

December 1992

HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN PAKISTAN

Social conditions in Pakistan make it difficult for political and economic rights to flourish. The increasing income polarization, removal of subsidies and cutting of services - part of Pakistan's IMF inspired structural adjustment package - will sharpen existing disparities. Rural masses who make up the bulk of the population live under the dominance of feudal overlords who have constituted the majority in every legislature Pakistan has had since independence. Illiteracy rates are among the highest in the developing world, and are particularly poor for women.

Religion, and especially Pakistan's version of Islamic Fundamentalism, has proven an obstacle to the advance of democracy and human rights as they are understood in the West (and in the UN covenants). Pakistani fundamentalists, although a small minority, are a well-organized politico-religious strikeforce who provide easy, anti-western "solutions" for discontented youth particularly from the lower-middle and middle classes. Successive Pakistani leaders have resorted to steadily harsher versions of Islam in an effort to give legitimacy to their otherwise dubious regimes. The passage in 1991 of the Shariat Act is but the latest stage in a gradual process of Islamicization. Secular traditions and institutions are clearly at risk.

Worsening socio-economic conditions, especially in Sindh, have contributed to the emergence of the "Kalashnikov" culture. The rich are heavily guarded and the powerful retain small private armies. Ethnic, sectarian, political and criminal violence is 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. The levels of venality, corruption and criminality in police ranks are extremely high. Physical abuse, rape and torture in police custody are commonplace.

The general breakdown in law and order and violent criminal action throughout Pakistan has prompted the government to grant increased powers to the police (Constitutional Amendment No. 12). This has served to exacerbate police abuse of human rights but has not been sufficient to restore order. In the Sindh, the situation deteriorated to the point that the military occupied the province in the fall of 1992 - martial rule now applies.

Though now superficially calmer, overall human rights prospects remains grim. In addition to traditional banditry, the provincial Chief Minister in the Sindh has conducted a campaign of systematic repression against members of Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party, other opposition politicians, Mohajirs (Muslims who originally migrated from India at the time of partition and who are dominant in business) and religious minorities. Discrimination of all forms characterises Pakistan society, although Pakistan does not have as rigid and pervasive a caste system as India. There are in fact few places in the world where

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