

Panel: Strengthening Voices of Minorities: Countering Hate and Violence

The state of religious minorities in Pakistan has been marred with growing extremism and acts of violence against them thus literally weakening their voices and reducing social spaces for them. This extremism and violence has damaged the very fabric of society in violation of the spirit of the Constitution and the foundation of inclusivity laid down by the founder of Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Mr Jinnah, while addressing the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 11 August 1947, said:

"... You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place or worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the State We are starting in the days where there is no discrimination, no distinction between one community and another, no discrimination between one caste or creed and another. We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State. ..."

The spirit of the Quaid's speech was distorted when religious extremism established roots in the country and bigots ruled in the name of religion by curbing voices of religious minorities. The places of worship were attacked. The attack on a Church in Peshawar in 2014 led to action by the then Chief Justice of Pakistan, Mr Justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani, who gave a landmark judgement in June 2014. The judgment asked the government to constitute a National Council for minorities' rights to monitor the practical realisation of the rights and safeguards provided to the minorities under the Constitution and law (Malik 2014). The apex court ordered to set up a Special Police Force with professional training to protect the places of worship of minorities. The judgement was received by the minorities and human rights activists as a relief, but implementation on the judgement is still pending on most of the counts.

The violent extremism did not stop at the Peshawar Church incident. In 2014, terrorists attacked the Army Public School in Peshawar killing over 100 innocent students and teachers. This led to the formulation of National Action Plan expressing a commitment by military and civilian leadership to counter terrorism and a military operation against the terrorists. Moving ahead, the Federal Government took all leading religious and sectarian leaders on board and developed a new national narrative, 'Paigham-e-Pakistan', and rolled it out in January 2018.

The efforts right from promotion of the Quaid-e-Azam's speech on 11 August 1947 to Paigham-e-Pakistan, we find a continued commitment to counter violence and extremism and to strengthen voices of the minorities. The journey from growing extremism to building a tolerant society necessitates inviting divergent scholars to share their work on the subject.

The invited speakers may discuss the following key points in their papers:

- State of minorities in Pakistan and elsewhere in the region
- Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Approaches to promote building tolerance
- Impact of hate and violence on women belonging to minorities groups

- Gender dimension in peace-building processes
- Interfaith harmony/dialogues approach to promote peaceful co-existence
- Minorities as equal citizens – constitutional provisions and legal protections

Reference:

Malik, H. 2014, 'SC asks govt to form a National Council for minorities' rights', The Express Tribune, Islamabad, <<https://tribune.com.pk/story/724188/sc-asks-govt-to-form-a-national-council-for-minorities-rights/>> Accessed 2 October 2018.

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