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When Tragedy Strikes: The Challenge of Honor Killings and Social Stagnation in Pakistan

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When a society faces an incident that tests its legal and moral foundations, it often triggers reflection, reform, and change. Unfortunately, Pakistan’s response to such crises tends to fall short of this ideal. Recent events in Balochistan, where a couple was brutally murdered in the name of “honor”, highlight a deeply rooted struggle between tradition and modernity, and the failure of the state to uphold justice and human dignity.

The chilling murder of Bano and her partner, ordered by a tribal council known as a jirga, gained attention only after a video of the killing went viral on social media. This tragic event

exposed not just the horrific act itself, but the ongoing systemic issues that allow such medieval practices to persist. According to reports, Bano showed remarkable courage even in her final moments, challenging her killers with dignity. This harrowing episode serves as a stark reminder of the dangers women and others face in parts of Pakistan where tribal customs override the rule of law.

Despite swift arrests and official condemnation, including a Senate resolution demanding justice and statements from Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif reaffirming that “no one is above the law”, such crimes continue unabated. It is estimated that approximately 1,000 honor killings occur annually in Pakistan, a grim indicator that these words remain hollow unless matched by systemic change. Harris Khalique, general secretary of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCPP), rightly points out that the state often protects tribal chiefs and feudal lords, perpetuating a “tyranny of medieval practices” instead of enforcing legal protections for its citizens.

This failure to evolve legally and socially is symptomatic of a larger paralysis within Pakistani society and governance. Rather than progressing, Pakistan remains near the bottom of global social development indexes, caught between an unwillingness to abandon outdated traditions and an inability to fully embrace modernity. The government’s reluctance to confront such deeply ingrained problems mirrors its handling of other controversial issues like blasphemy laws, where vigilante violence frequently goes unchecked.

The absence of a national outcry or sustained reform following tragedies like the Balochistan murders is painfully reminiscent of another catastrophe, the 2012 Baldia textile factory fire in Karachi, which killed over 260 workers. While this disaster shocked the nation, it failed to ignite the widespread social reforms or collective mourning witnessed after the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City. The latter tragedy led to significant changes in labor laws and became a symbol of social justice, commemorated in memorials, books, films, and public discourse, an enduring legacy that Pakistan sorely lacks in its times of crisis.

Ultimately, the ongoing struggle in Pakistan reflects a society caught in the painful grip of a Greek tragedy, one where courage and dignity exist but are met with systemic inertia and societal apathy. Until Pakistan confronts these issues head-on, embracing the rule of law over tribal custom and tradition, such tragedies will continue to scar the nation without sparking the progress so desperately needed.

