

Netanyahu's Extremist-dominated Cabinet in Jeopardy

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Muslims, Christians and Jews have peacefully celebrated major religious holidays around the world during this month everywhere but in Jerusalem, the city sacred to all three Abrahamic faiths. There the Israeli government has curbed Muslim and Christian worship, Israeli colonists have exerted increasing pressure on Palestinian residents of the holy city and Israeli extremists have insulted and abused Christians and Muslims.

Latin Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa declared that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's hard right-wing government has encouraged extremists to harass Christian clergy and vandalise Church property, stepping up pressure on the region's ancient Christian community to abandon Palestine to the Israelis.

"The frequency of these attacks, the aggressions, have become something new," Pizzaballa told the Associated Press. "These people feel they are protected [and] that the cultural and political atmosphere now can justify, or tolerate, actions against Christians."

Upon the proclamation of the state 75 years ago, Israel pledged to respect all faiths and allow freedom of worship. Israel has failed to honour this commitment. During this Easter season, Israel limited to 1,800 the congregation attending the holy fire ceremony on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on the Saturday before Easter. Traditionally 10,000 people have taken part in this service in the vast church. The Israeli government claimed it instituted the limitation for safety reasons.

Nuns standing at the entrance of a church were spat upon by black-clad Orthodox Jews while Christians carrying a wooden cross to commemorate Jesus' crucifixion were cursed by a Jewish man. Last month, a religious Jew attempted to torch a church and two Israeli teenagers destroyed crosses on graves at a Protestant church. All these incidents were filmed on phones or caught by security cameras.

One hundred years ago there were some 73,000 Palestinian Christians in Palestine, accounting for 10 per cent of the total, and 20 percent in Jerusalem. It was estimated in 2019 that the number had fallen to 2 per cent with only 2,000 Christians left in the Old City. Since Israel's occupation covers three-quarters of this period, it is largely to blame for the exodus of Christians.

It is striking that the Western Christian world shows little or no interest in what is happening in Jerusalem where the Christian faith was born and first took root more than 2,000 years ago. US evangelical Protestants, who are highly influential on that country, largely support the right in Israeli and honour Israeli colonists and Jewish extremists. As the US is the only country which can exert influence on Israel, this leaves Palestinian Christians in the lurch.

Jerusalem's Muslims are better off, largely because Muslims account for the 98 per cent of Palestinians. They have no option but to challenge Israel over official, colonist and extremist efforts to intrude in and take over Muslim places of worship, particularly Al Haram Al Sharif Mosque compound on the acropolis of Jerusalem.

On Friday, presumably the last in the holy month of Ramadan, some 250,000 worshippers entered Al Haram for prayers, filling Al Aqsa Mosque and the vast courtyard. Tens of thousands of West Bank Palestinians without hard-to-obtain Israeli permits to enter occupied Jerusalem were permitted to enter the city and Al Haram. While women and girls of all ages were allowed, males between the ages of 12 and 55 were banned. For most West Bank Palestinians Fridays in Ramadan are the only days they can visit the city and exercise their right to pray in al-Aqsa, the courtyard and nearby streets. This is not the freedom of religion Israel was bound to uphold.

Israeli police, border police and troops were clearly ordered to exercise maximum restraint last Friday, which was also celebrated across the region as Quds (Jerusalem) Day. This is because bad Israeli behaviour on April 5th generated widespread outrage and global bad publicity for Israel.

Before dawn on that day Israeli security forces raided the prayer hall in Al Aqsa where worshippers had locked the doors to spend the night in prayer and contemplation without being disturbed. The Israelis forcibly entered the mosque, firing tear gas and sponge tipped bullets and clubbing protesting Palestinians. Furnishings and stained-glass windows were broken.

In an attempt to defend al-Aqsa, angry Palestinians threw stones and threw firecrackers at

the armed Israelis in helmets and bullet-proof vests. Three dozen Palestinians were injured and 400 were thrown to the ground with their hands tied behind their backs where they laid for hours until carted off for interrogation and possible detention. Was this the freedom of religion Israel is meant to uphold?

Fortunately, the entire scenario was caught on video by Palestinians while they were under attack and circulated widely on the Internet. Despite an international uproar over Israel's brutal incursion, the Israeli security forces conducted a less dramatic and damaging raid the next morning.

The Israelis justified the raids by saying they had to prevent Palestinians from attacking Israeli religious zealots who were set to enter Al Haram or from throwing stones and firecrackers at devout Israelis praying at the "Wailing Wall", the stone wall which supports the compound on one side. Jews believe this wall is the only surviving relic of the Second Jewish Temple erected on this site. It was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD during a Jewish rebellion.

The upshot of the row over the well documented April 5th raid was that non-Muslims were barred from entering al-Haram during the last 10 days of Ramadan and Israel permitted West Bankers continue visiting Jerusalem on Friday the 7th and 14th. Palestinians from Gaza are banned from visiting mosques and churches during holy days. This is not freedom of religion.

The April 5th exposure of Israeli brutality against Muslim Palestinians and weeks of protests against the plan of Netanyahu's extremist- dominated Cabinet to pass legislation to undermine Israel's supreme court has put his latest government in jeopardy. There are indications that he is trying to restrain coalition members for whom "restraint" is a forbidden word.

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Featured image: Msgr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa the day of his episcopal consecration (Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

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