**Time to act**

BY Z U B E I D A M U S T A FA | 1/17/2020

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| THE state of religious minorities in Pakistan today is most deplorable. They are vulnerable to violence, terrorism and physical abuse and many of them have lost their lives as a result in the last few decades.  Their places of worship have come under attack on numerous occasions. This is in blatant violation of the Constitution which guarantees the right to life and religious freedom to all citizens of Pakistan.  True, the level of violence has somewhat declined of late thanks to more effective policing. But that does not mean that the sense of insecurity that has come to haunt the religious minorities over the years has also been alleviated. Their complaints in respect of discrimination in employment, education and all other spheres of life have gone up, leaving them worse of f than before, which is a shame.  What makes the situation more painful is the fact that this was not the case before.  The founder of the country reassured all religious minorities of their rightful place in the political and economic setup of Pakistan while giving them the freedom to practise their faith. The Christians, Parsis, Hindus and others have made notable contributions towards the progress of the country. Take the case of the judiciary alone. We have had eminent men like A.R. Cornelius, Rana Bhagwandas and Dorab Patel who have served on the bench and made their mark in the field of law. Things began to change after Gen Ziaul Haq launched his Islamisation programme. This move should not have had a negative impact on religious minorities if Islamic tenets had been followed truly in letter and spirit.  The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, which has championed the cause of the religious minorities steadily and persistently since its inception, is again making a last-ditch attempt to change the situation. It has been holding consultation meetings with people from all walks of life to lobby the government to advance its project for advocacy and legal aid for religious minorities.  In a landmark judgement of June 2014, then chief justice Tassadug Hussain Jillani mandated the government to constitute a task force at the federal level to work out a strategy to promote religious tolerance. It also called on the government to set up a National Council of Minorities Rights to monitor the `practical realisation of the rights and safeguards provided to the minorities under the Constitution`. It was also asked to frame policy recommendations for safeguarding and protecting minorities` rights.  As is the wont in Pakistan, no action followed for four years, and business continued as usual in the context of minorities` issues. In 2018, the HRCP, the Centre forSocial Justice and the Cecil and Iris Chaudhry Foundation filed public interest litigation in the Supreme Court to have the Jillani judgement implemented. The court responded by setting up a one-man commission headed by Shoaib Suddle, a former police officer, to address the matter.  That is not the end of the story. Tariq Mansoor, a constitutional expert and advocate and also a member of the HRCP, informs us that a national commission for religious minorities already existed for the enforcement of the fundamental and constitutional rights being guaranteed under Articles 20, 22, 26, 27 and 36 of the Constitution, having been set up by the Benazir Bhutto government in 1990.  For years, its status, functions, rules, structure and location remained unclear.  The minister of religious af fairs was supposedly its chairperson and in five years it had held five meetings before it was informed in 2018 of the anomaly created by the 18th Amendment. It was then renamed the Nati-onal Commission on Interfaith Harmony (religious minorities being a devolved subject).  Meanwhile, in 2015-16, three private member bills on minorities were moved in the National A ssembly, only to remainpending. The Senate subcommittee decided in 2018 to club these bills with an official bill and rename it the National Commission for Non-Muslim Pakistanis` Rights. This was to be done within 15 days but 20 months have passed and the law is nowhere in sight.  Where do we go from here? While the legal knots are being untangled, the other orders in compliance with the Jillani judgement could be implemented right away if the government has the political will to act.  For instance, a special police force to protect minorities` places of worship places can be established. A task force can be set up to devise a strategy to promote freedom of religious belief. Appropriate curricula recognising minority rights could be developed and measures taken to curb hate speech and promote interfaith harmony.  If the intentions are good, matters can improve. So far, no government in office since 1990 ie, seven in all have even bothered to look into the matter. Can we expect greater interest in religious minorities` rights f rom the incumbents? m www.zubeidamustafa.com |