

## THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN PAKISTAN

### ISSUE

The human rights situation in Pakistan remains worrying. Discrimination against women and minorities, underpinned by Islamic precepts, continue to stand out as particular problems. The election of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in October 1993 reaffirmed the democratic process, holding out the hope for basic social improvements, which in turn will improve the human rights situation. It is still not possible to fully assess the performance of her government in this regard.

### BACKGROUND

Prime Minister Bhutto's government, on taking office, indicated that it would place stronger emphasis on strengthening democratic institutions and address a wider range of social concerns. Social conditions in Pakistan make it difficult for human, political and economic rights to flourish. However, Mrs. Bhutto seems bent on steering Pakistan towards a more secular, western-looking orientation.

Increasing income polarization, removal of subsidies and cutting of services — part of Pakistan's IMF-inspired structural adjustment package — further sharpen existing social and economic disparities. The situation is compounded by the abject poverty that prevails throughout the country, which in turn supports odious institutions such as bonded labour. The rural masses, the bulk of the population, continue to live under the dominance of feudal overlords who have constituted the majority in virtually every legislature Pakistan has had since independence. Illiteracy rates are among the highest in the developing world, and are particularly poor for women where the rate is less than half the average rate for developing countries (22%).

The progressive and relentless Islamisation of Pakistani society has been a significant deterrent to fostering a better human rights environment. While successive Pakistani leaders have resorted to increasingly harsher versions of Islam, PM Bhutto has initiated steps to slow down its progress. These include establishment of a human rights cell to investigate cases of violence against women and excessive use of force by the police; a human rights tribunal headed by a Supreme Court judge; a forum to review the terms and to build consensus towards ratification of the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and women's police units.

Worsening socio-economic conditions 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 inter-mingled 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 still commonplace.