

## **Can Pakistan continue to afford its hatred for Ahmadis?**

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**Pakistan is in trouble. And a lot of it.**

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The world thinks the country is full of extremists, and despite the ever-elusive soft image many confused citizens continue to harp on about, the world's position on how great Pakistan looks has not been changing.

The Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz (PML-N) group government has made its own attempts at giving its narrative a makeover. The party was once almost atheistic in its approach to minority rights, in that they believed the right did not exist. Then it took a slight U-turn in recent years. Nawaz Sharif was seen celebrating Holi, revamping *mandirs*, hiring Christian lawmakers for jobs that impacted minorities, and the – somewhat short but very real – list goes on.

And then Captain Muhammad Safdar happened.

Just a few days ago Ahmadis found themselves back into perpetually unwanted limelight, thrown on them as a convenient tool for a variety of reasons. Most recently, it is Safdar who decided to put his unasked for two cents.

Safdar believes that Ahmadis work against the country's interest. He takes issue with Quaid-e-Azam University renaming its physics centre after Abdus Salam. And finally, he wants to ban Ahmadis from being recruited into the armed forces. His words are ironic, to say the least.

To start with, the country, its agencies, its people, and beyond, have been working against any interest that may benefit Ahmadis in the slightest. The fact that Safdar wants a physics centre renamed from the moniker it shares with an actual scientist is also laughable at best. And perhaps, he takes issue with Ahmadis being inducted into the army, because we'd much rather kill them ourselves than let them be killed defending the country.

While this has been ongoing, Ahmadis have continued to face a range of atrocities – from your garden variety harassment and accusations of *ghadaari* to more sinister and heinous treatments. Ahmadis are the only people in Pakistan that was unsafe even as they descend into their graves, promising never to ever again betray the state, the people or the religion everyone selectively claims to hold so dear.

If we were to start listing down the atrocities and evil this minority has faced in the very country it calls its own we'd probably run out of print space for a few issues of any newspaper, let alone this one.

But I digress.

The main question here is whether anyone gave Safdar a memo on where the party stands. It didn't take long for Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi to distance himself and the party from Safdar's views. Even Rana Sanaullah, former law minister, gave a statement that must have had his extremist brethren scratching their heads.

Abbasi calls Safdar's speech his personal views. The question of how a lawmaker and parliamentarian – someone who is the voice of the public — could take to the National Assembly floor to share light banter releasing his personal opinion into the world is one we must ask.

Pakistanis love to sit around most evenings and talk about the old Pakistan. In our never-ending quest to



build an entirely new one, we often choose to forget that the fault lines that now define us were once just scratches on the wall. There was indeed a time that this country knew what tolerance looked like. World leaders used to drop by for a visit, cricketers lined up the streets throwing ball with kids, and actresses of global prominence made us their one interesting pit stop to take.

But then we changed. Slowly but surely.

The world is watching as we continue to tumble between two extremes. Simultaneously thirsting for peace and blood, this country and its people know not what path to walk, but they know how to stop others from walking a path they do not like.

Only a handful of years ago we came up with a National Action Plan – a large component of which was hate speech. What Safdar did was nothing short of hateful – except his actions are backed by laws that were put in place ages ago. Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto was quick to tweet in the aftermath about the bigotry and hate filled extremist sandwich that was Safdar's speech. But the lad continues to stay sparingly mum on what he will do once in power to rid the minority of the law created by his own forefathers.

Our leaders are at best confused and at worst apathetic – and neither situation bodes well for any of us. Pakistan sits in isolation in the middle of neighbours that hate it. The super powers that once called it a friend have slowly inched away. Things are not heading in a better direction, the only way to go is not up, and if we don't wake up now someone will bomb us in the place of an alarm clock to shake us out of our slumber.

We cannot afford parliamentarians going off on rants that make the entire country look much worse than it did before – and it's not at all as though we looked pretty before this statement came out.

Instead of working towards bringing people together so that it isn't as easy for someone to decide who lives and who dies, we are standing around debating whether Ahmadis are evil or not. This acute paranoia is going nowhere till we

Truly the pedestal from which our rulers operate is too high up in the clouds for us to hold them accountable.

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