An op-ed by Mohsin Hamid in the daily Dawn of June 27, 2017

Fear and Silence

Why are Ahmadis persecuted so ferociously in Pakistan?

The reason can't be that their large numbers pose some sort of 'threat from within'. After all, Ahmadis are a relatively small minority in Pakistan. They make up somewhere between 0.25 per cent (according to the last census) and 2.5 per cent (according to the Economist) of our population.

Nor can the reason be that Ahmadis are non-Muslims. Pakistani Christians and Pakistani Hindus are non-Muslims, and similar in numbers to Pakistani Ahmadis. Yet Christians and Hindus, while undeniably discriminated against, face nothing like the vitriol directed towards Ahmadis in our country.

To understand what the persecution of Ahmadis achieves, we have to see how it works. Its first step is to say that Ahmadis are non-Muslims. And its second is to say that Ahmadis are not just non-Muslims, but apostates non-Muslims who claim to be Muslims. These two steps are easy to take any individual Pakistani citizen has the right to believe whatever they want about Ahmadis and their faith.

But the process goes further. Step three is to say that because Ahmadis are apostates, they should be victimised, or even killed. We are now beyond the realm of personal opinion. We are in the realm of group punishment and incitement to murder. Nor does it stop here. There is a fourth step. And step four is this any Muslim who says Ahmadis should not be victimised or killed, should themselves be victimised or killed.

In other words, even if they are not themselves Ahmadi, any policeman, doctor, politician, or passerby who tries to prevent, or just publicly opposes, the killing of an Ahmadi, deserves to die. Why? Because anyone who defends an apostate is themselves an apostate.

Aha. This is what the persecution of Ahmadis achieves. It allows any Muslim to be declared an apostate. For the logic can be continued endlessly. When an Ahmadi man is wounded in an attack and goes to a hospital for treatment, if the doctor agrees to treat him, she is helping an apostate, and therefore she becomes an apostate and subject to threats. When a policeman is deputed to protect the doctor, since she is an apostate, the policeman is helping an apostate, so he too becomes an apostate. And on and on.

The collective result of this is to silence and impose fear not just on the few per cent of Pakistanis who are Ahmadis, or even on those who are Christians and Hindus, but on all of us. The message is clear. Speaking out against the problem means you are the problem, so you had better be quiet.

Our coerced silence is the weapon that has been sharpened and brought to our throats. This is why Nawaz Sharif's statement in defence of Ahmadis met with such an angry response. Because the heart of the issue isn't whether Ahmadis are non-Muslims or not. The heart of the issue is whether Muslims can be silenced by fear.

Because if we can be silenced when it comes to Ahmadis, then we can be silenced when it comes to Shias, we can be silenced when it comes to women, we can be silenced when it comes to dress, we can be silenced when it comes to entertainment, and we can even be silenced when it comes to sitting by ourselves, alone in a room, afraid to think what we think. That is the point.