

Pakistan's religious minorities suffer abuse and harassment

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Pakistan was elected to the UN Human Rights Council in November 2012 with a thumping majority vote. It was one of the highest votes received by any country, despite having a human rights record that shows little compliance with the pledges it made in 2008.

The ongoing excuse for Pakistan's continuation of human rights abuses and non-compliance with international obligations is the fight against terrorism and defence of sovereignty and national interests. However, there seems to be little progress in the fight against terrorism, as can be witnessed by the almost daily attacks by religious extremists and Taliban elements from inside and outside the country's borders.

In international fora, Pakistan's leaders continue to spout their commitment to ensuring freedom of religion and equality for all. Their actions behind closed doors are somewhat different however, and it is not possible that the voting countries are unaware of this; this casts doubt on the sincerity of the countries that voted for Pakistan's election. Perhaps they are happier with the devil they know, afraid of what might happen if they have no control whatsoever over that devil's actions.

Pakistan will undoubtedly be proud of the number of votes it received, but this may lead to the false idea that the country must be doing something right, and therefore may continue to ignore its international obligations. Perhaps now is the time for the country to prove that it is worthy of this reward by complying with its obligations. Now is the time for the international community to ask definitively when Pakistan is going to abolish its blasphemy laws, introduce legislation to make torture a crime, and ensure that the military is placed firmly under the Constitution in order to stop enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

It was just a few short weeks ago when Hina Rabbani Khar, Foreign Minister and head of the Pakistan delegation stood before the UN at the Universal Periodic Review and assured her audience that freedom of belief and religion was practiced in Pakistan. She obviously does not read the newspapers. Perhaps such a thing is below her and she waits for one of her aides to inform her of what is going on in the real world. Perhaps her aides do not consider the harassment and physical attacks on members of the Hindu minority to be a matter worthy of attention. Whatever the case, harassment and attacks on the Hindu minority are a very real occurrence and one that the government of Pakistan is turning a blind eye to in its ongoing policy of appeasement towards the religious extremists.

In one of the most recent incidents on November 8, a group of Islamic extremists arrived at a Hindu temple on the outskirts of Karachi shouting, "Kill the Hindus, kill the children of the Hindus!" Armed with pistols, the group destroyed the temple fittings and ripped off the golden bangles worn by the women. Men and women were beaten indiscriminately and the attackers were so sure of their impunity from any government action they did not even bother to conceal their identities or cover their faces.

This was not an isolated case; indeed, it was the second time this particular temple has been attacked, and there have been many such incidents reported. Even Muslims who speak out in public in defence and support of Hindus leave themselves open to attack.

Marvi Sirmed is an outspoken defender of democracy and human rights. She has particularly spoken out on the rights of minorities such as the Hindus, Christians and Shias. More recently, Marvi was instrumental in the campaign to free Rimsha Masih, a Christian girl who was wrongly accused of blasphemy after a Muslim cleric planted evidence against her. Marvi has been receiving threats from rightwing and extremist groups for several months now, and for her own security has had to change her place of residence.

On November 3, unidentified gunmen opened fire on the car in which Marvi was traveling, but fortunately she and her driver escaped unharmed. The attack took place in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. While the police announced that they have started an investigation into the attack, no results have been forthcoming.

Another area of concern involving the Hindu and Christian minorities is that of forced marriage and conversion. Typically, a Hindu girl goes missing and when she next contacts her family they find that she is married to a Muslim boy. There have been numerous court hearings in several cases to determine whether the conversion was voluntary, and in each case students from nearby madrassas attend court chanting demands that the conversion be confirmed and intimidating the judges. An NGO worker said that in the 100 cases that he had personally worked on, only one girl had been safely returned to her family.

There is now a mass exodus of Hindus from Pakistan, which is noted but ignored by the government. The impetus for this exodus is generally believed to be the forced conversion and marriage of a Hindu girl, Rinkle Kumari. Even a *Suo Motu* action by the Supreme Court of Pakistan yielded no favourable results, and the girl herself, perhaps realizing the helplessness of her situation, opted to remain with her Muslim 'husband'. Rinkle's relatives allege that she was forced to decide in favor of her husband and her uncle said that the Hindu community had submitted to the kidnapping for ransom practices against them; however, kidnappings of girls followed by forced conversions so alarmed the community that their fear increases with every passing day.

At the time of Pakistan's creation, the Hindu community had the choice of remaining in Pakistani territory or immigrating to India. They chose to remain loyal to a country whose government is now turning a blind eye to the harassment and abuse perpetrated against them by religious extremists.

The glowing image that Hina Rabbani painted of Pakistan blatantly ignored the harassment and abuse of Hindus, Christians, Shias and the Ahmadiya community. She ignored the several attacks on members of the Shia community in which buses were stopped by people in military uniform, Shias identified, lined up on the side of the road and shot, execution style.

It is ironic that on the very day the Foreign Minister was giving her speech to the UN, the Ahmadiya community in Pakistan was forbidden to hold their Eid celebrations and prayer

meetings like other Muslims. One can only laugh at the Foreign Minister when she claims that religious minorities enjoy complete freedom. What freedom forbids the Ahmadiya community from voting in the general elections so they can have a voice in parliament or from praying as they wish?

Moreover, members of the Ahmadiya community are persecuted, harassed and killed, with no action taken by government bodies. On August 20 in Ghatialian, the police registered a case against four Ahmadis, Mr Naeem Ahmad, Mr Gulfam Naeem, Mr Ahsan Ramzan and Mr Shahid Abdullah, after receiving the complaint of a mulla, Qari Afzal. The reason for the complaint was that the four men had hurt his feelings and intimidated him. Interestingly, three of the accused were not even present at the time of the alleged incident, which indicates a fabricated charge. Although they obtained temporary bail at the initial hearing, on October 15 the Additional Session Judge of Pasroor changed the applied penal code in the case with PPC 298-C, an anti-Ahmadiyya clause, and rejected bail. The police arrested all the accused and sent them to jail until a new bail application was moved in the Magistrate's Court, which was granted on October 23. The accused still face trial.

Anti-Ahmadiyya activities are nothing new, but incidents have risen steeply in Hafizabad, with the desecration of an Ahmadiyya graveyard by the police on the instructions of a group of mullas. The police officials urged the Ahmadis to commit the desecration themselves, and when they refused a group of men went to the cemetery and erased Islamic inscriptions from the gravestones.

The problems for the Ahmadis started with the amendment to the Constitution in 1973 during the reign of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, which declared them as 'non-Muslim'. However, it was during the regime of General Zia Ul Haq that they were truly disenfranchised. Ahmadis were denied the right to declare themselves as Muslim. They were not allowed to build mosques similar to those of the Muslims. They could not write or inscribe Quranic verses on the walls of their mosques. And as described above, even inscribing Quranic verses on their gravestones left them open to attack by religious zealots.

Sadly the sectarian prejudice against Ahmadis even extends to their right to education; another area in which the government has failed miserably to live up to its responsibilities. Ms Afshan Malik was a student in the Government Degree College for Women, Gulshane Ravi, Lahore. While participating at the Natiya (poems in the honour of the Holy Prophet PBUH) competition in the Punjab Youth Festival, her recital was so well-liked that the Chief Minister of Punjab asked her to recite another Naat while the results were being compiled. She did so and was loudly applauded by the audience. She was awarded the first prize and a trophy.

After a few days, her rivals came to know that the two Naats she recited were written by Ahmadi elders, and started to harass her in college. They even tried to get a police case registered against her. When the situation became serious, Afshan had to discontinue her studies, and her family later moved residence for their safety.

Even Pakistan's only Nobel Laureate was not spared from anti-Ahmadiyya sentiment. An Ahmadi, Dr Abdus Salam won the Nobel prize in 1979 for his work in theoretical physics and

for his discovery of the 'God' particle. Dr Salam was the first Pakistani and the first and only Muslim to receive a Nobel Prize in Physics. He contributed heavily to the rise of Pakistan within the international physics community. In a career spanning 45 years, he worked tirelessly to promote training and research into physics. He worked as one of the science advisors to the government from 1960 to 1974 and played a major role in Pakistan's science infrastructure. After the parliament passed a bill declaring the Ahmadiyya sect as non-Islamic however, Dr Salam left Pakistan dejected.

Dr Salam passed away on November 21, 1996 in England at the age of 70. In the town of Alloway, Scotland, the cottage where the famed poet, Robbie Burns lived has been preserved for future generations. It is now a museum honouring the life and times of the 'Bard'. Sadly no such honour has been paid to the house where Dr Salam resided. Instead of being preserved as a mark of honour, it has been allowed to fall into disrepair and the local residents hang their washing from its crumbling walls; a deliberate snub to show that Ahmadis, scientists and Nobel Laureates have no place in Pakistan's history and culture.

Likewise, his headstone originally read, "The first Muslim Nobel Laureate Dr Abdus Salam." After the vandals were finished it, it now reads only, "Dr Abdus Salam". The government remains apathetic to the extremists' actions to belittle his work. There has been no investigation into the vandalism and to be honest, none is expected. This also speaks to the apathy of civil society and the institutes of higher learning. It is shameful that they are unable to respect the scientific achievements of one of its own citizens. Indeed, Dr. Salam's community has contributed more to the creation of Pakistan than any other religious sect or group. Unfortunately, in a time where the only heroes of the country are the soldiers supposedly guardians of its sovereignty, the Jihadists that operate with the full knowledge of the government to protect the 'purity' of Islam, there is no place for scientists and academics who work to enlighten society and advocate scientific knowledge. The government of Pakistan has turned its back on a man that dedicated his life to the betterment of his country; a country that disowned him because of his faith.

Though Dr Salam has been treated as 'persona non grata', one might have thought there would be hope for Pakistan's civil society in the person of Malala Yousufzai, the young girl of only 15 who stood up to the religious extremists and fought for her right, and the rights of other Pakistani girls to an education. She is the example that Pakistan's civil society should be following. Unfortunately, Malala too has now joined Dr Salam in the group of persons that are 'persona non grata'. She is said to be pro-American and even some state organizations have joined the chorus of hatred towards her. A Muslim group in the United Kingdom, where Malala is undergoing treatment for the gunshot injuries she sustained during the attempt on her life, also declared her eligible for assassination. The group has been angered by her public comments in support of the occupying US forces in the region and her mocking of the hijab and jihad. The group plans to announce a fatwa against her on November 30 at a mosque which was previously raided by British forces due to its religious extremism.

It is yet to be seen if the UK government will take further action towards this mosque and the group based in its territory.

It is high time for the Pakistan government to cease its policy of appeasement towards the religious extremists and armed forces. The country's true heroes are not Jihadists and hate mongers; the true heroes are the individuals who work for the betterment of the people and humanity in general.

[Footnote text for first page:] The authors may be contacted at the following addresses: Baseer Naweed: baseer.naweed@ahrc.asia; Stewart Sloan: sloanbooks@gmail.com