

COMMENT: Mainstreaming minorities —Peter Jacob



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Discussions on the media and opinions expressed on different forums suggest that Pakistan is in dire need of structural and policy reforms in several sectors. These broad-based reforms are an absolute imperative to deal with multiple challenges. This, of course, includes dealing with the challenge to peace and security. While the structural reforms would need a political consensus which might seemingly be difficult before next elections, as the house stands badly divided, however policy reforms could come rather rapidly. One important area, among of course many other areas needing reforms, is the policy towards minorities.

A Jinnah Institute report on the status of religious minorities, issued on May 29, 2011, states, "Pakistan needs to address and take measures to rectify the widespread bigotry and intolerance within the government, the judiciary, law enforcement, the media, as well as society at large. Ultimately and fundamentally, we support a transition from Pakistan's currently institutionalised 'two-tiered' citizenship, i.e., Muslim and non-Muslim, into one that ensures equality of all citizens and the plurality that was envisioned by Muhammad Ali Jinnah."

Accumulated legal and other discriminations have made this year's experience for the minorities one of acute social and economic marginalisation. This state of affairs has less to do with the performance of incumbent provincial and federal governments but everything to do with religion turning into an article of abuse in the state laws, institutions, policies, statecraft as well as social order and practices in the country. Therefore, dealing with issues concerning minorities is actually about handling this old menace plaguing our system. In that respect, all minority issues are nonetheless national issues.

Agreeing that empowering the marginalised means upgrading their status as members of a society and citizens of a country is crucial. The minorities must be involved in social-economic processes and political forums in an effective manner that ensures that their interests are guarded in the public life and their well being is part of the common agenda. Empowering the marginalised entails taking affirmative measures to ensure social justice. This can be accomplished by abolishing gender preference among grantees of micro finance or ensuring adequate allocation of reserved seats in legislative institutions. The outcome must be that the focused population is enabled to defend itself within the system against any gross or systematic injustices as individuals and communities, enabling them to enjoy a socio-economic and political status equal to other citizens. It does not imply creating or strengthening pockets of comfort zones that actually perpetuate discrimination.

In implementation of the 18th Amendment, there is a huge structural change or reform taking place in the country. The devolution of powers to provinces is likely to impact governance immensely. The federal government is criticised for keeping ministers in the Centre, while their ministries and their functions were devolved to provinces. This included ministry of minorities' affairs hence the move is looked upon with a degree of scepticism by minorities.

After Shahbaz Bhatti's assassination, the government appointed his brother Paul Bhatti as advisor to prime minister with a ministerial status and later appointed Akram Masih Gill as the state minister for minorities. While representation of minorities in the cabinet is appreciable, it is absolutely not necessary to have a minority member as minister for minorities alone.

In another example, Mian Nawaz Sharif took a daring stand when some members of his party objected to the presentation of provincial budget in June 2011 by Finance Minister Kamran Michael owing to his non-Muslim faith background. By making it possible that minister for finance is not changed, subject to the discriminatory whims of a few, he set another example of non-discrimination in the business of the state.

Representation of minorities should mean bringing them into the mainstream rather than casting them out or reducing their role to one ministry in the cabinet or a few seats in the House. The issues concerning minorities are too big to be dealt by a single ministry. The members of minority communities, too, need health, education, sports, social security, etc.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon all ministries and government departments, at all levels, to cater to minority citizens adequately and equally. The legacy of separate electorate has to be cleansed from minds and hearts, in theory and practice.

The federal and provincial governments notified a job quota for minorities in 2009 and 2010, however, the decision lacks implementation due to the absence of any regulatory authority. Without an enabling system or body, this scheme is likely to fail. Whereas the decision to enable meaningful representation of minorities in the mainstream services, especially judiciary and civil services of Pakistan is good, its success can be hampered by the lack of enabling system.

Ongoing national census is another opportunity to realise diversity of Pakistani nation as well as helping development and policy objectives. The Census Commission should be required to make credible and useable data of minorities available to the public. This data should present segregated statistics in all areas to help planners with the demographic profiles and social and economic indicators.

The focused approach should be limited in special areas and in objective manner whereas mainstreaming approach needs to be encouraged as an overall policy and strategy. Independent commissions for minorities have served the purpose of protection and promotion of rights of minorities in many countries. Instead of advisory and non-statutory bodies, the federal and provincial governments should consider setting up such commissions, with powers to investigate human right violations, provide redress, as well as make recommendations to policy makers. However, these commissions need to be 'for minorities' and not to be entirely composed 'of minorities' and should be geared to discourage exclusion on the basis of religion. Also, we have yet to recognise and acknowledge that minorities include national, cultural, linguistic, ethnic and other minorities. This serious omission misguides the discussions and misdirects the measures.

Successive governments found it difficult to address legal and normative discrimination on the basis of religion. Therefore, in order to undo this wrong the government should make a policy statement or pass a resolution in the federal legislature expressing a will to end all discriminations on the basis of religion and sect. This public posture would build confidence among the nation and repair Pakistan's image outside.

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