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## Protests by Pakistan against US' decision to add it to the blacklist of countries that violate religious freedom

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### The protest

Pakistani Federal Minister for Human Rights, Shireen Mazari, issued a formal statement rejecting United States' (US) decision of placing Pakistan on the black list of countries that violate religious freedom on 11 December 2018. It is an intriguing statement with little to say in defence of Pakistan, but more to cry wolf why Pakistan's arch rival India, and also Israel, are not blacklisted for what she calls "*atrocities on Muslims*". She asserted, "*In Pakistan, minorities rights are very well protected by our Constitution and there are precedence that our courts and government have favoured them in past on many occasions*".

More bizarre is her allegation that, "*the US was using this as a brazen political tactic to pressurize Pakistan to mitigate US failures in Afghanistan. The timing of this move reflects this most clearly*".

When Hillary Clinton acted as the Secretary of State, Pakistan was under the watch of the State Department for quite some time in regard to how religious minorities were treated. *The Tribune* of 12 December 2018, reported that the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) had then expressed concern over Pakistan's omission from the list of eight countries termed "*countries of particular concern*" with regards to violation of religious freedom. The US State Department published this list in a report and included Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan as countries where religious rights were severely infringed.

Although Pakistan was omitted from that list, the report had stated that Pakistan's laws restrict religious freedom and that the government enforced these restrictions. It also added that investigation and prosecution of perpetrators in the case of extremist attacks on minorities are rare. The USCIRF Chief, Leonard Leo, had observed that repeating the current list continued glaring omissions, such as Pakistan and Vietnam, would not be satisfactory. He had urged the then Secretary of State, Clinton, to consider the six additional countries USCIRF had recommended for designation. The other four countries recommended by the commission were Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria and Turkmenistan.

This history of the proceedings of USCIRF show that the allegations of the decision being politically motivated or specifically timed are baseless and untenable.

### Rebuttal

In the backdrop of such damning facts and the recent high-profile Asia Bibi blasphemy case, it is ironical to note how Pakistani rulers have been obsessed with comparisons of the country's state of affairs with its neighbour, India. Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan proved to be no exception when, while addressing an event to highlight the 100-day achievements of the Punjab government in Lahore, he emphasized that his government is taking steps to ensure that religious minorities in Pakistan get

their due rights, which was also a vision of the country's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah. PM Khan further said that his government will ensure that minorities feel safe, and that they are protected and have equal rights in his 'New Pakistan', adding, "...We will show the Modi government (India) how to treat minorities...".

The reason why the Pakistani Human Rights Minister has specifically mentioned India as a violator of religious freedom and why PM Imran Khan is keen to draw comparisons between Pakistan and India, is because Pakistan has invariably expected Western powers and international organizations to maintain parity between India and Pakistan in each and everything as long as Pakistan, supposedly, keeps serving the West's strategic interests in the region.

Pakistan Human Rights Minister's claim that in Pakistan, minority's rights are very well protected by the Constitution and that courts and the government have favoured minorities in the past on many occasions, is further invalidated by findings of the International Religious Freedom Report 2017, compiled by the US Department of State and submitted to Congress in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. In its Executive Summary, the report states: *"The constitution establishes Islam as the State religion but states 'subject to law, public order, and morality, every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice, and propagate his religion'. A 1984 amendment to the penal code restricted the rights of members of the Ahmadiyya community to propagate their faith. According to the constitution, every citizen also shall have the right to freedom of speech, subject to 'reasonable restrictions in the interest of the glory of Islam', as stipulated in the penal code. According to the penal code, the punishments for persons convicted of blasphemy include the death sentence for 'defiling Prophet Muhammad', life imprisonment for 'defiling, damaging, or desecrating the Quran', and 10 years' imprisonment for 'insulting another's religious feelings'. Speech or action intended to incite religious hatred is punishable by up to seven years' imprisonment. The constitution defines 'Muslim' as a person who 'believes in the unity and oneness of Almighty Allah, in the absolute and unqualified finality of the Prophethood of Muhammad, the last of the prophets, and does not believe in, or recognize as a prophet or religious reformer, any person who claimed or claims to be a prophet after Muhammad'. It also states 'a person belonging to the Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, or Parsi community, a person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves Ahmadis), or a Bahai, and a person belonging to any of the scheduled castes' is a 'non-Muslim'. According to the constitution and the penal code, Ahmadis are not Muslims and may not call themselves Muslims or assert they are adherents of Islam. The penal code bans them from preaching or propagating their religious beliefs, proselytizing, or 'insulting the religious feelings of Muslims'. The punishment for violation of these provisions is imprisonment for up to three years and a fine. The penal code criminalizes 'deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs' and provides for a sentence of up to 10 years in prison. A 2015 constitutional amendment allows military courts to try civilians for terrorism, sectarian violence, and other charges; this authority was renewed in January for an additional two years. The government may also use special civilian terrorism courts to try cases involving violent crimes, terrorist activities, and acts or speech deemed by the government to foment religious hatred, including blasphemy. The constitution states no person shall be required to take part in any religious ceremony or attend religious worship relating to a religion other than the person's own. The law prohibits publishing any criticism*

*of Islam, or its prophets, or insults to others' religious beliefs. The law bans the sale of Ahmadiyya religious literature".*

The report brings out the big gap between the precepts and the practice, as in regard to the religious rights of minorities, there is gross contradiction between what the Constitutions says and what the reality is on the ground. In essence, the entire narrative of the treatment of religious minorities in Pakistan has to be understood from the Two-Nation theory, on the basis of which the State of Pakistan was created. Briefly stated, the theory asserts that Muslims comprise a society different from the rest of the people on the globe. The Constitution of Pakistan has very clearly drawn a line between the Muslims and other religious entities and the interpretation of the term Pakistan by rabid Mullahs is that the word is composed of two parts, 'Pak' and 'stan' (or *sthana* of Sanskrit origin) meaning "*the pure place*". *Purity* (or *paak*) has a different connotation in the eyes of Pakistani Mullahs, as to them, Pakistan means the land that is cleared of all non-Muslims and is an Islamic State where non-Muslim minorities do not enjoy the same rights as Muslims do.

### Religious freedom hindered

The difficulty is, that in Pakistan, the country's national ethos is very much influenced by this propagated claim. The army and elements in the establishment have for decades been patronizing religious extremists, especially of the Sunni faction, who have taken upon themselves the implementation of Quranic injunctions of their interpretation. These fanatics have formed armed groups and have spread fear among the people assigning to themselves the role of final arbiter of Quranic injunctions. They have become powerful owing to the patronage from the army and have targeted religious minorities like the Christians, Ahmadis, Hindus, Shia, Bahais, Parsis, Sikhs and others. The result is that these religious minorities have shrunk and represent a negligible percentage of the total population of the country (altogether eight percent) whereas according to the 1951 census, only Hindus made up 16% of the total population of West Pakistan (Now, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan). It is outside the scope of this article to enlist individual or collective cases of persecution on religious basis, but a few recent examples may be cited to illustrate the barbaric treatment of religious minorities in Pakistan.

In 2016, on Easter Sunday, Islamist militants killed more than 90 people in a suicide bombing at Gulshan-e-Iqbal Park in Lahore. An affiliate of the Pakistani Taliban, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, took responsibility. Last year, Islamic State suicide bombers attacked Sunday services at Bethel Memorial Methodist Church in the south-western city of Quetta, killing nine people and injuring several others. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, about 40 people remain interned on charges of blasphemy. The *Dawn* of 21 December 2018, published highlights of the Jinnah Institute's Report on Religious Freedom in Pakistan, which sums up the state of the minorities in the following words:

*"During the period, 2012-2014 at least 351 incidents of faith-based violence were reported across Pakistan. 43 attacks of varying intensity targeted the Christian community; seven churches were damaged; and 14 people were charged with blasphemy. 39 Ahmadis lost their lives in faith-based killings; the highest number of targeted killings was carried out in Sindh*

*and Punjab. Little improvement was noticed in the socio-cultural attitudes of majority Muslim sects towards Ahmadis in Pakistan. Mass desecration of the Ahmadi graveyards was also reported. Forced marriages, abductions and rape of Hindu girls were the overriding concerns of the Hindu community of Pakistan. In 2015 alone, at least ten incidents of forced conversion, one case of rape and abduction, and two cases of desecration of worship places were reported. Shia Muslims continue to face some of the gravest consequences of religious intolerance in Pakistan. During 2012-2015, 23 attacks on the Imam-Bargahs and 203 targeted killings took place. In addition, 1304 lives were lost in bomb blasts”.*

### Conclusion

In final analysis, one might conclude that the State of Pakistan is either incapable of reigning in the murderous Sunni religious extremist groups who have wrought havoc, not only to religious minorities, but to the entire society of Pakistan in the name of faith, or that the State is complicit in perpetrating atrocities on defenceless minorities.

Out of utter frustration, Pakistan has accused the US of a political vendetta, springing from its “failure” in Afghanistan and it is anguished why India and Israel, whom Pakistan projects as ‘Anti-Muslim States’, are not also clubbed into the black list of countries with dark record of violations of human rights, especially of minorities. By holding on to this ostrich behaviour, the country is contradicting statements and reports of not only international reputed organizations, but also its own accredited NGOs and research institutions while it remains oblivious to the fact that apart from atrocities perpetrated against its religious minorities, Pakistan is also in the docks regarding discriminatory treatment and persecution of ethnic minorities in the country.

It seems that Pakistan is a State committed to the destruction of its own civil society, without realising that such ingrained prejudices and policies towards religious and ethnic minorities need to be acknowledged and challenged, and rectified with attempts of strengthening democratic institutions in order to lay foundations for meaningful steps towards social reform – a prerequisite for the development of the country.



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