



## COLUMNISTS

### Five steps to sanity

By I.A. Rehman

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**The priority demands of sanity (dictionary meaning: reasonable and rational behaviour) are determined by the challenges a society faces. Today Pakistan's supreme need is the adoption of a rational response to the menace of extremist elements operating, without due sanction, under the banner of belief.**

The horrific dimensions of last Friday's carnage in Lahore can be judged from the fact that even those who never take notice of atrocities against the Ahmadi community as well as those who never protest against the militants' excesses could not help feeling uneasy at the foul happening. What does sanity now demand from government and society alike?

The more than 90 Ahmadis wantonly cut down in their prayer houses were citizens of Pakistan entitled to the protection of their right to life. If they must be treated as zimmi in a supposedly Islamic state they had an additional reason to be protected by the state and the people. The assault on their prayer houses was not wholly unexpected; the authorities had been aware of the activities of the professional Ahmadi-bashers and their threats for months.

The first step towards reasonable and rational behaviour is that the state must fulfil all three of its legal obligations, namely, a thorough investigation into the obvious failure to ensure security of the prayer houses, a relentless prosecution of the culprits, especially those that are routinely described by the police and the media as 'masterminds', and adoption of effective strategies for the protection of communities that are vulnerable because of their belief.

It is not possible to ignore the fact that the higher authorities directly answerable for the Lahore massacre, who normally rush to hospitals or private abodes of victims of relatively less horrible incidents, could not muster the courage to console the injured Ahmadis. Whether this was due to any sympathy for the militants' creed or to a fear of attracting their hostility, the deviation from the routine points to the roots of discrimination and prejudice against the Ahmadis.

The extirpation of the deep-rooted bias against holders of beliefs different from that of the majority's orthodoxy is the second essential step towards sanity. The moment the custodians of state power start treating some of the people as second-class citizens they push the latter into a high-risk alley.

The official explanation for not taking action against hate-preachers, some of whom are allowed privileges as rewards for spewing calls to murder and worse, is the fear of breach of peace. The same excuse is touted to explain failure to remove banners and posters that explicitly call for violence against the Ahmadis or other vulnerable groups.

A shopkeeper in a town near Lahore is free to present each of his customers an anti-Ahmadi poster. Tolerance of criminal mischief so as to avoid breach of peace has been formalised into a theory that is used to justify the Ahmadi-specific provisions of the penal code arbitrarily inserted into it by Gen Zia. The denial of Ahmadis' right to hold meetings, especially their annual congregation, also is premised on this theory.

A critical review of this excuse has long been overdue. No such effort has been made because the victims, Ahmadis especially, are not considered entitled to enjoy their basic rights. But the consequences of overlooking mischief by some elements out of fear for their potential to cause disorder are now evident even to the purblind. Will no action be taken against gangsters who establish a state within the state because they might disrupt peace?

Most criminal acts fall within the definition of breach of peace. Must they go unchallenged? A state loses its title to wield authority if it blinks at criminal acts out of fear of repercussions of its intervention. The demolition of the theory of appeasing disrupters of peace is the third important step towards sanity.

The next step necessary for evolving reasonable and rational behaviour is elimination of discrimination on the basis of belief in practically all walks of life. This is going to be a long haul even after the state has acquired the will and the capacity required for the task, because this will involve not only a review of the 1974 amendment and the Zia ordinance XX but also the nature of the polity. What should receive immediate attention is the need to end the Ahmadis' exclusion from political life.

When Gen Zia revived the apartheid-like scheme of communal voting the Ahmadis declined to register themselves as non-Muslims. Whatever one may think of that decision the result is that the Ahmadis have been out of the political mainstream. The most striking illustration of their disenfranchisement is the fact that they have no say in the affairs of their town, Rabwah, forcibly renamed Chenab Nagar, and the local body functions have been assumed by a minority of land-grabbers/officially patronised settlers occupying the fringes of the town.

The 2002 election law abolished separate electorates but under a totally illegal and anti-democratic decision the Ahmadis are still denied inclusion in joint/common electoral rolls. This discrimination must end as, among other things, it strengthens discrimination in services, in educational institutions, in housing even.

Finally, the fifth step to sanity demands a critical appraisal of the theoretical foundations of religious extremism. Tomes have been written on tolerance in general, and often perfunctory, terms. Many have devoted time and resources to talks on inter-faith harmony. But very little has been done to protect Islam against its manifestly wrong interpretation by the high priests of militancy. The advocates of the liberal traditions of Islam have been forced into exile or silenced otherwise. There is no intra-Islam discourse in Pakistan, not even to the extent it is going on in many parts of the world, including a few Muslim societies. The effort to rescue belief from the clutches of hate-preachers can be delayed only at the risk of grave peril to Pakistan.

Moving away, for the time being, from the on-again off-again and largely tepid plans to regulate the working of madressahs, a commission may be set up to probe the contents of the so-called religious publications, which are believed to account for three-fourths of all publications in Pakistan every year. The objective should be compilation of the material used to brainwash young boys and convince them of the urgency of not only killing Ahmadis, the Shias, and even Sunnis for sectarian or political differences, but also of treating attacks on hospitals as a holy mission on the route to paradise.

For a people who have allowed raw emotions to rule their minds for decades the trek back to sanity will be neither easy nor painless.

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