

Minorities' Day Observed in Pakistan

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Religious minorities observed the National Minorities' Day across the country on 11 August for equal rights.

15 August 2023 - Religious minorities, including Christian, Hindus, and Sikhs, observed the National Minority Day across the country on 11 August for equal rights, and asked the state to curb forced conversion of Christian and Hindu girls. In various cities, several programmes were held, which were attended by people from different walks of life. Minorities issued statements, organised peaceful marches, rallies and demonstrations, and organised other events. Muslim members of civil society, journalists, and politicians supported their demands by attending those activities.

The day was also a remembrance of minorities' sacrifices for the prosperity of Pakistan and was a time to celebrate their contribution to the progress of the country through their services in health and education sectors.

Minorities demanded for an inclusive and democratic Pakistan by reminding the state to respect the vision of Pakistan's founding father, Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who said in his inaugural address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 11 August 1947 (just three days before the creation of Pakistan): "You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of 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."

They also reminded the state of its international human rights obligations and constitutional responsibility to respect the freedom of religion and belief in the country and protect the lives of vulnerable minorities from discrimination and violence.

Minorities make up only 5 percent of Pakistan's 220 million population and belong to the poorest section of society.

For decades, minorities demanded for the minorities' day. In 2009, Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian federal minister for minorities, got approval from the cabinet of Pakistan People's Party's government to declare 11 August as the National Minorities' Day. He was assassinated in 2011. Many believe that he was killed by the Taliban.

Therefore, every year, 11 August is observed as National Minorities' Day to ensure that they are equal citizens of the state. However, they are still struggling for their basic rights.

In Islamabad, Minority Alliance Pakistan (MAP), a political party run by a Christian solicitor, Akmal Bhatti advocate, held a rally. About 500 party members had clashed with police while they tried to walk from National Press Club toward Democracy Chowk – a sensitive area as many important buildings, including Prime Minister's Office, are located there. Some 15 participants and a few policemen were injured. Police filed an FIR (First Information Report) against some of the participants and arrested six Christian youth. They were released later when the case against them was dropped. Minority organisations, including Minority Concern, condemned the mishandling of

the participants of the rally by Islamabad Capital Territory Police.

In Karachi, about 5,000 men, women and children took part in the Minority Rights March, which was organised by the social activists of minority and majority communities. Safina Javed, a Christian and an organiser, appreciated the support provided by the local Muslims.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) issued a statement in which it said that the state must protect the rights of all minorities to promote a strong narrative that takes pride in diversity of belief.

In Islamabad, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) organized a convention on 10 August urging the political parties to deliver on their pledges made in the party manifestos to the minorities' rights.

Christian and Muslim speakers recalled a progressive and tolerant nation. They said, "We emphasize vehemently the promotion of religious freedom and tolerance, equality of rights and non-discrimination for all, as a national aspiration." They also aspired for "adequate, effective and mandatory safeguards for protection of rights and interest of minorities."

Hina Jillani Advocate from HRCP said that Pakistan came into being for the protection of minorities' rights, so, the issues faced by minorities need to be addressed by the state and the government. She added that regressive policies should be introduced, and hatred attitudes should be curtailed. She demanded, "The religious content in all compulsory subjects sometimes becomes harmful for children, particularly the believers of religions other than Islam, which needs to be reviewed."

Executive Director CSJ, Peter Jacob, organiser of the conference, said that regrettably the National Assembly had passed a National Commission for Minorities Bill, 2023, on 7 August without addressing its gaps.

Wajahat Masood, Chairperson CSJ said that the political parties needed to review their actions, as the laws introduced in haste under the influence of fundamental groups are difficult to be withdrawn. He added that the speech Jinnah delivered on 11 August 1947 outlines the principles of tolerance and equality. However, the Objective Resolution of 1949 is contrary to what Jinnah aimed for. It is time that the state of Pakistan ought to introduce measures to ensure the equality of citizenship and rights for all and demonstrate the neutrality of the state by removing the policy of preference based on religion.

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P.S.

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