Citizens Round Table: Charting Pathways for Pluralism
Islamabad, Pakistan
2nd of May 2018

I am extremely honoured and to be with you today. When I first visited Pakistan in December 2017, just a few months ago, I was invited to come back and I replied that it was also my wish to do so. Today I can see that this was not courtesy speaking, it was real engagement to continue the conversation started then.

During my visit, I had the pleasure to meet Dr Qibla Ayaz, Chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology. We had a good exchange and we agreed on exploring possibilities of a joint initiative. I am particularly thankful to him who supported this nascent idea. We are all honoured to have him here with his colleagues/delegation today.

I wish to thanks all other actors who made this Round table possible. First of all, authorities and friends in Pakistan, Members of the Parliaments, religious leaders and actors, civil society and academia. Special thanks to the Sustainable Development Policy Institute who is in front line of the organisation. And to our EU delegation, notably the Ambassador Jean François Cautain and the colleagues. A special thanks to the proactive commitment of Javeria Rizvi Kabani.

Let me introduce myself for the ones I have not yet the pleasure to meet. I was appointed by Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, in May 2016 to support and promote Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU, at country level and in international fora. So far, I conducted official visits in: Jordan, Iraq, Sudan, UAE, Senegal, Pakistan, Bosnia, Nigeria soon… After the summer, I hope to come back to South East Asia, Vietnam, maybe China, India. After the summer, I hope to visit Egypt, Lebanon. Missions were quite constructive. I engaged in dialogue with officials, religious actors and human rights and non-governmental actors, including human rights defenders. This is a very dynamic agenda growing fast; there is appetite for doing more by many different actors.

I am particularly pleased to be in Pakistan for the second time and invited to take a seat around this roundtable. I like the concept of circles and of round tables. Historically we may associate it to King Arthur table, around which he and his knights gathered together. A roundtable has no head, implying that everyone who sits has equal status. And Round table
is now used to describe a form of discussion where participants are given equal right to participate. It is a good and inspiring starting block to discuss equal citizenship.

I like also the title of this roundtable: "charting pathways to pluralism". There are multiple roads to build a shared plural space. And each society has to find its own, respecting and building on its tradition and identity. This roundtable is a precious opportunity to bring forward a very important conversation in Pakistan, for Pakistan, and maybe also to inspire others.

I see this roundtable as a starting block for a fruitful conversation and a “trust building journey” to continue I hope after this first meeting. We will share our different experiences and vantage points during three days. I hope to see already first recommendations coming out of these 3 days of work on how to chart steps on pathways for pluralism.

The international context
Indeed many indicators signal that in our increasingly diverse world there are raising tensions and intolerance /disrespect for the cultures and religions of the “others”. Let me share some figure by the Pew Research Centre:

- in 2015, in 40% of the 198 surveyed countries high or very high levels of restrictions were registered;
- In 105 countries, (53%) we see widespread government harassment of religious groups. This trend is growing fast in Europe as well;
- In almost 30 % high or very high levels of social hostilities were registered;
- Today, 79% of the world’s population live in countries that have either restrictions on the right to religion or belief or a high level of social hostility involving religion or belief. Only 20% lives in countries where freedom of religion or belief is fully enjoyed.

In Europe, as you are well aware, we do face problems. Social hostilities around religious issues have risen. To share one data: In 17 countries, incidents of religion-related mob violence were reported in 2015, up from 9 countries in the previous year.

Antisemitism is on the rise as well as so called anti Muslim hatred or so called islamophobia.

This is a serious challenge. Muslims in 2016 represent 4.9% of the European population and this share is projected to increase, even if we do not consider impact of future migration. By 2050, estimations say that Muslims will make up 10% of the European population with huge diversity among countries.
The EU institutions, in the remit of their limited competences are addressing tensions against the "others", with a number of initiative. Let me just quote one "symbolic" example.

The Agency on Fundamental Rights, which is the EU’s independent body for delivering fundamental rights assistance and expertise to the EU and its Member States does serious work on discriminations against Jewish and Muslims in Europe.

A few months ago, the Agency published its second survey on "Minorities and Discrimination" showing and giving statistics that Muslims living in the EU perceive discriminations in a broad range of settings – and particularly when looking for work, on the job, and when trying to access public or private services. The report examines how characteristics – such as an individual’s first and last name, skin colour and the wearing of visible religious symbols like a headscarf – may trigger discriminatory treatment and harassment. These statistics are important. Are about transparency and commitment to take informed action. The report also shows – interestingly – that despite this, the vast majority of them (73%) have a high sense of trust in democratic institutions. Maybe this is an interesting reflection point for our discussion on citizenship.

I recently visited Bosnia on invitation of the Islamic Community and of the Grand Mufti of Sarajevo. I participated in a “Roundtable on religion and secularity”, held in Sarajevo, gathering all religious communities. I welcome the engagement of the Islamic Community, which has an ambitious pro-active European agenda with systematic engagement with EU institutions. They offer their contribution in the ongoing dialogue on a progressive Islam in Europe as well as on working on anti-Muslim hatred in Europe. I am convinced that these collaborations are much needed in for a new inclusive citizenship in Europe.

I wanted to spend a few minutes talking on Europe to reflect that the challenge is global, we all have homework to do.

The situation in this region is of serious concern, in Pakistan as in many neighbours countries: to quote only some, in India there are many concerns about rising discriminations and even violence against Muslims and Christians, as well as in Indonesia, in Malaysia and many others. We cannot forget what is ongoing in Myanmar were we witness horrible persecutions and crimes.
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I have been recently to Vietnam for a conference and I had initial contacts with religious organisations again under oppression and heavily discriminated. I am planning to visit Vietnam and other countries soon.

Yes, the picture is grim and we all need to boost action and engagement. When I say all, I mean all. Politicians, religious leaders and actors, officials, civil society, academia. Media. Artists. Women. Youth. And also the wise older generations.

Let me also say that throughout my work as Special Envoy I have also seen a wealth of potential, of promising and constructive initiatives, good will, action, and great ideas…

And let never forget that that big part of the world population co-exist in peace and do respect and value diversity of religion/belief and culture and we have a wealth and global social capital to value and preserve in Pakistan as elsewhere.

So there are serious concerns but also many grounds and potential to act on.

Citizenship and shared citizenship as key avenue for pluralism.

My conviction is that to build common ground among religious groups as well as non-believers, fair citizenship is a MUST. Is not an option. Citizenship is a never-ending journey, a long-term process. A concept old thousands of years and still moving, reflecting evolutions of societies and humankind.

When I was in Iraq in 2016, I met two grand’s ayatollahs in Najaf as well as a Patriarch in Erbil and all of them gave me same vision for Iraq as a civil state. Is striking that different religious leaders use the same language and speak on citizenship.

When we speak citizenship we tend to think in terms of majority and minorities. These terms are more and more questioned. And I support this debate. We are all minorities somewhere. In Iraq, they use the term “social components”. Religious demography is changing very fast.

Recently in an important international conference in Vienna organized by King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), the representative of Al-Azhar reflected that the term minority has negative connotations and should be replaced by the term citizens, noting that all citizens have same rights and duties.
Today, almost one third of the 1.6 billions Muslims (600 million) live in non-Muslim countries. And two thirds of the 2.2 billion Christians live in the global south. Religious diversity is there and is growing fast. We cannot stop this evolution. We cannot build millions of walls.

Muslim and Christians and other religious groups need to become co-citizens and move from isolation to integration, avoiding to crystalize differences and fuel polarization.

This conversation is particularly important in Pakistan, which is becoming home to one of the biggest Muslim population in the world.

That’s why I suggest to pay attention to the “Marrakesh Declaration on the rights of minorities in Muslim majority countries”, issued in 2016 in Morocco. As many of you know, this declaration was issued by Muslim scholars from 120 countries. It is meant to be a “concerned and concerted” response to the widespread persecution and violence against minorities. This Declaration calls on scholars to develop and spread jurisprudence on citizenship digging in the sources of Islamic laws and calls on politicians to translate this in a new model of contractual citizenship inspired by the “Charter of Medina”.

There are concerned voices noting that the Declaration remains in an ivory tower, risk to be seen as an elitist/intellectual exercise, struggling to generate effects. I am aware and conscious that there are many calls recommending to western actors not to be too pushy in this area and reminding – I agree – that non-Muslim states and organizations must play a supporting, rather than leading, role.

The Declaration recommends to “address the mutual state of selective amnesia that blocks memories of centuries of joint and shared living on the same land”. I think that amnesia is widespread and we all regularly suffer from it. History is quickly forgotten.

Our challenge, in Pakistan as well as in Europe and elsewhere, is to look ahead, build a “common world”, well rooted in our respective traditions, a new common world. New solutions – fully respectful of our history and faiths – are needed to respond to new challenges.

I spoke on Marrakesh as an inspiring platform generated by Muslim scholars. More recently, in February 2018, a new declaration was issued by the “Alliance of Virtue for Common
Good”. This initiative is about a revived Alliance of Virtue, who was formed in the VII century in Mecca, bringing together leaders of various religions and ethnicities.

The initiative is supported by more than 400 representatives of the three Abrahamic religions, now known as the Washington Declaration. Let me share few quotes: It’s vision is to “embark in a new course informed by old wisdom”, to go “beyond mere tolerance”, recognising that “shared values are more important than differences”, stating that “there are no legitimate grounds for excluding the followers of any religion from full and fair participation in society”.

Mobilizing religious actors for Human Rights and for peace building religious leaders are influential. In society. And for society. They hold a special and precious "responsibility".

From Rabat, to Marrakesh to Washington and also to Pakistan with its recent fatwa, today there is no shortage of initiatives/movements mobilizing religious actors’ contribution to face jointly various challenges. Sheikh Bin Bayyah asserted that religious leaders must descend from their ivory towers. This is happening.

In 2012 the Rabat Action Plan called among other to religious leaders contribution to speak and act against intolerance and hate speech.

Recently a "Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to prevent Incitement to Violence that Could lead to Atrocity Crimes" was issued, resulted from the intense consultation organised under the Fez Process (232 religious leaders from all religions from 77 countries) under the leadership of the UN Office on Genocide Prevention. I can see this Plan moving fast into action throughout many regions. It contains three blocks: prevent, strengthen, build. It is an important step forward in mobilising broad of inclusive coalitions among religious actors...

Let me also just mention the initiative "Faith for Rights" sponsored by the High Commissioner on human rights and culminated in the 18 commitments of the Beirut Declaration (2017). Religious actors are important players for human rights, this initiative intends to be a platform for joint action. We will listen to the message sent by the Office of the High Commissioner on human rights on this.

Let's now address the situation in Pakistan.
First of all I want to praise and express full support to the Paigham-e Pakistan Fatwa gathering 1829 scholars condemning extremism and terrorism and declared the supporters of suicide bombing as traitors.

Responsibility of religious actors and religious leaders is important everywhere and is particularly essential in Pakistan. During my visit in December, I met many committed religious leaders and actors.

Let me say again that "responsibility" of religious leaders was part of the first conversation I had with Chairman Qibla Ayaz.

Many religious communities can and are contributing to a plural Pakistan, within the Muslim broad family and also among Christians. I am happy to see here Ms Jennifer Jag Jivan, I visited her Centre – The Christian Study Centre in Rawalpindi – and was very impressed by their commitment and their capacity to reach out credibly to all actors, also the ones who are not yet close. I am also pleased to see here as well Dr Allama Chisti.

I also met in Lahore the Interfaith Advisory Commission as well as the Archi-bishop Shaw. There are many others doing amazing work, please forgive me if I cannot quote them all.

All in all, religious leaders have a crucial role to play in reducing the extremism narrative in the society, and we consider the work of ulemas as well as religious dialogue as important elements.

Interreligious collaboration – I prefer this word to the term of interreligious dialogue only – is important for the reduction of extremist narratives.

But religious leaders are not only useful to stop the fire. They have a great preventive role to play out, to avoid fire starts and to build peaceful co-existence and equality.

We are ready to cooperate in support of the peace-building role of religious leaders.

In the interesting and sound concept note that SDPI prepared for this Round Table, there is quote of the speech of the father of the nation – Quaid – i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Let me add another piece of his great foundational speech to the Constitutional Assembly back in 1947 we read “You will find that in the course of time Hindus would cease
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to be Hindus, and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State". He concluded proclaiming justice and impartiality the guiding principles.

This powerful and sharp message, dating 1947, is about equal citizenship and seems very relevant today. Yet the practice of citizenship in Pakistan is not fully equal, and there is work ahead to make this vision a reality.

In the coming days we will explore together possible models and options following a holistic and inclusive approach. It is a privilege to be part to this conversation.

To conclude let me quote a few questions and suggestions.

For pluralism to be sustainable, we need a solid Human Rights architecture (laws / systems and implementation).

We see progress. Some steps forward were made notably at institutional and organisational levels. Pakistan since January 2018 sits in the Human Rights Council in Geneva, this proves once more commitment. However minorities' rights are nor respected and Freedom of Religion or Belief is not uphold. Some progress has been made in limiting the misuse of the Blasphemy Law. In the area of prevention at the level of registration of cases by the police, in ensuring that senior judges deal with these cases and also by deciding to punish false accusations. In controlling hate speech. But many people suffer still.

Human rights hardware is not enough. We also need the software: massive and creative investment is needed to build or rebuild a culture of respect. I noted down from my last visit that Pakistan is a “young and vocal society”, a very senior official noted “no Pakistani ever shut up”. But intolerance and violence are going viral, and this with a young population is a bomb.

Education for the youth is a sine qua non for sustainable pluralism.

Massive injection of positive messages through media and all possible channels, films, soap opera, soufi music and poetry, heroes makers.

Interreligious collaboration through action and concrete activities is also very effective. It generates much more than dialogue and understanding the other. It generates trust and co-
action. I was impressed recently by the inspiring initiative of a newly developed “Joint Master of Interreligious studies and Peace Building in Bosnia where interfaith work is applied to local realities.

“Knowledge based approach”, valuing knowledge as a key resource underutilised so far. This can feed serious and fair interreligious dialogue among scholars. Beyond shaking hands, we need scholars to meet and work with other scholars and together bring the conversation forward, even where it may hurt.

Then, culture and arts are unique allies to Human Rights and to equality because they generate “feelingfull” thinking. In such delicate areas, positive emotions and creativity are needed for breaking mental walls and defensive attitudes and for inspiring “out of the box” solutions.

A society where women rights are oppressed cannot be plural or equal. Women rights are building blocks for pluralism and fair governance. Religion and culture are often misused against women rights. For many reasons. Just one indicator: 60% of reservations registered in CEDAW are based on cultural and religious grounds. But there are excellent and inspiring examples in the region of Muslim women constructively building their voice and impacting positively on the public sphere. Let me quote just an organization called Musawah (means ‘equality’ in Arabic) based in Indonesia unfortunately they cannot be here today. It is a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family. Why I quote them is because their vision is that equality in the family is the foundation for equality in the society. They use a holistic approach that combines Islamic principles and jurisprudence, international human rights standards, national laws and constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination. I think this approach fits nicely with the spirit of this roundtable.

Musawah as many other actors are doing amazing work in the area of religious literacy, including “educating” on women and gender in Islamic doctrine.

This brings me to my last point: to build a plural society, grounded in tradition and capable to face current and future challenges, we need responsible engagement by all not by some. We need free but responsible citizens, women and men, responsible leaders, social and political innovators and institutions as well as responsible civil society organizations and new collaboration with scholars. You are here today living examples of this responsibility.
Human rights, rule of law and justice are at the core of the EU foreign and development policy. We are here to cooperate with you towards common good facing common global challenges. We all need new solutions grounded in our identities but open to diversity as a value and as a wealth.