

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.

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.

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.

What momentum on human rights that existed under the former Government of Benazir Bhutto was dissipated with the election of Nawaz Sharif, whose priority is economic reform and revival. 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. However, higher court justices routinely overturn such death sentences. In August 1997 his Government passed the Anti-Terrorism Act in response to public alarm over growing sectarian violence. In spite of its controversial aspects, the Act has not ended sectarian violence, which has recurred. Sharif's hand-picked candidate for President, elected in December 1997, Rafiq Tarar, is known for his conservative religious views. On the other hand, reform to the blasphemy laws to prevent frivolous use is under parliamentary review. In the meantime, far fewer blasphemy cases are now being filed.

Discrimination against women and minorities, rationalized by reference to Islamic precepts, are particular problems. 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