

International Religious Freedom Act: The Case of Religious Freedom and Democracy in Pakistan

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Abstract

The study discusses the International Religious Freedom Act (1998), a law of the US Congress that envisages religious freedom and democracy promotion as guarantor of international peace and security. It also highlights the IRFA as a core objective of US foreign policy. The discussion in the scholarship also elaborates the role of Evangelicals – a dominant religious group in the US, in enacting the law and making it an instrument of US foreign policy. Furthermore it explains the importance of IRFA to Evangelicals who despite having differences cooperated with other non-Evangelical Christians and other religious groups to facilitate the passing of the International Religious Freedom Act into a law in 1998.

It is believed that religious persecution seems to be evident in theocratic and authoritarian regimes. However, there are also suspicions in many quarters of the Muslim world about the US that through IRFA, she intends to impose her ideals and values around world. While religious freedom, democracy and issues related to human rights in the Muslim world are thought to be in chaotic situation, the study discusses the US foreign policy in the context of the Act and points out the critical responses presented in the Muslim world. After the incidence of 9/11, Pakistan's importance to the US increased not only because of its alliance in War on Terror but also due to increase in religious extremism. The purpose of IRFA is to take notice of issues such as environment, human rights and democracy including religious freedom, religious persecution and discrimination globally and recommends and implements policies, to the State Department, in other countries to develop programs and promote religious freedom. Many circles in the US believe that there are flaws in the US foreign policy on the issues of religious freedom and democracy; Evangelicals are concerned about the discrimination against religious minorities and Islamic extremism in the Muslim world including Pakistan after 9/11. While many Evangelicals believe that democracy can help eradicate religious extremism, there are others who ask for strict action against the violators of religious freedom and

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report cases to the State Department. The study, therefore, take an account of the US concerns related to religious persecution and Islamic laws in Pakistan.

Freedom of religion is a much-debated subject and the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA-1998), holds an important place in any discussion regarding it. It is commonly believed that Muslim states severely limit religious freedom and curtail freedom of thought and expression. According to Farr, the highest restriction of religious freedom is in around seventy Muslim majority nations. Christian are on top among the religious groups which are subject to harassment,. They are harassed in 130 countries, with Muslim majority at 117.”¹

Charles Grandison Finney, an Evangelist, argued in the middle of the nineteenth century that it is the business of the church to reform the world and to do way with every kind of sin. He further said that it is the binding duty of Christians to exercise their influence to secure a legislation that is in accordance with the Law of God.² To this affect, there are certain fundamentalist Christian organizations that want to have a direct influence on US foreign policy by passing a law that would make Congress responsible for protecting Christians worldwide. Michael A. Sells wrote:

The influence of Jacques Ellul and Bat Ye'or has extended beyond Serbian nationalists and their sympathizers in French-speaking Europe to North America. Their writings have become central to what might be called the ‘Global Persecution of Christian Awareness Movement’, an attempt by the religious right in the US to make the protection of Christians and Christian evangelization around the world a congressional mandated aspect of US foreign policy. Through such efforts, the Christian Awareness Movement works assiduously to supplement the traditional right with an equally developed anti-Muslim position.³

1.1. International Religious Freedom Act.

The Law established an office to monitor religious persecution abroad and place sanctions on any violator country. The Congress established the Department of State’s Office of International Religious Freedom under the IRFA. It is headed by an Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. The members of US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) appointed by the president and Congressional leaders of both political parties comprise of: two Catholics, two Evangelical Protestants, one Southern Baptist, one Orthodox Christian, one Jew and one Muslim, with one vacancy.⁴

Religious freedom is explained as an essential human right which is recognized by international law and is enshrined in the First Amendment of the US Constitution. Hence, besides an important element of national security, it is also an important element of the US foreign policy for promotion of democracy and freedom abroad for a peaceful and stable international order.⁵

The promotion of religious freedom guarantees security and hence peace. "The states that are engaged in religious persecution are more likely to become a national security threat to the US. It is believed that religious persecution, as an aspect of national security seems to be evident in three kinds of actors, i.e., jihadist terrorism, theocratic regimes and authoritarian powers. In case of the last two, such states fear religion and the inclusion of religious leaders in the political system. However, states, which are not theocratic, for example Pakistan that face substantial internal pressure in that direction are as troublesome as theocratic states."⁶

The IRF laws made by the US Congress and strongly backed by the Evangelicals recommend and implement policies to the State Department, against those countries where Christian and other minorities suffer. The stated mandate of the International Religious Freedom Act is thus the advocacy and protection of individuals persecuted abroad on account of religion as an important aspect of foreign policy. Besides the establishment of Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and a Commission on International Religious Freedom at the Department of State, the Act authorizes US actions against violators of religious freedom abroad.⁷

In the post 9/11 periods, IRFA is important, as it has raised issues pertaining to the Christian minorities and Islamic extremism in the Muslim world in general and Pakistan in particular. Moreover, US administration, policy makers, think tanks, religious scholars and elites have been increasingly seeking to highlight the significance of religious freedom as a source of peace and understanding among different faith communities in recent periods.

1.2. Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)

The IRFA demands that each year the President designate each country the government of which has engaged in or tolerated violation of religious freedom as a 'Country of Particular Concern' (CPC). The State Department, on the annual reports of the commission, designates a state as CPC and, if found guilty, imposes sanctions against that particular country. Private groups

or organizations have strong role in identifying the cases related to religious discrimination. However, it is argued, “IRFA does not affect the execution of the foreign policy on the religious discrimination grounds. The US government does criticize or report the cases to the violators, but it does not affect the US relations vis-à-vis any country in terms of friendship or enmity.”⁸

However, it is argued that in terms of inconsistent IRF policy making, there is a biased treatment of few states; for example, Israel has been ignored with regard to religious persecution.⁹ There is criticism on the enforcement of IRF Law by the US administration. It is believed that the administration has not been successful in promotion of religious freedom due to inconsistent and imbalanced treatment of CPC. Therefore, there is difference of opinion on advancing the IRFA, some favour strict actions like sanctions and others favour religious freedom and democracy through quiet and public diplomacy and negotiation.¹⁰

As far as the implementation of IRFA is concerned, North Korea and Sudan were listed as CPCs for discrimination against religious minorities in 2001 and were thus eligible for US diplomatic and economic sanctions. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were listed among those nations where the state is hostile to certain religious minorities and implements policies which threaten certain religious communities, forcing their followers to convert or to flee. However, many quarters within the US and abroad also argued that the US is reluctant to take action against these countries because of being allies in the War on Terror (WoT) and their religion, i.e. Islam.¹¹ Therefore, despite legislative arguments, it is unlikely that the designation will have much impact on US policy towards these countries.

The only case where the religious freedom argument was used in terms of influence on foreign policy was in Sudan. The Christian lobby was instrumental in highlighting the religious dimension of the conflict. Conversely, some counter voices were against it and termed it to be an economic conflict and not a religious one.¹²

1.3. IRFA: Democracy Promotion

There are interesting debates about the nature of relationship between the IRFA and democracy or how the Law can promote

and preserve democracies. Democracy is explained as a “a system of conflict regulation which allows its citizens an open competition over values and goals that they want to advance. It also means that as long as secular or religious groups do not practice violence, violate the rights of others and advance their interests within the set democratic norms, they have the right to advance their interests both in civil and political society”¹³

One of the purposes of IRFA is promotion of democracy and it is believed that IRFA can help in promoting liberal democracy and civil society,¹⁴ which as a result will help in eradicating religious extremism. Michael Gerson, the speechwriter of President Bush thus opines, “freedom of conscience is not only a sign of respect for human but it is also essential for the strengthening of democratic institution. Countries respecting religious freedom are more likely to respect other rights. Whereas, countries that encourage persecution of religious minorities and empower and strengthen extremism.”¹⁵

While many believe that democracy can help eradicate religious extremism, there are others who insist upon strict action against the violators of religious freedom. Despite always making claims of promoting democracy and eradication of extremism, the US has hardly shown any concern for democracy and has always supported dictatorship in Pakistan and similar authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. Therefore, so long as there is mistrust about the US role in international affairs, it cannot achieve the desired goal in its foreign policy with regard to religious freedom and democracy.

Many associated with the IRF policy formulation wanted to put it on the CPC list but the US might have ignored the issue as Pakistan is serving its interests in the region and fighting Al Qaeda. Double standards such as these lead the Muslim world to doubt the intentions of the US Government.

IRFA has attracted a lot of debates all over the world. It is believed that religious extremism is nurtured in authoritarian and undemocratic societies and “the US fear Islamic extremism as a threat to its national security.”¹⁶ To this aspect of democracy it is maintained, “the US policies have been often based on the idea

that the only fruitful solutions to Islamic extremism are either democracies that send Islam to the private sphere or authoritarian governments that control religion. However, such policies have proven at best ineffective.”¹⁷ Therefore, it is suggested by the policy circle in the US, “democratization, religious freedom in a democratic setup and active and constructive participation of religious actors help in democracy promotion and fight against terrorism as compared to those undemocratic and authoritarian allies that suppress their religious communities.”¹⁸

It is also deliberated that “the foreign governments do not see IRFA as a long-term initiative connected to the US interests because the State Department has not seriously advanced IRF policy. Therefore, it was proposed that a refurbished IRF policy could overcome many problems and contribute to the welfare of other governments and US national security. The US foreign policy on religious freedom directly contributes to the rooting of democracy and, hence, in containment of religious radicalism.”¹⁹

Bush administration’s emphasis was on promotion of democracy but as the aspect of democracy that they ignored was that it could bring in religious parties in the leadership in the Muslim world. The local governments do not deliver to the people so they look for other alternatives, which make these religious political parties more popular.²⁰ The argument stands true in case of Pakistan when MMA became the ruling party after 2002 elections. However, it is also a fact that due to resentment towards the government post 9/11 policy, the religious political parties were able to obtain the vote bank, which they had never enjoyed before.

Another view is that despite the US insistence on democracy it cannot flourish in countries with powerful religious communities. Thomas Farr argues that the problem is “the secularists/liberals views of separation of religion from politics who consider religion as a danger to democracy. Therefore, the US must engage religious communities, Muslim scholars, religious parties and jurists, who can help in molding a civil society and provide the moral underpinning of any democratic state.”²¹

The term democracy, for President Bush, has “the connotation of Western values rather than universal values, which was believed essential for national security strategy. President Bush did not enter the White house with a democracy promotion agenda, rather existing programmes continued. However, after 9/11, Bush foreign policy changed due to realization that the US was in direct conflict with radical Islam. To counter the threat emanating from radical Islam, it was necessary to encourage democracy throughout the Middle East. Bush often referred to Nathan Sharansky, a Christian Zionism’s hero, who argued that the best democracy is one in which one can declare his views without fear of punishment or reprisal. The Christian Right supported the idea believing that democracy could bring pro-American, pro-free market democrats and even Christians being elected. IRFA also provided Evangelicals²² an access to the formerly restricted areas to promote their message of salvation, and hence, proselytization.”²³

The central feature of foreign policy vision, as anticipated by President Bush, was promotion of democracy and freedom abroad.²⁴ Therefore, freedom of religion was considered as crucial for democracy as pointed out by President Bush:

“The most powerful weapon in the struggle against extremism is not bullets or bombs – it is the universal appeal of freedom. Freedom is the design of our Maker, and the longing of every soul. Freedom is the best way to unleash the creativity and economic potential of a nation. Freedom is the only ordering of society that leads to justice. And human freedom is the only way to achieve human rights.”²⁵

The US had been supporting dictators like Hosni Mubarak, Saddam Hussein and Pervez Musharraf whose countries were listed as supporting the Islamic extremists but who themselves had secular views. Similarly, the US simply ignored the human rights violation in Indian held Kashmir, China’s violation of human rights in Tibet and so on, but supported the above

mentioned leaders' stance on terrorism simply because there were Muslims involved.

1.4. IRFA: A Threat to Cultural and Communal Identity

Many see IRF policy as an attack on their religious traditions or a threat to communal identity. It is also seen as a cultural imperialism aimed at weakening a majority of religious communities by foreign states. Various quarters in the Muslim world view US unilateralism as imperialistic on many counts especially after the end of Cold war. The US, on the contrary considers itself as "a democratic nation, founded on the principles of liberty, equality, and happiness as the indisputable rights of human beings, bestowed on all of them by the Creator at birth. Hence, Americans reject to call their country an empire and resentfully deny it to be imperialist."²⁶

If the argument holds true and is to be believed, serious attention is needed to examine the US policy after the end of Cold War. After the fall of Communism, a few Western scholars very narrow-mindedly criticized Islam as a threat to Judeo-Christianity civilizations. In the post 9/11 period, Islam is highlighted as a religion that is intolerant, and a threat to the West in general and US national security in particular, hence leaving no space for dialogue. One among such scholars, Samuel P. Huntington in his Clash of Civilization theory explored Islam as a civilization whose people consider their culture as superior and who are infatuated with the weakness of their power. He further states that Islamic fundamentalism is not the main problem for the West but Islam itself is.²⁷

Muslims are seen as intolerant of other faiths. Muslims, therefore, feel misunderstood and denounced as terrorists. There are also suspicions in the Muslim world about the US intentions of imposing its values on the rest of the world. As will be detailed below, the Islamic laws, including Blasphemy Laws, are also a burning issue in the West. The criticism against these laws is not appreciated in the Muslim world. It is often discussed that "the US has not sought to counter the widespread perception that its democracy and religious freedom policies are designed against non-Western majority religious communities and to empower US missionaries. Pakistani society is not alone in having these fears

but rather Russian orthodox, Afghan Sunnis and Indian Hindu nationalists, among others, share the same concerns that it is paving the way for American missionary efforts.”²⁸

“The critic repeatedly targeted Bush’s Evangelical worldview, the known influence of the Christian Right (the red-states ²⁹ Evangelicals) and the Neo-Cons approach to democratization policy. It is argued, however, that Neo-Cons do not focus on religion, similarly Bush’s red-state fundamentalism against AL Qaeda is irrational.”³⁰The Christian Right organizations, such as, ‘International Christian Concern’ and ‘Christian Freedom International’ compiled a list of persecutors, which also included Pakistan. In doing so, they seek to use religious freedom to develop a sense of shared persecution among Christians and highlight their allegations of an Islamic threat to Judeo-Christian civilization.³¹

This is how US policy in the Muslim world and particularly Middle East is perceived and understood. The question is who is gaining from this conflict, the military industrial complex, and the religious bigots on either sides or the US itself? As far as its national security is concerned, that can be debated but the US has failed to engage the leadership, citizen and clergy on both sides. Therefore, the need for US is “to engage religious communities in the democratic process by exercising and defending religious freedom. It is also argued that if issues like democracy and human rights are not integrated with religion then it would be a problem for US foreign policy. The US acting unilaterally can be counter-productive, therefore, it is underlined that the US should act through the United Nations and promote religious freedom as part of their human rights agenda.”³²

1.5. IRFA: A Tool For Evangelism³³

Another concern in the Muslim world is that IRFA is a tool for the Christian Right in the US. John Shattuck in a discussion at PEW Research Center also identified these fears in the Muslim world, stating, “the legislation represents the interests of missionary religions, interested in proselytizing and changing religious views in other countries. Hence the US is trying to export a uniquely American brand of religion.” Similarly Thomas Farr at the same forum expressed that the “US policy has been one

of opposing religious persecution and not of promoting religious freedom.”³⁴

In the post 9/11 periods, the urge for spreading Evangelicalism has gained more momentum. The Muslims are apprehensive of Evangelicals missionaries and fear a threat to their religion. The Christian communities of these Muslim countries are also wary of these activities. In the Evangelical school of thought, both Muslims and Christians need their reformation. For the Christians, Evangelicals are posing a new challenge as Evangelism is historically a new development of Christianity, one that even wants non-Evangelical Christians to convert. However, such sorts of activities have become counterproductive in the Muslim world. Because of the Evangelical missionaries and their mode of action, Muslims have been hostile towards Christian communities within their countries and differences have cropped up between the two.³⁵

What is more is that there is a wide spread perception that US policies on democracy and religious freedom are designed against non-Christian communities to empower US missionaries and appears to privilege certain religious groups over others. The IRFA was supported by Evangelical groups and among them the ‘Christian Coalition’. The original Bill focused mainly on the persecution of Christians. However, the Episcopal Church, later on, supported the alternative Bill, which includes all religious groups. It is also held that to further the cause of religious freedom, a number of Evangelical groups have quietly supported Congressional members who were involved in the Bill.³⁶

IRFA, to some extent, has facilitated the contemporary wave of global engagement of Evangelicals. It is believed that “the Evangelicals advocate IRFA for two reasons. Many of them come from a background that requires religious freedom to preach and convert. Moreover, they want the countries that do not welcome them to be open for them to go to and convert people. This is visible in the Evangelical’s attitude after the US invasion of Iraq. Their entry opened Iraq for Christianity with a religious vision that believe not only in Born Again phenomenon but in the Second Coming of Christ, which is tied to pro- Israel agenda.

However, there are many Evangelicals who have moved into a new position but that is relatively a recent phenomenon.”³⁷

In India, which is termed as one among CPCs, the protection of the right to proselytize is viewed as a scheme to convert low caste Hindus with the sole purpose of increasing neo-colonial power. Furthermore, certain features of reports of the State Department and the Commission are seen as an indication that the US government is engaged in spreading the Christian religion.³⁸

For many in the West religious freedom includes ‘the right to convert’.³⁹ As far as conversion from Islam is concerned, the Muslim scholars, on the other hand, stress that the US should consider the restraints in IRFA. Similarly, scholars in the 19th World Congress of International History of Religions, held in March 2005 in Tokyo, “advocated for changing the existing formulation of the freedom of religion clause in the UDHR believing that it favours those religions that proselytize.”⁴⁰ For that matter, the IRFA is criticized in the Muslim world and is thought to be associated only with religious freedom in Muslim countries.

1.6. Religious Freedom: A Fundamental Part of UDHR

The US administration and Evangelicals advocated that religious freedom is a universally acknowledged right enshrined in various international covenants and declarations, for example, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Majority governments of the world have committed themselves through these covenants and agreements to respect and protect the individuals’ right to religious freedom within their respective borders. However, there are countries, which despite their commitments put restriction on the worship and seek to control thought and expression of minority religious groups. There are also instances where governments are silent in taking action against the perpetrators of religious discrimination.

Although the US is the harbinger of religious freedom in the world, yet the Christian leaders, as has already been discussed, would use this leverage to spread Christianity in the Muslim countries. Though, conversion may be an acceptable norm in the West, conversion from Islam is *irtidad* (apostasy).⁴¹ The US has

been accused of interfering in the internal affairs of other countries in the name of religion. There are also suspicions about the annual report related to religious persecution in a country. It is believed that the US designates a country as a CPC on the reports reported by organizations and media, which are rarely subjected to verification. It is also argued that regardless of the religious, cultural, economic and political realities and differences, the US shows no respect for the religious practices of other faiths and imposes its own values and standards. The US defends its position by maintaining this freedom to be a part of the UDHR. At the same time, the US is asserting that it is not imposing its values on the rest of the world. The Article 18 of UDHR on religious freedom states;

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.⁴²

The World Evangelical Alliance Religious formed the 'World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission (RLC)' with the purpose to highlight freedom of religion. It stresses on Article 18 of UDHR to be in accordance with the Scripture. Its purpose is to support all people particularly Protestant Christians to exercise their faith freely without the fear of oppression and discrimination.⁴³

1.7. IRFA: Muslim Scholars Response

Despite clear mention of religious freedom in the constitutions of majority of the Muslim countries, it is argued that these countries have failed to advance this right and protect religious minorities. It is maintained that other laws and policies of the Muslim states restrict religious freedom and the government generally enforces these restrictions. The Muslim scholars and philosophers stance is that "in Islamic states all minorities and their social protection are the responsibility of the state. Secondly, the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) life also illustrates religious freedom for minorities and accepting the right to religion, life and their

property confirm that Allah and His Prophet are their guarantors.”⁴⁴

It is again emphasized, “the Holy Quran recognizes both Jews and Christians as people of the Books, having special status, who could live and practice their faith after they pay Jizya (a certain tax for religious minorities instead of other taxes meant for Muslims). The reformers in the Muslim world have made an attempt to redefine and broaden traditional theological notions of religious pluralism and put their emphasis on equality of humanity but the major obstacle is the resistance that they face from conservatives and fundamentalists.”⁴⁵

The Islamophobia and marginalization of Islam in the West is a concern in the Muslim world. The Religious Right is said to have a role in spreading misinformation about Islam and promoting Islamophobia in the US. Also, the right to freedom of expression enshrined in IRFA is contested in the Muslim world⁴⁶ as it upsets the religious feelings of Muslims. Therefore, the reformers face resistance from the fundamentalists in the Muslim societies.

Interestingly, religious intolerance towards minorities is not acceptable to all and has become a pressing concern both in the West and the Muslim world despite the US imperialist and unilateralist approach in foreign policy. Having said that, the US concern about religious freedom is perceived to be related to religious persecution in the Muslim world only. This is, however, not true as the US is as much concerned about the Muslims minorities in China as it is about the Christians. Similarly, in Burma, the recent incidents of violence between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine region, the US has taken notice of Muslim massacre. Both countries are listed as CPCs.

On the other hand though, where democracy, human rights and religious freedom is concerned, the Muslim world implicitly criticized the double standards of the US. The US has failed to address these issues at home, for example the arrests in the recent protests against the government in ‘Occupy Wall Street Movement’ are violation of civil and political rights and clearly show the duplicity of the US. Similarly, Human Rights watch reported that “international human rights treaties, such as,

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Mine Ban Treaty, Convention on Cluster Munitions, Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, have yet to be ratified and only two, CEDAW and CRC have been signed by the US.”⁴⁷

With regard to conversion or the right to convert, Muslim scholar emphasized that IRFA enforcement is not possible in Muslim states because religious conversion is not allowed in Islam nor is embracing one religion after another. A Muslim or Islamic state cannot force a non-Muslim to convert to Islam. But after conversion to Islam, if that individual intend to leave Islam then he is an apostle and his punishment is death. Therefore, the West should consider the limitations of IRF as far as conversion is concerned.⁴⁸ Lastly, the IRFA can be beneficial if it is mobilized in the right way and that is when it pushes for the freedom of every religion in every way on equal footing. The political mobilization of IRF is not good and it can quite possibly create more trouble.⁴⁹

1.8. Evangelicals and IRF Policy towards Pakistan

The human rights situation was never at its best in Pakistan and deteriorated further after 9/11 due to military operations in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). This has led to discomfort and distrust in government agencies as far as the inhabitants of the tribal and settled areas of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) (later renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK)) are concerned as War on Terror (WOT) was mostly fought in these areas. The tribal territories have remained a constant source of disturbance for the adjacent settled districts of the province.

A report prepared for the members and Committees of Congress by Congressional Research Center focused on the various issues by concluding thus;

“Pakistan is the setting for serious perceived human rights abuse, some of them perpetrated and/or sanctioned by the state. According to the State Department, the Pakistani government is known to limit freedoms of association, religion, and

movement, and to imprison political leaders. Notable recent abuses have been related to violent attacks on religious minorities, indefinite government detention of detainees related to anti-terrorism efforts, and alleged extrajudicial execution perpetrated by the Pakistani military in conflict areas. Most recently, US government attention to human rights abuses in Pakistan have centered on press freedom, abuses perpetrated by security forces and religious freedom threatened by Pakistan's Blasphemy Law (1986)."⁵⁰

Furthermore, Pakistan has received criticism for its lack of democratic institutions, the unsatisfactory response to sectarian and religious violence, its failure to protect minorities, and the highly abused Blasphemy Law.⁵¹

Pakistan has suffered great blows to the opinion it holds in the world due to cases of religious radicalism and discrimination against minorities. Although Pakistan is at war with extremists, recent instances have raised questions and renewed concerns about its commitment to the cause. Pakistan's intelligence agency (ISI) was also blamed for the alleged links with the extremist elements.⁵²

It is argued among many circles in the West that laws like these and the Hudood Ordinance give birth to the violence against Christian, Hindus and members of the Muslim offshoots factions, such as Ahmadi and Zikri in Pakistan.⁵³ In Pakistan, under the anti-Blasphemy Law, desecrating the Quran is a capital offence punishable by death. The Gojra incident, the case of Asia Bibi and the recent one against an eleven years old Christian girl, Rimsha Masih, who had learning difficulties, and many other cases of alleged blasphemy are glaring examples which have raised controversy over these Laws. Additionally, the killing of Punjab's Governor Salman Taseer and Minister for Minorities Affair, Shahbaz Bhatti, for criticizing the Blasphemy Law as well as the support that these killings received in some circles is all very disturbing. Recent killing of Shia minorities also highlight the marginalization of religious minorities in Pakistan. Also raising

apprehension are the harsh restrictions on the equal rights of women, freedom of thought, conscience and religion. In fact, most have likened the atmosphere prevailing in Pakistan under these laws and the resulting intolerance to a return to the Middle Ages.⁵⁴

The perception in various quarters in the West is that the "Blasphemy Law was used as a pretext to attack minorities."⁵⁵ The fact, however, is that more than 1500 cases have been registered under Blasphemy Law in Pakistan. In these cases Christians, Ahmadis, Hindus and Muslims of other sects were arrested. However, many Christian and Ahmadi victims of the Blasphemy Law were killed by extremists and in all these cases; no one was arrested to guarantee law.⁵⁶ Under Blasphemy Law, 10 Christians are awaiting trial for Blasphemy charges whereas the number of Muslims charged with Blasphemy is 289 since 1986 and 59 of those are still awaiting court proceedings.⁵⁷ One thing becomes clear here that the West perception that Blasphemy Law is used against non-Muslim is not quite correct as Muslim charged with blasphemy are also awaiting penalty.

Evangelical Christians in the Bush administration attempted to designate Pakistan as a 'Country of Particular Concern' (CPC) and oppose its Blasphemy Laws through IRFA. The Law is considered as hostile and discriminatory and most often the allegations are false. Furthermore, extremist groups and mullahs violate it for vindictive and political purposes resulting in an increase in violence against religious minorities.

It is also believed that these accusations against Pakistan have the backing of US Evangelicals who are staunch supporters of Israel and want to keep Muslim countries under pressure through the US foreign policy. However, despite the human rights issue and influence of Evangelicals on Bush administration, the US government has not put Pakistan on the list of CPC and has to a great extent avoided raising human rights issues related to Pakistan.⁵⁸

The reports about domestic violence against Christian workers in Pakistan are rife, which are reported by NGOs, operating in Pakistan, to IRFA. It is also true that because of the influence

wielded by the perpetrators, in many cases minimal or no actions is taken against them. However, saying that the government has a role to play in all such cases would be an exaggeration. Still, as Taliban extremism reached to its height, they increasingly attacked Shias and Ahmadis as well as Sufi shrines of the Barelvis, who follow a more moderate interpretation of Islam.⁵⁹ It is incorrectly believed that all the incidents by religious extremist against Christians in Muslims states took place due to religious prejudice; the fact is that kidnappings or killing of Christian missionaries or foreign aid workers by the extremists was because of the US post 9/11 policies towards the Muslim world. As expressed by an official on the condition of anonymity, “the US policies of democracy and human rights are nothing but pretense.”

The Evangelicals’ flagship magazine, ‘Christianity Today’ reported stories of the risks faced by minorities in Swat where Taliban announced enforcement of Sharia and the Pakistan government surrendered all governance of Swat Valley to Taliban forces.⁶⁰ Religious radicalism, causing discrimination against minorities, has substantially eroded Pakistan’s image and shaped a negative world opinion. As hinted previously, the blasphemy law, Hudood Ordinance, Islamic code of punishment, demand for imposition of Sharia by MMA government and non-state-actors like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan-Swat (TTP-Swat) were dangerous developments proving to be counterproductive. Pakistan government’s approval of any such development would be an invitation to US to act against it.

The situation has not been helped by Pakistan Government’s apparent willingness to accommodate certain violent extremist as for example, in Swat Valley. The IRF Commission has also expressed concern over the alleged role of Pakistan’s madrassahs in providing ideological training to religious extremists and in creating an atmosphere of intolerance in which abuse of religious freedom is more likely to occur.⁶¹ The 9/11 Commission Report, released in 2004, exposed that some of the Pakistani madrassahs served as ‘incubators for violent extremism’.⁶²

Pakistan government has shown its willingness and cooperation in fighting religious extremism. In this regard, President Musharraf in a speech on June 5, 2001 to a group of Muslim clergy, encouraged harmony and tolerance between different sects of Islam in society and banned two sectarian groups. Musharraf also introduced 'Pakistan Madrassah Education Board Ordinance – 2001' to introduce scientific curriculum and the 'Voluntary Registration and Regulation Ordinance – 2002 to control and check the enrollment of foreigners. Musharraf claimed to introduce reforms in madrassah curriculum came to a halt with the Operation Silence of Lal Masjid in Islamabad. Despite claiming to be an ally in WoT he did nothing about it until July 2007 Operation Silence when Western perception about madrassahs link to terrorism proved correct.⁶³

The flawed public policy and unwillingness on the part of the government and institutions in Pakistan to isolate certain hostile elements of the society are also worrisome. Therefore, it is argued, "due to the discriminatory policies and legislation in Pakistan, religious minorities continued to face problems. Though minorities' representation in parliament was ensured, members of religious minorities were relegated to a separate electorate system, which meant that the lawmakers representing the majority had no accountability to minorities."⁶⁴ Expressing their concern, the US law makers in 2009, submitted a 'House Resolution 764' to the Committee on Foreign Affairs "to repeal the Blasphemy Law and urged the Government of Pakistan to review other laws that limit the right to profess, practice and propagate religion or that constitutes discrimination on the basis of religion in order to bring Pakistani law into conformity with international human rights standards."⁶⁵

Conclusion

Religious extremism has been the feature of authoritarian states. The US foreign policy has given priority to the issue of religious extremism in the Muslim countries and trying to isolate extremists by extending support to the liberal and moderate elements. Notwithstanding, the IRFA's declared objective, this Congressional Act is perceived in the Muslim countries with a lot of suspicions. The critics of the Act argue that the US will even

support authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world for its neo-imperialist designs. However, in the countries with which the US has political differences, IRFA is invoked. It is argued that the supporter of Israel and the Islamphobes are behind the creation of this Congressional Act. The IRFA is believed as an instrument of the US foreign policy devised by Christian Rights, including Evangelicals to moderate the Muslim societies and create opportunities for Evangelism. Pakistan, a nuclear-armed Muslim country, has been pressured by the US to abrogate the Blasphemy Laws and try to isolate the extremist elements in the society. For its importance in the WoT, Pakistan has so far been safe from any type of punitive sanctions. However, the US Evangelicals view Pakistan as an extremist state wherein the extremist ideologies are nurtured. That is why the extremist elements along Pak-Afghan border have been the priority of US since the 9/11 incidents.

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