

Persecution of Ahmadis in Pakistan

A brief

Introduction

The Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam is a religious organization, international in its scope, with established branches in 170 countries in Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe, Australia and Oceania. The Ahmadiyya Movement was established in 1889 by Hadrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian. The movement he started is an embodiment of the benevolent message of Islam - peace, universal brotherhood and submission to the will of God, in its pristine purity. It strongly rejects terrorism in any form and for any reason.

Anti-Ahmadiyya Riots in 1953 and 1974

The religious establishment in Pakistan does not approve of the reformatory nature of the Ahmadiyya Movement, and it considers it heretic. Politicians have often found it politically attractive to support the *mulla* in his anti-Ahmadiyya agitation. The first countrywide violence erupted in 1953. A high level judicial inquiry subsequently found and declared that political considerations and exigency were the main cause of the spread of the Anti-Ahmadiyya violence. Many years later, Mr. Bhutto found it politically advantageous in 1974 to have Ahmadis declared a non-Muslim minority. This was done after another countrywide violent anti-Ahmadiyya agitation conceived and engineered by the government and carried out by *mullas*. Minority status was an innovation, in that, while other groups were a religious minority by their own profession, Ahmadis were forcibly declared a minority through legislation.

General Zia's Ordinance XX

General Zia, the military dictator of Pakistan, went many steps further in 1984, when to gain the support of Islamic fundamentalists in Pakistan, he promulgated the notorious anti-Ahmadiyya Ordinance XX that added Sections 298-B and 298-C in Pakistan Criminal Code. Through this Ordinance, Ahmadis were deprived of most of their basic human rights and their freedom of faith. Under the provisions of this ordinance, an Ahmadi could be given rigorous imprisonment of 3 years and fined any amount. An Ahmadi can be easily charged for profession of his faith or for 'posing' as a Muslim. The ordinance was a green signal for anti-Ahmadiyya elements to open the floodgates of tyranny with the help of the State. The ordinance provides a ready and convenient tool in the hands of fundamentalists and the government to incriminate Ahmadis on flimsy grounds and petty excuses. **Since 1984, forty four Ahmadis have been murdered, ninety subjected to attempted murder, properties of a large number looted, their places of worship destroyed and desecrated, and subjected to all kinds of harassment.**

Approximately three thousand Ahmadis have faced prosecution in courts. Hundreds have been convicted. In addition, the entire Ahmadiyya population of Rabwah (approximately 35,000 individuals) were charged under the anti-Ahmadiyya PPC 298C. All the branches of the government were directed to ensure that the Ordinance XX is actively enforced. Consequently, Ahmadis, using normal greetings of *Assalamu Alaikum*, were given prison terms by magistrates. Large scale riots and violence erupted, with support of law enforcement agencies, in places like Nankana Sahib and Chak Sikandar from where large sections of Ahmadi communities had to emigrate to seek shelter elsewhere after extensive loot, arson, destruction and death. The government did little to help the victims. On numerous such occasions, the victims were even arrested by authorities. The persecution was designed and steered to be pervasive. Its evil was made to spread over almost every aspect of individual and communal life of Ahmadis. Education, jobs, economy, social life, all aspects were targeted and remain so. Ahmadi students' entry into professional colleges was restricted. There were occasions when an Ahmadi student was admitted on merit, but the admission was canceled because of his faith. Even to get in certain hostels, the candidate has to declare that he is not an Ahmadi. A religion column was added in Pakistani passports where the holder's faith is entered. Even to get a national Identity Card, every citizen of Pakistan, claiming to be Muslim, is made to sign a declaration wherein he/she has to deny the veracity of Hadrat Ahmad, the Founder of Ahmadiyya Community. In the field of employment, even petty public positions are often denied to Ahmadis simply for the reason of their religion. **The Supreme Head of the Ahmadiyya Community could no longer perform his functions, so he had to proceed abroad from where he has not been able to return ever since. During his absence abroad, he has been implicated here in 17 different cases; most of these carry long-term imprisonment penalties while one involves death punishment for alleged blasphemy.**

Rabwah Situation

At Rabwah, the headquarters of the Ahmadiyya Community, the Ordinance's effect was exceptionally glaring. Ninety five percent of the population of this town is Ahmadi. The government has taken steps to deny them the minimal citizen rights. Even holding of sports events was forbidden. At the happy occasion of the first centenary of Ahmadiyyat, the residents were forbidden to have decorative lights and even to distribute sweets. By devious means, they were forbidden to elect or even vote for their local government councilors. They were told that they could vote only as non-Muslims, which was not acceptable to them. Consequently, local councils are imposed on Rabwah that do not represent 95% of its population. Annual religious gatherings, which were routinely held here since 1948, were forbidden and remain so till today. As mentioned before, the police registered a criminal case against the entire Ahmadiyya population of Rabwah. The case has remained open until today, and any Ahmadi from Rabwah can be arrested against this FIR at any time. The non-Ahmadi Muslims are permitted every year to hold numerous meetings and rallies in this town where they are free to speak and behave in the most provocative manner against Ahmadis. Although the government has allowed a seat in the National Assembly for Ahmadis but with the

condition that they vote as non-Muslims. This way, Ahmadis have been effectively disenfranchised in the country's democratic set-up. Publication of Ahmadiyya religious literature is virtually banned. Ahmadiyya press is gagged; scores of criminal cases have been registered at the orders of the government against the editors, publishers and printer of Ahmadiyya daily paper and periodicals. They were not permitted to use simple terms like *Amen* and *Inshallah*. The printer incharge of the press has been booked in scores of cases, qualifying him perhaps for entry in Guineas Book of World Records. In 1999, Nawaz Sharif government changed the name of Rabwah to Chenab Nagar in total disregard of the wishes of 95% of its population. It was a most serious and outrageous violation of the democratic principle. On April 30, 1999 authorities arrested the top leaders of Ahmadiyya Community in Pakistan and Rabwah on entirely fabricated charge of defiling the Quran, and pressed charges that could have landed them in prison for life. It was under international condemnation and pressure that the charge was withdrawn.

International Reaction

International human rights organizations have taken notice of this unfortunate situation. Amnesty International, International Commission of Jurists, Pakistan Human Rights Commission, Human Rights Advocates Inc. USA etc have published reports on the subject. The UN Sub Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, in 1985, expressed its grave concern over Ordinance XX and urged the Commission to call on the government of Pakistan to repeal the Ordinance and to restore Ahmadis' human rights. However, regrettably nothing substantial or effective has been done abroad to compel the authorities in Pakistan to repeal this Ordinance that is now a part of the Constitution as 8th Amendment.

The Blasphemy Law

In 1986, the blasphemy law, PPC 295-C, was passed. True to the design of its authors, majority of the victims of this law are Ahmadis although they cannot even think of defiling the name of the Holy Prophet. The only punishment under this law now is Death. Although many governments have come and gone, the anti-Ahmadiyya laws and the Blasphemy law have remained in the Statute Book, and Ahmadis are being roped in. Since 1984, not a single day has passed when an Ahmadi was not in prison under these laws. **Till now, 200 Ahmadis were charged under the Blasphemy law that could render them liable to face death penalty.** Pakistan government's assertion that no Ahmadi has been yet hanged is misleading, as the government policy has encouraged mullas to take law in their own hands and murder Ahmadis. Dozens of Ahmadis have been murdered in recent years only for their faith, and almost none of the murderers have been arrested. This is a textbook example of 'continuing a policy by other means'. In many instances, the murderers and their patrons are definitely known to the government but no action is taken to bring them to book. Three Ahmadis were given

life-imprisonment sentences under this law by a trial court. They were spared death sentences on the grounds that when charged in 1988, life imprisonment was available in the statute book as an alternate punishment.

Anti-terrorism Act (ATA)

This Act was promulgated in 1997 ostensibly to curb terrorism. However, unscrupulous officials and mullas have discovered in this legislation a convenient and efficacious tool to persecute Ahmadis by manipulating the religious clause PPC 295A. An Ahmadi was awarded 10 years' imprisonment by an ATA Court for allegedly filling in a Census proforma incorrectly. An Ahmadi youth, who put on a shirt with *Kalima* (Islamic creed) written on it, was arrested and pushed to a Special Court. In essentially similar situations, 62 Ahmadis have been booked under PPC 295A that is cognizable by ATA Special Courts. Ahmadis thus charged are often denied the privilege of release on bail.

Situation Now

There is no let-up in sight. Long-term prison sentences are being awarded to Ahmadis on petty grounds. An Ahmadi was sentenced to a total of 13 years' imprisonment by a Special Court last year for telling someone that the Reformer of Latter Days has already appeared. The Supreme Court of Pakistan, in its verdict of 1993, rejected Ahmadiyya claim to religious freedom; thus, the judicial road for it has come to a cul-de-sac. The Supreme Court not only justified General Zia's Ordinance XX, it went further to suggest that Ahmadiyya theological position itself could be considered blasphemous.

Encouraged by the Supreme Court decision, other courts have mostly stopped accepting bail applications of Ahmadis facing trials. Magistrates and police find it convenient to casually add the crime of blasphemy under PPC 295-C. A typical case is that of 4 Ahmadis from Mianwali. Their adversaries, who had a family feud with them, got them arrested under false accusation of Blasphemy. Their plea for release on bail kept pending before the Supreme Court since 1994. They languished in prison for four years before they were released on bail. Eventually they were declared Not Guilty.

Murders and other forms of violence continue against the Community. A nephew of the Supreme Head of the Community was murdered in brought daylight. Recently, during the present regime, the residence of a community official was stormed, damaged and looted by a mulla-led mob in the presence of the police who later arrested the victim and his two sons on fabricated charges. No action was taken against any of the miscreants-unbelievable, but true.

Although soon after assuming power General Musharaf declared his intentions to treat all sections of the Pakistani society as equal citizens, his government has taken no worthwhile steps to alleviate the sufferings of Ahmadis. The government issued a policy statement in February 2000, that notwithstanding the suspension of the Constitution,

there is no change in the constitutional and legal status of Ahmadis. The Federal Government complied with Mullas' demand by incorporation of all the religious provisions of the defunct Constitution in the military regime's Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO) with back-dated effect. The government also backtracked on its intentions to modify the procedure for registration of cases under the Blasphemy Law. The Courts tend to refuse bails and continue to punish Ahmadis on religious grounds. Two years' imprisonment was awarded to the President of a local Ahmadiyya Community in district Bahawalnagar for building a niche and minaret in an Ahmadiyya mosque. On October 11, a magistrate at Qasur awarded one year's imprisonment each to three Ahmadis for displaying Islamic creed and Quranic verses at home and in their shops, in a thirteen years' old case. Nothing has changed; Ahmadis are getting more of the same.

Such is the agonizing and heart-rending situation of Ahmadis in Pakistan.

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