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Why Has Pakistan Become So Intolerant?

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I was beaten in Pakistan for my religion. I am far from alone.

A Christian couple, parents of three children with a fourth on the way, were accused of blasphemy by a mob and incinerated in a brick kiln at their worksite in Punjab last November. Suicide bombers blew themselves up at two churches in Lahore in March. Asia Bibi, a Christian laborer and mother of five, awaits a hearing on her death sentence after being accused of blasphemy in 2009. In Peshawar 127 worshipers were killed and 160 wounded by suicide bombers at All Saints' Church in September 2013.

My getting beaten up by agents of Pakistan's military Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in the back cab of a pickup truck on the outskirts of Peshawar last year was mild compared to the discrimination and violence that the country's religious minorities have experienced since Pakistan was founded in 1947.

Nevertheless the beating was significant, for it illustrated the extent to which governmental authorities in Pakistan are willing to violate their own constitution's mandate for religious freedom in order to placate the radicals pressing Pakistan in ever more extreme Islamist directions.

For starters, I'm a U.S. citizen, not a Pakistani. I was principal (the south Asian term for president) of one of Pakistan's oldest and most prestigious institutions of higher education: Edwardes College, established in Peshawar in 1900 by a mission agency of the Church of England and since 1940 an institution of the local church. And I was being attacked not by the Taliban but by agents of the government's most powerful intelligence unit.

The assault on me was not personal but political, and the politics had everything to do with religion. Edwardes had about 2,800 students and over 100 faculty members – 92% of them Muslim and 7% Christian – and a longstanding reputation for a liberal learning environment that fostered inter-religious understanding. The campus has both a chapel and a mosque.

The provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was so enthusiastic about our educational innovations that they made an unprecedented grant of Rs. 300 million (over \$3 million at the time) to support the college's effort to award its own degrees and de-affiliate from the University of Peshawar.

Degree-awarding status required a charter, and this was where conflict arose. Edwardes has always been a church institution, but its auspices got confused during the nationalization drive of the 1970s, when the local governor illegally installed himself as chair of the board, with a majority of government appointees. The Church of Pakistan and its Diocese of Peshawar never accepted this shift, but the risk of violent retaliation prompted them, understandably, to muddle along with confused governance rather than actively resist.

Until, that is, the charter issue arose in 2013. Following the guidelines of the government's own "Model Charter for Private Universities," the proposed charter restored a church majority on the board, with the diocesan bishop as chancellor. Government officials and some Muslim faculty members insisted that the government's majority be retained, but the church rightly rejected codifying by charter an illegal and dysfunctional governance system. Without constitution, law or history on its side, the government resorted to threatening Bishop Sarfaraz Peters and me, abusing a Christian administrator, and physically attacking me. I had to leave the country, and the church is still trying to resolve the situation.

In addition to mandating that all persons shall have the right to "profess, practice and propagate" their religion, Pakistan's constitution states that "every religious denomination and every sect thereof shall have the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions" (Article 20). Violations of this institutional protection are less dramatic than individuals being accused of blasphemy or neighborhoods going up in flames, but in the long run they're just as important because they affect the longterm viability of religious minorities and their contribution to society.

Several factors feed into the personal, communal and institutional violations of religious freedom in Pakistan today, violations visited on Christians, Hindus and Sikhs, but also Shiite, Ahmadi and Ismaili Muslims. sought to avoid in India.

One factor is the struggle within Islam about the future of Islam, a struggle that for years, especially since 9/11, has dominated news about North Africa and the Middle East, with ISIS

atrocities now occupying center stage. Muslims are wrestling with Islam's place in the modern world, especially in relation to democracy, education and freedom as promoted by Western Europe and North America.

In Pakistan this struggle was aggravated by U.S. and Pakistani support for the mujahedeen as they transformed jihad into a tactic of modern warfare against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Today it is aggravated by the proxy ideological battle being waged between Iranian Shiite Islam and Saudi Wahabi Islam. Yet as Farahnaz Ispahani argues in her forthcoming book, *Purifying the Land of the Pure: Pakistan's Religious Minorities*, persecution is not a new development, for minorities have been oppressed in Pakistan since shortly after independence in 1947.

Another factor is the global revival of religious chauvinism across many religions, including both Christianity and Islam but also in Hindu nationalism in India and Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. As populations increase and governments fail their constituents, religious majorities prey on minorities in competition for resources, especially as local identities have resurfaced since the end of the Cold War.

An irony in the case of Pakistan is that it achieved nationhood almost 70 years ago, but its 96% Muslim majority still exhibits the siege mentality of the minority status it sought to avoid in India. Distrust of the different results in efforts to suppress and eradicate the other.

And then there is terror of the violence that can be meted out to those who oppose extreme views and policies. The vast majority of Pakistanis are moderate and tolerant in their convictions. Newspaper columnists regularly condemn radical views, violent incidents and the government's inaction. "We were not like this!" a Muslim colleague of mine cried out at news of another outrage. It was a well-connected Muslim who saved me from being killed by the ISI.

Yet the assassinations of two prominent government officials in 2011 – Salman Taseer, the Muslim governor of Punjab, and Shabaz Bhatti, the Christian federal minister of minority affairs – for opposing the nation's draconian and much abused blasphemy laws illustrated how there is no limit to the radicals' reach. The threat of such violence, especially when coupled with the ability of religious political parties to sway voters, intimidates governmental officials into doing little except speechifying after horrifying incidents. Perpetrators go unpunished, and school textbooks continue to disparage religious minorities.

At 200 million inhabitants, Pakistan is the world's sixth most populous nation, and it will be fourth by 2050. So what happens with religious freedom in Pakistan is important for the future of religious freedom globally in the 21st century. Can religious people in the human family honor one another's search for the sacred and explore each other's paths? Or will religious people disparage, oppress and kill the religious other and thereby defile the divine?

