view: Ahmedi killing —Usman Ahmad

The day was in the words of Charles Dickens, "...one of those March days when the sun shines hot and the wind blows cold; when it is summer in the light, and winter in the shade", and there all the tears of yesterday and tomorrow were shed once again

Spring is supposed to be the season of renewal. It is the time of year when nature’s life cycle begins again and the world heaves with the verdant breath of future promise. The ancient Mesopotamians ushered in the season with the festival of Akitu that celebrated the cutting of barley. In more recent times, spring festivals have become as abundant and vibrant as the fruits, flowers and harvests they extol. But, in our topsy-turvy age, the nascent Pakistani spring of 2012 has been harsher than the bleakest arctic winter for the country’s Ahmedis. Life has given way to death, and joy has once again been consumed by the unholy shadow of bereavement. Last Wednesday, Maqsood Ahmad became the second Ahmedi to be killed in Nawabshah within the space of ten days. Two motorcyclists assailed him in the busy Mohni Baazar and shot him dead at point blank range. He was 58 years old. This is just the latest harrowing episode in the decades-long persecution Ahmedis have suffered in a country that they helped build from its foundations.

We have been here too many times before. The constitutional amendment enacted by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in 1974, which declared Ahmedis to be non-Muslims, opened the way for a total moral collapse of society that has led us to where we are today. What more is there to say, amidst the many shameful silences, which has not already been said? There is no fresh perspective to the debate, no alternative, no middle ground, no tolerance, no quiet revolution in the hearts of the people and, therefore, no compromise or peace. So far, if we have learnt anything, it is that there are no limits or bounds that prejudice will not cross. And having observed this lesson, willful impotence is the choice most have opted for.

Where does the nation go from here? It is a question I dread to ask, but one which must be pointedly put forth for the answer will determine how we face the many serious challenges that lie ahead. Matters have gotten so out of hand that simple soul-searching is woefully insufficient, perhaps even impossible. The country is gripped by chaos and morality has been perverted. The murder and persecution of those whose beliefs are at variance with the mainstream is seen as the highest virtue, while indignity and outrage has become the preserve of the purveyors of terror.

More than anything else, the chief legacy of 1974 is the appropriation of the ‘Will’ of God. With the aid of this, religious extremists have been allowed to ride roughshod over Ahmedis in Pakistan. These extremists act with the sanction of the state, and have thus zealously latched onto the impunity this affords them in order to force their perverted catechisms down the throats of a docile laity — it is a form of submission — alas, the submission is to men of hate, rather than to a supreme omnipotent deity. Those who dare to speak out, like the late Salmaan Taseer, are usually silenced with bullets or bombs. Fear and oppression are the ultimate arbiters in this hideous affair.

The Ahmedi narrative does not make for easy reading. Over the past four decades well over 200 Ahmedis have been killed for their faith, while thousands have endured legal prosecution for the simple matter of enacting the rights of their religion. However, numbers, statistics, facts and figures can never convey the toll these events have taken on countless. One lost can never be explained away by a number.

Surely, enough is enough? The nation must awake from its collective stupor and protect the rights of those who deserve protection for the simple fact that they too are human beings regardless of their beliefs. The question of whether Ahmedis are Muslim or non-Muslim is irrelevant and, quite frankly, an appalling obfuscation of the real matter at hand, namely, that all people, regardless of their colour, faith, creed or politics have the right to peacefully exist in any society of the world. The Quranic teaching: There is no compulsion in religion — is nothing if not a universal declaration of freedom of faith and conscience. Persecution needs to be forsaken in favor of advancement of life and dignity. Hitherto, failure to act has only reaped one terrible harvest after another. Ahmedis have been at the forefront of this suffering, but it now afflicts the whole nation. No one is immune and with each passing day it becomes harder and harder to stem the tide.

But, these are mere words. Ideas to be expressed but not implemented. The state, judiciary and all the other estates of society seem unable or unwilling to enforce change. With each new death, with each new family destroyed, the conspiracy of inaction grows ever more entrenched.

And so, with no new dawn on the horizon, Maqsood Ahmad was laid to rest in his hometown of Rabwah. Among the mourners were numerous people whose lives had, in one way or another, been affected by the relentless hate directed towards the Jama’at. The father of a young son killed two years ago on that fateful day in Lahore, a father and son kidnapped and abused for many months just because of their profession of faith, a gentleman once arrested for reciting the name of God, came together to bear the weight of the funeral of another slain kinsman. The day was in the words of Charles Dickens, "...one of those March days when the sun shines hot and the wind blows cold; when it is summer in the light, and winter in the shade", and there all the tears of yesterday and tomorrow were shed once again. The writer can be reached at usmanhotspur@gmail.com

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