable**

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Reportedly, an agitated crowd attacked a police station in Nankana on 11 February, pulled out a man accused of desecration of the Holy Quran from the lock-up and killed him. This tragic incident of mob justice unfortunately is not the first of its kind. A similar punishment was inflicted on Mashal Khan a student of Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan on 13 April 2017 over allegations of posting blasphemous content online.

The anti-terrorism court in Haripur announced the verdict convicting 31 out of 57 accused with a death sentence to the main culprit, while 26 students were acquitted based on lack of evidence. What was alarming about the developments in the backdrop of this decision was that those who were acquitted by the court were given tumultuous welcome by their supporters and mainstream politico-religious parties as if they had returned from the battlefield after fighting for a righteous cause, which indicated religious bigotry at its worst that decidedly is inimical to building a progressive Islamic polity in line with the Islamic teachings and the vision of the founding father.

On 4 January 2011, Salman Taseer was assassinated at the Kohsar Market in Islamabad by his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri, for raising his voice against the death sentence awarded to a Christian woman Asia Bibi on charges of blasphemy and his views that the Blasphemy law needed to be revised to ensure that it was not misused. His killer was also eulogized for his act and declared a shaheed after he was hanged as a result of the court verdict.

These regrettable episodes are a ranting manifestation of the religious bigotry and intolerance afflicting our social fabric.

The carnage of the Christian community at Gojra in August 2009, would put to shame even Adolf Hitler, the architect of “The Holocaust”, for having underperformed. The most sordid aspect of that gory incident was that those who were lynched and whose houses were subjected to arson were not at all involved in the alleged desecration of the Holy Quran. According to the investigations into the incident, some children belonging to the Christian community had cut some pages out of an Islamiyat textbook and used them as confetti at a wedding ceremony in the village without being aware of the gravity of their actions. The Imam of the mosque of the locality used the incident to incite the people against the Christian community.

A Christian locality near Badami Bagh was also attacked on 8th May 2013 when a Christian man was accused of blasphemy. The mob reportedly burnt 160 houses, 18 shops and two small churches in the locality. That was the exhibition of ultimate bestiality.

All these acts are against the teachings of the Holy Book. In Sura Maidah the Quran enjoins the Muslims to do justice and shun hatred against other communities in these words “Oh Ye who believe, be a steadfast witness for Allah in equity and let not hatred of any people seduce you that ye deal not justly, that is nearer to your duty.” These regrettable episodes are a ranting manifestation of the religious bigotry and intolerance afflicting our social fabric. One really shudders to think where are we headed to?

Blasphemy is a very emotional issue for any Muslim if committed deliberately by an individual or an organization with an explicit purpose to cast aspersions on the person of the holy prophet or desecrate the Holy Quran. But even then it provides no justification whatsoever to the people to take the law into their own hands and perpetrate mob justice on the offenders. There are laws in the country to deal with such matters and it is the responsibility of the state to initiate action against the accused person or persons whatever the case may be and the accused also have the right to be given a chance to defend themselves and prove their innocence.

The growing graph of such happenings is indeed very ominous for peace and respect for law in the society. These criminal acts perpetrated on the hapless victims by the charged crowds abetted and egged on by the religious extremists have not only soiled the image of Islam but have also dented the reputation of Pakistan as a progressive Islamic state where liberal-minded Muslims and minorities enjoy the protection of life and property as equal citizens in the light of the Islamic teachings.

The government and civil society have to stand up and refuse to be a hostage to the bizarre brand bandied around by religious fanatics. A loud and clear message should go out to them that there would be zero tolerance against their creed of hate and violence.

As a first step, the government should ensure to make an example out of those who have been and are found guilty of fomenting and executing mob killings of Muslims charged with blasphemy as well as the members of the Christian community and destroying their properties. Allowing the law to take its course, however, is only one aspect of dealing with the problem. Since it relates to the religious sensitivities of the people misguided by religious extremists, it also needs to be fought on the ideological front.

There is a need to consult Ulemas of all schools of thought to ensure that the Blasphemy Law is not misused and people are discouraged from taking the law into their own hands. Religious leaders and media can play a very significant role in erasing the bad influence of the ideologies preached by religious extremists and creating awareness among the masses about the true spirit of Islam and its emphasis on building a harmonious society boasting peace and tranquillity as its hallmarks. This should synchronize with the efforts to bring all the seminaries into the mainstream of our education system and revision of their curricula with greater emphasis on Islamic teachings in regard to the rights of the minorities in an Islamic state and the importance of dispensation of justice through state apparatus.

The threat that we face from religious bigotry and extremism and a culture of hatred is much greater than the external dangers to our social harmony, security and territorial integrity. We shall be able to quell the external threats with greater confidence if we are strong internally. Any slackness on the part of the government or civil society towards that end would, God forbid, have disastrous consequences for our very existence as a sovereign state.

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