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Hate, fear, conformity- How the Pakistani media is marginalizing the persecuted

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This Project Report is submitted to the Faculty of Business Administration as partial fulfillment
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Dedication

In the memory of a nation lost to the scourge of hate

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to all who came on the record and also to those who refused to provide me comments for this story for it only helped to understand the matter better. It is because of the latter that the necessity of picking this issue came up.

I am thankful to my instructor Ms. Muna Khan, who played a vital role in making this story happen. From the conception of the story idea to its conclusion, she was always there when I needed her help.

That this will be documented, I want to mention my parents here. Nothing would have been possible without their immense and unconditional love and support. Whatever I have done so far and will do in my life will only be because of them.

As I type this, I find myself in a predicament. I cannot say I am thankful to them, because, no matter how much I emphasis on it, I will never be able to thank them enough for the sacrifices they have made and continue to make for me.

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Abstract

To say that Ahmadis are the most persecuted minority in Pakistan is not an exaggeration. The State has brought an amendment to the country constitution and enforced laws in the penal code to target the members of Ahmadiyya Community. Its members like to add the word “Muslim” in the middle of the word “Ahmadiyya Community”, but doing that can lead them to three-year prison terms along with fines.

For over four decades, the State has sided with the extremist elements to persecute the Ahmadis – the members of a community considered the most peaceful and which even banishes the concept of street protests against the prevalent abuse. But, that it uses its organs to ensure that the community is prevented from even highlighting what it goes through on daily basis is worrisome.

Since, media plays unarguably the most important role in shaping narratives, it is pertinent that its power is utilized with responsibility. But, in Pakistan, there are a few power centers that have monopoly over that responsibility. And, it is they who often dictate the media policy.

Pakistan’s print and electronic media has played a crucial role in ingraining hatred and often inciting violence against the Ahmadiyya community. On some occasions, decrees from the clergy - during Ramzan transmission - has led to murders of Ahmadis. The community is often labeled as “traitors” and “mischiefs” on national TV.

The political and religious class though might accept that the minorities deserve equal opportunities in Pakistan. But, when it comes to the Ahmadis, they are not even ready to yield that to them, right away making them special citizens.

There remains a blackout in the media, especially in the broadcast media, regarding the coverage of the hate crimes, murders, and state-backed police brutality against the Ahmadis. “We don’t really want coverage of any sort in the media,” says an official of the community’s Press Section in Rabwah. “In the past, some anchorpersons invited our representatives and we obliged to our requests, but in their bid to ‘balance’ the coverage after pressure from the mullah, they conducted two or three shows targeting us. It is simple math. What is better for us? Coverage or no coverage.”

Pakistani media extensively covered the attacks on two Ahmadi places of worship in Lahore in May 2010 in which 86 were killed. Throughout the coverage, the Pakistan media, both broadcast and print, referred to the aggrieved community with derogatory terms such as “Qadiyani” and “Mirzai”. Article 298-B of the Pakistan Penal Code might restrict the Ahmadis from calling their places of worship as “mosques”, but it doesn’t deny that freedom from a non-Ahmadi Pakistani. Yet, the places of worship under attack were referred as “places of worship” throughout the coverage.

To portray the community to be followers of some other religion than Islam, Kamran Khan, in his top-rate show “Aaj Kamran Khan Kay Saath” openly claimed that the Ahmadis were celebrating the birth anniversary of their founder due to which there was a large presence of people at the time of “prayer”. The community says that people were gathered for Friday prayers - an Islamic ritual. Such is the distortion of facts. According a report published by the community, Pakistani Urdu print media printed around 4,000 news items and more than 500 editorials that contained “hate propaganda” targeting them.

In the holy month of Ramazan in 2016, when renowned TV actor Hamza Ali Abbasi said that the Ahmadi community was subject to discrimination and he unveiled his plan to discuss the issue surrounding the community in the latter part of the month, his show was banned by Pakistan Electronic and Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA). On September 7 that year, two channels (Channel 92 and NEO) aired hateful shows towards the community in commemoration of the passing of the second amendment.

When the community approached the media regulatory authority, it took notices of the ‘provocative’ content. But, later it dropped the complaints terming them ‘non-maintainable’ after a mob of hundreds under the stewardship of one of the hosts of the shows and a former civil servant, Orya Maqbool Jaan, entered the PEMRA office in Lahore Cantt and threatened the officials to drop the complaints during the ongoing hearings with the representatives of the Ahmadi community present. The members of the community were not even allowed to present their case, after made to wait for several hours, and were escorted out of the office in police’s protection.

What further aggravates the situation is how the media organisations refuse to carry the versions of the community when it wishes to propagate. Refusing to carry the

community's press releases is a norm. But, something extraordinary unfolded during the days leading up to 2018 general elections.

By law, Ahmadis are either required to declare themselves as non-Muslims or declare the founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a false prophet or liar. Both scenarios are unacceptable to them. Hence, for decades, the community has been tactfully kept from practicing its constitutional right.

To create awareness about the State's refusal to grant the Ahmadis their basic voting rights, the community reached out to print publications to send publish its statement through ads. It was turned out right away. One of the English dailies, largely considered to hold liberal and secular values, after quoting a price and yielding the soft-copy of the ad refused to publish it citing owner's refusal.

But, some reporters who dare to report the sufferings of the minorities receive death threats. Express Tribune's reporter Rana Tanveer, who has now left Pakistan, had to bear the consequence – a fractured leg - of reporting on the persecution of the minorities in 2017 as on a fateful Friday he was run over by a car in Lahore. The incident took place days after the main door of his house in Garhi Shahu, Lahore was defaced with a graffiti saying "Qadiani supporter Rana Tanveer is an infidel who deserves to be killed". Despite Tanveer's reporting of this graffiti, Lahore police refused to provide him protection.

Since 2012, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority has banned the community's official website, alislam.org, saying that it's a constitutional obligation as it refuses the Ahmadis from propagating their religion. In 2014, the Punjab government banned the publication of the community's literature, including the books of its founder, terming it "seditious and treasonable". (The Express Tribune, 2012)

If that was not enough, in December 2016, in a first-of-its-kind operation, Faisalabad police's Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) raided the central offices of the community in Rabwah. It arrested two people and seized a printing press.

Though, the raid was conducted to curb the publication of magazine Tehreek-e-Jadid and daily Al-Fazl, one, of the two persons, was arrested on allegation of possessing monthly Ansar magazine. The raid, however, was contemptuous to the Lahore High Court

as the Ahmadiyya community had gotten a stay order that barred the State organs from keeping the community from publishing the daily and magazine in question.

“The publications were never intent to be handed out to the non-Ahmadi population of Pakistan,” says the official. “It was to educate the Ahmadis and it supported bold headings that conveyed that the pages were only for the consumption of the community. With the ban on the publication of our literature, the situation has become so problematic that we don’t even have books to educate our children about our faith. You may say that what’s the point of paperback books in this age? But, our websites and blogs are also banned.”

Hate, fear, conformity – How the Pakistani media is marginalizing the persecuted

It is just another day in the newsroom of a recently-launched English news channel. As the sun continues to set, the news desk searches frantically for a sports story for the evening bulletin.

Pakistan hasn't been making noteworthy yards in the field of sports of-late. The editorial policy of the news channel, however, states only 'positive stories' should be aired which makes the hunt frustrating. There's a hysteria in newsrooms to project a favourable image of the country to remain in the good-books of those who crackdown on the media houses for going against their narrative.

One of the employees, who asked for anonymity fearing backlash from his employer, comes across a tweet that promises to fit the bulletin. It is a story of Wahaj Mirza, a special athlete from Pakistan who secured a silver medal in 3000-meter race in the Special Olympic World Games held in Abu Dhabi earlier this year.

When the tweet is shown to the seniors, one of them grabs the mouse and highlights a word from it. It is 'Rabwah'. The name of the athlete is followed by his hometown. "They told me you have no idea the amount of trouble this word can land us in," the employee recalls.

The employee insisted on carrying the news, only to be shunned.

-Who are the Ahmadis? -

Ahmadis are the followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad who in 1889 claimed to be the Promised Messiah, who Muslims await. His claim of being a prophet contradicted mainstream Muslim belief that there cannot be another after Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Ahmad's claim drew ire from the Muslim clergy.

Since Ahmad's death in 1908, the Ahmadiyya community is led by a caliph, the spiritual head and leader of the community. Currently, the movement is being led by its fifth caliph, Mirza Masroor Ahmad, who resides in London, where the community's headquarters are situated.

From its onset, the community has remained subject to violence from religio-political parties and religious organisations. This continued, in fact intensified, after Partition.

Throughout the Pakistan movement, the Ahmadiyya community and religio-political parties like Jamaat-e-Ahrar and Jamaat-e-Islami remained at odds as the former assisted All India Muslim League in its demand for the creation of a separate Muslim homeland and the latter, siding with All India Congress, opposed it.

After Partition in 1947, the Ahmadiyya community, under Mirza Bashir-ud-din Mahmood Ahmad, the second caliph of the community, shifted its headquarters to a small town, which it named Rabwah, situated at the bank of river Chenab near Faisalabad. The new base being 233 kilometers away from its first, Qadian.

The Ahmadis are one of the most persecuted communities in the world with the state of Pakistan not only denying them the freedom to practice religion but also assisting the anti-Ahmadi sectarian organisations.

In 1953, the government of Punjab, led by chief minister Mumtaz Daultana, in West Pakistan provided assistance to Jamaat-e-Ahrar and Jamaat-e-Islami in its call for civil disobedience movement to have Ahmadis declared non-Muslims and Sir Zafarullah Khan, Pakistan's then foreign minister and an Ahmadi, removed from the office. Tens of Ahmadis were murdered and hundreds of business and houses, belonging to the Ahmadis, were ransacked in Punjab and particularly in Lahore which led to the enforcement of a martial law in the city.

Twenty-one years later, the federal government, under Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, after an in-camera session of the Parliament, the details of which are yet to be released, brought an amendment in the constitution, famously known as the second amendment, to declare the community non-Muslim.

A decade later, the government of Pakistan, under a military-ruler, General Zia ul Haq, made it a criminal offence for Ahmadis to call themselves Muslims and use Islamic terminology and gestures.

In 1999, a bill passed by Punjab assembly, changed the name of Rabwah to Chenab Nagar, which remains till date.

Such measures by the state has enabled the anti-Ahmadi elements to act freely, furthering the community's social discrimination. Since the gruesome anti-Ahmadiyya Ordinance XX, which Gen. Zia brought in 1984, 262 Ahmadis have been murdered for their faith in Pakistan. At least 1,200 Ahmadis have been booked in religious cases, including blasphemy. Sixty-eight Ahmadi places of worship have been destroyed, forcibly occupied or damaged and 39 have been sealed by the authorities.

-Vilification on airwaves-

On September 8, 2008, Dr. Abdul Mannan Siddiqui was on a round of a two-storey Fazl-e-Umar Hospital which he had established to serve the otherwise neglected populace of Mirpur Khas in Sindh. As the 46-year-old heart surgeon climbed down the staircase on his way back to his office, two gunmen, armed with two pistols each, rushed in from the backdoor and opened fire at him. Dr. Siddiqui died on the spot.

His was the 15th instance of the murder of an Ahmadi doctor since 1982. After completing his education from the US, Dr. Siddiqui returned to Pakistan to serve his compatriots. Little did he know that the same people he wished to save from ills would take his life.

The next day, as soon as Dr, Siddiqui was buried in Rabwah, the gravediggers were asked to prepare another grave. It was for Sate Muhammad Yousuf, a resident of Nawab Shah, who was shot thrice for his Ahmadi Faith.

With Yousuf's murder, the Ahmadiyya community lost two regional presidents in a span of two days. There would be another murder in the coming days.

This sudden surge in the killings of the Ahmadis was a consequence of a religious show. A day before Dr. Siddiqui's murder, Geo Entertainment, the entertainment channel of Pakistan's largest television network, decided to commemorate the passing of the constitutional amendment which declared the Ahmadis as non-Muslims on September 7, 1974, by discussing the topic of finality of the Prophethood on a renowned show called Aalim Online, hosted and produced by Aamir Liaquat Hussain, a religious scholar and Pakistan's most famous TV host.

According to the format of the show, Hussain debated on Islamic issues with various personalities from different Islamic sects. Like any other episode, Hussain, in this

one, also had heads from various sects. Throughout the course of an hour-long episode, the Ahmadis were deemed to be traitors of Islam and Pakistan and were accused of conspiring against both.

That there exists a bias against the Ahmadis in the media is said to be a reflection of Pakistani society. But, its role in fanning hatred against the community by presenting opinions as facts without any evidence is often ignored. What further sheds light on the media's failure to follow the very basic journalistic ethics is how it uses derogatory terms such as 'Qadiani' and 'Mirzai' to refer to the Ahmadis in its reportage.

As society continues to move away from the principles of pluralism, largely due to the state's policies, underscored by the second amendment and the blasphemy laws and anti-Ahmadiyya laws in the penal code, the space for non-Muslims - or the ones considered to be out of bounds of Islam, which now also includes Shiites - continues to shrink. It is a widely accepted notion in the country, perpetuated by the mullah, the ruling political parties, and the military, that the Jews, Christians, and Hindus are the enemies of Islam and are conspiring against Pakistan, since the country is supposed to be the 'fort of Islam'.

This narrative not only appeases the conservative vote bank, but also hides ineffectiveness and failure of the state in curbing all the ills in the country, ranging from terrorism to inflation. As society's paranoia continues to grow, the existence of a 'foreign hand' - an ambiguous term to describe a nexus amongst Jews-led Israel, Christians-led the US and Britain, and Hindus-led India - is said to be behind the troubles that the country faces both internally and externally.

The mullah further exploits the notion to incite violence against the Ahmadis. The most common accusations in the hate-speech against the community includes accusations that the Pakistani Ahmadis are a part of that nexus and are working to disintegrate the country.

So, when such accusations are made by various leaders of the Muslim sects or religio-political parties, the media, rather than investigating, presents them as facts as was the case in that episode of Hussain's 'Aalim Online'.

Hussain started off the show by leveling accusations on the Pakistani Ahmadis for stirring up civil strife since Pakistan's creation. It followed excessive hate-speech and indecent remarks against the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement by both the host and

the guests on the show. The guest panel, which had no Ahmadi on it, took turns to accuse the community of conspiring against Islam with the host not stopping any of them in tracks at any moment to ask for facts.

With mullahs on the loose on national television for an hour, that also live, the Ahmadis were accused of being behind the publication of Prophet Muhammad's cartoons in the West, to be behind terrorism in the country, and to be conspiring with the Jews to destabilize the country. Since it had been established that the Ahmadis were the enemies of Islam and Pakistan, the guests openly called for their murder as a service to Islam.

That Muhammad Amin Shaheedi, head of Majlis-e-Wahdatul Muslameen (a Shiite political organization), left no stone unturned in spewing hatred against the Ahmadis was ironic. Like it is with the Ahmadis, Sunni leaders openly incite violence against the Pakistani Shiites by terming them infidels. In Pakistan, various anti-Shia terrorist organizations have been operating freely and have been behind suicide attacks on the community's processions and killings of famous Shia scholars.

The article 3(1)(f) of Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority's (PEMRA) Code of Conduct states the licensees shall ensure no content is aired which "passes derogatory remarks about any religion, sect, community, or uses visuals or words contemptuous of religious sects and ethnic groups or which promote communal and sectarian attitude or disharmony".

Despite the clear worded article, PEMRA, however, did not initiate any proceedings against Hussain or Geo network. Rather, Hussain, on every major TV channel, produced and hosted programs in the coming years and Geo continued with its vilification campaign against the community.

Five years later, Hussain, again from the platform of Geo Entertainment would do a morning show which got another Ahmadi, Luqman Ahad Shehzad, killed in Gujranwala. As cleric Syed Arif Shah Owaisi labeled Ahmadis to be the 'enemy', Hussain nodded his head in affirmation. While using the term 'Qadiani' widely considered derogatory by the community, Owaisi said: "This enemy is a common enemy and is an enemy of all of Pakistan. And this enemy is the sect of Qadiani. They are the ones blaspheming against the Holy Prophet (PBUH). All Muslims should recognize that enemy." (Owaisi, 2013)

Rather than taking Hussain off the screen, the Geo network, in a statement, put blame on Owaisi, saying “it is difficult to control crowds and guests who speak according to their mindset”.

The network copped out by throwing the guest under the bus. But, what begs question is the necessity of having such clerics, known for their extremist views, on the show. That no representative of the community which is under discussion – or to put it aptly: targeted – further puts a question mark on the network’s journalistic ethics.

“The basic rule of journalism is to take version of all parties. I don’t remember anyone approaching me for the community’s version. And, when we give our statements, they don’t publish them,” laments Saleemuddin, the spokesperson of the Pakistani Ahmadi community. “That’s the biggest discrimination. Thousands of articles published every day against us. But, when we reach out to these publications, we are not provided space. This makes the masses develop a narrative against us because our version never goes to them.

“If someone takes our version, they have to do two-three shows against us to balance the coverage.” (Saleemuddin, 2019)

When I approached an editor to understand why Ahmadis are not provided opportunities to present their views, I was told that it was due to the refusal of the Ahmadi community to have its version put forward. When I put it to Saleemuddin, he said: “By saying that we don’t want to speak to them, the media is only absolving itself of its responsibility. If they want us to visit their offices, we can do that to give our side of the story. We want people to listen to us. These journalists sit with us in drawing rooms and talk, but they are reluctant to take our side of stories to the masses.”

Raza Rumi, a bureaucrat turned journalist who now lives in the US after coming under an attack for speaking for the Ahmadis and Shias, outlines three main factors behind this bias. “There is a lot of radicalisation in the media due to the state policies and propaganda,” he says over a phone call, “A large section of the media holds that Ahmadis are non-Muslims. Then, there’s a fear of backlash. Those who don’t hold the same values as the state feel that they would face backlash from their viewers and the bosses if they project or report on the persecution of the Ahmadis.

“Then there’s a factor which relates to the imagination of nationalism in Pakistan. The idea of a Pakistani nation is that this is an Islamic country for Muslims only and all others who don’t fall into the category are either unimportant or invisible.”

Such demeanor of the electronic media is not restricted to shows. At first, it refrains from providing coverage to news regarding the Ahmadi community. But, when it is forced to carry the story, after it has gotten big, it takes out the religious element out of it. Despite the Ahmadis being the target of one-sided attacks, it portrays as a skirmish between two groups.

“It is very common for the media to refer to us as ‘Mirzais’ and ‘Qadianis’,” says Saleemuddin, as we sit in a lounge of a guest house in Rabwah. Being the spokesperson of the Pakistani Ahmadi community, Saleemuddin is responsible to provide the official version of the community, which due to the situation in Pakistan is mostly persecution-related. “But, what was interesting to note during the May 2010 attacks was their confusion regarding how they have to refer to our Bait uz Zikr [The Ahmadis refer to their worship places this way as the country’s law forbid them for calling them as mosques].

“When there are attacks on us and our people are killed, the media reports it to be a skirmish between two parties when clearly we are attacked and our people are killed. It happened during the mob attack in Gujranwala. Jang and Geo reported the incident as a conflict between two groups.”

When two Ahmadi worship places in Lahore came under attack on May 28, 2010, the newscasters, across all major news channels, initially refused to acknowledge that Ahmadis were the target of the attack. And, when they did, they resorted to term them ‘Qadiani’ rather than Ahmadis. The incident, one of the worst attacks in country’s history, left as many as 86 dead.

“The electronic media doesn’t even consider giving coverage to them and when some untoward incident happens with the community, like when someone is killed, the news is downplayed to such an extent that the religious element is taken out of the picture,” says Rana Tanveer, former reporter for Express Tribune who now resides in Canada after he came under attack for reporting on the persecution of the Ahmadi community.

“It happened during the May, 2010 attacks in Lahore,” he said narrating the incident over an audio WhatsApp call. “The news channels kept reporting that worship places of a

community have come under attack when it was pretty evident that they were terrorist attacks on two Ahmadi worship places during *Jumma* [Friday afternoon] prayers. It all happened in broad day light, when usually we, the media, are alert. It took them two hours to report the actual incident.”

That night, Kamran Khan, a leading journalist, on his show *Aaj Kamran Khan kay Saath* on Geo News, openly claimed that the worshippers had gathered to commemorate the birth of their founder when they had in fact gone to offer the prayer in congregation, a Muslim tradition. Neither Geo nor Kamran Khan was held accountable for this purposeful spread of disinformation.

“It gives every Ahmadi immense pain that their identity is distorted on the media like it is done by the clerics on the loudspeakers. Who can like it when their name is being distorted?” asks Saleemuddin. “We are Ahmadis and our community is registered as *Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya*. A person who belongs to Qadian might like to be referred as a Qadiani. But, how can a person from Rabwah or Sargodha, for example, be called a Qadiani? It is a derogatory term used by the clerics to hurt our sentiments. And, the media is fully aware of it.”

When Azhar Abbas, the managing director of Geo News, was approached for his comments, he, while terming the topic to be sensitive, asked to have questions sent beforehand. After he was provided the questions, Abbas did not reply to subsequent messages.

Geo network, however, is just one of the many that has played a role in fueling hatred against the Ahmadis. After the May 2010 attacks, in an extraordinary development, Mubashir Luqman, a talk show host, invited a representative of the Ahmadi community on his show ‘Point Blank’ on Express News channel in June. A couple of weeks later, under the ambit of providing equal coverage to all the parties, Luqman had a three-member panel comprising leaders known for their anti-Ahmadi propaganda.

The panel was given a freehand to thrash the community. Again, the sentiments of the Ahmadis were hurt as the panel not only bad-mouthed the community’s founder but also blamed them to be behind all the ills in the country while deeming them to be traitors.

Pakistan's electronic media is said to be nascent since it got its freedom at the turn of the century. The industry, nonetheless, continues to expand and currently the number of news channels in the country is estimated to be around 45.

With the fast changing trends, Pakistan's media, especially the electronic, is said to be maturing. But, the reality largely remains different.

“During its early days, the electronic media went on an adventurous route and talked about issues which were not openly discussed in the society,” says Dr. Ali Usman Qasmi, an author and a history professor at the Lahore University of Management Sciences. “There used to be a program ‘Alif’ on Geo which particularly did that and it was astonishing to see such issues being discussed on the national TV.

“But since, the electronic media has been following a conformist policy and there is kind of a management to put a halt on difference of opinion. Religion is used in the media for commercial purposes, but at the same time it is not willing to recognize that there are so many differences. It is okay to minimize the differences, but the behaviour shouldn't be like they [minorities] don't exist or don't have any significance. The differences certainly are significant.

“This is a kind of shift that has happened. Maybe it is post Salman Taseer. But, that's one incident which instilled a great deal of fear.”

The shift, which Dr. Qasmi mentions, was on display during the coverage of the infamous Faizabad Dharna in 2017.

Then government, led by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), had passed a revised election bill, famously known as Election Act 2017, which had three major points with respect to this story. It allowed a legally disqualified person to be a party president (the clause ostensibly included to have Nawaz Sharif instated as PML-N's head), a contestant filing his/her nomination papers to participate in elections had to ‘declare’ rather than ‘solemnly swear’ – as was the case previously - his faith to the finality of Prophethood, and it allowed Ahmadis to become a part of the electoral process by abolishing the rules 7B and 7C, promulgated by General Pervaiz Musharraf in 2002, that had Ahmadis in the separate voters' list under the banner of non-Muslims.

To keep Ahmadis from registering themselves as Muslims in the national database, those identifying themselves as Muslims while attaining passports or national identity cards are asked to sign a declaration which calls Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's claim to prophet hood to be false. Since last year, on the orders of an Islamabad High Court's justice, the Ahmadis have to register themselves as non-Muslims to get national identity cards.

Since they are put under a separate voting list under the banner of non-Muslims, the Ahmadis, who want to identify themselves as Muslims, had stayed away from the country's electoral process for the past four decades. With the amendments proposed in the Election Act 2017, the Ahmadis could vote. But, in mere five days, that amendment was reverted.

With the anti-PML-N narrative at high and many parties looking to make the most of it before the 2018 general elections, the religious sentiments were flared up by both the political and religious parties against the ruling party that it had went against the constitution (the second amendment) with the said amendments in the Election Act 2017.

Tehreek-e-Labayak Pakistan held weeks-long sit-in on an artillery that connected the capital city with the rest of the country asking for the reversal in the last two of the aforementioned amendments. Its leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi, known for his crass discourse, bad-mouthed the country's political leadership. Of course, the Ahmadis had their share of abuse.

The sit-in saw skirmishes between the protestors and the law-enforcement forces, before the state's civilian and military wings in unison capitulated to the mullah's demands.

This brought the issue of finality of Prophethood into the media discourse, which put Ahmadis on the radar. It is pertinent to mention here that the community, as confirmed by their spokesperson also, had nothing to do with the controversial amendments.

As finality of Prophethood remains arguably the most sensitive matter in the country, it is often used by the country's powerful military and political parties to inflict damage on rivals and gain political mileage. The same was the case, according to Rumi, during the Faizabad Dharna. The military deployed the issue as a tactic to put the ruling political party under pressure, he says.

"The Faizabad Dharna was clearly a project engineered by the deep-state to basically get Nawaz Sharif out of power," says Rumi. "In fact, one TV channel [92 News

HD] was promoting the Dharna and providing food to the protestors as also revealed by a Supreme Court judgement. The media was airing hate-speech all the time and PEMRA took no action.

“This is where the state is to be blamed because a society is shaped by state’s laws and policies and the Faizabad Dharna, in this regard, is the best example.”

For days, the Ahmadiyya community’s beliefs were discussed in the media without any of its representative provided air-time. They were again labeled ‘traitors of Islam and Pakistan’ and there were open calls for their social boycotts. Captain Safdar, a member national assembly and son in law of Nawaz Sharif, launched a vociferous attack on the community while being on a point of order in the assembly. He termed them to be a ‘threat to the country’ and demanded their expulsion from service in government and armed forces, something that the mullahs have continuously pressured the subsequent governments to do since the creation of Pakistan.

Such a vitriol against an already persecuted section of the society is not only alarming but puts into perspective how the government and its institutions have been aiding the extremists and terrorist organizations.

IA Rehman, former chairperson of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and now its honorary spokesperson, sheds light on the nexus. “The Taliban kill people on the basis of takfir,” he tells me at his office in Lahore, “and according to them the Ahmadis and non-Muslims – or anyone who doesn’t agree with them – is to be beheaded. When Musharraf became the President, he was asked how he planned to deal with the Taliban. He said: ‘What’s the problem with them? They want to implement Islam; we want that too’.

“The objective of the extremists and the government is the same. The government signals the extremists that don’t worry we will do it for you people. When the state takes that position, everyone takes cue from it. I call it persecution by the state.”

Captain Safdar’s speech was broadcasted live by news channels, including the state’s Pakistan Television Network (PTV).

In its annual report, which tracks the persecution of the community in Pakistan, the Ahmadiyya community, in regard to the media’s role during the Faizabad Dharna, said: “Events of October 2 and thereafter expose the insidious, wily and dangerous nature of the politics and media in present day Pakistan ... TV channels availed the occasion to play up

the controversy. Those who normally do not vilify Ahmadis, but are committed to anti-PML-N policy, spoke against the revision of the past electoral rules and supported the status-quo that deprives Ahmadis of their right to vote.

“The official channel PTV shared the shame of broadcasting the entire highly objectionable speech of Captain Safdar in the assembly, knowing that it was violation of the official National Action Plan. In these two months, if the electronic media spent almost 1000 hours over the mullah’s demands, it did not spare 10 minutes for Ahmadis to state their view.” (Reuters, 2018)

The whole episode of the Faizabad Dharna made Ahmadis afraid for their lives, especially after how the media allowed itself to be used as a tool to vilify the community, says Saleemuddin. “During the Election Act fiasco in 2017, the electronic media ran programs targeting us in tandem,” he said. “It went a step ahead and started to question our beliefs on air. This all, when neither the bill favoured us nor we backed it.

“It has happened at every occasion. This fiasco is just an example. Everyone has done point-scoring by targeting us without seeing how their actions have increased our vulnerability. Naturally, when they say we are infidels and against the state, it is bound to create animosities against us in the society. During this fiasco, nobody even approached us to take our version.”

According to IA Rehman, who is also a columnist for Dawn, the episode depicts how the media has become a complicit in the Ahmadiyya persecution and turned away from the very basic journalistic ethics. “The media has rather become complicit in promoting hatred whereas its responsibility should be to fight it,” he says. “The electronic media is by and large conservative and hostile towards the Ahmadis.

“The Faizabad Dharna was a put up show. Some elements in Pakistan wanted to downgrade the government and used the mullah for it. The whole thing was bogus. In 1953 also, the Ahmadi issue was used to topple the government. After the government had decided to restore the text, why did the sit-in continue? They demanded resignations [from cabinet ministers] and other things. What for? They were only excuses to undermine the government of the present day and make political capital for other people.”

-Those who dared-

“Perhaps, they wanted to carry the ad, but they acted like this because of the reaction of the religious parties. Their office was attacked, there were applications to register FIRs against Nawa-i-Waqt, and the paper’s management was declared infidel.”

Bilal Warraich, 43, narrates an extraordinary incident which cost him his job in 2018. Warraich, an Ahmadi, was reporting on Chenab Nagar for various Urdu dailies. In September last year, the press section of the Ahmadiyya community approached him for the publication of an ad in regard to the September 6th celebrations, held across the country every year to commemorate the efforts of the armed forces during the 1965 war with India.

Last year, the military’s media wing had planned special celebrations and asked the populace to mark the ‘Defense Day’ with furor. The Ahmadiyya community, says Saleemuddin, wishing to join in the celebrations, decided to publish a quarter-page ad in newspapers across the country.

“The Ahmadiyya community had asked me to get a quarter-page ad, regarding September 6 celebrations, published in various newspapers,” remembers Warraich, sitting in the garden of a community office in Rabwah. “When I forwarded it, most of the publications denied the space even before giving a quotation.”

On September 6, 2018, however, Nawa-i-Waqt, one of the oldest Urdu newspapers, carried the Ahmadiyya community’s quarter-page ad which paid tribute to the soldiers who had died for the country since its birth. The bottom portion of the ad featured pictures of 14 Ahmadi soldiers who died in various wars. Their names were written as ‘Shaheed’ or martyr at the end, which did not go down well with the mullahs.

The Nawa-i-Waqt staff was declared infidel for using an ‘Islamic term’ with the name of the Ahmadis. Reportedly, the Lahore office of the publication was attacked by the religious parties.

The reaction, however, did not stop there. Maulana Mohammad Ali, the general secretary of Tahafuz-e-Namoos-e-Risalat Mahaz, a fierce anti-Ahmadi organization, registered an application, with the Superintendent Police at Civil Line Circle in Lahore, for an FIR to be registered against the paper’s editor-in-chief and marketing head.

“Nawa-i-Waqt’s Lahore edition is published online and in it,” says Warraich, “the ad of the Ahmadiyya community was [placed] above Tehreek-e-Labaik’s which aggravated the situation.”

The Nawa-i-Waqt, giving in to the fierce pressure of the mullah, made Warraich a scapegoat by terminating him for sending in the ad and replaced him with a reporter affiliated with International Khatam-e-Nabuwwat movement, a vehement anti-Ahmadi organization often behind hate-crimes against the Ahmadis in the country.

“The Nawa-i-Waqt management called me and said I have wronged them,” recalls Warraich. “I reminded them that I was granted all the necessary permissions and I have evidences of it on WhatsApp. Refusing to listen to me, they terminated me and put an ad that in the newspaper that I have been fired. They also published that I have been replaced by a reporter affiliated with the International Khatam-e-Nabuwwat movement.”

The reaction from Warraich’s employer did not stop there. As it is the case in Pakistan, an individual or an entity has to reaffirm their faith, if they, in any way, have affiliation with an Ahmadi or the community.

So, the next day, Nawa-i-Waqt carried an ad stating their management and staff were Muslims and believed in the finality of Prophethood. What further aggravated the situation for Warraich, who happens to have a transport business in Rabwah, was that this incident cost him his job at another Urdu daily. “This episode also got me terminated from daily Dunya Faisalabad,” he says. “They told me they couldn’t continue with me because of the incident as it was not in coherence to their policy.

Despite being approached several times, the Nawa-i-Waqt management and editorial staff remained unavailable for comments.

“There are very few publications which pay their reporters in small stations,” Warraich continues. “Rather, they ask us for business. It is like they sell their representation if we get them business, which is often around 20 to 25 thousand rupees. I was only pursuing journalism because it is my passion.”

Warraich’s was a lucky end. Rana Tanveer almost lost his life.

Tanveer, a reporter for Express Tribune in Lahore covered minority issues; stories about their persecution by the religious parties. For his reportage, especially on the Ahmadis, Tanveer started to receive death threats, which police refused to investigate.

The threats culminated in a car running over him in June 2017, fracturing his leg. This happened a week after graffiti appeared on the main gate of his house that said: “Qadiani supporter Rana Tanveer is an infidel who deserves to be killed.”

Soon, Tanveer had to flee the country to save his life.

“Two years before the incident [of the car running over him], I received a threat [to my life] via a letter,” he says on phone call from Canada. “I was told by our editor, Mr. Kamal Siddiqi, to refrain from going to the office and I stayed at home for ten days.”

Tanveer had been reporting on minorities since 2008. He was then a court reporter and at court was exposed to blasphemy cases, which developed his interest in picking up minorities as his beat.

“I took it upon myself to report on the minorities,” Tanveer says. “Nobody gave me this beat. I tried to do this to make Pakistan a better place – a place for all. My reporting on minorities started with the coverage of the Ahmadi community. When I began reporting on them and other minorities in the country, I realized that I need to cover the perpetrators, which are usually Islamic religious parties, as well.

“While covering blasphemy cases, I was exposed to the minorities as usually the cases are against them. Muslims also face such cases. The ratio is almost 50:50. These cases are usually curated to settle personal scores. I properly started to report on minorities in 2010-11.”

For years, he remained a celebrated reporter for his fearless work. That he remains the only reporter to highlight the plight of the minorities in the country speaks volumes about the fear that the mullah has instilled in society. They say that people can never be replaced but, that no reporter even tried to emulate what Tanveer did is alarming.

Over his effort to become a voice for the marginalized, Tanveer developed many enemies. He was often subjected to untoward remarks from his employees. But, Tanveer was not to be daunted.

“When I started to receive threatening calls I approached police but they refused to register an FIR. I moved the courts, even then the police refused to lodge an FIR. My colleagues started to malign me. They told me that I am becoming a public relations officer of the Qadianis and I am dishonoring the Prophet.

“When you give a story on minorities then you even have to avoid your colleagues for a couple of days. Because, majority reflects everywhere. If the majority is anti-Ahmadi that reflects at your office too,” he said.

“Since, I belonged to the perpetrators – the majority sect – I never realized the threats were this serious. When you are from majority, you never really care. When you are from minority, you are usually trained by your family on how to respond in different situations.

“When the graffiti appeared at my house, I left right away. It was on rent. My landlord returned a minimal amount of the advance payment, probably he thought he is doing Jihad by keeping my money,” Tanveer chuckles.

It is understood that Hasan Muawiya, brother of Maulana Tahir Ashrafi, along with other famous anti-Ahmadi activists were behind the attack on Tanveer.

“Tahir Ashrafi’s brother, Hasan Muawiya, the lawyer Chaudary Ghulam Murtaza who fought a case against Aasia Bibi, and former chief justice LHC Khawaja Sharif they were running an anti-Ahmadi group which ran several campaigns against the community. They tried to court me into not reporting on Ahmadis, but when I didn’t pay any heed to them, Hasan Muawiya started to threaten me in high court, while I used to be on my journalistic duties.

“I had nobody to support me there. Not even journalists as they used to consider me an infidel because I reported on Ahmadis. So, I used to avoid interactions with him. Even Chaudary Ghulam Murtaza refused to give me his version on different stories.”

Tanveer hopes that upcoming journalists will take up the mission of providing voice to the persecuted. When he is told that this story is being done as a part of a university project, he shares guidelines on how to cover religious organizations.

“While covering their [religious parties’] events it is necessary to avoid any personal contact with them,” he suggests. “There used to be a conference every year on September 7 in Awan-e-Iqbal [in Lahore] to commemorate the declaration of Ahmadis as non-Muslims. It is imperative not to wear press card or sit in the seating area reserved for the press,” he said.

“I avoided speaking to clerics face-to-face as they get rash. I preferred speaking to them on phone, even if they were in the same city. Also, if I get highlighted amongst their

groups, then I wouldn't have become vulnerable and unable to protect myself and eventually it happened.”

Despite a crackdown on the militancy by the country's armed forces, the security situation has seen a marked improvement. But, the journalists, threatened by both anti-state and state elements, remain in the line of fire. And that numerous journalists have been killed in the country make those in the field wary and sees them tow their line, says IA Rehman. “The media, in fact the whole society, is afraid to say a kind word or take a realistic position. Because, it is likely to get you killed. And out of fear, they commit atrocities,” he says. “Nobody wants to protect the journalists who cover the minority issues or provides voice to them. The state just doesn't want to be their protector.”

But, like Tanveer, Raza Rumi is another journalist who refused to bow down. Unfortunately, he too came under an attack. Rumi, who had a stint as an analyst on a talk show, used to speak at length about the grievances of the Ahmadis and Shiites. In March 2014, his car came under attack which left him and his guard injured, and his driver dead.

The authorities informed Rumi that they had taken four men belonging to Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a proscribed sectarian organisation known for attacking Shia processions and Hazara community, into custody as they were behind the attack.

“The state has to be blamed because it doesn't give protection to journalists who stand up,” he says. “Media has to act in a responsible manner and give voice to the voiceless and raise issues surrounding minorities. There's no question in that and there are journalists who have been doing that.

“Daily Times [of which Rumi remained editor from 2017 till 2019] has published the most articles for Ahmadis. When I worked at Friday Times, I gave space to the stories about Ahmadis. Even on TV, when I had a show, I was very vocal in the defense of the Ahmadis, but you know what they did to me. So, that's the problem.”

-Scribbling with blood-

That electronic media practices are reluctant to report on the Ahmadis may just be a blessing in disguise, especially after studying the trends of Pakistani print media's reportage – especially the Urdu-language – of the community.

A report by the Ahmadiyya community last year stated the Urdu print media, when compared to English-language print media enjoys massive circulation, published as many as 3,936 news item and 532 editorial pieces in 2017 which contained ‘hate propaganda’ against Ahmadis.

It is a common practice in the Urdu press, which usually provide coverage to anti-Ahmadi rallies and conferences, to publish opinions of the anti-Ahmadi clerics as facts. The reporters, filing those stories, and their editors refrain from carrying the version of the Ahmadiyya community – thereby denying readers the other side of the story.

For decades, those readers, who happen to be the majority of the populace, are not exposed to the Ahmadiyya community’s version; they consider the published stories as the truth. This, Saleemuddin says, puts thousands of Pakistani Ahmadis’ lives at stake.

“If we talk about the Urdu press, which covers the masses, it publishes reports that are biased against us,” he says. “We have statistics to prove it. In the past three years, it has given thousands of such reports. They take it as an obligation upon themselves to publish any news that is against us. Probably because it increases their circulation. Such is the state of affairs that often editors publish reports against us without verifying their credibility. And, they don’t even think about the impact it will have on the targeted community.”

What further adds fuel to the fire is the practice of yellow journalism in the Urdu press. The anti-Ahmadi mullah fans hatred against the Ahmadis calling them “traitors of both Islam and Pakistan” and “working against the interest of Pakistan”. The Urdu dailies carry these very statements as headlines.

“Some of the statements against the community are being published as it is for several decades,” laments Saleemuddin. “[Things like] ‘Qadianis are the enemies of the nation’, ‘Qadianis are agents of Israel and British’, ‘Qadianis are causing mischief in the country. Just a few days ago I saw a statement that said Ahmadis were responsible for the Fall of Dhaka.

“These are rather hilarious accusations. In 1971-72, they used to publish statements that said there were 600 Ahmadis in Israel’s army. Today also, in the headlines and statements, they remain 600. Not more, not less. Then they say Ahmadis are behind terrorism in the country or they are the traitors. Which Ahmadi terrorist have the captured till date? Which Ahmadi traitor have they shown?”

The accusations of working for foreign powers have seen a transformation with the change in the geo-political climate, says Dr. Ali Usman Qasmi.

“The accusations of being a Jewish or Israeli agent began after the 1967 Arab-Israel war because it made people here realise how big of a power Israel is,” says Dr. Qasmi. “I came across a magazine which said that Ahmadis receive their training [to cause mischief in the country] from Russia. It made me wonder why Russia and then I realized that it was a publication of the Afghan Jihad era.”

When it comes to the vilification of the Ahmadis in reporting, there is no distinction between the national and the regional newspapers. The large papers, however, seem to be competing to win that race.

“The press is generally anti-Hindu or anti-Christian and its biases are quite evident,” continues Dr. Qasmi. “But, the purpose with which the press works against the Ahmadis is not found when they report on any other religious group. There is a state of exception that exists.

“There is a kind of pre-history which makes me insist that this existed in the colonial era as well. Even Arya Samaj [a reform movement of modern Hinduisim, founded in the late 19th century, to reestablish the Vedas as revealed truth] had a clash with Ahmadis and they published poems against them.

“There’s a different character of journalism in subcontinent which includes poems and rhetoric and doesn’t have the model of truth, fairness, objectivity or analysis. It is journalism with agenda and purpose with emotions involved.

“But, during the colonial time there was a level-playing field. The non-existence of that level-playing field is an issue. There should at least be such acceptance that an Ahmadi is allowed to say something in self-defense on a forum.” (Qasmi, n.d.)

The initial years, however, were very different. Dr. Qasmi shares an excerpt of a Pakistani newspaper from 1947 that had the word “Ahmediya [Ahmadiyya] Muslims” in reference to the community. But with the passage of time, the situation continues to aggravate for the community every second.

“In their imagination, they are convinced that these [Ahmadis] are not the marginalized,” says Dr. Qasmi, who has authored a book on the political exclusion of the community named ‘The Ahmadis and the Politics of Religious Exclusion in Pakistan’.

“Rather they have been made to believe that the Ahmadis are the oppressors. They consider Ahmadis to be violating their copyrights by acting as Muslims or making false claims of being Muslims which for them is the most hurtful offense. So, it rather becomes a duty to target them in columns. The journalists feel they have contributed to some certain kind of Jihad.

“This gives a great feeling to certain people and they feel they are part of a certain crusade. It gives them a high. Because, they feel they have taken on a big power. This, perhaps, could have been true in the 1950s when the state violently cracked down against these elements. It was indeed difficult to spread such propaganda at that time. But now, it is a norm. It is a very handy weapon for certain political and special gains.”

Though hundreds of news articles and editorials are published on daily basis, below are a few examples of the headlines:

On September 10, 2018 daily Jang, the newspaper of Pakistan’s largest media house Jang Group which also owns Geo Network, carried a headline in its Lahore edition which said: *Qadianis” citizenship should be annulled and their properties be confiscated: Khatme Nabuwwat (Lawyers Forum) Conference.*

The Faisalabad edition of daily Express on February 2, 2018 said: *Qadiani hand behind massacre of Kashmiris is plausible: Maulana G. Mustafa and Qari Shabbir Usmani.*

The trend continues. In its March 18, 2019 edition, one of the headlines of daily Ausaf said: *Qadianis are snakes up the sleeve, and greatest enemy of Muslim Ummah: Maulana Abdul Mahboob Azad (in Khatme Nabuwwat Conference).* On the same day, the Daily Din, in its Lahore edition, carried a headline which said: *Terminal hurt to world peace is attributable to Jewish-Qadiani lobby: Mian Shafiq (of PTI).*

These practices, which go down as grave violation of the ethical codes laid down by journalists for the journalists, according to Raza Rumi, is due to the deep-rooted presence of the right-wing in the Urdu press.

“During the 1980s when Gen. Zia ul Haq radicalized society, the Urdu press was the first place where the right-wing made its mark as a lot of the right-wingers were employed here,” he says.

“Therefore, that legacy continues. We have a big problem now. Media persons are writing columns against the Ahmadis and peddling conspiracy theories against them and unfortunately the editors don’t take a stand against it either for the fear of a backlash or because they believe in this nonsense.” (Rumi, 2019)

Such is the state of the bias that incidents in which Ahmadis are targeted are twisted to defile the community. This is further underscored by a comparative study of reportage of the same incident by English, which resorts to reporting facts, and Urdu press.

In 2009, a local land mafia, which wanted a passage point from the graveyard, bribed a cleric to instigate the locals to demolish an Ahmadi graveyard in Pir Mahal. Subsequently, its wall was demolished which was reported by both English and Urdu newspapers.

Dawn, Pakistan’s oldest English newspaper, headlined the report as: Sectarian strife hits the dead whereas, Jang and Ausaf reported it as: Protest in Pir Mahal against Qadiani occupation of state land.

The victimization doesn’t stop here. Rana Taveer says the Urdu-print media even glorifies the perpetrators.

“Some years back a student entered the premises of a police station near Sheikhpura and killed an Ahmadi man, accused of blasphemy,” he recalls. “It was such a grave violation of the law on two accounts. First, the student committed a murder. The second, it happened in a police station. The Urdu dailies curated their headlines like ‘A student sends a Qadiani to hell’.”

The consequences of such reporting endanger Ahmadis’ lives.

“With such coverage, the media indirectly provokes these perpetrators to kill Ahmadis and give them an impression that it stands by them. It has a great impact on a layman. By doing this the media is provoking ordinary citizens to act in the same manner,” Tanveer says.

“When some untoward incident happens with the community, like when some Ahmadi is killed, the news is downplayed to such an extent that the religious element is taken out of the picture ... It happened when an American national doctor [Dr. Mehdi Ali, a cardiac surgeon and an Ahmadi who had come as a volunteer], was gunned down in

Rabwah [in 2014], Urdu dailies took the intent behind the murder out of the story and ran just a paragraph long stories.”

Even Express Tribune went on the path of the Urdu newspapers and ran a paragraph-long story, despite Tanveer filing an in-depth report.

The space for Ahmadis is shrinking in the English press too. Daily Times, considered the most liberal newspaper in the country where Tanveer worked from June 2006 till February 2010 before joining Express Tribune, was once at the forefront in raising minorities’ issues. It is here where Tanveer while “enjoying editorial independence”, as he says, filed numerous follow-up stories in the aftermath of a murder of an Ahmadi man in Ferozewala, Lahore at the turn of the decade.

But last year, Daily Times refused to carry an Ahmadiyya community ad. For several decades, the Ahmadiyya community, prior to every general election, reach out to various publications with ads which inform the public of the reason (the discriminatory laws) for their boycott of the electoral process. For the same purpose, the community had approached the paper before the July 25 elections. Initially, they were told that their ad will be accommodated. But a few days later, the Daily Times management denied the space.

“That was our marketing department which made that call,” says Raza Rumi, who was then the paper’s editor. “There was a fear of backlash. Especially after the murder of the Daily Times owner [Salman Taseer, a sitting governor murdered by his own guard for controversial remarks about the country’s blasphemy laws] by anti-blasphemy brigade.”

- ‘Speaking about Ahmadis not commercially viable’-

Whether it is a movement seeking equal rights for the Pashtuns in the country or the return of thousands of missing persons in the country, activists and aggrieved parties have resorted to the use of social media to propagate their message due to the media’s state appeasement policy.

With the Ahmadis denied coverage because of state’s and media houses’ editorial policies, the community has to look for alternatives. Since the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) restricted access to the official website of the Ahmadiyya community and

various community-run blogs which highlight its persecution, Saleemuddin's office is bound to use the social media.

“Sometimes we want to get our press releases published, but the newspapers, including English, refuse to publish them despite us offering them money,” laments Saleemuddin. “So, we now give out our press releases through Twitter and other mediums on the social media.”

In 2012, the PTA, on the recommendations of the Muttahida Ulema Board, banned the community's websites across Pakistan. In 2014, the Punjab government banned Ahmadi publications terming them ‘seditious and treasonable’. In December 2016, the Faisalabad police's Counter-Terrorism Department conducted a raid on the community's offices in Rabwah and seized the Ahmadiyya literature along with sealing its printing press. This, however, was a violation of a Lahore High Courts' stay order which had refrained from any further action on the Punjab government's decision until its next hearing in June 2015.

Such steps by the state have left a huge vacuum when it comes to the grooming of the new generation of Ahmadis, an official of the community's press section tells me. “With the ban on the publication of our literature, the situation has become so problematic that we don't even have books to educate our children about our faith,” he says.

“You may ask what is the point of books is in this age. But, our websites and blogs are also banned. The publications were never intent to be handed out to the non-Ahmadis. They were only to educate the Ahmadis and they supported bold headings which conveyed that message.”

With the ever-growing divide in Pakistani society along the religious lines which continues to cause a surge in extremism, there remains no hope for the community, say the professionals of the media industry and rights activists interviewed for this story. That the media holds a bias against them and refuses to provide them any voice further exacerbates the problem.

“Why the media would be bothered about the Ahmadis?” questions Dr. Ali Usman Qasmi. “They are a very small section of the population. Catering to them would land them in trouble commercially rather than bringing them ratings. They don't have any interest whatsoever.

“They say they want Ahmadis to accept themselves as non-Muslims. In my opinion, if an Ahmadi even does that, they still wouldn’t provide them the platform because it is not commercially viable.”

Raza Rumi, who is now visiting faculty at the Cornell Institute of Public Affairs, concurs while pointing out flaws in the state’s decades-long policies. “The future of the Ahmadis, unfortunately, remains very sad because we are going through the phase in which extremism is being used as a tool by the state for political ends,” he says.

“Until the state changes its policies we are not going to have any change. State has to end this bullshit. A true Pakistani is imagined as a Muslim because this is a ‘fortress of Islam’. Since the state has declared Ahmadis non-Muslims and the clerics carry out rapid propaganda against them, even educated families in Pakistan also consider them either non-Muslims or take them as people who insult the prophet or are some foreign agents, which brings their citizenship into question. Since the media industry is a part of the society it filters down in it too.”

The state of the Pakistani media has declined too. Because of poor financial structure of the industry, the media houses largely rely on government ads for the revenue. If any media house tries to step aside from the state’s policy, which is now hardly the case, the state not only refuses to give ads to that house but also pressurizes national and multi-national corporations operating in the country to follow its lead.

Veteran human rights activist IA Rehman, who has lived through the country’s history, says: “Rather than leading people, the media, in practice follows the most conservative sections of the society as it is so concerned about the resources that it has to play the second fiddle to the government. And, it accepts all the taboos that the conservative society imposes.

“It has no sympathy with the Ahmadis and it is prepared to believe the worst about them. It is, however, not limited to Ahmadis, it extends to Christians and Hindus and it treats minorities as third grade citizens ... I don’t see any improvement. The more we pander to religiosity, the more difficult life for Ahmadis will become.”

The events which has seen networks like Geo and publications like Nawa-i-Waqt openly spew hatred against the community portray a grimmer picture. Initially, it was believed

that the state acted as an enabler when it came to the propagation of the hate-speech against the Ahmadis. But, now, suggests Dr. Qasmi, the situation seems unmanageable.

“The things have gotten out of their [State’s] hands,” he says. “It has become irreversible. There was an indigenous power to it as well. We cannot say only the state was enabler. But since it has surrendered to the extremists, the situation has gotten out of its control.

“The most it can do is damage control. It cannot penalize them [the extremists]. I haven’t come across a case in which a perpetrator behind the destruction of Ahmadi worship place or a murderer of an Ahmadis got punished.”

Though anti-Ahmadi elements in the country, which are in majority, want to purge Pakistan of the community, there remains a section which hopes things will return to normal. Due to the damage the sectarian divide has caused, there’s a debate in the country on how to improve the country’s situation. The National Action Plan, laid out after an all parties conference in the aftermath of a gruesome attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014, calls for a ban on any sort of hate-speech. But, the mullah’s anti-Ahmadi activities - which include social boycotts, calls for instigation of violence, and forcibly occupying the Ahmadi lands and properties – go unchecked.

“There isn’t a need to be done something new [to make Pakistan an inclusive society],” says Dr. Qasmi. “If the current laws – which deal with hate-speech and incitement to violence – are enforced in spirit, I don’t think there will be much of an issue. The problem is that this has gone out of the scope of law and its social acceptability has increased manifold because the anti-Ahmadi propaganda has been allowed to fester for so long.

“There should be a creation of an environment where perpetrators are prosecuted so the people are allowed the space to talk. This has to be a step by step process.”

When asked this question, Saleemuddin calls upon the state to shun the ideology of takfir – the act of excommunicating sects from the fold of Islam. It will help in creating a country where the journalists won’t have to fear for their lives.

“Since the media is of this country and the people running it belong to this society, they are bound to be influenced by the thriving narrative,” Saleemuddin says. “When it will start to change, that’ll reflect in the media too. There should be efforts to bring in the

positivity in the society. If the narrative of takfir or jihad is allowed to continue, it won't be good for the country at large. If today, we are surrounded by the fire, it will someday reach the other segments of the society too.

“There are some segments of the media that want to talk positively about us but they don't do that due to the pressures. I know them personally. And, that section also includes females. Some of them speak openly. They are very few in number. Nothing has happened to them yet,” he says.

That there is not much hope of that section of the media growing anytime soon is worrisome for Pakistani society and the country's journalism industry. “Young entrants into journalism have some idealism when it comes to being a voice for the voiceless. But, in a short while they realize there's no fun in risking your life,” says IA Rehman.

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