**Of patriots, liberals and traitors**

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Liberal-bashing is becoming fashionable in Pakistan.Liberals are regarded as unpatriotic and pro-West, inclined to malign and defame their own country.

The dictionary definition of a liberal is a person “favourable to progress or reform, as in religious or political affairs, free from prejudice or bigotry, tolerant”. Sounds like the kind of person who can bring peace, harmony and progress to the world.

Not if you ask a majority of Pakistanis, including Prime Minister Imran Khan. Not long before he became prime minister, he denounced Pakistani liberals as “more dangerous than anyone else”, adding that they are “always thirsty for blood”.

Now, if there is one thing that liberals have never done and will never do, in Pakistan or in any other country, is to engage in any kind of violence, let alone thirst for somebody’s blood. Such is the liberals’ aversion to violence that they even oppose the death penalty in principle.

No liberal-led lynch mobs have ever been recorded in history anywhere, whereas anti-liberal mobs baying for blood in the name of religion or sect, ethnicity or tribe, nation or country are frighteningly common.No member of a lynch mob or anyone running amok has ever self-identified or been regarded as a liberal.

To take only recent and contemporary history, it is not liberals but anti-liberals who perpetrated the holocaust in Germany, who committed the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia, who persecute Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, who engage in genocide against Rohingyas in Myanmar, or who lynch Muslims in India.

What liberals oppose with all their moral authority and political and legal activism is the tyranny of the majority of any kind, against any vulnerable or weak section of society. They defend the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, protect women and children from domestic and sexual violence, promote workers’ rights, demand affordable universal education and medical care for all, and so on.

It is Indian liberals – Hindu, Sikh, atheist and agnostic -from all parts of India, who are now resisting the RSS and BJP’s majoritarian fascism against Muslims.

Here are two recent articles by Indian liberal journalists in defence of Muslims. One is by Hartosh Singh Bal, editor of The Caravan magazine in New Delhi, entitled “Why Delhi Police Did Nothing to Stop Attacks on Muslims” in the New York Times (March 3, 2020).

He writes: “Over the past six years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his colleagues in the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, their armies of social media trolls and a vast majority of India’s television networks have consistently been building an atmosphere of hatred, suspicion and violence toward India’s Muslim minority.”

The other is by Soutik Biswas, the BBC correspondent in India, entitled “Delhi riots: How Muslims’ homes were targeted and burnt” on the BBC website (March 4, 2020).

He writes: “the mob targeted the Muslim houses and shops with chilling ease. Soot-laced, gutted Muslim homes with broken doors, melting electricity cables and mangled CCTV cameras stand next to unspoilt and neatly painted Hindu homes. Muslim-owned chicken, grocery, mobile phone and money transfer shops, a coaching centre, and a soda factory are scorched. Shops owned by Hindus are beginning to open their shutters.”

Bal and Biswas are Indians condemning their own government, in two of the world’s most read and respected media,for organised violence against their Muslim minority.Small wonder that they are denounced as liberal traitors by the Hindutva “patriots” now let loose by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah.

Interestingly, however, while Pakistanis adore India’s liberals for speaking in support of the oppressed and marginalised Muslims of that country, they are angered when liberals in Pakistan do the same in relation to the minorities in this country.

Generally speaking, the anti-Liberals “patriots” who denounce majoritarian oppression against a minority in another country either perpetrate or tacitly support discrimination against minorities in their own country. Paradoxically, they adore the liberals of that country and denounce their own.

Though liberals never preach, let alone resort to violence, surely they are entitled to be passionate in defence of just causes. And one thing liberals don’t do is brand their opponents as traitors and themselves as patriots.

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Opponents see liberals as less patriotic or downright unpatriotic, even treasonous, because they expose the shortcomings, failures and transgressions of their own governments and compatriots.

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One major strength of the liberal West is precisely that they don’t brush their problems under the carpet but highlight and openly discuss them. In America it could be the impeachment proceedings against its president being broadcast live or deficiencies in government contracts being debated on TV and in the senate, for the whole world to hear and see.

Recently, all Australian television channels repeatedly showed how the prime minister was humiliated by firefighters and ordinary folks who refused to shake his outstretched hand. They were angry because he did not respond to the bushfires promptly enough. He was forced to admit his failure and apologise.

Even in the most stable and prosperous countries, love of country allows and encourages criticism and vigilance from citizens against possible shortcomings, excesses or transgressions of their own government and leaders.Patriotism requires no certification from any person, institution or authority.

On the other hand, demands for conformity and compliance, loyalty and patriotism are most vociferous under dictatorships and despotic regimes. They oftenlead to lynch mobs,pogroms and ethnic cleansing, even wars.

As Samuel Johnson, “an English writer who made lasting contributions to English literature as a poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, literary critic, biographer, editor, and lexicographer”, warned in 1775, patriotism often becomes the last refuge of the scoundrel.

Thisis nowevident in India. The Hindutva crowds baying for Muslim blood are the loudest in trumpeting and demanding patriotism.It does not behove Pakistanis to say hurrah to Indian liberals while condemning their own.

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