**National identity crisis at the heart of sectarian and communal divide in Pakistan**

Islamabad (PR) - “It is unfortunate that we are confined to our narrow identities. These identities, clashing with each other, divide the people and deny many of them any role in national participation. If we want to progress collectively, we need to shape an inclusive national identity, which embraces people of all faiths and sects.”

These views were expressed at daylong workshop on social harmony, conducted by Pak Institute for Peace Studies, an Islamabad-based think-tank. Conducted in three sessions, the training workshop was attended by around 50 young religious scholars of all Islamic sects and members of Hindu, Sikh, and Christian communities, from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA.

Laying down the context, Professor Qibla Ayaz said the current realities calls for coming up with frameworks which peacefully accommodate people of different faiths. One of those realities, he pointed out, stem from the simple fact that many Muslims and non-Muslims now reside in each other’s countries in what he called as the “post-globalized world.”

Professor Ayaz argued that the differences between groups are due to “society, not religion.” At times, it was reminded, how political acts are couched in religious language, even though people of that religion may hardly offer support to those acts.

In addition, the state of Pakistan too, participants were told, warns against religious discrimination. Pakistan’s founder Quaid-e-Azam, for instance, clarified that people of all faith are “free” to go to their places of worship in the newly-created state of Pakistan. The Constitution of Pakistan, Romana Bashir, a peace-building activist, pointed out, stresses upon equality among all citizens of Pakistan.

Romana lamented that the eighteenth constitutional amendment, passed in 2010, mandates that the country’s prime minster be a Muslim only. Earlier, she said, it was only about the president. She questioned the rationale of the latest restriction, arguing that already non-Muslims, who constitute 3% of the population, find it very difficult to rise to the top positions. Such divides, she argued, creates a “psyche that treats the majority as superior and minority are inferior.”

Another speaker, Khursheed Nadeem, columnist and anchorperson, however, argued that in order to overcome sectarian divides, we need to address three challenges: one, narrow religious interpretations, which set in divides among people of different faiths; two, Islamized laws, which exclude minorities from state building; and three, social attitudes that push minorities to the fringes. Ammar Khan Nasir, a religious scholar, also echoed similar thoughts, arguing for overcoming three challenges, ideological, political, and societal, to promote inter-faith harmony in the country.

Saqib Akbar, Akhuwat Academy, said that culture of dialogue should be promoted to resolve critical inter-faith conflicts. Maulana Ahmed Yusuf Banuri, Darul-Uloom Islamia, Banuri Town, appreciated the presence of different community members in the workshop, terming it an example of social harmony, which can be carried forward.

Participants were also told that while there are many positive examples of inter-faith harmony the world over, many a times, the media stresses upon the differences between them. Professor Ayaz advised the media to “promote commonalities”.

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