

PAKISTAN

ISSUE

While human rights are now firmly on the political agenda in Pakistan, the improvement of human rights has not been given a high priority by the administration of Prime Minister Sharif and little progress, if any, has been seen in implementation.

BACKGROUND

Pakistan is a traditional society where inertia and intransigence have hampered modernization. The government must deal with ethnic and sectarian violence, poverty and resistance to change. These characteristics, as well as the power of the security forces and feudal landowners, have hampered the enforcement of human rights. Moreover, strong religious and traditional cultural currents are antagonistic to what are perceived as western conceptions of human rights.

The prevailing climate of political and religious intolerance compounded by Islamist extremism, ethnic tension, crime, terrorism, small scale public disorder, and the breakdown of legal institutions have all contributed to a worrisome human rights situation in Pakistan. Worsening socio-economic conditions, aggravated by high population growth, have contributed to the emergence of the "Kalashnikov" culture. Ethnic, sectarian, political, and criminal violence are often intermingled and increasingly lethal due to the easy availability of weapons. The police are seen by many Pakistanis not as protectors but as oppressors.

What little momentum on human rights that existed under the former government of Benazir Bhutto was dissipated with the election of Nawaz Sharif. Indeed, his first government, 1990-1993, strengthened the blasphemy laws, which date from President Zia's time, to require the death penalty (never applied) for defiling the name of the prophet Mohammed. Higher court justices routinely overturn such death sentences; despite this, in May 1998 Faisalabad Catholic Bishop John Joseph committed suicide to protest a lower court death sentence imposed on a Christian for blasphemy. In the aftermath, protests and counter-protests fanned already heated emotions resulting in attacks against Christian homes.

The Ahmadis, a religious minority practicing a variation of Islam, are also targets of religious vilification and systematic persecution by orthodox Muslims. The blasphemy law has been extensively used to abridge their religious freedom, and violence against Ahmadis often goes unpunished. While the government has proposed changes to the law to prevent its inappropriate use, no progress has been seen to date.

In August 1998, the government introduced a constitutional amendment to extend Islamic law, thereby augmenting the existing parallel Shariat judicial system with the aim of 'improving' the law and order situation. Despite protests from women and minority groups, the government denies any potential negative impact of the bill. Although the amendment has been passed in the Muslim League-dominated lower house, it appears unlikely to be passed by the Senate as currently constituted. However, this situation could change after the next Senate elections.

Discrimination against women and minorities, rationalized by reference to Islamic precepts, is a particular problem. Women face systemic discrimination in Pakistan; they have less access than men to basic requirements such as education and health care. Female literacy in rural areas is extremely