

Pakistan: Enforced disappearances and violations of religious freedoms becoming point of isolation in world community

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Pakistan has recently been placed on a special watch list for severe violations of religious freedom by the United States' Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. This was done under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. A brief announcement by the United States' State Department said that for the first time it has created a 'Special Watch List' for countries that "engage in or tolerate severe violations of religious freedom but may not rise to the level of CPC (Countries of Particular Concern)". Pakistan's systemic discrimination against its minorities is a cause for concern, with the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom advocating since 2002 for designating Pakistan as a CPC.

In its 2016 report, the Pew Research Center determined that over an eight-year period Pakistan is one of a small group of countries that "stand out as having the most restrictions on religion when both government restrictions and religious hostilities are taken into account".

Extremist organizations sharing centre stage with political parties on the political front has made matters worse for the vulnerable minorities, who find no protection from the state or the judiciary.

The religious, ethnic minorities continue to suffer discrimination, despite the constitutional obligation to protect the life and property of all citizens regardless of their caste, ethnicity, religion or gender, the state plays the role of the bystander when human rights abuse occurs at the hands of the powerful majority group. In 2014, the Supreme Court ordered the government to establish a National Council for the Rights of Minorities and set up a special regulatory body to monitor abuses of religious rights.

The government finalized the entire process without consulting the minority groups themselves. Religious minority groups termed such a move as undemocratic and unethical, and to date the commission has yet to be formally established.

State bias and prejudice is apparent in the judicial and administrative attitude towards the Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus and Hazara Shias, all of whom are made to suffer incessantly for their beliefs and denied promotions and jobs in State departments. They are not even allowed to openly profess their beliefs; their properties and even graves are not exempted from being vandalized by unruly fundamentalists. The State does not intervene to protect the life or property of a citizen belonging to minority groups, despite its obligation to protect its citizens.

In March 2017 the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) held a side event in Geneva on the issue of human rights abuse in Pakistan, asserting that international aid must be tied to the improvement of the human rights situation in Pakistan, particularly in Sindh and Baluchistan. The Pakistan desk at the AHRC has been continuously making interventions, documentation, and vigorous campaigns on the issues of persecution of religious minorities, religious intolerance, use of blasphemy laws, forced conversion to Islam, abduction of girls from minority groups, rapes in

custody, lynching, displacement of their settlements, and discrimination in employment.

The United States has also now suspended its Coalition fund—meant for foreign military aid—to Pakistan’s military, creating a furor in the country, and threatening a severance of ties between the two allies in the war against terror. Despite having full knowledge of Pakistan’s blatant violation of human rights, the U.S. State Department continued to oil its war machine, thus becoming an ancillary to the human rights abuse. Instead of funding social sector and human development, for decades the U.S. paid money to the military to take up arms against its own people. In addition to taking up a lion’s share of the national GDP, the military also used the entire coalition fund for the purchase of arms and ammunition that were used to kill the innocent people of Balochistan.

The European Union has stated that it might review “its economic concessions given to Pakistan over the deteriorating human rights situation, including the wave of abductions (enforced disappearances) of activists reportedly by the security agencies and discriminatory laws against minorities.” The European Union has warned Pakistan that there can be no place for enforced disappearances and secret detention in the country; the government must investigate and criminalize the practice, as well as amend its discriminatory laws against minorities.

These actions by the international community are a great achievement by civil society, which has been raising concerns over the state of Pakistan’s minorities. It remains to be seen whether these moves will halt Pakistan’s downward slide in the international index on freedom of religious beliefs. It is hoped that the AHRC’s campaign against enforced disappearances will also attract the international community to take such actions in the future to ensure compliance from the state on its international obligations.

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