

Launch of Youth-led Observatory on Freedom of Religious Beliefs in Pakistan

*Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)
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After a year-long exercise to train university students on interfaith harmony and social peace, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) selected a pool of 50 young observers to monitor freedom of faith violations and hate speech. A two-day training and orientation session was conducted on 27-28 March in Islamabad where they were introduced to the web observatory developed by PIPS IT team. The training commenced with an awareness session on legislative framework on faith-based rights in Pakistan. PIPS team provided a training manual to the students. Dr. Fizza Batool, a Research Associate at PIPS, explained definitions of key concepts to the students such as minorities, interfaith harmony, hate speech etc.



Ahmed Ali, Program Manager at PIPS, spelled out articles and clauses from national and international law that provide protection to the rights of faith-based minorities. He also shared the articles in the constitution of Pakistan that contradict Pakistan's legal commitment to provide equality of citizenship irrespective of faith as a signatory of the Charter of Human Rights. Lastly, he discussed key provisions

of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) relating to hate speech, explaining how hate speech against any religion or faith system was prohibited and prosecutable under the Pakistani law.

Dr. Fizza then shared the existing complaint cells by different public and private organizations to register cases of hate speech or persecution against minorities. An activity was conducted where students made test calls to complaint cells of Federal Ministry of Human Rights, National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and Federal Investigative Agency (FIA) and found that except for HRCP, all numbers were either dysfunctional or non-responsive. A social media campaign was launched using hashtag #YouthforChange to inquire these authorities on why the numbers shared on their websites for complaints are not functioning.



Ali Baba, a poet, educationist, and social activist, held an interactive session with Hindu and Christian students where they shared their experience of being “otherized” in Pakistan. They informed participants of the tabooed behavior and bullying they experienced as a child growing up in a 90 percent Muslim country. A Hindu observer from interior Sindh shared how he was not allowed to drink water in school for it was believed that this would contaminate the drinking vessel. Another shared his experience of being called Indian because of his religion. A Christian student shared he has to face odd questions and offers to accept Islam on regular basis. Students agreed that having Sanskrit or English names that reveals their faith-based identity can pose an issue, forcing some members of their communities to name their children with Arabic names so to mask their religious identity.

As several experts engaged with the students through trainings and Social Action Projects (SAPs) in the last year, Amir Rana, Director, Pak Institute for Peace Studies moderated a recall session with

students inviting experts such as Wusatullah Khan, senior journalist and anchorperson; Sabookh Syed, journalist and media person; Ghazi Salahuddin, writer, scholar, and renowned media person; Khursheed Nadeem, renowned scholars and columnist and Dr. Khalid Masud, Judge, Supreme Court of Pakistan. Amir Rana asked these experts of their experience of engaging with the young students. Khursheed Nadeem described the experience as a ray of hope for him, making him optimistic of the future of Pakistan.

Likewise, Dr Khalid recognized how the young generation is far ahead of the past generation in terms of technological knowledge and this generational gap could only be filled through such interactions. Ghazi Salahuddin told about his own wish to join university and how the young students are fortunate for being able to achieve higher education in a country where most cannot go to schools. He recommended students using this opportunity for bringing a good change in society. Wussatullah Khan appreciated the intelligence and intellectual honesty of the young generation, claiming that he learns a new world view through engagement with youth. Sabookh Syed shared his personal experience of faith-based hatred and how it shaped his commitment to interfaith harmony. He applauded the young observers for having a will to establish interfaith harmony in society.

Students also shared their experience, explaining the key learnings they have made through these training and how it impacted their attitude. A student shared how he had a conservative upbringing and used to hate non-Muslims, but the training made him change his views and he is now actively working in his locality for creating awareness of interfaith harmony. Another student shared her social initiatives and community service inspired by PIPS training.

The youth-led online observatory to register cases of faith-based persecution and hate speech was formally launched in the event. Hazrat Bilal, IT Manager PIPS, gave a multimedia presentation to the students to orient them on how to use the observatory for making complaints. He shared the system for user registration and the different options available in the portal to file complaints and observe the progress on each complaint in terms of response from the relevant authorities. They are informed of the privacy and security policy to protect their identity. Hazrat Bilal answered questions of observers about the web portal and the complaint mechanism.

The first day of training concluded with an important session led by Gul-e-Nokhaiz Akhtar, a renowned writer and columnist, who shared his satirical pieces with the students. This light-mode session was meant to educate students on how to differentiate between humour, satire and abuse. Through examples, Gul-e-Nokhaiz Akhtar shared the key function of jokes as disseminating hard realities that cannot be expressed openly. He held that a joke is meant to make you rethink the social realities of our life and bring positive change.

Training Day-2

Command Task Exercises

The training module on day two was designed to acquaint the young observers with practical challenges relating to social peace and harmony. The first session of the training comprised a 'Command Task' exercise involving various real-life scenarios and challenges. The observers were

divided into groups of 4-5 and each group was given a specific challenge depicting real life scenarios to resolve. For instance, one of the tasks drew this imaginary situation to handle:

It is the Ashura day – 10th of Muharram – and the traditional Ashura procession is about to cross a certain point in the bazaar in two hours. However, at the same time, the traders' community is also holding a sit-in protest at the same spot in the bazaar and demanding certain concessions from the government. Now, the problem is that if the Ashura procession cross the protest sit-in, there is high probability of some accident or clash occurring. In this scenario, as the concerned deputy commissioner, how would you handle the situation? What would you do to avoid the potential clash?

The above is an example of the command tasks conducted with the young observers. The purpose was to sensitize the youth about the various religious issues that spring up in the society very frequently. It also aimed at showing the audience how challenges may look like in concrete forms in everyday life. The exercises also helped the youth empathize with public officials such as administrators and law enforcers who deal with sensitive challenges on routine basis.

Meeting with Netherlands Ambassador

After the command task exercise, the group of young observers met with H.E Mr. Wouter Plomp, the Ambassador of the Netherlands to Pakistan, and discussed the youths' peacebuilding role in society.



Mr. Plomp appreciated the youths' interest in promoting peace and their commitment to contributing to interfaith harmony in Pakistan. During the interactive meeting, the Ambassador enquired about the youths' experiences of exploring the issues of interfaith relations and their learning outcomes. The youth shared their learning experiences and exposures to the challenges that preclude relations among different faith groups in Pakistan. During the conversation, the Ambassador remarked that ultimately it was the people of Pakistan particularly the youth who were to take the lead in building a

peaceful and prosperous Pakistan, adding that no one from outside would ever come to fulfil this responsibility. He also termed the youth a great source of strength for Pakistan, saying that the latter could benefit their country by focusing on their positive potentials. The meeting ended on an upbeat note with the youth reaffirming their resolution to work for social peace and harmony.

Program with the National Television PTV

The national broadcaster PTV World arranged an interactive program with the young observers in Islamabad. Senior journalist Sabookh Syed interviewed the youth about their visions and missions for interfaith harmony and social cohesion in Pakistan. Young observers from all corners of the country attended the PTV program. Syed hailed the Pak Institute for Peace Studies' efforts for promoting religious harmony through the youth, saying that the youth were ambitious and energetic as they were in the prime of their lives, and that they could make great contributions to peace in society. Sabookh asked the observers why interfaith harmony was important to them, and what drove them to volunteer for such a cause. In response, one of the observers said the welfare of individuals depended on the welfare of the whole society. A society rises and falls as a single whole. Peace, stability, and prosperity in society benefits all, he said. Another one said it was the responsibility of every citizen to raise voice against injustices in the society and contribute to rule of law. Likewise, others opined that all citizens, regardless of their religious faiths, were equal before the law.

Visit to the Council of Islamic Ideology

The day concluded with a study tour to the Council of Islamic Ideology in Islamabad. The observers were received by senior officeholders of the Council on arrival. Later, the group held a formal meeting



with the CII Chairperson Prof. Dr Qibla Ayaz that lasted for over an hour. During the interactive meeting session, the Chairperson briefed the participants about the Council's mandate and working

as well as its historical background and significance. He mentioned some cases studies in which the Council had played a significant role in helping resolve issues of national significance. Some of the Council's landmark rulings relating to religious matters and interfaith relations were also mentioned.

The observers also posed questions on some very critical issues such as forced conversions of Hindu girls etc. One of the observers from the Hindu community of Sindh questioned the CII's decision to invite Mian Mittu to the Council and speak on forced conversions. Mian Mittu is a religious figure of Sindh who is widely accused of facilitating the forced conversions of Hindu girls and women. The CII's Chairperson replied that the reason behind inviting Mittu to the Council was to hear his accounts on the question of forced conversions. He said it was a basic principle of justice to hear all sides before reaching a conclusion. Dr. Qibla Ayaz took multiple questions form the young observers and answered them in detail. He acknowledged that youth had a critical role in promoting narratives of peace and countering extremism in Pakistan.

