**Jaranwala incident - Moving beyond condemnation**

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In a single day on 16 August 2023, around 19 churches in Jaranwala were ransacked. The mob rampaged through the prominent Christian areas of the city to accomplish its dastardly mission, which had begun on the pretext of the Holy Quran being defiled by two Christian brothers. The vigilante mob had gathered strength from the neighborhood by exploiting their religious emotions that demanded that an act of blasphemy be responded to with equal force. According to the reports, an announcement was made through a mosque calling upon the faithful to take revenge not from the two brothers who were blamed for desecrating the Quran, but from the entire community—from its children, its women, and its elders. In no time, the city was engulfed in hatred emanating from a story that had neither been investigated nor reported to the police. Unfortunately, by the time the police took control of the situation, the damage had been done. If reports from the crime scene are to be believed, the police allowed the game of hate to take place without intervention. Moreover, like always, not until the news broke out on national media did the police gather muscle to make a foray.
Until now, hundreds of miscreants have been arrested, along with the two brothers blamed for dishonoring Quranic pages.
The Jaranwala incident is part of a series of violent acts perpetrated on minorities in the name of religion. The way the drama unfolded; it is convenient to blame the external forces that are hell bent on painting Pakistan as a failed state. I cannot rule out the probability that Pakistan’s foes, both within and without, may have scripted this bloody theatre. However, I also cannot turn my sight away from the failure of Pakistan as a state to prevent such incidents from happening.
As part of the Pakistan Ulema Council’s mission to strengthen interfaith harmony in Pakistan, we hurriedly managed to contain the situation from spilling further. We rallied Christian leadership from across Pakistan and jointly condemned the incident.
We resolved not to allow such incidents to sever our relations as one nation—Christians and Muslims. However, this is a patchwork that we, as the propellers of interfaith harmony, have been doing whenever such a situation arises. The real work, however, needs to be done by the state.
The unforgivable part of this entire story is the ease with which the people’s religious feelings were manipulated, just like it was easy to manipulate their religious sentiments four decades back. We have not progressed in building character in our nation. Would I be wrong to assert that this country is a group of people lacking a common objective that helps in character building?
When the Army Public School incident occurred, the state assigned itself the duty to address not the symptoms—terror-related incidents—but the cause—extremism—in society.
The dawning of this realisation led to the formulation of the National Action Plan. It was a 20-point agenda agreed upon by all the political and religious parties and key stakeholders as an appropriate policy response to thrust back the rising tides of terrorism.
Under the plan, a constitutional amendment was made to allow the Pakistan army to try terrorists in military courts, with the apparent objective of turning the wheel of justice in the right direction. Many terrorists were hanged to death; terror financing was choked; proscribed organizations were restricted from rebranding themselves; registration and regulation of religious seminaries were carried out with effective results; FATA was merged into KP. The use of social media in terror assistance was also stemmed, militancy in Punjab was brought down, and the Karachi operation was completed successfully, resulting in target killings being reduced to zero. Moreover, the dissemination of hate material through newspapers, media, and other sources was controlled, and the media was restricted from giving airtime to terror-related activities. I must say that the Pakistan army did a tremendous job of assisting the civilian government in lending wings to the NAP. Nevertheless, despite all the successes, our failure to revamp the criminal justice system of Pakistan—one of the 20 points NAP agendas—had rendered weak the entire edifice of the National Action Plan.
The criminal justice system is composed of multiple pillars, such as academia, law enforcement, forensic services, and the judiciary. They support the idea of legal justice to protect the citizens’ life and property and ensure the implementation of law and order.
Since the Jaranwala incident, I have repeatedly said that had we tried and given exemplary punishment to the culprits of the Gojra and Joseph colony incident, we might have stopped other attacks from taking place against minorities.
I would urge the government of Pakistan to focus on creating a system whereby people are educated about blasphemy and how it should be approached. Training people on how to react if their religious sentiments are attacked is required. Congregational setups such as Juma prayers and church masses should be used to highlight the importance of interfaith harmony.
The Pakistan Ulema Council has formed a high-level committee of 20 members, which includes senior religious leadership from both Christian and Muslim communities. This committee aims to probe the drivers behind such tragedies to identify gaps and recommend measures to address them. The rise in blasphemy related incidents in the recent past is concerning and paints a worrying picture for the future. It is high time that we move on from mere condemnation and devise a holistic and inclusive strategy to address the core issues behind this phenomenon.