# Minorities under attack?

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January 3, 2020

“The government of Pakistan failed to adequately protect minorities groups, including Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Ahmadis, and Shia Muslims, and it perpetrated systematic, ongoing, egregious religious freedom violations; this occurred despite some optimism about the potential for reform under the new government of Prime Minister Imran Khan.”

This is what a recent report issued by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom stated. However, Pakistan’s Foreign Office has rejected the report, terming this one-sided, biased and unfair.

The report further mentioned that: “Based on these particularly severe violations, USCIRF again finds in 2019 that Pakistan should be designated as a ‘country of particular concern’, or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2002.”

Interestingly, the US report recommended the government of Pakistan and the Standing Committee on Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony to create the National Commission for Minorities’ Rights as mandated by the Supreme Court of Pakistan’s 2014 decision.

This US report released on the eve of new year forced me to look into the past. After the terrorist attack on a church in Peshawar, the then CJ Honorable Tassaduq Hussain Jillani took suo-motu notice of the tragic incident. He formed a three-member bench along with Justice Shah Azmat Saeed and Justice Mushir Alam to ensure the safety and rights of patriotic minorities. Being patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council and a non-Muslim minority parliamentarian, I was also invited to express my views.

I ensured my presence at all the proceedings. My stance was very clear that all religions are equally respectable and the blasphemy laws should be imposed for all religions. I also highlighted the offensive content on social media and hate material in school curriculum. Similarly, I informed the court about various horrific incidents of abductions, forced conversions, child marriages and attacks on temples.

Finally, on June 19, 2014, the Supreme Court after carefully reviewing all facts announced its detailed decision for the protection of minority rights in Pakistan. The chief justice also ordered to delete objectionable content from the educational curriculum and social media.

On the last day of the year 2019, I was invited by LUMS to deliver a lecture. On the occasion, all participants were agreed on the fact that Pakistan was created to keep the minority Muslim community of the Subcontinent safe from exploitation. Quaid-e-Azam along with all other leaders of the Pakistan Movement wanted to transform Pakistan into such a role model country where all citizens, irrespective of majority or minority, would play their due role for the development and prosperity of the country.

In my view, every Muslim and non-Muslim Pakistani citizen should respect the ideological base of Pakistan, which also includes protection of minorities and respect to all. Unfortunately, a few extremist elements present in our society are providing a basis to the US and the international community to malign Pakistan.

We just reject all such kinds of international reports, without analysing their content. The international community is well-aware that the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) was established to look after the properties of the Hindu and Sikh communities. According to the Liaquat-Nehru accord, India appoints a Muslim minister to take care of Muslim properties in India.

Why are we in Pakistan failing to appoint an eligible Hindu citizen as the ETPB chairperson? Today, out of 1800 temples and gurdwaras, not more than 50 temples are functional. The remaining temples, which are supposed to be under the control of the ETPB, are illegally encroached. For the implementation of the June 19, 2014 decision, the Supreme Court formed a commission last year, headed by Shoaib Siddal – along with me and Advocate Saqib Jillani as members. It is regrettable that the Ministry of Interfaith Harmony is not even interested in providing an office despite the SC’s clear order.

Unfortunately, this landmark decision still awaits practical implementation. Most particularly, the ETPB failed to implement the Supreme Court’s orders for protecting a Hindu temple in Terri (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and, thus, Pakistan Hindu Council had to come forward. On the complaint of a 13-year-old, school principal Notan Lal is in jail but all of those who attacked the temple in Ghotki are roaming around freely.

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

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