**The future of minorities**

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Protests against the amended Citizenship Act introduced by Indian PM Narendra Modi’s government continue to grow and intensify in India.

Although this bill is against Muslims, there is hope, as Muslims are not alone. People from all faiths, even Hindus, and all factions of society – including the media, academics and politicians – have joined the voices being raised against this discriminatory bill.

Such manifestations are rarely seen in Pakistan. It is very encouraging that at least ten chief ministers in India have opposed the law, under which non-Muslims from neighbouring countries would be granted fast-track citizenship, but Muslims would be denied.

The amended bill not only violates the rights of Muslims, as enshrined in the Indian constitution, but is also against international covenants, like the International Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), to which India is a stated party.

The protests are considered to be the largest in decades and to control them, the Indian government has banned gatherings of more than four people in turbulent areas across the country. This attempt to suppress the opposition seems unlikely to be successful as the opposition continues to grow despite thousands being arrested and the internet being shut down.

Those arrested included one of India’s most eminent historians, Ramachandra Guha, who said, “It’s the sign of a paranoid, insecure regime who cannot deal with dissent in any way,” after his release.

India is a secular state that’s supposed to remain indifferent to individual beliefs and ensure every individual enjoys equal rights and religious freedom. However, since the BJP came into power, religious extremism against non-Hindus continues to grow, especially under the leadership of Narendra Modi, and India’s secularism is now in danger as discrimination and persecution against religious minorities continue to rise.

Under Modi’s leadership, the prominence of Hindu nationalism and Hindutva is being promoted and now seems to be dominant in politics and everyday life. With the history of communal violence in India, this scenario will be quite threatening for minorities. They will have no future in India if this situation continues and secularism is replaced by religion, as we have seen in Pakistan.

It is not just Pakistan; the international community is equally concerned about what is going on in India. First, there was what happened earlier in Kashmir and now there is concern over this bill.

Rep Chris Smith, a member of the US Congress and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, has raised concerns about Modi’s government and its growing intolerance of religious minorities, including Christians and Muslims.

Pakistan has been re-designated as a “country of Particular concern” on a list of countries that tolerate religious discrimination. The UN Human Rights Office has also expressed concern about this new citizenship law, saying it is fundamentally discriminatory in nature.

Unfortunately, the condition of both countries’ minorities is lamentable and is getting worse because the politicians of both nations have deviated from the vision of their founders.

There is no doubt that both leaders were strong believers of democracy, equality and equal citizenship rights, but Pakistan deprived its minorities of equal citizenship rights long ago in 1949 and then by embarking on a process of Islamisation. It introduced tough laws aimed at religious minorities in the 1970s and 1980s and now India is heading on a similar path.

Recently, we celebrated the 144th birth anniversary of Quaid-e-Azam with traditional zeal and respect.

But sadly, after 72 years, we are still searching for Jinnah’s vision of the country, which is based on his historic speech on August 11, 1947 when he clearly said, “You may belong to any religion or caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the state… you will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state.”

Prime Minister Imran Khan said that the best way to pay homage to the Father of the Nation on his birth anniversary was to adhere to his principles of ‘Unity, Faith and Discipline’, which were a beacon of light for making Naya Pakistan truly Quaid’s Pakistan.

But the sad reality is that our politicians and ruling elites have effectively repudiated what Jinnah stood for and they seem to be far from the Quaid’s vision, which was driven by a desire for fairness. He was keen that Pakistan’s minorities would not suffer in the way that Pakistan’s Muslims had in India.

He assured minority leaders of the full protection of the state and guaranteed that they would have equal rights in Pakistan. However, minorities are living under constant fear for their lives and continue to migrate to other countries.

Now is the time to accept the truth and change our policies so that they will fit Quaid-e-Azam’s vision and give minorities the rights they were promised. We must not forget that the main reason for the Muslim population demanding a separate country was the increasing injustice of the British rulers and Hindu leaders.

Quaid-e-Azam wanted Pakistan to be a truly democratic country that was based on equality and freedom for all its citizens, regardless of their religion colour or creed, free from religious sectarian, ethnic, provincial linguistic and racial prejudice, with the guarantee of freedom of religion given to minorities.

Unfortunately, instead of following his vision, successive governments and the political leadership have manipulated religion by mixing it with politics based on the interpretation of a handful of so-called religious scholars.

According to experts – whether by national or international standards – the acid test of democracy is its treatment of minorities and through several articles of the constitution, we have already deprived minorities of their equal rights and barred them from participating and fulfilling their roles in the government.

Yet our politicians and bureaucrats never tire of saying that minorities enjoy equal rights in Pakistan. We have set our own standards and use our own lens and framework to measure equal rights for religious minorities in Pakistan, while the best way to view the treatment of minorities is from the perspective of international human rights law.

None of the human rights organisations seems to be satisfied with our human rights record, and instead, we are always reminded by the international community of our obligation to international treaties ratified by us.

In 2014, the Supreme Court ordered the establishment of a task force for the protection of minorities, as well as a National Commission for Minority Rights. The order has yet to be implemented.

The nation does not need a Naya (new) Pakistan but Quaid’s Pakistan. We have failed to protect and safeguard religious minorities and, frankly speaking, while I believe there is still some hope for India’s minorities as long as the country’s constitution remains secular, there is little hope for Pakistan’s minorities.

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