**Good liberals, bad liberals**

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Liberals are the favourite whipping boy of governments and their loyalists, not only in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh but in all pseudo- and quasi-democracies, autocracies and dictatorships in the world. From Europe (Belorussia, Hungary) to Southeast Asia (Myanmar, the Philippines) and from Africa (Uganda, Egypt) to Latin America (Venezuela, Brazil).

But there is a paradox. While these governments and their loyalists detest and denounce the liberals within their own countries, they commend and congratulate the liberals of other countries. For them, in other words, there are good liberals and there are bad liberals.

How do you judge which is which? Pretty easy, from the standpoint of the chest-thumping “patriots” who take their cue from their governments: domestic liberals are bad but foreign liberals are good. But, again, the latter are good only insofar as they champion causes that are dear to these people, such as Kashmir and Palestine, but bad when they criticise the governments of their countries for failure to protect minorities.

Let us begin with Pakistan. Two well-known liberal activists, Pervez Hoodbhoy and the late Asma Jahangir, have been subjected to malicious campaigns by pro-regime elements. These elements, however, admire and cite liberals of India, such as Arundhati Roy and Ravish Kumar, for defending the rights of the people of Kashmir and Indian Muslims, who are under attack from Hindutva forces there.

A pall of silence fell over the audience as most Pakistanis cannot believe that a man who speaks so passionately and persistently about Palestinian rights, besides castigating Israeli expansionism, can be a Jew!

On the other side of this paradoxical equation, these Hindutva forces in India hate and denounce Roy and Kumar for precisely this very reason, for defending the rights of minorities of their own country. While these two liberals carry on despite threats, Gauri Lankesh was killed a couple of years ago for her activism. At the same time, while killing their own, these forces shamelessly quote and cite Pakistani liberals like Pervez Hoodbhoy and the recently-deceased Irfan Hussain for raising their voices in support of persecuted minorities in Pakistan, including Hindus.

Malala Yusufzai is probably the best known Pakistani liberal who has faced a barrage of criticism and condemnation from right-wing “patriots” in her own country while winning the Nobel Prize for Peace for defending the rights of women to education in Pakistan and everywhere.

The renowned American linguist and philosopher, Noam Chomsky, is much admired in Pakistan by liberals for obvious reasons. But even those who hate Pakistani liberals do not mind quoting him often for his criticism of Israel and support of Palestinian rights as well as his denunciation of US military interventions overseas.

Over three decades ago, I was told of an instance when, in answer to a question at a talk in Islamabad to a large audience, Noam Chomsky revealed that he is a Jew. A pall of silence fell over the audience as most Pakistanis cannot believe that a man who speaks so passionately and persistently about Palestinian rights, besides castigating Israeli expansionism, can be a Jew!

State-controlled Russian, Chinese and Turkish media, as well as their dedicated English-language TV channels (Russia Today, CGTN and TRT World, respectively) profusely quote liberals from Western and other countries on selective international issues. At the same time, these regimes jail dissidents and crush their own liberals.

Russian President Vladimir Putin allegedly went so far as to attempt to poison the country’s best-known liberal, namely, Alexei Navalny. A few years earlier, the most prominent Russian liberal leader, Boris Nemtsov, was assassinated not far from the Kremlin. In the weeks before his assassination, he had expressed the fear that Putin might have him killed.

The dictionary meaning of a “liberal” is a person “favourable to progress or reform; free from prejudice or bigotry; tolerant.” Liberals of every country demand of their governments to respect fundamental human rights and liberties, uphold the rule of law, guarantee due judicial process and equality before the law, hold transparent, free and fair elections, protect women’s rights and ensure the rights of minorities to full and equal citizenship.

Naturally, then, while Pakistani liberals call for the protection of Hindus, Christians and Ahmadis, their counterparts in India defend the rights of Muslims and of Kashmiris, in Sri Lanka they support the Tamil and Muslim minorities, in Israel the rights of Palestinians and, in the United States, an end to police brutality against blacks.

As I write these lines, an article in Time magazine questions US support for the Narendra Modi government in India (“How Long Will Joe Biden Pretend Narendra Modi’s India Is a Democratic Ally?” 15 Feb 2021):

“The U.S. would like to see India as an ideological and strategic counter to China’s rise, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to overlook India’s fast-declining democratic standards. The daily assaults on civil liberties and the threats to India’s Muslim minority under Modi’s Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have noticeably increased since Modi’s re-election in 2019. Hate speech is rife, peaceful dissent is criminalized, freedom of expression and association faces new constraints, and the jails are filling up with political prisoners and peaceful dissenters as a servile judiciary looks away.”

These words, coming from an Indian liberal, namely, Debasish Roy Chowdhury, would be very welcome for the pro-establishment forces in Pakistan. And no doubt that these very words would earn Chowdhury the ire of Modi’s government and their Hindutva champions in India. Reflecting this paradox, Indian and Pakistani expatriates in the United States prefer liberal administrations in Washington for ensuring their rights as minorities while condemning liberals in their own countries for doing the same there.

Smear campaigns against non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are carried out and restrictions imposed on their operations in all autocratic, pseudo- and quasi-democratic countries for the same reasons that liberals are condemned, for exposing the failures of these governments from the standpoint of international law and universally accepted human rights standards.

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