

THE PLIGHT OF **MUSLIM MINORITIES** AMIDST WAR AGAINST CORONAVIRUS



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Opinion Piece on The Plight of Muslim Minorities Amidst War Against Coronavirus **By Ashfaq Ahmad, Research Associate,** **MUSLIM Institute**

Almost three months after it was first identified in Wuhan, China, the World Health Organization (WHO) termed COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. Owing to “the alarming levels of spread and severity,” governments across the globe were advised to take all possible, urgent and aggressive steps to curtail and control the spread of the infectious virus.

It is understandable that in such a serious global crisis, some human



**World Health
Organization**

rights can be restricted to prevent any threat to the existence of mankind. Moreover, such “**restrictions on some rights can be justified**” when they have a legal basis, are strictly necessary, neither arbitrary nor discriminatory in the application, of limited duration, respectful of human dignity and proportionate to achieve the objective.” Keeping in view the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, curtailment of certain rights, owing to stop the pandemic through the quarantine and social distancing efforts, are justified. Undoubtedly, human rights and freedoms such as freedom of movement, assemblies, work etc., as per recommendations of WHO, are being curtailed to control the spread of the virus. However, certain fundamental principles of human rights such as non-discrimination, transparency, respect for religion and human dignity should never be ignored.



Unfortunately, this has not been the case in some countries which have deliberately undermined

these principles under the cover of pandemic control efforts, especially vis-à-vis minority groups. Among exacerbating discriminatory behaviour and prejudice towards different minority groups within the society, such actions

have given rise to Islamophobia as well. Resultantly, Muslim minorities in many parts of the world are facing serious challenges to their socio-religious rights and practices.

Responsibilities of a State under International Law

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

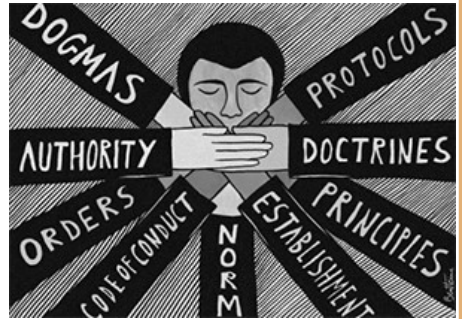
It is the responsibility of states to take efficient and effective measures to prevent, treat and control the epidemics, endemics, pandemics, occupational and other diseases. [Article 12 of the](#)

[International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#), “recognizes the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.” Moreover, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which is also the guardian of the implementation of this covenant and monitors the state compliance, has categorically stated, that “the right to health is closely related to and dependent upon the realization of other human rights, as contained in the International Bill of Rights.” In addition to that, keeping in view arbitrary and discriminatory intentions of certain states, a [group of UN Human Rights experts](#) categorically warned in a

statement on March 16, 2020, that “emergency declarations based on the COVID-19 outbreak should not be used as a basis to target particular groups, minorities, or individuals.”

The Plight of Muslim Minorities

Indubitably, we are living in an extremely difficult time. This time is challenging, dangerous and decisive not only because of the multidimensional threats posed by the COVID-19



but also due to the policies and strategies introduced or refused to be introduced by different governments. Although states exercise their all executive powers to alleviate the emergencies such as COVID-19 pandemic, history tells that measures taken in emergencies are frequently abused and become permanent at times. Muslim minorities in many parts of the world are facing serious socio-religious and socio-economic challenges. Prejudiced governments are not only stifling social dissent, spreading Islamophobia, but also forcing Muslims to act against the fundamental religious principles. Moreover, poor health care facilities, overcrowding, movement restrictions, such as

that in Myanmar, have further aggravated the situation.



Human Rights Watch reports that more than 350,000 displaced people in Myanmar are “sitting in the path of a [public health](#)

[catastrophe](#).” Overcrowding, restrictions on the movement, poor sanitation, malnutrition and devastated health care system have left the Rohingya’s Muslim community vulnerable to coronavirus outbreak. With regards to the situation in the camp, [Oxfam](#) reports, “if someone falls ill and needs more specialized care, they must seek and receive official permission, which often takes a few days... [and] pay for a security escort to travel with them to the hospital.” Moreover, more than thirteen hundred thousand Muslims are living in open-air detention camps of Rakhine State with poor and restricted access to health facilities and zero testing facility for COVID-19. Even these displacement camps have been declared as [COVID-19 Tinderboxes](#). Surprisingly, one toilet is being used by as many as 40 people and one water access point is shared by as many as 600 people due to which physical or social distancing is impossible. Owing to the restriction of the freedom of movement,

they are unable to access nearby health care centres.

In India, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its ancillary groups like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Singh (RSS) have always tried to subjugate the rights of its minorities, especially Muslim. After the outbreak of coronavirus the situation in India has become worse. Enforcement of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and BJP's intentions under the National Register of Citizenship (NRC) speak clear of the reality behind Hindutva's heinous designs. The Muslim community in India and the Occupied Kashmir are facing severe challenges such as discrimination, Islamophobia and hatred. In addition to that, social media propaganda by BJP and other like-minded factions has linked the spread of dozens of coronavirus cases with Muslims. Usage and planned promotion of terms like *"#CoronaJihad"* proves how fascist BJP government is exacerbating Islamophobia in society. The Indian government and news channels are deliberately misinforming the masses to target the Muslim minority. Media restrictions are being manipulated in such a manner that Indian media was not allowed to cover the peaceful protests against CAA in past

months but blame on Muslims regarding coronavirus is being aired on all channels.

Moreover, in such a medical emergency BJP has left no stone unturned to change the demography of Indian Occupied Kashmir. Exploiting this emergency, the fascist



Indian government has passed a set of laws for IOK including the domicile rights. As per the new law, “those Indians who have resided in IOK for 15 years or studied for seven years and appeared in Class 10/12 examinations in educational institutions located in the region are now **eligible to become permanent residents.**” The government of BJP seeks demographic changes in IOK through such illegal laws. Additionally, the criminal curfew imposed on IOK since August 05, 2020, is raising serious concerns regarding the right to health of hundreds of thousands of Kashmiris who are not allowed to access public health care centres.



Another point of deep concern is the issue of cremation. Indubitably, cremation of the deceased is forbidden in Islam. The sanctity of the dead body,

performing congregational funeral prayers known as *Janaza* and the importance of religious burial are an integral part of the religious practice of Muslims which are not compromisable. However, recently, a some countries have denied their Muslim minorities to perform congregational funeral prayers of their beloved ones who died due to coronavirus. For example, the forced cremation of two coronaviruses infected Muslims in Sri Lanka raised concerns about the religious rights of minorities. According to the Health Ministry of Sri Lanka, cremation is the only standard procedure to dispose of the dead bodies of COVID-19 infected patients. It also says that the body of the deceased should not be washed and packed in a seal bag and coffin, which is against the fundamental Islamic practice of washing the body properly before burial. [Amnesty International](#) has called on authorities to “respect the right of religious minorities to carry out the final rites.” It is hoped that, at this difficult time, the Government of Sri Lanka will choose to unite

the community to counter the threat of coronavirus, as it has been doing in the past.

Likewise, United Kingdom is also considering to allow the local authorities to disregard the Section 46(3) of the Public Health Act of 1984, which bans the cremation without the approval of the deceased, in the Coronavirus Bill 2020-2021. This legislation might be intended to deal with a potential surge in deaths and the shortage of space in the cemeteries. However, not only the Muslims but the Jews are also urging the Government to [respect their religious practices](#).

Similarly, Muslims in Italy are unable to find a place to bury their relatives. The high amount of deaths due to coronavirus outbreak has worsened the already shortage of Muslim burial spots in limited Muslim cemeteries. There are only 58 Muslim cemeteries in the whole country for 2 million Muslims. Although repatriation was a main option before the coronavirus outbreak, that option is also not available due to the closure of borders even for the dead. [Muslim families in Italy](#) are forced to keep the dead bodies of their relatives for upto a week to find a place for burial.

On the other side of the world, the Muslim minority of Cambodia is faced with hatred,

discrimination and violence. The Health Ministry of Cambodia linked the spread of coronavirus in the country to Muslims. The post by the Cambodian Health Ministry on their Facebook page about the confirmation of positive coronavirus test of '*Khmer Islam*' on March 17, 2020, led to not only a surge in hateful and discriminatory comments online but also at markets, shops and community areas against the Muslim minority. Non-Muslim communities of Cambodia are refusing to sell or buy products, exchange money with Muslims or even talk to them. There are reports that the non-Muslim Cambodians wear face masks as soon as they see the Muslims. Keeping in view these incidents, HRW asked the Cambodian authorities not only to avoid using inflammatory statements and rhetoric against the vulnerable groups in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic but also limit the release of personal information of the coronavirus patients. Even HRW asked the Cambodian government leaders to formally apologize their Muslim community for the **discriminatory statements of Cambodian Health Ministry**.

The situation in Palestine is also getting worse as Israel imposes further restrictions on Gaza that limit border crossing thereby posing serious



challenges to the Palestinians people to tackle coronavirus outbreak. Indubitably, Gaza is among one of the most densely populated areas of the world. Mass movement restrictions are also being used exclusively against Palestinians elsewhere, who are forced to line up every day at Israeli checkpoints to obtain military permits to cross. Moreover, although four Palestinian prisoners were tested positive for COVID-19, Israeli authorities have not taken any serious action as guided by the WHO and HRW.

Unfortunately, we continue to witness many cases of stigma, xenophobia, Islamophobia, hate speech and discrimination against Muslim minorities wrapped under the cover of 'fight against coronavirus' across the world. Only well-coordinated and cooperated global efforts can counter such global challenges as well as emergencies. Fundamental human rights of all minorities should be protected especially when it comes to religious rituals. States have to take all

possible measures to counter any trends of hatred, xenophobia against other communities. The international community should thereby take steps against all countries which are deliberately following discriminatory actions against the legal parameters and fundamental human rights. While COVID-19 will hopefully go away sooner or later, the ramifications of such discriminatory behaviour and violations of human rights are known to persist for much longer within societies.