**Limits of freedom**

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The now-revoked decision of the Geert Wilders-led far-right Freedom Party to hold an offensive caricatures contest in the Netherlands predictably led to outrage among the Muslim community worldwide.

Pakistan was at the forefront of these protests with Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi raising the issue with his Dutch counterpart. Political groups such as the TLP contemplated their own means to protest the decision, which could have sent the nation into the kind of deadlock witnessed in November 2017.

This makes us wonder how such a ‘contest’ was even allowed to take place in the first place. Even though blasphemy laws have been abolished in the Netherlands, little was said about how the decision to allow this event to take place would still be illegal according to their own laws. Member states that are signatories to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) have laws prohibiting hate speech. The contest, which was specifically calculated to antagonise a whole community, falls under this category.

The only reply that the Dutch government furnished when the decision drew criticism was that the Freedom Party wasn’t part of their government. This was an attempt to show that the decision to hold the contest wasn’t government-sponsored.

However, inaction on the government’s part in such circumstances amounts to complicity in hate crimes. They might have said that their decision not to interfere is due to the Freedom Party’s right to freedom of expression. However, that made for an extremely weak argument since the ECHR itself suggests that freedom of expression isn’t absolute but a right qualified by public interest considerations. Aiming to offend a particular community, therefore, runs counter to every conceivable public interest.

This is not just an isolated event, but also a theme of which such contests are little more than a variation.

While Pakistan’s condemnation of the Dutch cartoon competition for propagating hate speech is commendable, the country’s simultaneous silence on the treatment of its own minority groups comes across as highly ironic. Shireen Mazari’s sharp rebuke to Human Rights Watch for asking the new government to focus on human rights reflects a form of unwillingness on the federal minister’s part to undertake what her responsibilities truly entail.

The weakest argument is one where you highlight the failures of other states without looking in your own backyard. While Mazari’s suggestion that HRW needs to do more with respect to human rights violations in Indian Occupied Kashmir or occupied Palestine is correct, it still doesn’t change Pakistan’s shortcomings in prioritising human rights.

So, human rights are being applied in a selective manner. Although the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of anti-semitism covers any statement criticising the Israeli government’s policies towards Palestine, the same people use the label of freedom of expression when it comes to producing content that is offensive to the Muslim community.

The same applies for India where there has recently been a purge against Indian Maoists, resulting in the arrest of Indian PM Modi’s dissenters. The incident has created international outrage despite the Indian media’s backing. Meanwhile, freedom of expression comes to the aid of the likes of Boris Johnson who recently made insensitive remarks against women choosing to wear the burqa. But the same freedom is not extended to the very women who are the targets of this form of intolerance.

It is time to reflect on this matter. Is freedom of expression a label that is used to disguise the oppression of others or is it a tool available to everyone to advancing their legitimate rights? The rule of thumb is that in matters where you want to follow your own way of life peacefully, you are talking about beliefs you are entitled to hold. But if you are trying to suppress dissent by oppressing minorities, you are creating a ‘cult’, which is surely dangerous.

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