**Mob violence**

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Reportedly, a mob inflamed by a diatribe against an alleged blasphemer by a cleric attacked several churches and homes of the Christian community in Jaranwala on Wednesday. Fortunately, no casualties have been reported. An editorial in a national daily revealed that not only were the churches vandalized, but many copies of the Bible were also desecrated by the attacking mob.
Unfortunately, this incident of mob justice is not the first of its kind. Who can forget the carnage against the Christian community in Gojra in August 2009? The most regrettable aspect of that gory incident was that those who were lynched and whose houses were subjected to arson were not at all involved in the alleged desecration of the Holy Quran. According to the investigations into the incident, some children belonging to the Christian community had cut out some pages from an Islamiyat textbook and used them as confetti at a wedding ceremony in the village without being aware of the gravity of their actions. The Imam of the mosque in the locality used the incident to incite people against the Christian community.
Similarly, a Christian locality near Badami Bagh was also attacked on May 8, 2013, when a Christian man was accused of blasphemy. The mob reportedly burnt 160 houses, 18 shops, and two small churches in the locality. An agitated crowd reportedly attacked a police station in Nankana on February 11, 2023, pulled out a man accused of desecrating the Holy Quran from the lock-up, and killed him. Similar punishment was inflicted on Mashal Khan, a student of Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, on April 13, 2017, over allegations of posting blasphemous content online.
On January 4, 2011, Salman Taseer was assassinated at the Kohsar Market in Islamabad by his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri for raising his voice against the death sentence awarded to a Christian woman, Asia Bibi, on charges of blasphemy and for expressing his views that the Blasphemy law needed to be revised to prevent misuse. Regrettably, his killer was also eulogized for his act and declared a shaheed after he was hanged as a result of the court verdict.
These regrettable episodes, in fact, are a glaring manifestation of the religious bigotry and intolerance afflicting our social fabric. They are not only reprehensible but also decidedly against the teachings of the Holy Book. In Sura Maidah, the Quran enjoins Muslims to do justice and shun hatred against other communities with these words: “Oh ye who believe, be steadfast witnesses for Allah in equity and let not the hatred of any people seduce you that ye deal not justly. That is nearer to your duty.” These shameful acts also undermine the protection given to minorities by our constitution.
The growing trend of such incidents is indeed ominous for peace and respect for the law in society. These criminal acts committed against the hapless victims by charged crowds, abetted and incited by religious extremists, not only tarnish the image of Islam but also damage the reputation of Pakistan as a progressive Islamic state where liberal-minded Muslims and minorities should enjoy equal protection of life and property according to Islamic teachings.
The government and civil society must stand up and refuse to be hostages to the bizarre interpretation of Islam propagated by religious fanatics. A clear message should be conveyed to them that there will be zero tolerance for their creed of hate and violence. As a first step, the government should ensure to make an example out of those found guilty of inciting attacks on churches and homes of the Christian community in Jaranwala, as well as those who participated in those attacks. However, allowing the law to take its course is only one aspect of dealing with the problem. Since the issue relates to the religious sensitivities of people misguided by religious extremists, it also needs to be addressed on the ideological front.
There is a need to consult Ulemas from all schools of thought to ensure that the Blasphemy Law is not misused and to discourage people from taking the law into their own hands. Religious leaders and the media can play a significant role in countering the negative influence of ideologies preached by religious extremists and in raising awareness among the masses about the true spirit of Islam, which emphasizes building a harmonious society marked by peace and tranquility. This effort should be synchronized with attempts to integrate all seminaries into the mainstream of our education system and revise their curricula to place greater emphasis on Islamic teachings regarding the rights of minorities in an Islamic state and the significance of dispensing justice through state apparatus.
The threat posed by religious bigotry, extremism, and a culture of hatred is much greater than external dangers to our social harmony, security, and territorial integrity. We can better address external threats with confidence if we are internally strong. Any negligence on the part of the government or civil society in this regard could have disastrous consequences for our existence as a sovereign state, may God forbid.