

Dealing with sectarianism

Society + Social Probops/01 News



Mir Jamilur Rahman

The author is a
freelance columnist

mirjrahman@yahoo.com

The religious parties involved in sectarian violence have become a real danger to the security of Pakistan. The murder of Sunni Tehrik Chief Maulana Saleem Qadri in Karachi on May 18 and the subsequent protest by his followers has forced the government to take notice of their violent activities. In this backdrop the Interior Minister, Lt General (R) Moinuddin Haider has disclosed that provinces have been instructed to ban all those religious parties that are involved in sectarian violence.

The workers of Sunni Tehrik were understandably angered at the murder of their leader. They expressed their anger by calling countrywide strike last Monday. Strikes are a common phenomenon in Pakistan, which mostly serve no purpose except causing hardship to the citizens and holding up the economic wheel. However, the Tehrik introduced an innovation to its strike call by designating it as 'curfew'. Next time a religious party might go a step further and declare 'Martial Law' to register its protest.

The strike or curfew did not travel beyond Karachi although it was meant countrywide. But even this restricted strike was enough to cause huge economic losses and untold miseries to the hapless citizens. As is normal in such strikes, some shops that tried to defy the strike were gutted, some buses and cars were put to torch, a person was killed and many injured. The Interior Minister has rightly remarked that the religious parties murder each other's leaders and then punish the citizens and pressurise the government.

General Haider has warned that Sipah and Lashkar would be banned and their hate-filled literature burned if they did not abandon their violent ways. Sipah and Lashkar both mean 'armies'. They are militant groups violently engaged in promoting their *fiqh* (school of thought) in Pakistan to the exclusion of all other *fiqhs*. Here an explanation would be in order. The Interior Minister was referring to Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and not Lashkar-e-Taiba. The latter is a *je-hadi* outfit and in no way involved in sectarianism.

The statement of the Interior Minister gives a strong indication that at last the government has come to the conclusion that the country would not progress economically and the people would not have peace unless it takes a strict action against the extremist religious groups. A law is now on the anvil that will empower the government to ban such groups.

The banning of a party or a group has seldom yielded the desired results. A party banned under an executive order has numerous ways to circumvent the ban. It might go underground, which will make it more dangerous, or it could simply adopt a new identity by renaming itself. Therefore, the proposed law should not have an element of arbitrariness and more importantly it must have the strength to bear the rigours of legal challenge. These two precautions are necessary otherwise the ban would be rendered meaningless.

All parties or associations, whether religious or political, need funds. The funds come from the public either in donations or subscriptions. It is strongly believed that some parties, especially the religious ones, get financial support from some foreign countries. Do we have a law to monitor the accounts of parties? If we have such law, it is not enforced.

In democratic countries the political parties or any other association of persons including religious groups that solicit and get public donations are required to maintain accounts and submit them annually to the prescribed authority for scrutiny. It is universally recognised that the recipient organisation holds the donations in trust. Therefore it falls upon the government to watch that such monies are spent transparently, on legitimate causes, and according to the bylaws of the recipient organisation. The source of the donations, including donations received in kind, must also be disclosed. The organisations engaged in social and welfare services are usually exempt from disclosing the names of the donors.

A religious or other party suspected and accused of violence and creating sectarian rift and hatred may not be banned without due process of law. The government after having gathered evidence against the accused party may approach the court of law to impose the ban. The case should be heard in open and the accused party given full oppor-

tunity to defend itself. A ban imposed in this manner would have legitimacy and wide public acceptability.

The *madrassahs* are rendering a valuable service in the education field. However, their mushroom growth needs government's attention. It has become imperative to introduce some academic and administrative discipline in their working. First of all, census should be conducted to determine their number and category. It should be ascertained through census that who owns the *madrassah*, which *fiqh* is taught there, what are the qualifications of its teachers, when was it established, the number of students and teachers and what sort of degree or diploma is awarded to the successful student. As the *madrassahs* are run on donations or handouts from the government, therefore they should be required to maintain proper accounts, which should be subject to official auditing.

One who contributes to the building of a mosque is blessed here and hereafter. But would he be rewarded if he builds an unauthorised mosque? It has become a common sight to see mosques rising on government lands without permission or authority. Neither Islam nor the law permits the building of mosques on stolen lands. But it is such a sensitive issue that both public and civic bodies avoid taking notice of this unlawful trend.

The CDA has built beautiful mosques in Islamabad in every sector. These mosques are well designed and well maintained adding beauty to the environment. Some authorised well-designed mosques are coming up in the Blue Area that is a treat to watch. And yet the professional mosque builders keep on encroaching on the green belts and traffic islands. They start by placing a few bricks marking the territory of the mosque and put up a collection box and thus slowly but surely acquire the status of legal occupants. This is happening all over the country. The government should make some stringent rules to stop the unauthorised building of mosques.

The religious and sectarian parties do not have a vote bank. They have never made an impact in the general elections. However, everyone including the government looks the other way when they break the law. It is claimed that they might not have the votes but they have the street power. Does it mean that the government is powerless against the street power?