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THINK SOUTH ASIA 13

MINORTIES IN SOUTH ASIA

EDITORIAL

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Dear Think South Asia Readers,

The Russian invasion of Crimea and the unrest in further cities in the East of Ukraine have once again shown that minorties still play a major role in power politics and are often instrumentalized by states to coin and pursue extreme policies or actions, in the case of Ukraine a clear violation of international law.

The issue of minority rights, the question of self-determination, separatism, and positive discrimination laws has been, and still is, alive and kicking within the european discourse of the past few years. The plight of the Romani people in France, Germany, or Hungary has generated heated debates in policy circles as well as civil society, revolving around the questions of humanity, responsibility, dignity and how realpolitik and normative values of the EU are increasingly becoming opposite poles. Catalans and Basques are still striving for independence and want to carve out own territories in Spain. Religious unrest in Northern Ireland between protestants and catholics is still simmering fervently, at times boiling over.

All these developments indicate that we might be facing a resurgence of nationalism as well as ethnic and religious divides within Europe. This is not necessarily to say, that claims and aspirations of sovereignty within Europa are uncalled for or unjustified. This is not the place to make assumptions over the righteousness of these movements, rather these examples highlight the fact that we are in the midst of witnessing a shift away from what Europe represents. Especially because, many of these movements use the argument of an intrusive supranational entity to promote their cause; being under the auspices of Europe is deemed to be

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harmful to tradition and identiy. Many in Europe question the post-war regional project and say it has failed. The project, which provided cultural and political unity to a war-torn continent and the normative framework to override the logic of inward-looking nationalist states, which were foremost concerned with survival and not with cooperation or forging a mutual identity.

The European project might be in danger, but to speak of ist certain demise is foolish ;a case of fear-mongering. The EU has survived crises in the past and will likely do so in the future. The stance in the case of Crimea demonstrated unity and even if far-right powers are gaining in popularity and nationalism is celebrating a comebackt hese forces are still dwarfed by pro-European voices. But these forces should not be ignored or belittled but must be confronted and dealth with in discourses and debates.

The role of minorities and minority politics can not be overemphazised in the case of South Asia. The Partition of India came into existence due to fears of a predominantly Hindu State neglecting its Muslim population. Bangladesh, formerly known as East Pakistan became a state because West-Pakistan failed to acknowledge and live up to Bengali interests. The ethnic conflict between the Singhalese and the Tamils led to ethnic cleansing and horrendous war crimes over the course of several decades. Nepal and Bhutan have yet to come to terms regarding the situation of refugees who are in dire need of a safe and secure livelihood.

Especially today and in the weeks to come, with eletions being held in Afghanistan and India, it will be interesting to observe how discourses based on minority issues will be led and which initiaves and legal frameworks are derived from these debates. The vastness of South Asia's heterogenity does not allow us unfortunately to dwell on all issues. But our contributors have provided a powerful and insightful snapshot of the situation of minorities in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Mynamar and China.

I hope you all enjoy Think South Asia 13 and that it enriches your day in some way or form. Please feel free to contact me at djan@sadf.eu if you wish to comment on our published articles or would like to publish an article* with "Think South Asia" yourself.

Yours Truly,
Djan Sauerborn

* The views expressed in the articles are those of the authors and not of SADF. The authors are responsible for the content of their work.

INDEX

The Erosion of Pluralism: Pakistan's Religious Minorities

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Religious persecution in Pakistan is a very complex issue, and one that is challenging to understand without appreciation for the political context in which it manifests. The country was established on the pre-text of carving out a home for Muslims, which by default placed religious minorities such as Hindus, Amhadis and Christians, among others at a disadvantage. Communal and religious tensions predate the 1947 Partition, but they have been amplified in the subsequent decades through the use of political instruments and institutions.

The main tools of persecution are very much codified in Pakistan Penal Code, namely in the British colonial era Blasphemy Laws. It has been used and abused to erode religious pluralism with devastating effects. A recent example of its use was illustrated in the case of a Lahori Christian man sentenced to death for blasphemy.

On 27 March, Lahore sessions judge, Chaudhry Ghulam Mustafa, handed a capital punishment sentence to Sawan Masih after he was found guilty of violating Pakistan's blasphemy law (article 295-C). Specifically, Masih allegedly insulted the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) during a conversation with a Muslim friend a year prior. Masih is a Christian.

The incident triggered rioting in Lahore's Joseph Colony, home to the city's Christian community. More than 100 houses were set ablaze and ransacked as the neighbourhood was convulsed by days of violence. Traumatised families fled for their lives amid an onslaught by around 3,000 highly charged Muslim rioters. Two Christian churches were torched and Bibles desecrated as Lahore police stood idle and muted.

Additional Advocate General Punjab Hanif Khatana later defended the inaction of law enforcement during an investigation. He said that police avoided the mob out of concern over any fatalities because had there been a death, then the situation would have been 'blown out of proportion,' according to The Express Tribune. To the uninitiated observer, nearly every facet of this case is likely to be met with incredulity. To the better informed, the incredulity is tempered by the knowledge that Masih's case adds to a growing trend of extreme forms of religious intolerance that are destabilising the country.

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The potential incredulity stems from the fact that such wanton acts of violence demonstrate a huge departure from the vision that Pakistan's founding father, Muhammad Ali Jinnah (Quaid-i-Azam or "Great Leader"), had for the country.

There is certainly a utopian hue to Jinnah's words, and given its historical context, this is understandable. Jinnah's narrative of Pakistan was that of a progressive, secularist state, which did not reconcile with many of his Muslim contemporaries who were inspired by Muhamad Iqbal, the poet and philosopher, and Syed Abul Ala Maududi, founder of the Muslim revivalist movement, Jamaat-i-Islami.

Eminent Pakistan scholar Farzana Shaikh wrote: "Jinnah was famously ambivalent about his understanding of the relationship between Islam and politics." However, he was not afraid to "use the language of Islam to generate power." Maududi was unabashed about using Islam as a political instrument and his revivalist Islamic discourse laid the foundation for movements like the Jamaat-i-Islami to crowd out religious pluralism in the successive decades since Partition. He opposed secular democracy on the basis that it ran counter to the Islamic narrative, and couched his writings and rhetoric in the language of "otherness". He described secularism as the obverse to Islam, meaning that its jahiliyyat (anti-Islamic polity) would exist in the dar al-harb (land of unbelief). Political leaders would also periodically succumb to this Islamist dialectic of a monotheistic state, and always to the detriment of Pakistan's religious minorities.

General Zia ul Haq ramped up Pakistan's Islamist credentials by introducing a series of ordinances that tightened the screws on religious minority communities and effectively codified discrimination and persecution at the institutional level. His most famous contribution was to revamp the British colonial-era Blasphemy Laws, which are still vaguely defined and widely abused. More concerning, however, is that allegations of blasphemy have given justification to sectarian and interfaith violence.

In 2010 and 2011, Pakistan's blasphemy law came under the international spotlight when a Christian woman, Asia Bibi, was sentenced to death. Evidence surrounding the case remains doubtful according to international rights groups; and her case served to highlight the institutionalised persecution of religious minorities. Bibi's case was to have further repercussions, with the assassinations of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer and Religious Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian. Both were outspoken critics of the law in the wake of the Bibi case.

In 2012, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) registered around 1,000 blasphemy

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"In 2010 and 2011, Pakistan's blasphemy law came under the international spotlight when a Christian woman, Asia Bibi, was sentenced to death."

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cases, mainly accusations of desecrating the Quran, and about 50 cases of insulting the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The vast majority of blasphemy cases were Muslims accusing other Muslims; very often these accusations were spurious and motivated by settling personal disputes.

Following Muslims in the hierarchy of victims is the Ahmadiya community, who are classified under Pakistan law to be non-Muslims. This messianic movement named after its 19th century founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, was targeted specifically during Zia's Islamisation drive.

His Ordinance XX of 1984 (officially Anti-Islamic Activities of Quadiani Group, Lahore Group and Ahmadis Prohibition and Punishment) prohibited them from posing as Muslims and halted any activity professing their faith. This gave the state and Islamist movements the legal remit to suppress this community, and often with violent results.

In 2012, the HRCP reported that 20 Ahmadis were killed due to their religious identities. Fast forward to 2014, and the Ahmadiya community still suffer persecution. In April of this year, an Ahmadi man was accused of desecrating the Quran in Sindh province. News of his detention triggered a riot in Tando Allayhar, some 240 km northeast of Karachi where a mob ransacked his house and an Ahmadi mosque.

Pakistan's Hindu community has also been pushed into a state of perpetual insecurity and increased political, economic and social marginalisation. The Pakistan Hindu Council claimed in 2011 that 94 percent of the country's Hindu population lives in Sindh province, with many of them residing

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in Tharparkar. They are mostly lower caste day labourers toiling the fields of wealthy Muslim land barons.

The other side of the Hindu population—the upper caste Brahmins in Sindh's interior urban centres—is under considerable security threat. They comprise a small proportion of the population, but are victimised because of their relative wealth. Kidnappings, rape and forced conversions and marriages of Hindu females are a frequent occurrence.

Politically, Hindus are losing ground. There are no Hindu-based or led political movements. Instead, the Hindi electorate will vote for fringe political movements, independents or are coerced into voting for mainstream parties. They hold no high level executive positions at the municipal, provincial or national level, although there is no legislation barring them from doing so; with the exception of the office of president, which must be occupied by a Muslim.

Aside from the small electoral base, Hindus are, in the eyes of zealous nationalists and Islamists, thought to be agents of India, and even "moderate" Muslims or "liberal" Pakistanis would not openly countenance the notion of allowing a Hindu into a political leadership role, for fear of retribution. Such an idea would run counter to the national narrative and practice of Pakistan—a Muslim state.

Due to the effects of insecurity and the lack of state representation, Pakistan for many Hindus has become a country which is inhospitable and unattractive to live in. The Hindu population is dwindling in Pakistan. At the time of Partition, Hindus constituted approximately 40 percent of the population and now that figure has shrunk to roughly 1.9 percent of Pakistan's 180 million people, according to the Pew Research Center.
Migration flows vector towards India, but ironically, the Indian government has been less than receptive. There are around 400 refugee settlements in Rajasthan state, mainly in Jaipur, Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Jodhpur, according to the Indian daily, The Hindu.

More than six decades since Jinnah gave his address to the Constituent Assembly in Karachi, Pakistan has hardened its credentials and identity as a Muslim state by pushing forward on exclusionary political discourse and practices. Practices in the form of Blasphemy Laws are incompatible with commitments to universal human rights as such laws have a stifling effect on many freedoms. The ramifications in the Pakistan context have been the greater erosion of political, social and religious plurality. This momentum seems unstoppable given the deep entrenchment of religious extremism and its interminable influence on politics. ■

"Practices in the form of Blasphemy Laws are incompatible with commitments to universal human rights as such laws have a stifling effect on many freedoms."

Uighur and Han: another thorny issue in China's multiethnic society

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We say China is a country vast in territory, rich in resources, and large in population; as a matter of fact, it is the Han nationality whose population is large and the minority nationalities whose territory is vast and whose resources are rich.
Mao Zedong

When the Malaysia Airline flight MH370 went missing on March 8 some media speculations pointed the finger towards Uighur terrorists. The attack at the Kunming train station a week before, which cost the lives of 29 people and injured more than 140, was still fresh enough to push some analysts to write about a "strategic shift" in Uighur-related terrorism. Although no group has claimed responsibility for the Kunming attack, the incident has contributed to raising further tensions between Han Chinese and the Uighur ethnic minority.

The Uighurare one of China's 55 ethnic minorities. Turkic by ethnicity and Sunni Muslim by religion, the Uighur share more cultural ties with other Central Asian communities than with Han Chinese. They are present not only in China but also in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Russia and Ukraine. In China, they are predominantly located in the western province of Xinjiang, which hosts 12 other ethnic groups (Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Uzbek, Hui, Mongol, Tartar, Russian, Solon, Xibo, Manchu and Han).

Xinjiang is a central element to understand the strained relations between Han and Uighur. Xinjiang is China's largest administrative unit (approximately 17 percent of China's territory) and it borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Mongolia. For China, Xinjiang is a region of strategic importance; it is a basin of oil and gas fields and deposit of gold, coal and iron ore; it hosts nuclear facilities like the testing ground in Lop Nor desert; and it is becoming a transit corridor for energy and transport routes toward central Asia and beyond. According to recent estimates, coal production could reach 750 million metric tons by 2020, while the whole energy and mining sector has registered an increase in investments by 33 percent in 2011 and 2012. In addition, the province will increasingly serve as a transport route, with projects like the Kashgar-

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Gwadar corridor (China's operated port in Pakistan) and the China-Europe railway gaining significant geopolitical relevance. For all these reasons, China feels the need to pacify the province from any manifestation of social unrest or, even worse, attempts of separatism.

Indeed, the current territory of Xinjiang (literally "New Frontier") has witnessed a turbulent past. Tensions between Uighur and Han have been going on since the second century BC. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that China managed to fully incorporate the province only in the 18th century. Nevertheless, Uighur struggle for independence continued and in the 20th century they managed to establish two independent states: the Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkestan in 1933-34 and the East Turkestan Republic in 1944-49. The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) was formally established in 1955 and since then it has not benefited from the same amount of investments as other eastern and southern regions. Underdevelopment and isolation added new drivers of discontent among the Uighur communities and to tackle them Beijing launched the Great Western Development program with the sake of pacifying restive regions by improving socio-economic conditions in 1999. However, what happened was quite the opposite.

Since the 1990s, the state-induced relocation of Han people in Xinjiang has been reshuffling the ethnic composition of the province, which saw the Han population rising from 5.7 million to 8.2 million in the period between 1990 and 2007; hence reaching almost the size of Uighur (about 9.6 million). This process was made on purpose in order to contain Uighur nationalism by re-balancing the ethnic mix in the region. Nevertheless, this phenomenon not only put Uighur identity under threat but also created social and economic disparities between the two communities. In fact, most of the jobs require fluency in Mandarine, something that Uighur do not possess or simply prefer not to speak in protest with what they perceive as a forced ethnic assimilation. Therefore, jobs are mostly assigned to Han, who have raised their socio-economic conditions

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"Xinjiang is a central element to understand the strained relations between Han and Uighur."

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at the detriment of Uighur.
This dynamic has generated a societal security dilemma, in which any increase in Uighur national identity jeopardizes China's territorial integrity and, at the same time, any assimilation attempt into Han society threatens the Uighur identity. The security implications of this societal dilemma became evident during the 2009 riots in Urumqi, during which clashes between Uighur and Han left almost 200 dead and thousands injured. Even more, China's territorial integrity has been jeopardized by the emergence of radical groups ever since the beginning of the 1990s that put the establishment of an Uighur independent state on the top of their agenda.

The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) – also known as Turkestan Islamic Party – is a terrorist organization with apparent links to Al Qaeda, the Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The current ETIM leader, Abdullah Mansour, is believed to be hiding in North Waziristan in Pakistan (a tribal area under the control of the Haqqani Network). Unlike the rest of Uighur, ETIM aims at establishing an independent state: East Turkestan. In 2008, ETIM threatened terrorist attacks during the Olympic Games in Beijing, while more recently they claimed responsibility for the car bomb attack in Tiananmen Square in October of last year. Moreover, Mansour also approved the terrorist attack at the Kunming train station on March 1, although not claiming responsibility.

In spite of the fact that ETIM's attacks have been quite rudimental – mostly involving the use of knives and only in few cases that of car bombs – China fears that their increasing activities »

"Since the 1990s, the state-induced relocation of Han people in Xinjiang has been reshuffling the ethnic composition of the province."

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may internationalize the Uighur cause worldwide, above all in those Muslim countries where China has relevant economic or political interests. In particular, Chinese interests could be targeted by Islamist groups in Africa, in the Middle East and in South-East Asia, not to mention in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Energy as well as transport infrastructures would be easy targets for terrorist organizations endorsing the Uighur cause.

This risk of internationalization has brought China to securitize the issue with both national and international consequences. In fact, since 2001 Chinese authorities have been applying the narrative of the War on Terror on Uighur separatism. Uighur have been defined as a Trojan Horse for radical Islamist movements and ETIM's links with Al Qaeda and the Taliban have been emphasized in order to justify tighter security measures and restriction to the expression of the Uighur identity. Religious institutions and practices have been monitored and restricted. For instance, it has been forbidden to wear a beard, dress in Islamic clothing, hold unauthorized religious gatherings and teach religious practices to minors. The same can be said for the use of Uighur language and literature; all features that, in China's eyes, could foster separatism.
On the domestic side, security measures have been tightening up to avoid further terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, China lacks a comprehensive anti-terrorism law and for this reason terrorist-related crimes have been persecuted according to the criminal code. Since 2001, the Chinese criminal code has punished both terrorism financing and terrorist acts, such as: leading a terrorist organization, arson, damage of property and murder of course. In addition, individuals can be charged with separatism; a crime punishable with 10 years detention or the death penalty. In January 2014, Uighur scholar Ilham Tohti was charged with separatism, which triggered the reaction of several human rights organizations worldwide.

More recently, in Yunnan province – where the Kunming attack took place – residents have been requested to register their IDs in order to fill the tanks of their cars at gas stations. In addition, more surveillance of web activities have been put in place, above all concerning access limitations to Virtual Private Networks (VPNs); used by the Chinese to overcome the Great Firewall and by terrorists to access online trainings. Following the Kunming attack, Chinese authorities are also planning to adopt a proper anti-terrorism law. The motion was proposed by National People's Congress deputy Zhu Lieyu from Guangdong and supported by many deputies. Lieyu proposed to include the dissemination of terrorist thought among the charges of the yet to be anti-terrorism law.

On the international side, China is seeking regional cooperation in anti-terrorism and border control. With regards to the former, China has promoted multilateral cooperation in anti-terrorism within the framework

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of the Shangai Cooperation Organisation, which led to the establishment of a Regional Anti-Terrorim unit in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 2004. On a more bilateral way, China has established agreements with both neighbouring countries (Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan) and regional ones (Thailand) for border control and to assure the extradition of alleged Uighur terrorists back to China. Indeed, Beijing is currently pressuring Bangkok to return some 400 Uighur refugees detained in Thailand's Songkhla province. However, Thailand has so far refused to comply with such requests to avoid further tension with its own minorities. In fact, Thailand is already facing its own troubles with Muslim minorities in the southern provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, where Malay separatists have been sustaining an insurgency since 2004. In addition, Thai authorities are pressured by the US, the EU and the UN not to comply with China's request for concerns over possible human rights abuses against the Uighur refugees. The US, for instance, have always denied to return to China those Uighur detained in Guantanamo Bay for concerns of mistreatment or even torture.

These latest events show that the Uighur issue has already been internationalized. This opens up a new front on China's fight for maintaining territorial integrity and at the same time defending itself from accusations of human right abuses; the latter monopolized so far by the immolations of Buddhists protesting against China's rule over Tibet.

China is and will remain a multiethnic country. However, if China wants to remain a country "vast in territory, rich in resources, and large in population" it has to find a new balance in incorporating ethnic minorities, without seeking their assimilation into the Han. More than an anti-terrorism law China needs to find a new approach to socio-political cohesion, by respecting diversities but at the same time fostering a shared "idea of state" among all the ethnic components of the society. This is certainly not an easy task for Beijing, but the risk of seeking a confrontational approach vis-à-vis minority issues is to face one day a divided country in which minority nationalities control the majority of its territory and, consequently, its resources. ■

Suffering from Statelessness: Rohingyas in Bangladesh's

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The Rohingyas are predominantly Muslim and closely related to the Bengali people. Originally many of them migrated from the Indian subcontinent towards the East into 'Theravada Buddhist Myanmar', especially during the British Colonial time. But the initial harmonic relations between Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar started deteriorating during the country's liberation struggle. In consequence, relatively soon after gaining independence, the new rulers in Myanmar identified the Rohingyas as economic refugees, challenging the socio-economic composition and political power structure of the country.

In response, a policy of repression was imposed on them arguing that the Rohingya's had illegally settled in Myanmar's territory and as such they should be subject to eviction. Here, one should argue that the dramatic dimension of the Rohingya's migration is a clear result of three intermingling factors: First, the emergence of authoritarian (military) regimes in Myanmar; second, the consequence of a cultural confrontation of different ethnic-religious communities. This conflict gained significance after the military rulers attempted to assimilate religious-ethnic minorities into the mainstream Burmese culture. In other words, a strategy of an enforced cultural unification, namely Burmanisation, was used as a way of 'National Reconsolidation'. Third the large scale ignorance of policy makers worldwide despite the fact that the Rohinyga issue was increasingly becoming a global issue.

Persecuted and denied citizenship, the Rohingya ethno-religious minority fled as stateless refugees into Bangladesh from the bordering Rakhine province (former Arakan state) of Myanmar. This process started gradually from 1977 and in the 1980ties turned into a mass exodus. An agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh, facilitated by the UNHRC, temporarily led to a reduction of refugee influx. Nevertheless, the migrations of Rohingyas from Myanmar into Bangladesh continued with varying degree of intensity. Subsequently a couple of hundred thousands were repatriated. In 1992 the situation started deteriorating once again.

The flight of the Rohingyas from Myanmar to Bangladesh and other countries did not help improve their actual conditions and they remained a marginalized and disadvantaged group because these asylum seekers were accused of depleting scarce resources of densely populated Bangladesh.

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"Persecuted and denied citizenship, the Rohingya ethno-religious minority fled as stateless refugees into Bangladesh from the bordering Rakhine province."

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Subsequently the government in Dhaka has always been reluctant to recognise the Rohingyas even as refugees. Consequently, only a limited number of Rohingya's refugees have been documented and received the chance to reside in official camps that have been set up with support from NGOs and the international community.

However, the vast majority of the Rohinyga in Bangladesh, estimated at 200,000 to 500.000 individuals, remain undocumented and are forced to live in unofficial camps in abominable conditions, deprived of the most basic rights. Many reports state that the Rohingyas are treated tremendously inhumanly. Economic exploitation in form of cheap labour, no adequate access to food or health services, sexual harassments, torture and other atrocities by security forces and common locals seems to be the conditions the refugees, especially those belonging to the unofficial camps find themselves confronted with on a daily basis. Accusations of being involved in robbery, stealing, destruction of the environment, creating distortions in the regional job market leading to disadvantages for the Bangladeshis is increasing an environment which is hostile towards the disenfranchised Rohingya.

Today there are clear indications that some segments of the Rohingya community in Bangladesh are being trafficked or drawn into criminal activities. Despite these examples of an unfortunate trajectory of the relationship between Rohingyas refugees and Bangladeshis, there are also positive glimpses of hope. Locals have in many cases decreased the plight of the Rohingya-out of humanitarian goodwill as well as the due to bonding religious sentiments. This marks a phenomenon which is quite different from the official policy of the decision-makers in Dhaka. Having this in mind, it is important to mention that there is an increasing trend in Bangladesh that analysts are beginning to perceive the Rohingya issue not only solely as a humanitarian

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and refugee issue. Rather they identify the refugees increasingly as a security threat.

The most significant element in this rationale is the claim that the Rohingyas are serving as a recruiting base for Islamic militant extremists. As such, it is proclaimed that they contribute to the rise of the religious fundamentalist movement challenging the democratic framework as well as the notions of democracy and tolerance. Bangladesh authorities and security analysts don't miss many occasions to emphasize the apparent links between the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) and militant fundamentalists Islamic groups like the Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam (Huji), which are well-known for their terrorist activities. Furthermore, the Rohingya issue has a strong impact on Bangladesh's relations with Myanmar. In this context, not only the government of Bangladesh but also the decision-makers in Myanmar are portraying the refugee's camps on Bangladeshi soil as a national security predicament. As a result, Bangladeshi authorities are trying to stop further migration - or at least, making a migration for Rohingya into Bangladesh less appealing.

However, the argument for banning the activities of aid organizations because they would encourage an influx of Rohingya refugees is worrisome at best. Of course Bangladesh is confronted with a vast amount of troubles and is itself dependent on foreign aid; nonetheless, Bangladesh should not forget its own history and remember that millions of Bangladeshi people had to experience the traumatic conditions of being a refugee twice. Therefore, Bangladesh's government should conduct a more proactive foreign policy regarding potential solutions which also rely on external support. In this context, the Rohingya issue should be rather be seen as an opportunity than a problem for regional collaboration. Instead of ignoring an integrated cooperation with international donors and NGOs, Bangladesh's authorities should work towards multilateral, sustainable and coherent initiatives to improve the situation of Rohingya.

The latest exodus of Rohingya in 2013 after another wave of violence and discrimination vividly demonstrated once again the conflicting positions and reactions of actors involved, especially of the regional and non-regional governments as well as major international non-governmental organizations. Nevertheless, there is a certain understanding among the international community about the on-going human rights violations and the extraordinary absurdity of the policy of portraying the Rohingya as 'stateless. But despite this awareness, it seems that there is not much political will and/or an appropriate forum to address the issue of Rohingya yet. It's time to invite the governments in the broader region, not only Bangladesh and Myanmar, but also India, Thailand and Malaysia among others, to contribute to a discourse on a sustainable solution to a long-standing issue. ■

"The vast majority of the Rohinyga in Bangladesh, estimated at 200,000 to 500.000 individuals, remain undocumented and are forced to live in unofficial camps in abominable conditions, deprived of the most basic rights."

"Bangladesh should not forget its own history and remember that millions of Bangladeshi people had to experience the traumatic conditions of being a refugee."

"Criminally Muslim - Ahmadis in Pakistan"

Hassan Bajwa
Pakistani/Danish entrepreneur, Communications Professional, TV & Radio host and social commentator

On May 28th 2010 I returned to my office in Lahore after the Friday lunch and prayer break. Being essentially non-religious I had spent the extra hour granted for Friday prayer to catch up with some old friends for an extended lunch. As I entered the office a colleague hurried up to me and dragged me into the common area where a massacre was unfolding live on TV.

Immediately my spine ran cold as I recognized the scenes of the massacre. I was witnessing an armed conflict in the mosque I had gone to throughout my childhood. Within minutes I was in my car speeding towards the mosque, praying desperately for the well-being of my family who still went to the mosque regularly.

When I arrived the place was absolute pandemonium. The dead and injured were being carried out to waiting ambulances and taken away for treatment. Police were trying to create some semblance of order and place a cordon around the scene. Suddenly I saw my uncle walking towards me bruised and bloodied, clothes torn and with a kalashnikov slung over his arm. This, I was told, was the kalashnikov used by one of the attackers in his attempt to kill as many worshippers as possible. My uncle (a retired army officer) had tackled the attacker as his weapon misfired and wrestled him to the ground before he could detonate the suicide vest strapped to his torso. This was one of two survivors of the coordinated team that executed the single worst massacre of ahmadi muslims in Pakistan. By the end of the day 94 Ahmadis were dead and another 120 injured.

Even though none of my immediate family were among the dead, like every other person of ahmadi background in the world I could not escape the feeling of utter helplessness in the wake of the massacre. After all, in Pakistan the killing of an ahmadi is rarely considered murder. For perpetrators of such killings, Ahmadis are Wajib-ul-qatal (liable for death). To kill an ahmadi is considered a blow against the enemies of Islam and the killer is hailed as a hero by fundamentalist muslims.

Ever since the movement was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in 1889, Ahmadis have aroused the ire of mainstream muslims all over the world over. Ahmadis consider Mirza to be the Promised Messiah and a Prophet, a belief mainstream muslims consider to be heretical. Mainstream muslims believe in the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad, taken to mean that God's communion with Man ended with him. Any subsequent claimant to such communion must therefore be a false prophet intent on

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"I was witnessing an armed conflict in the mosque I had gone to throughout my childhood."

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luring muslims away from the righteous path. To radical muslims this is the ultimate blasphemy worthy only of the ultimate penalty of death.

1953 saw the first of several waves of anti-Ahmadi violence in Pakistan. The 1953 riots were quelled by then military dictator Field Marshal Ayub Khan but the matter was not laid to rest. A subsequent inquiry into the riots culminating in the Justice Munir Report determined that all the other sects of muslims could not come to a common definition of who is a muslim. The only point on which they all agreed was that Ahmadis were blasphemers, apostates and were "out of the fold of Islam".

Over the next two decades the embers of intolerance continued to burn and after the national trauma caused by the separation of East Pakistan (what is today Bangladesh) in 1971, the country's new Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto gave in to the demands of the Islamists in his attempt to forge a new Pakistani muslim identity. The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan therefore officially termed Ahmadis as non-muslims.

During the 80's the Ahmadi community was further criminalized by military dictator Zia Ul Haq's government with a series of constitutional amendments and ordinances which deprived ahmadis of even the most fundamental human rights. At the time of Zia's death he had ensured that ahmadis could no longer refer to themselves as muslims, call their place of worship a mosque, preach their faith or even use the common muslim greeting without being liable for severe penalties under the new draconian laws.

Anti-Ahmadi sentiment has permeated into every sphere of Pakistani

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officialdom. Pakistani citizens cannot obtain a National Identity Card without signing an affidavit declaring Mirza Ghulam Ahmad a false prophet and all his followers apostates. Anti ahmadi demonstrations are allowed to proceed with official acceptance and many prominent political figures participate in such gatherings. Ahmadis cannot complain when police enter their mosques and graveyards to erase any islamic inscriptions they might find. Ahmadi places of worship are not allowed minarets either as this constitutes a crime of "pretending to be a muslim".

Ahmadies face discrimination from all over the world. The Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh has, like it's Pakistani counterpart, organized demonstrations against Ahmadis. In 2011 a video of the torture and killing of three indonesian ahmadis by an enraged mob spread around the world. The ahmadi community keeps a record of all religiously motivated violence faced by the community all over the world and the list continues to grow.

Nowhere in the world however do anti- ahmadi sentiments find the legal cover they do in Pakistan. The two surviving perpetrators of the 28th May massacre have yet to be tried and sentenced for their atrocity. Time and again the hearings have been adjourned as no judge wishes to be the one to pass sentence over the killers of Ahmadis.

It is easy to imagine that a community living under such unjust conditions will eventually react to the injustice with aggression, violence and destruction. Yet it is the community's exemplary patience in the face of such sheer injustice that is the source of its strength and continued growth. Ahmadis are expressly forbidden from resorting to violence in the name of religion. Instead they are taught to live by the community's motto "Love for All, Hatred for None". And so they continue to educate their young, work for the well-being of their local communities, become active members of society and stay true to their own set of beliefs. For there is no surer way to defeat the violent creed of fanatical islamists than by peaceful perseverance. ■

The Indian Muslims: At the Periphery or Core of the Election Debate?

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India's Muslim community is unique in many ways. India has the largest number of Muslims in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan. The over 170 million strong community however, comprises merely about 13.4% of the population and is dwarfed by the Hindus with whom Muslims share a sensitive relationship. Unlike the other minorities, the Muslim community is associated with the partition of India which took place in 1947 and is still considered one of the most traumatic experiences for Indians. Consequently, their loyalty towards the Indian state has often been doubted by elements of the Hindu right wing, even more so after the advent of 'Islamic terrorism' in the 1990s. Another peculiar feature of the minority group is its very low level of average economic and educational status which distinguishes it from Sikhs, Christians and Buddhists, the other prominent minorities in India. As the 2014 election greets the world's largest democracy and psephologists as well as the general public speculate about the outcome, it becomes important to examine if religious minorities, particularly Muslims find a mention in the election debates, especially since Narendra Modi, Gujarat's Chief Minister with an anti-Muslim image has emerged as the strongest candidate for the post of the Prime Minister.

Indian Muslims' representation in government is disproportionate to its demographic strength. While the community accounts for about 13.4 % of the country's population, studies show that in 2002 only 6.26% of the 479 High Court judges, 2.95% of 5,018 Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officers, and 4.02 % of the 3,236 Indian Police Service (IPS) officers were Muslims. The situation has only deteriorated over the years. The community is also under-represented in elective bodies. Currently, only 5.5% of the members of Lok Sabha, India's lower house of parliament are Muslims and a number of Indian states do not have even one sitting Muslim member. The condition in the state assemblies is also discouraging, as on an average the deprivation rate is below 20%. Their human development indicators are alarming as well. Muslims are starkly under-represented in the educational institutions; according to a 2006 report on the "Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India" popularly called the Sachar Report, Muslims hold less than 5% of the total posts in the government. The report further claims

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that merely 4% of the students that attend elite Indian universities are Muslims.

Communal violence between Hindus and Muslims is another issue that requires mention. Over the years there have been several instances of ethnic violence, which has caused the death and displacement of thousands of people from both the communities. While riots have been a recurrent phenomenon of post independent urban India, some of the worst instances of Hindu-Muslim riots took place following the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism in 1992 in the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, a mosque that Hindu nationalists claim was build over the birthplace of the Hindu God, Ram. Recent clashes in Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh marked one of the major riots, more than a decade after the Gujarat pogrom of 2002. Having taken place close to the election season, it has caused anxiety among the contesting parties.

In the past few years the government has addressed the issue of Muslim marginalization by conducting studies and encouraging committees to make recommendations. Present Prime Minister Manmohan Singh constituted the Justice Sachar Committee in 2005 to prepare a report on the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community, and the Justice Ranganath Mishra Commission was formed in 2004 for identifying criteria for socially and »

economically backward classes among the religious and linguistic minorities, and to suggest various welfare measures including reservation. Nevertheless, the recommendations of both the committees have not been received well by some groups. Sachar committee's recommendations have been criticized for suggesting preferential treatment for Muslims. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has called the report an attempt by Indian National Congress led United Progressive Alliance to 'appease' Muslims to gain electoral support in the form of 'vote banks'. The implementation of the Mishra report that calls for reservations for Muslims in educational and government institutions have also been vehemently opposed by Hindu nationalists and BJP on the ground that reservations for Muslims would slash the percentage of seats for Backward Classes and the Scheduled Castes, official social groups that are entitled to affirmative action.

A look at India's electoral history reveals that through the years religion has been an important factor in elections along with caste and ethnic identity. Yet interestingly, this year's general elections, India's 16th, the debates have tended to focus on issues other than identity. The three popular parties— the incumbent Indian National Congress, the main opposition party BJP and the new party called Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have not over-emphasised the topic of religion or religious minorities, at least in their election manifestos. The election manifesto of Congress stresses achieving growth, health care for all, investment in infrastructure, poverty allievation and inclusion in the development of the country. The BJP manifesto has emphasised on good governance and development, proclaiming that the party will combat corruption and encourage entrepreneurship among the youth. It also professes that it will 'facilitate the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya' and 'draft a Uniform Civil Code' for the country. The AAP has promised to bring the Janlokpal Bill into force, which according to them will check corruption at all levels and provide greater accountability of government institutions. Besides, they have expressed their intentions of de-centralising the economy and encouraging reservations only on the basis of social and economic status.

Though the manifestos of all the three parties seem equally progressive, the majority of Muslims do not regard BJP as sensitive to their grievances, if not outright antagonistic to their aspirations. The BJP manifesto has again brought up two issues— construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya and implementation of Uniform Civil Code, which Muslims generally object to. The Muslim community has been dubious about BJP prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi's role in the 2002 Gujarat pogrom which caused the death of thousands of Muslims. In spite of Modi being cleared of all blame by a Supreme Court appointed Special Investigation Team, the angst

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among the Muslim community remains. Indeed, the abysmally low conviction rates of accused Hindu nationalists in prosecution carried out by the Gujarat government as compared to investigations conducted by New Delhi, casts a long shadow on the legitimacy of Modi. Also the party has often portrayed itself as the upholder of Hindu nationalism, a belief that is sometimes understood to be in contradiction with the interests of Muslims and Christians.

"Nevertheless, as the opinion pools rank BJP way ahead of the other two parties, it seems to be making an attempt to appeal to the minorities."

Nevertheless, as the opinion pools rank BJP way ahead of the other two parties, it seems to be making an attempt to appeal to the minorities. Modi, known for making offensive speeches in which Muslims have been on occasions ridiculed, has moderated his stance in recent times and refrained from making parochial statements. His former emphasis on Hindu nationalism which is often interpreted as anti-Muslim is absent in his recent speeches. Despite the relative absence of identity in formal documents, its significance in campaign is apparent. BJP, for example, is yet to have made any definitive statement about the place of religious minorities in its interpretation of Hindutva, the ideology that calls for a Hindu nation. Likewise, leaders widely believed to have participated in riots and otherwise made inflammatory anti-Muslims remarks, continue to play an important role in election campaigns. Meanwhile Congress has been attempting to reach out to the Muslims and portray itself as the secular alternative. Sonia Gandhi, the Congress president has met influential Muslim clerics and asked for their support in the elections. Though the party has secured the support of Shahi Imam, a prominent Muslim religious leader, it has not been able to address the concerns of the Muslim community at large. After ten years in power the party's image is tainted by a number of corruption allegations against several of its leaders, which has not gone down well with any community in the country. Though AAP's manifesto has devoted a section to 'security and non-discrimination of Muslims', the party does not have a strong base among Muslims throughout India.

"Congress has been attempting to reach out to the Muslims and portray itself as the secular alternative."

The Muslims are undoubtedly a key constituency in the 16th general elections. They might be a minority in the country but they have a significant vote share especially in states like Uttar Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal, Kerala and Jammu and Kashmir. Additionally, Muslims are believed to vote as a bloc and for candidates that best suit their community's interests. Though it cannot be said that the issues of identity and minorities rank high on this year's election debates, but it is apparent that each party understands the power of the Muslim vote and at some level the BJP, Congress, AAP and several regional parties have tried to woo the community's vote. Perhaps the issues related to the Muslim community are not at the core of the election debate, but certainly they are not at the periphery either. ■

Status of Minorities in India: The Case against Reservations

Jhelum Bagchi
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"When the constitution was drafted the "Dalits" and Hindu backward classes – lowest in the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system, were deemed the most disadvantaged in modern India."

The constitution of India was written with a view to create an equal society, where everyone has the same rights in the eyes of the law and is treated on equal footing irrespective of their background. Given the diversity of India that was not the case with various groups co-existing and some having obvious privileges over others sometimes by birth, sometimes due to economic and regional circumstances. The policy of special reservations and quotas for disadvantaged groups at institutes of higher learning and government offices for people seemed the most obvious answer in the attempt to give everyone equal opportunity.

In particular, when the constitution was drafted the "Dalits" and Hindu backward classes – lowest in the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system, were deemed the most disadvantaged in modern India. Since caste was inherited, centuries of repression and social ostracization, had resulted in almost no development of skills for the lower castes, which hindered their participation in the democratic process that India had adopted. It was decided that they would be given special reservations or quotas at higher education institutions and government offices to help them bridge the gap that had been created by an unjust practice kept in place for centuries. Per the constitution 22.5% seats or positions at these institutes are reserved for scheduled castes and other backward classes, as these groups are called in official parlance. At that time, it was decided this would be a temporary policy to be implemented for a maximum of 10 years to help these groups.

While the practice is fair in theory, its application has not yielded the development and progress that was hoped. A small percentage of untouchables and backward classes have reaped the benefits of the system while others have languished in the background with little or no change in their living status over the years. In fact the fears of Indian leaders against the idea of reservation have been confirmed with the reservation system reinforcing unjust divisions among the people of India instead of uniting them.

One of the primary causes, as Dr. BR Ambedkar, Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee and a "Dalit" himself, pointed out was that while India was trying to bring political democracy; social and economic democracy still had a long way to go. So even though the idea of one person one vote has been successfully introduced into the psyche of the Indian irrespective

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"Middle class Indians who live in the cities or urban areas where caste matters less, benefit immensely from this policy if they also happen to be from a lower caste."

"To suggest abolishing or even reforming the reservation system is political hara-kiri so few politicians even broach the topic. "

of caste, community or religion the idea of one person, one value is still alien. More than 65 years after independence there are significant pockets of India where caste is the decider for all social interaction - from marriage to employment, particularly in the rural informal economy. Unfair rules in place for centuries are still applied – intermarriage between castes is seen as reason enough to justify honor killing and food cooked by a lower caste Hindu will not be eaten by anyone from a higher caste.

This problem has worsened as reservations are increasingly used as an election tool. Since people are divided on the lines of caste, they are easy to woo as a vote bank. Focusing on their history of repression and resulting dire economic condition is a common tactic to sway people towards parties that purportedly forward the cause of the lower caste communities. However, outside of gaining votes there is little else done by any political party to help scheduled castes and backward classes develop and contribute to society. The only policy to that end is the reservation and quota system but it is of little use to rural India where the basic standard of living is hard to achieve. For the rural scheduled caste or backward class person, standard of living has not improved significantly since independence. Since he or she can barely read or write, he or she has no value for the certificate stating his or her eligibility for special quotas. His or her value is primarily for the politician vying for his or her vote every 5 years. In fact, keeping them socially and economically backward keeps the issue alive for politicians giving them a sustainable campaign platform every election. The reservation system reinforces the division of India along caste and community lines.

On the other hand, middle class Indians who live in the cities or urban areas where caste matters less, benefit immensely from this policy if they also happen to be from a lower caste. They get easier access to educational institutions and jobs when compared to their peers of higher castes or different religions. Often times they have had the same opportunities as their higher caste peers because of economic status of their parents. There is a flip side too - as competition for seats in educational institutions and jobs intensify, students who come in with reservation are begrudged by non-reservation or general category students. Often times, the reserved seats are left empty because there aren't enough qualified students from lower castes to fill seats and positions.

The other group that benefits greatly from reservations is lower caste members who have joined politics as an article in the Economist points out. A lot of them hold immense clout in the political sphere using

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their caste and history of suppression to gain electoral victories. Indeed, India has had a house speaker and chief minister from the Dalit community. But these leaders have done little or nothing to change the living conditions of the poor Dalit, despite their support for reservations and special quotas. There has been no study to prove that reservations do indeed help disadvantaged communities catch up with the rest of the population. Unfortunately the likelihood of such a study is low given how contentious the issue of caste and community is becoming in India. To suggest abolishing or even reforming the reservation system is political hara-kiri so few politicians even broach the topic. The call for additional reservations is met with support across all party lines. It is no coincidence that these suggestions and demands come primarily during State and Assembly elections.

It must be noted that not all members of the lower castes make extensive use of their special status. There are many who will not accept benefits of reservation, because their circumstances do not require them to make use of special access to institutes and offices – particularly in urban India. In their cases, reservation has truly helped achieve parity with other castes. But these cases are far and few.

Finally, it has to be recognized that reservations as a policy is so deeply entrenched in Indian society that it cannot be done away with completely – there is no social or political will for reform. Reservations are a political and economic tool in modern day India. However, there is room for reform within reservation policies. The aim of reservations was to undo the injustice that backward castes have been subjected to for centuries under high caste Hindus – by bringing them on par with competing groups socially, economically and politically. Hence, the best way is to ensure that everyone starts at the same place – via equal education at the primary level. Through the Right to Education Act primary education of the same standard must be guaranteed for all citizens of India. If foundations are strong, there will be no need for reservations at higher levels of education and at work, building a society based purely on merit offering equal opportunities for all its citizens, just the way writers of the modern Indian constitution envisioned India. ■

"Reservations as a policy is so deeply entrenched in Indian society that it cannot be done away with completely – there is no social or political will for reform."

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