**Religious Freedom**

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As we walk along the winding paths of history, it is not difficult to feel the sheer horror of forced conversion, religious aggression, misuse of blasphemy law and mob violence against faith communities. But unfortunately, almost everywhere in Pakistan, violence in the name of religion and government’s lack of interest are peddling religious minorities to the endless ordeal.

If you don’t know then head towards Jaranwala, where ransacked churches, and burnt houses display the price of having a different faith is simply beyond imagination. You will find mourning parents suffering in silence with intense loneliness, mental health problems, and sleepless nights in fields which sometimes include hospitalisations and emotional numbness. You will find the victims burdened with the trauma of violence, fear and the pain of socio-religious hostilities.

Are we living in the age of shamelessness? Can you imagine the pain of losing home, books, freedom and hopes all together? Don’t you feel all hopes to reboot religious freedom in Pakistan are dying?

In a single day, more than twenty churches and hundreds of Christian homes were set on fire following an alleged incident of blasphemy on 17th August 2023. Consequently, an angry mob ignited a series of violent attacks on a Christians. Scenes on TV screens showed how hundreds of people armed with rods and sticks looted property from Christian houses and then used flammable liquids to set them on fire.

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This horror story has visited every house of Christian town in Jaranwala, and will haunt many Christian towns for years to come. So sad we aren’t a kinder nation anymore!

A mob went on a rampage not only to ruin the church buildings but also graveyards, just after three days of Pakistan’s 76th Independence Day.

On 14th August 1947, Pakistan’s founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah set forth the goal of a tolerant, progressive and inclusive Pakistan. In his address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, he said “People may belong to any religion, or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the state”. But, sorry, 17th August will always be remembered as a “black day” in the history of Pakistan which has left everyone heartbroken and hopeless. This sounds exhausting but every corner of society is failing to take the “transformational change” required to avert the most disastrous consequences of betraying Quaid’s legacy of character and faith. Whereas, the present situation reminds us that the test of courage comes when we are in the minority and the test of tolerance comes when we are in the majority.

Perhaps, minorities’ expression of anger, grief and despair profoundly demonstrate how Pakistan is headed for an ethical car crash. Regrettably religious identity has become a brand factor in today’s Pakistan that determines which citizen is more equal than others in terms of rights, status and opportunities.

Broken furniture, piles of rubble and ruins of houses. These are what remains of the Christians who are stunned by the sense of rage and despair in their beloved country. Those who have lived through this nightmare are sharing their horror stories. I see victims of violent attacks wailing, mourning all they have lost to religious belligerence just because of having a Christian faith. These scars are the scars which will never heal.

I think of a Christian mother who told me a mob has looted the dowry of her daughter who was getting married soon. I think of an eight years old Christian boy whose books and school bag were burnt and he can’t go to school anymore. The school was everything to him. Another victim said that mobs have not only looted our animals but also our future.

The present situation also casts light on how Pakistan has failed to ensure the security and respect of religious minorities, with experts calling the situation a national and international tragedy.

Of the many unanswered questions surrounding the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), one of the most pressing is what can be done when government, society and laws fail altogether to protect religious freedom and diversity.

Nevertheless, the Jaranwala incident conjures an image of a fractured justice system, anaemic rule of law and an ocean of impunity which described the situation as a “human-rights catastrophe”. Unfortunately, you will find the dogged persistence of the constitutional guarantees and promises which have failed to end the brutality towards different faith groups.

On 21st August, Pakistani Christians in the UK held a protest in front of the Pakistan Embassy in London to urge Pakistani authorities to arrest the perpetrators of Jaranwala riots and ensure the safety of Christians and other faith communities. Many have raised their concerns that growing intolerance and religious violence is tipping off Christians into premature graves of torment and grief. Meanwhile, the government of Pakistan has failed to fulfil its “duty of care”.

To my mind, the legislator’s and executive’s dedication to ensure the safety of both Christians and other faith communities without ratifying Minority’s Rights and Protection Bills will always be a bad policy choice. And what is disappointing is that Pakistan’s Parliament has always failed to reinforce much needed legislation that ensures the rights and safety of religious minorities. Traditionally, Pakistan has failed to promote the importance of religious freedom through school curricula, dialogue and effective parliamentary representation of religious minorities.

This displays national shame in the museum of government’s historical incompetence which has failed to safeguard Christians and other faith groups. Crossing fingers and hoping for good is barely a sensible way to tackle the present calamities, but it is a strategy that everyone seems determined to follow now.

It’s worse than embarrassing that Pakistan has one of the worst levels of religious persecution in the world, and it is failing on its (FoRB) commitments. Of course, the Jaranwala incident is a dress rehearsal for how Pakistan is expected to deal with the religious freedom crisis in years to come.

It is heart-breaking that religious freedom isn’t missing from schools but also gradually evaporating from the minds of people in Pakistan.

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