

# The menacing sectarianism

Society & Sp.  
Nation  
04/10/01

Iftekhar A. Khan

**F**ortunately, Pakistan is not situated in the geographic expanse where, earthquakes, hurricanes, and famines regularly occur, leaving in their wake devastation to its people and their property. These calamities are difficult to control, as these are largely beyond the scope of human endeavour. We have to endure them. But we have no reason to blame nature for our miseries like, poverty, poor health conditions, and illiteracy. These are essentially self-created. We close our eyes to issues that initially sound trivial but later develop like cancer.

Take sectarianism and law and order, the two most unnerving problems at the national level. One stems from the other. First a glance through the newspaper in the morning evokes outright revulsion. Gruesome details of savagery and mayhem splashed on front pages, along with splattered with blood drives peaceful citizens insane. Gradually, people become insensitive to such events. This state of mind brutalizes photographs of victims society.

There are two major causes for the outburst of emotions that ultimately sever the tendons between life and death. Firstly, it is the sectarianism. Its main objective is to achieve economic growth and political clout under the shadow of religion. All sects have co-existed in harmony for the last half a century save the past few years, when religio-political parties turned highly aggressive to secure themselves a place in mainstream politics. There were times when the religious heavyweights abhorred participating in politics and elections, considering them worldly affairs. They considered politicking out of line with their religious predilection. They soon realized that they had the perfect making of political leaders, with money

and following galore — the two most important ingredients to succeed in politics.

Gradually, the religious parties began to participate in the country's politics, and aligned themselves with one or the other main party. No objection on that count, as long as they stayed within the ambit of law. But after gaining political standing, they turned more and more pugnacious in projecting their party philosophy. Following suit, small splinter groups of religious cleavage began to emerge to make their presence felt on the scene. As a result, financial aid by, so to say, brotherly Muslim countries started flowing into the coffers of religious parties. The parties then firmly aligned themselves with countries that supported them financially to carry out their agenda. Stage was thus set for the showdown that has been taking place unabated on regular intervals.

The government must use its diplomatic channels to request the brotherly countries to stop funding the religious parties that fight donors' proxy wars in another Muslim country. There is no room for further dithering, as it is now a matter of survival for us. The killing spree has transferred from targeting active members of the opposing parties to less active members. Next it may turn to a free for all.

Loudspeakers have a major role to play in propagating and inciting the people to violence. Two years ago Supreme Court in India through a suo moto action imposed a complete ban on the use of loudspeakers in all religious places of congregation. It is practically impossible to monitor the use of loudspeakers and to maintain its level of use within the law. Once it is al-

lowed to be used, it is very difficult to control its misuse. All mosques must be registered along with their imams. A mosque should not have more than one loudspeaker and that too should be toned down only to be heard within its precincts. A firebrand maulana of a small city mosque, never short on oratory, was tongue-lashing his adversary through his powerful loudspeakers. As he paused, his opponent cleared his throat and directed him to wait and hear what was to follow.

What followed was a volley of reprobation. The plight of the citizens, including women and children living in between the two mosques can well be imagined. We have no choice but to control the use of loudspeakers with an iron hand. No public address other than azan and khutba in Arabic should be permitted through the loudspeakers. Imams wishing to curse their religious opponents will have to learn expletives in Arabic. What we intend to stem out is the religious prejudice and bigotry, as no religious sect teaches to kill, religious prejudice does. Small minded religious leaders create that prejudice to cash on the volatile situation. It is their bread and butter.

The second reason for merciless killing is due to the absence of an efficient judicial system. The legal course is time consuming, expensive and lengthy. It tires out the aggrieved parties. There are incidents when the families lost their total belongings in the process of pursuing cases in the courts. If people trust the legal system and hope that it will provide them with quick relief by redressing their genuine grievances, the cases of taking law into their own hands will go down. Lawbreakers must get their due punish-

ment at all cost. It will give mental comfort to those who have been wronged; otherwise scores will continue to be settled outside the courts. Violence breeding out of sectarian killings or due to breakdown of law and order grows into a vicious circle with far reaching ramifications. The country cannot attract local and foreign investment due to adverse law and order situation, as violent conditions are never conducive to trade and industry. Capital is always shy of unstable environs and flies out like the migratory birds, where it finds the suitable environment. With increasing unemployment, the youth are forced to fend for themselves. What methods they adapt is a matter of their choice, which may not be legitimate. It is heartrending to read that people take their lives at the hands of poverty and hunger. Sometimes the whole family perishes; the bread earner takes with him all his dependents. What a tragedy!

The government must come down heavy on lawbreakers and their honchos. Since it is the primary duty of every government to protect its citizens' life and property, families of victims of sectarian terrorism must be compensated. By not compensating the families of victims, the government would stand accused on two counts: failing in the basic duty to protect its citizens and leaving the sufferers in the middle of nowhere. Intelligence agencies of all makeup have received sharp public criticism in the past few years. They were wrongfully employed. It is time the agencies play a pivotal role by providing advance information. All religious parties must be disarmed. Why are leaders of these parties scared of each other for their lives while they claim to be working for the common cause to promote Islam?