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## Run for your life

In Pakistan one's religious faith, or lack of one, has become sufficient to warrant execution and murder.

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Eighteen bloodied bodies, shot Gestapo-style, lay by the roadside. Men in army uniforms had stopped four buses bound from Rawalpindi to Gilgit, demanding that all 117 persons on board alight. Those with Shia sounding names on their national identification cards were separated out. Minutes later it was all over; the earlier massacres of Hazara Shias in Mastung and Quetta had been repeated.

Having just learned of the fresh killings, I relayed the news on to colleagues and students at the cafeteria table. Some looked glumly at their plates but, a minute or two later, normal cheerful chatter resumed. What to do? With so many killings, taking things too seriously can be bad for one's mental health.

In Pakistan one's religious faith, or lack of one, has become sufficient to warrant execution and murder. The killers do their job fearlessly and frequently. The 17th century philosopher and mathematician, Blaise Pascal, once observed that "men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it for religious conviction".

Equipped with just enough religion to hate those with another faith – but not enough to love their coreligionists – Pakistanis have mostly turned their backs on religious atrocities. Exceptionally grotesque ones, such as when 88 Ahmadis quietly praying in Lahore on a Friday were turned into corpses, have also failed to inspire public reaction. Mass executions do not interest Pakistan's religious parties, or Imran's Khan's PTI. For them, only the killings by American drones matter.

The title of this essay deliberately excludes Hindus, Christians, and Parsis. The reason: these communities were never enthused about India's partition (even though some individual members pretended to be). Indeed, they were soon slapped with the Objectives Resolution of 1949 which termed them "minorities", hence freaks and outcasts dispatched to the margins. Some accepted their fate, keeping a low profile. Others altered their names to more Muslim sounding ones. The better off or more able ones emigrated, taking valuable skills along with them.

But with Shias and Ahmadis it was different. Whatever they might feel now, they were enthusiastic about Pakistan. Mr Jinnah, born a Gujrati Shia Muslim, believed that Muslims and Hindus could never live together peacefully but that Muslims, of course, could. Chaudhry Zafarullah Khan, an Ahmadi leader, was commended by Jinnah for having eloquently argued the Two-Nation theory, and then appointed by him in 1947 as Pakistan's first foreign minister. Mr Jinnah died early, but Zafarullah Khan lived long enough to see disillusionment. The inevitable had happened: once the partition was complete, the question of which version of Islam was correct became bitterly contentious.

Until recently, Pakistan's Shias did not have the self-image of a religious minority. They had joined Sunnis in supporting Mr Bhutto's 1974 decision to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslim. But now they are worried. The Tribal Areas are convulsed in sectarian warfare: Kurram, Parachinar and Hangu (in the settled districts) are killing grounds for both Sunni and Shia, but with most casualties being Shia. City life has also become increasingly insecure and segregated; Karachi's Shia neighborhoods are visibly barricaded and fortified.

But while Shias are numerous enough to put up a defence, Ahmadis are not. Last month, a raging 5,000-strong mob descended upon their sole worship place in Satellite Town, Rawalpindi. Organised by the Jamaat-i-Islami, various leaders from Jamaat-ud-Dawa, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Sipah-e-Sahaba addressed the rally demanding the worship place's security cameras and protective barricades be removed. The police agreed with the mob's demands, advising the Ahmadis to cease praying. The worship place has now been closed down.

Forbidden from calling themselves Muslims, Ahmadi children are expelled from school once their religion is discovered. Just

a hint may be enough to destroy a career. Knowing this, the school staff at a high school in Mansehra added the word ‘Qadiani’ to the name of an Ahmadi student, Raheel Ahmad, effectively eliminating the boy’s chances of getting a university education. The same school also held an anti-Ahmadi programme, distributing prizes to winners.

The latest outrage is that new ID cards, issued by the Punjab government, require the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) to insert a ‘Qadiani’ entry in the online forms. Ahmadis now do not have the option of declaring themselves non-Muslims. Instead the government demands that they open themselves to public persecution, a method that Nazi Germany used against Jews.

Even dead Ahmadis are not spared: news had reached the Khatm-e-Nabuwat that Nadia Hanif, a 17-year old school teacher who had died of illness ten days ago, was actually an Ahmadi but buried in a Muslim graveyard in Chanda Singh village, Kasur. Her grave was promptly dug up, and the body removed for reburial.

Pakistan’s state apparatus, for all its tanks and guns, offers no protection to those deemed as religious minorities. Is it just weakness? Or, perhaps, complicity? While swarms of intelligence agents can be seen in many places, they fail spectacularly to intercept religious terrorists. More ominously, recent months have seen state-sanctioned Difa-e-Pakistan Council (DPC) rallies across the country, drawing many tens of thousands. Prominent self-proclaimed Shia and Ahmadi killers, prance on stage while holding hands in a show of unity.

At the Multan DPC rally on February 17, Khatm-e-Nabuwat leaders bayed for Ahmadi blood while sharing the stage with the famed Malik Ishaq, a self-acclaimed Shia-killer. Newspaper reports say Ishaq was freed last year after frightened judges treated him like a guest in the courtroom, offering him tea and biscuits. One judge attempted to hide his face with his hands. But after Ishaq read out the names of his children, the judge abandoned the trial.

What does the Pakistan Army think it will gain tolerating – or perhaps encouraging – such violent forces once again? Its *jawans* pay an enormous price in fighting them, and their offshoots, elsewhere in the country. But perhaps the notion that extremists are Pakistan’s ‘strategic assets’ for use in Kashmir and Afghanistan has captured the military’s mind. Or, post-OBL, perhaps a miffed leadership seeks to show anger at the US through such rallies. Whatever the explanation, Pakistan’s minorities face catastrophe.

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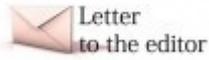
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