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The Lahore Blast: Revisiting the Role of Religion in Pakistan

By Sara Mahmood

Synopsis

The bomb blast in Lahore on Easter highlights the focus of terrorist groups on attacking religious minorities, and reflects the radicalisation of the broader community. It is time for the state to focus on more fundamental approaches to nation-building.

Commentary

THE TERRORIST attack in Lahore on 26 March 2016 which killed more than 70 and injured at least 300 civilians reflected a colossal security lapse. The fact that the attack happened in the heart of Punjab, a stronghold of the ruling party Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, is a further testimony of the security failure.

This latest incident has once again triggered debate on the role of religion in Pakistan. Arguably, some would point that various legislations and policies introduced by the military regime of Zia-ul-Haq and perpetuated by succeeding governments, have led to increased intolerance towards non-Muslims while radicalising an increasing number of Pakistanis.

State of Terrorism in Pakistan

Shortly after the attack, the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, an off-shoot of the Taliban in Pakistan, claimed responsibility for the incident. Ehsanullah Ehsan, the group's spokesperson, stated that the attack was targeting Christians, who were celebrating Easter in the Gulshan-i-Iqbal Park. Even though more Muslims were killed in the attack than Christians, the fact remains that the Christian minority was the main target.

Arguably, in terms of the casualties and the number of attacks, terrorism in Pakistan has witnessed a steady decline since the December 2014 attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar. However, despite the reduction in violence, attacks against religious minorities, including Christians and Ahmadis as well as smaller Muslim sects such as the Shias, Ismailis, and Dawoodi Bohras, have persisted.

In March 2015, Jamat-ul-Ahrar launched twin blasts targeting churches at a town in Lahore that is home to more than 100,000 Christians. In May, close to 50 Ismaili Shias were gunned down in a public bus in Karachi by ISIS-inspired militants. In December, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi claimed responsibility for a suicide attack on Shia Muslims in Kurram Agency in northwest Pakistan.

Increased Intolerance Towards Minorities

There is a deeper crisis that impedes peaceful coexistence of minorities within Pakistan. The takfiri mentality, propagating excommunication of other Muslims and religious faiths by labelling them as apostates or disbelievers, has gained steady traction in the country. This has contributed to the persecution of religious minorities, not only by the terrorist groups, but also by the broader radicalised populace concurring with such narratives.

The legitimisation of violence against minorities was evident in the protests outside the Parliament in Islamabad on the same day of the attack in Lahore. One significant catalyst of the sit-in at the Parliament relates to Mumtaz Qadri's hanging in February 2016. Qadri had murdered Salman Taseer, Governor of Punjab in 2011, defending the Blasphemy Laws of 'Islam' after the latter proposed changes to the legislations.

Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws, a part of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) codified in 1860 by the British, were initially formed to provide protection to all religious faiths. However, these laws were changed or rather, Islamised by President Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s through punishments such as death sentences and life imprisonment for those who disrespect the Quran and the Prophet.

The implementation of the laws has also been regarded as discriminatory, with non-Muslims comprising an overwhelming number of those convicted. The laws have at times been used as a pretext to settle personal scores, and to sanction violence against religious minorities, that have been accused of 'threatening' Islam.

In this case, the 25,000 protesters and the 30,000 individuals who had gathered for Qadri's funeral in Rawalpindi were not only protesting Qadri's execution, but symbolically defending the continued persecution of religious minorities. In fact, the protesters also called for the state to remove Ahmadis from government positions, to declare Qadri a martyr and to ensure the blasphemy laws of 'Islam' remain unchanged.

This large-scale mobilisation and the fervent demands hint towards a dangerous trend where intolerance is deeply entrenched within Pakistani society. Similarly, a Pew Research Poll conducted in 2011 revealed that close to 50% Sunni Muslims in Pakistan regard Shias as non-Muslims.

Rebuilding Pakistan through National Integration

To contain and roll back the growing trend of polarisation, the state has to take a broader, more fundamental approach to nation-building. Some steps that have been taken are important, but new ones may have to be considered.

For example, the state has made efforts beyond militarisation to integrate religious minorities into the wider community. Recently, for the first time, the government granted concessions such as public holidays on the Hindu festival of Holi and allowed Hindus to legally register their marriages. These efforts are integral to the broader integration of religious minorities. Even then, some from the majority may attempt to deny the right of religious minorities to celebrate their 'anti-Islamic' religious festivals.

The Pakistani authorities must also counter radical and extremist narratives which have become dominant within the society. These radical narratives of intolerance emanate from a minority section of the religious class that drowns out the moderate voices. Here, there is a need for the state to promote peaceful narratives through influential and moderate Islamic scholars such as Javed Ahmed Ghamidi, Tahir Ul Qadri and Ibtisam Ilahi Zaheer.

For a more long-term impact, the education system will also have to play a frontline role in curbing the intolerance towards the religious and sectarian minorities. In September 2013, the government banned the study of Comparative Religion in schools, regarding it as an attempt to 'endanger' Islam. The course, which was intended to focus on the history of religions, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, could act as the very foundation for building narratives of peaceful coexistence. Such initiatives, in private and state institutes, are the key to achieving harmony and social cohesion in the long-run.

Moreover, in January 2015, the state drafted the National Action Plan (NAP) to counter terrorism and extremism in Pakistan, and one of the major takeaways was ensuring the 'protection of minorities'. Since this aspect of the NAP still remains neglected, the government needs to focus on alleviating the crisis of religious minorities with proper institutional frameworks.

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