

Violence and the Stance of Clerics in Afghanistan

By Jimmy C. Dabhi



For most Afghans including clerics, violence and killing do not come as surprise. They have a perspective, a stance on it. The recent incident of the burning the Holy Quran in the USA is unfortunate and deserves the strongest condemnation. It has hurt the religious sentiments of many Muslims across the world, including Afghanistan. There have been a number of protests in Afghanistan, and

rightly so. People have a right to a peaceful protest against injustice, social evils, government inaction as well as religious and socio-cultural intolerance.

Many clerics and religious leaders have condemned the burning of the Holy Quran. This is expected and it is right to condemn such acts of violence. Many people from various faiths across the world have condemned the act of insulting the Holy Quran and similar acts of disrespect and violence carried out by people like Terry Jones. Mazar-e-Sharif and Kandahar have witnessed the strongest protests which have resulted in violence and killings.

There have been numerous protests across the provinces and some were led by religious leaders and clerics. In a few places the protests turned violent and a number of people were either wounded or killed. Some of the religious leaders have condemned the killings others have justified them and some other have ignored them.

It is heartening that people, and religious leaders in particular, are aware of their right to faith in God and veneration of the Holy Quran. However it is disappointing that some of these very leaders have turned a blind eye to atrocities and violence against human beings created by the same God.

Gender based violence in families and in various domains in society exists in Afghanistan inspite of policies, laws and pronouncement – national (Constitution, Afghan MDGs, etc) and international (Human Rights, UNSC Resolution 1325, UNSC Resolution 1820, International Humanitarian Law, ICC etc). It exists because a few people including religious leaders are violent and perpetuate and justify it in name of religion.

Though societal institutions like family, educational institutions, work places, religion, media, the community and the government in Afghanistan are capable of gender justice, they are guilty of promoting and sustaining gender discrimination. Religious leadership is slow in condemning gender injustice and gender based violence.

Often underage girls are forced into marriage without their consent and religious leaders solemnise these marriages. Some people feel that marriage in Afghanistan is, in some cases, a form of sale in which women are traded to solve family disputes or strengthen family bonds. In this context forced marriages of underage girls often occur in defiance of the national law, which stipulates that women must be sixteen years old to marry.

Some girls are married off to men who are five times their age. The high rate of self-immolation in provinces like Herat speaks volumes for the suffering women go through. Observers say that in Afghanistan's traditional male-dominated society violence against

women, combined with the absence of the rule of law, mean those who face such pressures have no way out and often turn to suicide.

As reported in RAWA (February 16, 2011) news powerful locals of Takhar province killed one girl and kidnapped another from the same family. Let me cite RAWA news of May 28, 2010 - The ruling by the Herat Religious Council also said Islam prohibited women engaged in activities out of the home from wearing makeup. Announcing the fatwa, a number of religious scholars asked the government to implement their advice.

The clerics said they could not shut their eyes to the current situation. Maulavi Muhammad Kababeyane, deputy head of the council, said that travel without a mahram, or a person she cannot get married to raised "questions about a woman's piety".

Gruesome footage of Sediqa's execution in North Afghanistan, captured on a mobile phone, was broadcast around the world last week sparking an international outcry (The Scotsman, February 05, 2011). This young woman was stoned to death. Her so called crime was that she had run away from home because her father had sold her into marriage with a wealthy relative. The killing apparently was supervised by a few fundamentalist religious clerics. There are a number of incidents where girls and women are thrashed and even raped.

Innocent people are killed by extremists. These are not just isolated incidents in Afghanistan; they are part of the social fabric and culture of a sizable population across the country. One hardly hears of protest marches with religious leaders appealing to the people that such violence against girls and women is against Islam, against the Quranic values of compassion and mercy. Somehow religious leaders and prominent people in civil society prefer to remain mute.

It is possible that many Muslims who believe in the Rahim and Rahmat (compassion and mercy) of Almighty may deep in their heart condemn such brutality in name of religion. But they are afraid to speak up out of fear of the religious fanatics, fundamentalist clerics and other religious leaders.

The fact of the matter is that such cruelty especially against women goes unchallenged by the very same leaders who are willing to justify the killing of human beings responsible for the burning of the Holy Quran. The compassion and mercy revealed in the Holly Quran and the violent attitude and brutality of these so called religious leaders are conflicting to say the least.

Let me conclude by stating that people who consider themselves guardians of the values of Islam and the teaching of the Holly Quran are right in condemning the burning of Holy Book. But the very same people fail to condemn violence and brutality against innocent people, especially girls and women, who are also creatures of the same God that the Holly Quran speaks about.

Unless common women and men realise this dual stand and challenge the religious leaders and religious fanatics the latter will continue to perpetuate violence in name of Islam when the very name Islam stands for PEACE.

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