

DAWN

The day I declared my best friend kafir just so I could get a passport

Zainab Imam — Published Jun 01, 2016 11:47am

If you are a conscientious Pakistani, or if you don't live under a rock, it is hard to ever forget or ignore the kind of infuriating discrimination and shameful persecution that members of the Ahmadiyya community suffer in our country.

You console yourself by thinking, "at least I personally don't discriminate or persecute".

And, if you're outspoken, you think, "I won't and don't ever let it happen in front of me".

But then, there is a point in time when you are forced by the lottery of birth, and the Constitution of Pakistan, to become party to the state-sponsored discrimination of Ahmadis.

This is the time when you go to perform a simple act of citizenship: get or renew a passport.

The last time I got a passport back home, I was able to duck the question: you know the one right at the end where you have to sign to attest to the accuracy of all information on your application form — and that Ahmadis are infidels.

Phone Number _____ Profession _____ Religion Islam

Qualification Doctorate

AJK National No _____ Pakistani By Birth

Whether repatriated on Government expenses or not ? _____

Whether employed in Govt./Semi Govt./Autonomous body/corporation/local bodies/State owned industry ? _____

Whether served in Armed forces ? _____

Whether reservist in Armed Forces ? _____

Signature.....[Signature]

Declaration
To the best of my knowledge and belief the information given in this application is correct.

Declaration in case of Muslim

I hereby solemnly declare that:-

(i) I am Muslim and believe in the absolute and unqualified finality of the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him) of the prophets.

(ii) I do not recognize any person who claims to be a prophet in any sense of the word or of any description what so ever (peace be upon him) or recognize such a claimant as prophet or a religious reformer as a Muslim.

(iii) I consider Mirza Ghulam Ahmed Qadiani to be an imposter nabi and also consider his followers whether belonging to the Qadiani group to be non-muslims.

Signature...[Signature]

Attestation
I am eighteen years and is not issued with an Identity Card and the information given above is correct.

Passport application form. —Photo by Manan Ahmed Asif

Somehow, through the miracle of bureaucracy where nobody has enough time to go through your application in minute detail, my little act of defiance went by unnoticed and I was handed my passport.

Even as I write this, I weigh the pros and cons of putting this out there. At the risk of sounding self-important, I don't want a bigot in the government or with any connections to the government to become aware of this loophole.

This time, I had to apply for a new passport at an embassy of Pakistan. With a far fewer number of applications, the officials did have the time to catch my "mistake".

Here's how the conversation went:

Official: "You didn't sign this attestation."

Me: "Oh, right. I actually didn't want to."

Official: "Then you will have to declare yourself non-Muslim."

Me: "OK."

Official: "You will have to have that changed in Nadra records."

Me: "OK."

We share an awkward moment of silence as I hope in futility that my one-word answer will halt the conversation and I will walk out of there without having to do this.

Official: "So, please sign it."

Me: "But I didn't sign it in Karachi."

Official: "Madam, please don't create more issues for us. We are just an embassy."

I am ashamed to admit, I picked up the pen and I signed it.

My hands shook as I forced myself to go through a motion that would go against every belief I dearly hold, every fibre of my being.

An action that would mean I was declaring myself party to causing the anger and the pain I have heard in my friends' voices, as I sat across hearing horrific stories of growing up in a country that sounded so alien yet, so real.

I did grow up as a member of an endangered minority too, but at least the state considers us full citizens. For now.

A few months ago, I had argued with one of my close friends — an Ahmadi — who said that every person who signs that declaration to get a Pakistani passport is giving his/her consent to the state-sponsored discrimination enabled by the Second Constitutional Amendment.

I disagreed vehemently; I felt offended.

It is not fair, I shot back, to assume that, because there can be no consent where there is force — the state forces me to sign this declaration because it can, it doesn't make it optional for me.

This is not to deny that most Pakistanis do believe that Ahmadis are infidels, but signing that declaration isn't the evidence for it, opinion polls are.

Also read: Keep Hajj out of politics — Notes on the 'Are you Shia?' form debacle

That conversation went through my head in the seconds that I prepared myself to sign my name on a declaration that I find perverse, discriminatory, and wholly unjust.

I still believe that because I was forced to sign it, I did not give my consent to it.

But that realisation does little to shake away the feeling of disgust and helplessness I felt in the process of establishing my relationship with my country but giving up my conscience.