**The rise of bigotry**

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A religiously motivated violent mob in Jaranwala, Faisalabad attacked, vandalized and set houses and churches of the Christian community on fire on August 16.

According to the initial official assessment, nearly 90 houses and around 19 churches were damaged and ransacked in the violence. All this violence was carried out on allegations of blasphemy. The mob without verifying the facts of the allegations acted as judge, jury, and executioner and punished the entire community.

It is good to see that interim Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, COAS Asim Munir and other officials have strongly condemned the attacks on the Christian community. The Punjab government has ordered strict action against the culprits. The police have so far arrested more than 138 people and registered cases against them. The senior-most Supreme Court judge and the next chief justice of Pakistan Justice Qazi Faez Esa also visited the affected area and met with the locals.

While these statements and visits are encouraging and will send a positive message to the local community, they might not be enough to assure minority communities that such horrifying events will never happen again. More needs to be done to prevent religiously motivated mobs from taking the law into their hands. Some policy and administrative measures need to be taken.

The history of such events shows us that the police and local administration always watch such violent attacks as mere spectators. This approach and attitude needs to change. We have witnessed since the 1980s that the police avoid intervening when religiously motivated mobs use violence against minorities. A clear policy needs to be adopted in this regard.

Our ruling class has a similar pattern when responding to such gruesome and disturbing incidents. As happened in the past, inquiries will be held, committees formed and meetings called. Our ruling elite will condemn the brutal killing and express its shock and anger. But nothing constructive will happen.

Such incidents keep returning to bite us mostly because we have never really taken the issue of religious extremism seriously. Our state has made a lot of efforts through the National Action Plan (NAP) to eliminate militancy, but little has been done to stop the spread of religious extremism and change the flawed policies of the past, which gave rise to extremist forces.

Unfortunately, we have failed to learn from our past mistakes or, worse, we are not even ready to accept the use of religion as a political weapon and the spread of religious extremist ideas and the creation and promotion of jihadi ideology and organizations as a mistaken policy which has had devastating consequences for our society.

What has happened in Jaranwala is neither the first nor the last incident of mob violence against religious minorities in Pakistan. Mob violence against religious minorities has been on the rise since the 1980s. The first incident of mob violence on a large scale against Christian the community took place on February 06, 1997 in Shanti Nagar, District Khanewal.

Since then, mobs have attacked Christian communities in Gojra and Lahore. Pakistani rulers previously assured us that they would not allow such horrifying incidents to occur, but they continue to happen every few years. The disturbing images coming from Jaranwala will further tarnish our image as an intolerant, religious extremist and bigoted society. We are already facing an image problem. It is true that a majority of the Pakistani population is neither extremist nor supports such ideas, and extremist forces are in minority. But what happened in Jaranwala is another gruesome reminder that we have become a nation held hostage by hatemongers and religious extremists.

Although small in numbers, extremist groups have made both society and state hostage. The state has failed to check the spread of extremist religious ideologies and the subsequent radicalization in society.

Unfortunately, the Pakistani ruling class is not ready to abandon its decades-old policy of appeasing and supporting the religious right. This policy has spread hatred, intolerance, extremism and bigotry in society. We have not learnt from our past mistakes that the use of religion for short-term political gains can have long-term consequences.

This form of capitulation is not new; it started in the 1970s and has never halted since then. By surrendering to the hardliners, Pakistan’s state apparatus and ruling class have sent a clear message that they are not interested in stopping bigots and mobs.

This policy of appeasement and surrender has brought catastrophic consequences for us. Our economy has lost billions of dollars. Thousands of lives have been lost, including those of our brave men in uniform. Our international image has also been tarnished. But who cares?

We need to realize that those who spread hatred, bigotry and extremist ideas through their sermons and religiously motivated political speeches are as dangerous as those using guns to impose their ideas and worldview.

We have done a lot to control militancy and armed groups, but little has been done to control the spread of hatred, bigotry and extremism through speeches and sermons.

The fact is that the religious right is not ready to give up the space and authority it gained during the military rule of General Zia. And the real issue is that the state is not very keen in reimposing its writ and taking back the space it surrendered to the religious right in the 1980s. The people of Pakistan have already paid a heavy price for such flawed policies, and it is time to rethink the decisions made years ago.

Hardline religious groups and organizations have been exploiting the religious sensitivities of society to garner public support. Over the years, the state has tolerated such groups and their activities to spread hatred in society – they often use violent means to create fear in society.

How can a state and the ruling elite stop others from using religion for political interests and purposes when they have continuously used religion as a weapon?

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