

AT LARGE

Target Pakistan for Religious Persecution

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American policy in Central Asia is threatened by Pakistan's slow surrender to extremism and violence. The growing mistreatment of religious minorities demonstrates that many of Pakistan's problems are rooted in the spread of hateful and intolerant beliefs. The State Department should cite Pakistan as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act.

Islamabad is not the only U.S. ally that persecutes Christians, Jews, and other religious minorities. In fact, most Muslim states mix discrimination, repression, and persecution in varying degrees.

Saudi Arabia is essentially a totalitarian state when it comes to matters of faith. Much of the Christian community has been driven from the new Iraq, and Coptic Christians are coming under increasingly violent attack in Egypt. Among the worst persecutors is Iran, which has been actively brutalizing religious minorities.

But it is Pakistan, perhaps America's most obvious "frenemy," that best illustrates why religious persecution is a problem transcending national boundaries. Freedom of conscience, the essence of religious liberty, is a foundation for all other human rights.

A national community that refuses to even accept, let alone defend, those who believe differently is likely to become a source of intolerance, hatred, and violence -- which may end up directed well beyond its own country's boundaries. A government unwilling to protect individuals worshiping and serving their creator, both singly and collectively, is not likely to respect the life, dignity, and freedom of its citizens, and even less so people from other nations. Such a regime certainly will find itself ill-equipped to confront the very extremist forces it has previously, even if inadvertently, encouraged.

The ongoing disintegration of Pakistani society was dramatically illustrated by the assassinations of Punjab governor Salman Taseer in January and Religious Minorities minister Shahbaz Bhatti in March. Taseer was a Muslim who opposed the religious parties and denounced Pakistan's blasphemy law. Bhatti, known internationally, also opposed the blasphemy laws and said he was "speaking for the oppressed, marginalized and persecuted Christians and other minorities." Although a few brave Pakistanis embraced the two men in death, many more, including in Taseer's own ruling Pakistan People's Party, stayed silent while extremists praised the

murderers.

In such an environment, it should surprise no one to find official support for al-Qaeda and other terrorists. While civilian members of the Pakistani government may have had no idea about Osama bin Laden's presence on Pakistani soil, it beggars belief that members of the military and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency did not know, and did not aid him. A poll last year found that some 60 percent of Pakistanis viewed America as an enemy. Rank-and-file military attitudes seem little different.

Much of America's unpopularity results from Washington's policies. The war in Afghanistan and especially drone attacks in Pakistan have created growing popular hostility.

But the spread of Islamic extremism has created an environment in which violence naturally flourishes. Even if those willing to strike remain a minority, they increasingly receive warm support from religious and other leaders.

In Pakistan, the social environment is toxic. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reported that "Pakistan continues to be responsible for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief." The Commission pointed to the blasphemy laws which, along with "other religiously discriminatory legislation, such as the anti-Ahmadi laws, have created an atmosphere of violent extremism and vigilantism."

The State Department's assessment of religious liberty is equally blunt. Noted State: "Security forces and other government agencies did not adequately prevent or address societal abuse against minorities. Discriminatory legislation and the government's failure or delay in addressing religious hostility by societal actors fostered religious intolerance, acts of violence, and intimidation against religious minorities."

Both the Commission and State emphasize the blasphemy laws as a particular problem. Not uncommon around the world, the laws have become a particularly threatening tool of persecution against non-Muslims in Pakistan.

In a detailed study released last year, Freedom House concluded: "Although many other countries have laws against blasphemy, the situation in Pakistan is unique in its severity and its particular effects on religious minorities." The extremist Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party has even proposed banning the Bible as "blasphemous."

The majority of those prosecuted for blasphemy are Muslim, but the law is disproportionately deployed against Christians, who also often find themselves targets of vigilante violence. At least 35 Christians charged with blasphemy have been murdered since 1986. "Many others have endured brutal rapes and beatings, while churches, homes and businesses have been ransacked, looted and burned," added author Lela Gilbert.

Unfortunately, even before the Taseer and Bhatti murders, the situation in Pakistan was deteriorating. Last November the State Department declared: "the number and severity of reported high-profile cases against minorities increased" and "organized violence against minorities increased."

The Commission only last month released its latest assessment: "The religious freedom situation

in Pakistan deteriorated greatly during the reporting period." Despite taking some positive steps, the Zardari government, added the Commission, "has failed to reverse the erosion in the social and legal status of religious minorities and the severe obstacles the majority Muslim community faces to the free discussion of sensitive religious and social issues."

International Christian Concern, which placed Pakistan in its "Hall of Shame," noted that Islamabad "absolutely refuses to progress toward a religiously free society." Or a free society in any other way.

Washington obviously can do little to transform internal Pakistani affairs. But U.S. officials should make this toxic human environment an issue for bilateral discussion. The best way to do so would be to designate Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern, which is warranted under U.S. law when there are "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" violations of religious liberty "engaged in or tolerated" by the relevant government.

A CPC rating requires State to act, such as imposing sanctions, or at least grant a waiver. Even in the latter case the designation should spark an ongoing dialogue and create a continuing threat of action at a time when many Americans, including congressmen, wonder why the U.S. continues to provide Pakistan with billions of dollars annually in foreign aid.

Pakistan's geopolitical importance inevitably inclines State against holding Islamabad accountable for its dangerous religious climate. The Bush administration made political accommodations in applying the CPC label. However, Pakistan's very centrality to U.S. policy makes the internal situation especially threatening for Americans as well as Pakistanis. Today the ministries of education and information may be almost as important as those of defense and foreign affairs.

Unless the current government confronts those promoting intolerance, moderate Muslims may vanish along with Christians. Three leading Pakistani Christian leaders issued a statement after Shahbaz Bhatti's death: "We would also like to appeal to the federal and provincial governments to wake up to the challenge of protection of the citizens of Pakistan. If the country becomes a killing field of the democrat and liberal individuals who exercise their freedom of conscience and expression, it would embolden the criminals trying to take charge of the country."

If the government is taken over by such "criminals" -- or, more specifically, extremists advocating the use of violence -- the U.S. and Pakistan risk moving from informal frenemies to formal enemies. The principal concern is not military cooperation in Afghanistan, which America should leave sooner rather than later. The primary issue is a nuclear-armed state in the hands of those shaped by a system that celebrates intolerance and murder.

Washington should do its utmost to avoid such a clash. Angering Islamabad today by raising the pressure through a CPC designation today might prove to be the best means to prevent a crisis in relations tomorrow.

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