

HUMAN RIGHTS IN PAKISTAN

ISSUE

Pakistan is a traditional society where inertia and intransigence have hampered modernization. The government must deal with ethnic and sectarian violence, poverty and ignorance. 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 government of Prime Minister Bhutto was at times vocal in its support of improving the human rights situation, and appointed a minister of human rights, but rhetoric exceeded accomplishment. With her dismissal, political uncertainty hangs over the country. Nevertheless, while some political parties are more receptive than others, human rights are now firmly on the political agenda in Pakistan.

BACKGROUND

The prevailing climate of political and religious intolerance spiced by Islamist extremism, ethnic tension, crime, terrorism, and small scale public disorder, 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 most Pakistanis not as protectors but as oppressors. Nevertheless, some positive movement has occurred.

Discrimination against women and minorities, rationalized by reference to Islamic precepts, continue to stand out as particular problems. The election of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) under Benazir Bhutto in October 1993 reaffirmed the democratic process; her dismissal by the President was by constitutional means. Mrs. Bhutto indicated her government would place significant policy emphasis on social development. It made some efforts to improve the human rights situation, and indeed appointed a minister of human rights in 1996, but rhetoric exceeded accomplishment in most areas. Ministerial responsibility for human rights has been absorbed into the Law Minister's office under the interim government, and it is unclear what its future will be after the elections scheduled for February 03, 1997.

Women face systemic discrimination in Pakistan; they have less access than men to basic needs such as education and health care. Female literacy in rural areas is extremely low. The *Haddood* ordinances, ostensibly based on Islamic law, have been used to arrest, detain, and punish women for sexual offences such as adultery. Women who have attempted to bring charges against their rapists have sometimes found themselves countercharged under the *Haddood* ordinances. In tribal areas, women suffer high levels of domestic violence, and murders based on traditional concepts of "honour" often go unpunished. Women in both rural and urban areas have been subject to mistreatment and rape in police custody. The Bhutto government responded with the creation of a handful of police stations staffed entirely by women. Pakistan in 1996 ratified the Convention for the