

## Discourse with Balochistan Youth

### *Identifying and Overcoming Obstacles to Social Peace and Harmony*

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Poverty, insurgency, and political discontent are but few of the reasons why Balochistan makes grim headlines every once in a while. The stifling of religious freedom is one under-reported aspect of social problems in this province. The migration of hundreds of Hindu families from Balochistan to India and the plight of Christians, Zikris, and Shias seldom inform the national discourse. The media have its own compulsions of corporate priorities and self-censorship for sidestepping the province's issues. Progressive radicalization, fuelled by security instability and flawed policies, have added to the social challenges faced by religious minorities. Inadequate access to public health and education, and obstacles in acquiring identity cards and other documents compound their economic woes.

Once known for religious tolerance and interfaith harmony, the society in Balochistan is a shadow of its former self today. Its problems beg for attention, and sooner or later the situation will have the policy circles realize that without genuine course correction on the province the issues will only pile up further. At micro and non-policy levels, even little efforts by civil society for promoting harmony among various religious communities can make a positive change over time. In this whole scenario, the educated youth are critical actors who, with knowledge and training, can lead on social peacebuilding. These were the views expressed by scholars and senior journalists at a series of interfaith harmony workshops with youth hosted by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies in Balochistan. The program was built on PIPS' earlier findings that youth could help stem the resistance to freedom of faith and promote interfaith harmony. The workshops brought students together from universities across Balochistan, and the initiative formed part of the broader PIPS' program for interfaith harmony in Pakistan.

Issues that came under discussion at these workshops ranged from education to citizenship concepts, and from political and legal matters to civic and common sense. The idea was to take a holistic approach and sensitize the youth on diverse issues that have a direct or indirect bearing on peace and harmony in the society. According to PIPS deputy director Safdar Sial, any step for resolving faith-based conflicts is preconditioned to a full realization of ground realities. Awareness is the key, he said, adding that no matter

how unpleasant the facts, the youth need to confront them in order to realize how and where things have gone wrong. Sial who has written widely on religious extremism gave a detailed presentation on the state of religious minorities in Pakistan, listing the social, political, legal, and economic challenges faced by the non-Muslim citizens.



Sharing key findings of his study on minorities' persecution, Safdar Sial said what the minorities face are more than just sporadic incidents of discrimination. Faith-based persecution is prevalent and systematic, and it also targets the economic sphere where members of the minority groups especially the Hindus and Christians struggle to find decent employments. Their economic exclusion is effected, among other things, by denial of full citizenship. They face many obstacles in getting basic identity documents, and many fail in this pursuit. The noose is further tightened by the weaponization of the criminal codes that outlaw blasphemy or rituals of Ahmadiya faith. The sword of these laws have fallen on the heads of both Muslims and non-Muslims in Pakistan, often ending in gruesome incidents such as mob lynching, Sial said. He urged the youth to acquaint themselves with facts by studying and researching issues instead of being content with hearsay and ready-made information. 'When you know the truth of a matter on the basis of evidence, then you can you figure out how to be a part of the solution and contribute to peace', he said.

Likewise, PIPS founder Muhammad Amir Rana said that a lot of social issues that including those about religion and faith are related to how people make sense of their surroundings and perceive things. Often, the factors that cause faith-based discord in the society can be addressed by individual efforts if more people practiced common sense in their daily lives. While common sense helps people judge the good from bad and the right from wrong, it does not make them judgmental about other people who belong a different ethnicity, culture, or faith group, he said. Therefore, underlining the importance of common sense, he urged the youth to avoid impulsiveness in their everyday decisions and instead use common sense for a better and more rational choice. The youth were also encouraged to create little opportunities for happiness because staying happy is good for their health and wellbeing.



Amir Rana said religious extremism is often manifested through violence, and one form of that violence is mob justice. Mob mentality has been responsible for numerous episodes of vigilante justice in Pakistan. Such a mentality is rooted in people's inability to see through the consequences of their actions. Many people are instigated by others to behave irrationally and jump the bandwagon of vigilantism. In the heat of the moment, they fail to realize that by committing the act of violence they are breaking the law for which they will face the consequences. It takes not intelligence but common sense to imagine in mind the consequences of one's actions, Amir Rana said.

Dr. Syed Jaffar Ahmed, an educationist who has taught at leading universities of Karachi, also held a session on rational thinking and reasoning. Dr. Ahmed said humans hold diverse beliefs on any given issue. Mentioning some of the myths about Covid-19, he said myths may or may not be harmful, but believing



in unsubstantiated and conspiratorial stories in times of serious crises such as during the ongoing pandemic can have grave consequences at individual, family, and much broader levels. The basic reason people fall for conspiratorial narratives is the lack of culture of scientific research. He said scientific knowledge rests on universal facts which means they can be tested anywhere for accuracy and authenticity but the results would be universal.

Where scientific thinking is missing as is largely the case with Pakistani society, people often rely on myths and stereotyping which, of course, is not helpful for social harmony. During the workshop, Dr. Ahmed urged students to make it a principle of their life to always think rationally and scientifically. Basic scientific principles should be applied to matters of everyday life, he said. It is easier to jump to conclusions or adopt preconceived ideas and harder to think scientifically, but the little efforts put into rational thinking and reasoning will pay off in big ways, he said.

Veteran journalist Wusatullah Khan spoke about freedom of expression at the workshop. He said that fundamental rights and freedoms are ensured by the constitution, but that does not automatically mean that those rights and freedoms would be offered to people readily. The rights are taken, and that often requires sacrifice. In societies where the public lacks awareness about its rights and lack understanding of how accountability should work, the state tends to encroach upon basic rights and freedoms on various pretexts. Wusatullah also discussed restrictions on the freedom of speech, saying that before complaining about state highhandedness, one must realize that curbs on free expression begin at home where young people are often prevented from talking on many issues in the name of social values or traditions.



According to Wusatullah, the society has a tendency to curb free expression on grounds of religious sensitivity, security, or social norms and mores. And the few limited freedoms that exist in the country are also reserved for the privileged lot. The minorities have practically no say in whatever narratives the elite manufacture. While such a practice may create an illusion of *all-is-well* in the society, but it also breeds resentment in the minds of ordinary people because their voices were muffled to create the illusion in the first place. He warned that suffocating environment leads to explosive outcomes.



In addition, the mainstream media's attitude towards the problems of religious minorities was also discussed by a panel of journalists. President PFUJ Shahzada Zulfiqar said journalists in Balochistan face a lot of issues in their professional work, and they routinely resort to self-censorship due to reasons of safety and security. However, he admitted that the mainstream media was significantly biased in its reporting priorities. He said that relatively insignificant incidents in bigger provinces got more air time than serious incidents in smaller provinces like Balochistan. Likewise, Yar Mohammad Badini agreed that Balochistan did not get adequate coverage on the national media.

According to Badini, religious freedom has diminished in the province which is evident by incidents of violence against religious minorities. The region has been under a humanitarian crisis, but the media has

chosen to look the other way, he added. Similarly, journalist and social media activist Veengas said the minorities get coverage only when they get persecuted or killed. As a routine, their plight does not make a saleable story for the profit-driven media. She also mentioned how some of her investigative stories on the persecution of Hindus in Sindh were turned down by media houses because they were supposedly less marketable and not as per the demands in the news market. Senior reporter Imran Mukhtar concurred that the mainstream media was dictated by commercial interests where the worth of a news is judged by its marketability.

In addition, speakers also highlighted gender issues in Pakistan at the workshops. In Pakistan, there has been a relationship between religious extremism and misogyny. It has been observed that the extremists tend to be opposed to women rights. Speaking on challenges faced by women, rights activist Faiza Mir said her parents were stigmatized by the society for having only daughters and no son. She said that at young age she shouldered familial responsibility due to her father's failing health, and helped her siblings get education. 'I faced hardships and numerous challenges, but in the end I proved to be equal to a son', she said. Women are strong enough to face and overcome challenges, but they require great patience to put up with male dominance, she added.



Likewise, researcher and educationist Fatima said men are preferred in employment opportunities including in the development sector. She deplored the patronizing attitude of the society towards women. Women are denied decision making even in matters of their own lives such as education etc. She urged women to stand up for their fundamental rights as equal citizens, and put their abilities to use to improve their lives.



The workshop participants were also sensitized about national and international legal instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) 1949 and the constitution. Secretary General of the HRCP Harris Khaleeq discussed the background of the UDHR and the factors that necessitated its adoption by the world nations. He said the World Wars destroyed human societies and killed millions of people which compelled the world leaders to put their heads together and propose the UDHR in 1949. This legal instrument is milestone in human history, he said, adding that before its adoption people lived as subjects under monarchical

authorities. The committee of five countries that drafted the UDHR included Pakistan. The instrument contains five broad categories as following:

1. Civil rights
2. Political rights
3. Economic rights
4. Cultural rights
5. Social rights

Each individual category was explained at length at the workshop. Harris Khaleeq said the legal instruments like the UDHR and constitution empower people to claim their basic human rights because

these rights are inborn. He also pointed out the contradictions in the constitution, saying that the articles conflict with each other. For instance, one article ensures basic freedoms for all citizens, while another prohibits religious minorities from contesting for the offices of the president and prime minister. Likewise, freedom of speech is ensured in the constitution, but the same constitution bars any criticism of the judiciary and military, he said. According to him, these discrepancies needed to be corrected by the parliament, otherwise there is no need to include the fundamental rights in the constitution.

In a separate session, journalist and blogger Sabookh Syed taught the workshop participants about the effective use of social media for amplifying their voice. He said the social media has emerged as a counterweight to the mainstream media with the added benefit of greater freedom for expression for common users. The youth can use social media platforms to have their voices heard by the policymakers, government officials, and others. He explained how social media influences the powerful, and impact behaviors or even policies. Through effective use of social media, the government can be held accountable for its policies and actions, he added. The discourses during the workshops led to a number of practical recommendations for promoting social peace and harmony in the society.

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