

CHAPTER 11

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND INTERFAITH HARMONY

Pakistan is a home to a population of 184 million people (projected according to 1998 census), belonging to different religions. 95 per cent of the total population is Muslim, while the rest five percent are Christians, Hindus, Parsis, Zoroastrians, Bahais, Sikhs, Buddhists, and small portions Kalasha, Kihals, and Jains. This diversity signifies the need to develop a pluralistic society in which people with different beliefs can live in peace and harmony. The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan declares Pakistan as an Islamic Republic, and Islam as the state religion protects rights of all citizens without any discrimination of faith and religion. Islam has proved to be a guardian of human rights in accordance with the vision of father of the nation Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who made it clear in his epoch-making speech of August 11, 1947. This manifests commitment to the interests and rights of the minorities, and promotion of the interfaith harmony.

In the current global scenario, many societies are facing problems of extremism, cultural and religious intolerance. This requires international cooperation and collective efforts to combat all forms of hatred, intimidation, incitement and acts of violence motivated by intolerance. The situation warrants working together for promoting dialogue, and cooperation and understanding among all cultures and faiths, whereas all people bear equal responsibility for promoting this objective. Cooperation, not confrontation, is the way forward, and tolerance is to be promoted through all mediums, and in all domains.

The Plan aims at strengthening peace, harmony, tolerance and religious pluralism among all segments of the society, and accepts diversity of the people living across the country for promoting religious pluralism, prosperity and inclusive society. The government is cognizant of the issues of minorities, committed to protect their lives and properties, and is making concentrated efforts to uplift the socio-economic conditions of non-Muslims living in the country, and all efforts are for progressive, democratic and moderate Islamic state.

The Annual Plan, Vision 2025 and prospective 11th Five Year Plan further strengthen the promotion of religious pluralism and interfaith harmony by encouraging acceptance, non violence and launching of interventions by the federal provincial governments, and civil society.

Performance review 2014-15

The situation of peace and human rights in the country has been shaken and had a considerable impact on national, regional and international peace and security, which has been fluid for many years. During the recent past, religious minorities have faced some discrimination and victimisation by some dissident elements, which has an adversely impact on the national development. To address these emerging challenges, there is a need for promoting tolerance, religious freedom and mutual acceptance in order to provide peace and justice in the society. The performance review shows that many initiatives have been taken for the well-being of the minorities, which include:

- The Articles 20, 21, 25, 26, 27, 28, and 36 of the Constitution of Pakistan provide full protection and equal rights to all citizens, including minorities, without any discrimination of colour, creed, cult, language or gender to freely profess and practice their religions and culture respectively.
- The system of separate electorate for minorities was abolished in favour of the universal adult suffrage on the demand of the minorities.
- There are 10 reserved seats for minorities in the National Assembly and four in the Senate in addition to 23 reserved seats in all the provincial assemblies.
- In emergency crises faced by minorities in different areas of the country, financial help from Rs3,00,000 to Rs5,00,000 is extended to the victims and their families.
- A marriage grant of Rs50,000 for daughters of widows, and orphan girls of the minorities is being given.
- Allocation of five per cent job quota for minorities in all federal government services, and jobs in addition to their participation on the open merit basis
- Declaration of August 11 as the Minorities Day to recognise services, sacrifices and contributions of minorities in nation-building
- Celebration of ten religious festivals of minorities at the official level every year, include Christmas and Easter for Christians, Holi and Diwali for Hindus, Besakhi and birth anniversary of Guru Nanak for Sikhs, Nauroze for Zoroastrian, Eid-e-Ridvan for Bahais, Festival of Lights for the Buddhist community, Chelum Jhust for Kalasha people
- Grant of financial assistance through the Minorities Welfare Fund (MWF)

Outlook 2015-2016

To achieve the religious pluralism and interfaith harmony, a national framework and guidelines for equitable development of communities of all provinces is required, which will be developed in consultation with the national and provincial stakeholders. Further initiatives will be encouraged for extension of services to meet needs of the less-served and unattended social sector areas through development programme with the stakeholders' support. This will strengthen the integration of different segments of the society, including marginalised groups and religious minorities. There is an emerging need to explore new possibilities with the participation of the youth, professionals, development workers, civil society, writers, artistes, and international stakeholders, who can contribute to a positive change, and focus on peace, mutual acceptance and tolerance. Pakistan has a rich tradition of Sufism, which will be tapped for interfaith harmony.

Programmes

Several initiatives for achieving interfaith harmony have been highlighted in the Plan. These include: establishment of an apex body to register and regulate religious institutions – mosques, temples, Gurdwaras, churches and religious schools – by the government, formation of a regulatory body (with representation of all religions), immediate action towards promoting peace, mutual acceptance and tolerance to diminish radical elements causing hatred towards minorities, and vulnerable segments of the population.

Moreover, the agenda encompasses outlining of a reporting mechanism for cases of discrimination against religious minorities, establishment of a helpline, promotion of religious tourism, social and cultural gatherings, proper implementation of the existing policies for interfaith harmony, and resources allocations for the welfare, development and empowerment of minorities across the board, including persons with disabilities, who belong to minorities.