**[Arabic Pakistan?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1624228/arabic-pakistan)**

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THERE is a curious contrast in how the people of Pakistan have consistently prevented religion-based political parties from receiving more than eight to 10 per cent of the votes cast in all 11 general elections held between 1970 and 2018 and, on the other hand, the steady retreat into showy religiosity and visible piety in the public domain and in most media.

Though the recent upsurge of the TLP and its mass violence are a disturbing indicator, this manifestation has more to do with lack of courageous governance and strict enforcement of the law than the accurate representation of most people’s religious views. The failure to enforce public safety against violent extremism is shaped by sheer inhibition and gross incompetence — or covert wilful support from some quarters — but by no means does religious extremism mirror the popular will.

For a country in which illiteracy, ignorance and some primitive social practices — particularly discriminatory against girl-children and women — persist in some areas and some segments, the majority of Pakistanis are moderate, balanced and quite open-minded. Their pattern of usage of the internet and social media platforms is a potent expression of a remarkably cosmopolitan facet of the Pakistani psyche. Adoption of other symbols and facilities of new technologies is another expression of acceptance of modernity and change.

Every Muslim here is immersed in religious expressions.

One demonstration of respect for other religions by most Muslims is the fact that across Pakistan, every day (except during the pandemic) tens of thousands of families, many of them fairly conservative or orthodox, send their daughters and sons to schools and colleges operated by Christian missionaries. They do not think the strength of their faith in Islam is vulnerable to negative influence from another faith even if their innocent children spend five or six hours every day in institutions managed by non-Muslims. Mob attacks on Christian communities or accusations of blasphemy do regrettably occur. But these are rare exceptions, not daily or weekly occurrences.

In such a reality it is both amusing and disturbing to learn how certain holders of high public office — especially the Punjab governor and the Punjab Assembly speaker —seem overly anxious to ensure that the Holy Quran in Arabic and Islamic studies are comprehensively imbibed from Class I onwards not only by Muslims but, in the case of Islamic studies, if unavoidable, by non-Muslim pupils too.

In Article 22 of the Constitution ‘Safeguards as to educational institutions in respect of religion, etc.’, Clause (1) prohibits forced learning of religion by non-adherents. To circumvent this obligation, it is reported that non-Muslim students will be asked to leave the classroom when Islamiat is taught!

In a population that is 97pc Muslim, every Muslim child and adult is fully immersed in expressions of religion and the use and sound of Arabic. Examples abound. The call in Arabic to prayer five times a day is heard from mosques in every nook and corner in every village, town and city, often from more than one mosque in the same neighbourhood, followed by worshippers silently or audibly reciting surahs or passages in Arabic from the Holy Quran. Ramazan and Muharram are observed with reverence for about 40 to 60 days during which holy verses are frequently recited.

Three major festivals (Eidul Azha, Eidul Fitr, Eid Miladun Nabi) are celebrated by every child and adult with holy verses remembered in special prayers. Tens of thousands of families have at least one member every year travelling to Makkah and Madina (except during the pandemic) to perform Umrah or Haj. Hundreds of thousands travel long distances across the country to pay homage to great Muslim saints at shrines. In both, pilgrimages overseas and internally, Quranic verses in Arabic are recited.

There is a copy of the Holy Quran in Arabic, or portions of it in virtually every single home, rich or poor, literate or illiterate. TV and FM radio channels broadcast religious content including the call to prayer in Arabic and other Arabic language content every day. Non-licensed religious TV channels broadcast unimpeded. Zakat is rendered visibly as well as discreetly, often with respectful remembrance of holy verses in Arabic. Due decorum is maintained in all rituals associated with marriages, births, funerals and soyems in families during which the Arabic language and holy verses feature prominently. Offices, homes and public places display Arabic words and holy verses. Salutations and farewells are mostly spoken in Arabic. In one sense, we are already an ‘Arabic Pakistan’.

The leadership of the federal government and of Punjab, KP and Balochistan would do well to learn from how the Sindh government laudably resists surrender to the irrational stress on a language and on rituals in which our society is already rich and replete.

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