

The spectre of 'forced conversions', the unfortunate and dubious legacy of the Niyogi Committee (1954), has begun to haunt Goa. On the night of Friday, 27th of May, Pastor Dominic D'Souza, a Pentecostal preacher, and his wife Joan, were arrested at their home in Siolim. Pastor Dominic and his wife lead the Five Pillars church in Siolim, a hub of Pentecostal activity in Goa which has been gaining a huge number of followers from among both Catholics and members of other faiths, notably bahujan Hindu. Acting on complaints that the couple were "luring" people to Pentecostal Christianity, on the basis of money, relief from illness, or other "false promises", the couple were arrested and charged with offences registered under sections 153-A, 295-A, 506 (II) read with 34 of the Indian Penal Code and sections 3, 4 of the Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954.

The Al-Zulaij Collective wishes to express its opinion on the implications of the arrest of Pastor Dominic D'Souza and his wife because this arrest is not without consequences for the increasingly threatened Goan way of life.

The first issue we raise is one of due process. The pastor and his wife were arrested in the evening, around sunset. Given that their religious activities were long ongoing, with no indication of unduly causing immediate social conflict on that day, it is difficult to see why the arrest did not take place earlier in the day. Was the arrest timed to inconvenience the couple, and demonstrate the power of the complainants?

Secondly, there seems to be a notable lack of equity in the way in which the police have behaved. Through the years there have been multiple cases of various Goa-based Hindu nationalist groups threatening public peace, with some of these groups openly and defiantly making hate speech against Christians and Muslims in Goa, and encouraging violence against these groups among their followers. There has, to our knowledge, been no similar prosecution against these groups. Why then, were the police mobilized to act on this case?

We would propose that it is the current atmosphere of shrill and rising intolerance against non-Hindu communities in the country which has motivated the action against Pastor Dominic and his wife. While the thrust of the actions, both by the police as well as the complainants, has been to stress the couple's reliance on blind faith and encouragement of superstitious practices, at the heart of the issue is the campaign against conversion to Christianity – a long-standing grouse of the Hindu Right which has become increasingly strident. The fact is that, especially after the publication of the Niyogi Committee report in 1956, all conversions to Christianity came to be understood as conversions by force or enticement. Hence, these were liable to be punished by the state. This threat has largely remained on paper, until more recently, with the *de facto* establishment of the *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu State).

Several Catholics, both from among the clergy and the laity, have sought to distinguish

Catholic practice from that of the Five Pillars church of Pastor Dominic. Conversion to the Catholic, they argue, is a long-drawn out, cautious, due process, which relies on establishing the motives of the candidate. It should be noted that distinction from Pentecostal groups, known for their somewhat fiery methods, has been a major strategy of the Catholic Church, not just in Goa, but across India. The whole case against Pastor Dominic reeks of being a Hindu nationalist plot against Christianity, crafted so that some Catholics will lend their support to, and thereby legitimise, this project that will eventually be turned against Catholics as well.

Indeed, the Chief Minister Pramod Sawant has been threatening to present an anti-conversion law in the legislature, and is no doubt using this arrest to reassert his desire. There should be no doubt that the arrest of Pastor Dominic is being used to spur a climate of intolerance towards non-Hindu conversions of any kind in Goa, and a prelude to the pushing forward of an anti-conversion bill in the state.

Every single thinking Goan should be wary of supporting any such discourse because, as experience in other states in India has demonstrated, the passage of an anti-conversion law will result not only in an effective ban on conversions, but could complicate the practice of non-Hindu faiths in Goa, and indeed affect every aspect of Goan life. Catholic-run schools in North India, for example, have often been threatened with potential social persecution and legal prosecution for engaging in conversion if they fail to kowtow to the desires of the leaders of Hindu nationalist groups or persons acting on their behest or under their influence. An anti-conversion law in Goa will eventually result in the suffocation of the Catholic educational system in the state – one which benefits non-Catholics as well. As the experience of the Missionaries of Charity in Gujarat has demonstrated, an anti-conversion environment will eventually impact all activities of the Catholic church in Goa.

Such a law will also impact the everyday lives of Christians in the state, as it will open the floodgates for the scrutinization of inter-religious marriages. The so-called “love jihad” argument is now being levelled against Muslims, but it will be raised in other forms against Christians too. Every marriage of a Christian, especially a Christian man to a non-Christian woman, may become the focus of vigilante ire.

Also notable among the social-media comments from the complainants was the argument that Pastor Dominic gets money from abroad and engages in conversion. We see here the long-familiar “foreign hand” argument that has been routinely trotted out by the Hindu Right in India since soon after Independence. This has had various results, perhaps the first of which has been the blocking of the entry of priests who are foreign nationals. This in turn has had the effect of limiting the universal dimension of the Catholic faith and must be seen as a

compromise of the constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of religion.



The stakes are high and so it is important that the public be vigilant that due process is followed in this case. We would like to stress again that Pastor Dominic has been treated disproportionately. This must be remedied, and the Pastor given redress for being subjected to the arbitrary action of the state, while those responsible must be held accountable. Further, we must also ensure that he is not prosecuted on hearsay, but only if there is evidence that meets the rigorous standards of the law. Else, this will be but the start of the proverbial slippery slope.



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