[Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-ramesh-kumar-vankwani)

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**Resolving minority issues**

Two major problems non-Muslim minority communities in Pakistan face are directly linked to religious conversion and encroachment of holy sites of worship.

Most of the conversion cases in Pakistan are related to Hindu girls living in Sindh. Such sensitive incidents not only echo in the local media but also receive attention from the international community. However, it seems that my 20-year long tireless struggle to resolve such issues is now seeing some success.

A major breakthrough in recent days has been the visit of Mufti Nauman Naeem, Maulvi Abdul Haq alias Mian Mitho and Pir Ayub Jan Sirhindi to my office in Karachi to condemn the attack on the Terri Temple in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Since these three scholars have been criticized for a long time for their alleged role behind the forced conversion of Hindu girls in Sindh province, I decided to avail the opportunity to discuss this sensitive issue with them.

During our meeting, they emphasized that they are not involved in forced conversions. While it is true that some girls are converting voluntarily, the situation becomes so complex that every stakeholder, including girls, parents, Muslim husbands and courts, comes under pressure. The clerics showed the commitment to accept the legislation with the consultation of the Council of Islamic Ideology on this issue. Meanwhile, I convinced them to inform me when somebody from a minority community approaches them for conversion. I suggested a meeting with such individuals' parents, in the presence of a local minority leader. After sufficient time post meeting their parents, if they are still committed to convert then there will be no issue from any side.

Our consensus on this sensitive issue also reflected in press releases separately issued by them and the Pakistan Hindu Council. In my view, lack of formal procedure for conversion in Pakistan is resulting in creating panic among society. Therefore, a bill on religious conversions, on the basis of my recommendations, is going to be finalized with the consultation of the Council for Islamic Ideology on February 15 during the meeting of the joint parliamentary committee.

In my view, all kinds of religious and sacred places require respect and dignity in every good society. It is quite unfortunate that holy places of worships belonging to non-Muslim communities in Pakistan are being left on mercy of extremist elements. I have therefore been highlighting on every platform available that the Evacuee Trust Property Board, a national institution which is supposed to protect Hindu and Sikh related religious properties, is quite incapable to perform its duties. There must be appointment of any capable Pakistani Hindu national as its head. The Supreme Court of Pakistan, while hearing the case regarding the horrible attack on Terri temple, has recently ordered the ETPB to share data of all sacred places under its control. In my view, the ETPB issue is also going to be resolved very soon.

Recently, the British parliament asked me about the situation of minorities in Pakistan. In this regard, when I tried to conduct research on the internet, I came across a number of dubious news websites which are involved in conducting propaganda against Pakistan. Mostly, these websites, while mentioning a few mishaps with Pakistani minorities, are trying to influence international organizations in a very smart way. We should be thankful to the EU Disinfo Lab for exposing India's huge network of more than 550 fake news websites and suspicious NGOs created with the sole purpose to malign the image of Pakistan in the eyes of the international community.

Unfortunately, our silence on fake news results ends up providing authenticity to such propaganda items and various international organizations are used to make these fabricated news part of their annual reports, especially related to the condition of Pakistani minorities and faith freedom. Although resolving long-awaiting minorities’ issues would somehow minimize the emergence of unwanted news from our beloved country, there is a dire need to focus on fact checking in order to keep a close eye on foreign media reporting about events in Pakistan.

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

Twitter: @RVankwani