

# Strengthening Freedom of Faith in Pakistan

## Educating Youth as Agents of Social Change

Expanding the young generation's worldviews through the right knowledge about Pakistan's sociocultural history and rich diversity can help stem the growing tide of religious fanaticism, and promote greater acceptance for peaceful interfaith coexistence in the country. A generation of youth cognizant of the broader history of their region and the natural evolution of the social dynamics in their society develop the tendency to appreciate values of diversity, multiculturalism, and social peace and harmony. These views were expressed by speakers at youth for interfaith harmony workshops organized by Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) across different cities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa including Peshawar, Abbottabad, Swat, and D.I. Khan from Jan-Feb 2021.

The speakers also pointed out flaws in many of the prevailing social norms as well as the education system that contribute to twisted worldviews and stereotypical thinking among the Pakistani youth and hamper their social and intellectual grooming. They urged the workshop participants – students of different KP universities – to develop reading habits and read widely about various topics including the constitution and modern concepts of citizenship in order to widen their worldviews and refine their thinking processes.



Noted religious scholar and jurist, Dr. Khalid Masud, said diversity is a blessing as it provides variety of opinions and perspectives on a given issue and helps understand things better. Diverse societies have great potential for socioeconomic progress. But, he lamented that in Pakistan diversity was looked down upon by the ruling class from early on. Instead of capitalizing on the strengths of diversity, the state began to see it as an obstacle to what it viewed as its *nation building* efforts. Attempts were made to whitewash the country's sociocultural diversity and create a sham homogeneity. Such policies only gave birth to sociopolitical discord as many ethnic groups viewed the so-called nation building project as an attempt to undermine their distinct identities.

Chairperson Council of Islamic Ideology, Dr. Qibla Ayaz, said Pakistan's cultural diversity is a natural result of evolutionary social processes. Pakistan has a diverse geography which is inhabited by diverse ethnic and religious groups. While there a general national culture, sub-cultures among various ethnic communities differ from place to place and province to province. And often, local cultures and customs vary within an ethnic group. Dr. Qibla compared the varying dress styles between Pakhtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and within Pakhtun communities in Pakistan's mountainous rural regions and cities. The youth should seek to understand the social, physical, and environmental factors that give shape to a particular distinct culture, instead of simply otherizing people whose culture seem exotic to us.





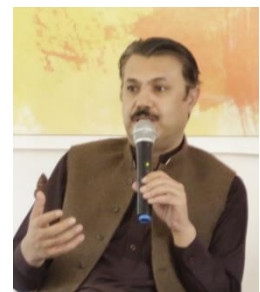
Muhammad Amir Rana explained citizenship in legal and political contexts, pointing out how religious extremism was undermining the fundamental rights and freedoms of minority religious communities. He said it is a great privilege to be a citizen of a state because citizenship comes with many opportunities, but religious minorities like the Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, etc. are often denied their due rights, though the constitution propounds equality of citizens. Amir Rana also said that citizenship is a universally accepted human rights as per the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which Pakistan is a signatory, yet thousands of people continue to languish as stateless persons in Pakistan. Mostly living in Karachi, these people include the Rohingyas and Bengalis who came to Pakistan decades ago.

Azaz Syed, senior investigative journalist, was critical of the public education system. He said apparently the purpose of public education is anything but education because the literature taught to students are ridden with fallacies and twisted accounts of historical events in Pakistan. Speaking at the workshop, Syed warned the students not to construct their worldviews solely on the basis of what they read in the textbooks and expand their knowledge of things by reading works of independent authors. He said it was unfortunate that through education social biases including suspicion about different religions are drilled into the minds of students. Youth often carry these biases to their adulthoods and thus exclusionary social behaviors are formed. Azaz Syed urged the students to exercise mindfulness and have a deep look at their own thinking processes and behaviors in order to identify their biases.



Constitutionalist and parliamentary historian, Zafarullah Khan, underlined the importance of political literacy among the Pakistani youth because youth make up majority of the population, and they wield immense energy and potential to challenge the obsolete status quo that feeds on mass political confusion. Khan is it was duty of every literate citizen to read the constitution because it is the mother of all laws in the country, and the basic agreement between the citizens and the state. The constitution creates the state, and without it the state has no legitimacy to operate or exist, he said. He urged the workshop participants to read the constitution and understand their fundamental rights as citizens. 'You cannot defend your rights and freedoms when you don't know what they are', he added.

Cultural researcher and author of many works, Zubair Torwali, explained the connection between religion and culture, saying that religion is a faith system while culture is a product of people's prolonged interaction with nature and physical surroundings. But, these two are closely interlinked and both exert influence over the other. Due to this nexus, people often confuse cultural values with religious dogmas and vice versa. According to Torwali, Pakistan's indigenous culture is rooted in ancient civilizations like Mehrgarh and Gandhara. He said instead of tolerating diversity, the youth need to embrace it as a positive trait of their society.





Director China Study Center at the University of Sargodha, Dr. Fazal-ur-Rehman, said in a multicultural society like Pakistan, social and cultural conflicts are inevitable but not inherently violent. Such conflicts can be resolved through dialogues between different social and cultural groups in the country. He emphasized the utility of the culture of dialogue, logic, and reasoning in the society for resolving social issues.

Director IBC News, Sabookh Syed, warned against the broader impact of domestic extremism, saying that incidents of religious extremism have far greater consequences than normally people think. Citing the example of the destruction of a Hindu shrine in Karak district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sabookh said that while the incident was highly unfortunate in every sense, it also shattered the country's image around the world and projected Pakistan as an extremist society where basic rights were disrespected and minorities were persecuted. Due to the extremism problem, Pakistan is already lingering at the threshold of blacklisting by FATF. He said when a country faces problems like international sanctions, the effect trickles down to the common men.



Former BBC journalist and senior security analyst, Rifatullah Orakzai, said the mainstream media has not played its due role in preventing discrimination against religious minorities. He was of the view that media's priorities do not include issues of minority faiths which is why their persecution has been going on in the country. He said the media should promote rule of law because when rule of law falters the mob takes charge which lead to violence. Orakzai said people belonging to minority faiths are often lynched by violent mobs on mere allegation of blasphemy. In such an environment, the citizens' basic rights such as right to fair trial is trampled upon, he added.