



Human Rights Challenges in Pakistan: Global Norms and Local Realities

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This paper discusses the complicated issue of human rights in Pakistan through the lens of contradicting principles between international practice and regional reality. Pakistan has been struggling with the systematic failure of upholding the rights of women, minorities, and freedom of expression despite the constitutional protection offered and international laws committed by the country. The continued existence of discriminatory cultural actions, ineffective law enforcement process, and the politicizing of laws, especially those on blasphemy law, discourage the protection of human rights and propagates social injustices. Religious and ethnic minorities continue to find themselves in a vulnerable position, talking of marginalization, violence, and legal exclusion as the main manifestations of their lives. Gender discrimination, violence and hurdles to empowerment in womanhood is deep-rooted even after the change in laws. This paper discusses these problems in the context of a larger life question of universal human rights and more cultural relativism but specifies how socio-political resistance impedes reforms. It gives policy recommendations to put in place secure legal frameworks, rights-based teaching, and conforming the domestic practices to the Pakistani way of thinking with the international standards of human rights.

INTRODUCTION

Human rights are moral and legal entitlements, which exist universally and are at the same time, natural human beings by their existence. They include civil, political, economical, social, and cultural rights that combine in supporting human dignity, equality, and freedom. As grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) 1948, these rights have been entrenched into international treaties and established minimum standards of what states may do when acting towards individuals and communities; including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

Pakistan is United Nation member and articles of important conventions on human rights, such as ICCPR, ICESCR, CEDAW, and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) are agreed to be followed in the form of global norms in the country. Internally, its Constitution includes the corresponding rights that reflect the obligations at an international stage, ensuring equality before law (Article 25), freedom of religion (Article 20), and protection against discrimination (Article 26), and the rights to life and dignity (Article 9 and 14). The Constitution of 1973 can therefore be seen as a legal instrument that would guarantee human rights to all the citizens without regard to gender, religion, cast or ethnicity. But the reality of these commitments is highly controversial and skewed. Patriarchal social structures, structural inequalities, politicisation of religion, and poor institutional structures remain as impediments to the realise the rights of significant proportions of the Pakistani population. The article is devoted to three vital sectors indicating a constant human rights agenda in the country: rights of women, minority rights, and laws against blasphemy.

Various forms of discrimination and violence against women are still common in Pakistan, even though the constitution does not condone the behavior and there exist policies that encourage gender equality. Student rights to an education and employment, barriers to higher education, honor killings and domestic violence, and child marriage are all still in existence, highlighting the gap between the law and reality. Social exclusion, targeted violence, forced conversions, and discrimination in the wider context of life have been witnessed in the case of religious minorities, e.g., Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, and Shia Muslims, that compromise the state to its commitment to pluralism and equal citizenship. Also, the blasphemy laws in Pakistan have become a controversial instrument that, despite being used to defend the religious feelings, it has been widely used to solve personal conflicts, oppress the religious minorities, and restrain critically minded people. Charges lead to mob violence, judicial inequities and a general feeling of panic over such issues as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and due process.

Through such interrelated issues, this article aims to shed light on the complexity of adopting universal human rights rules in Pakistan's social-political context. It examines the contradictions between international rights and local realism and what elements of structure, law, and culture define the human rights discourse in the country. By doing so, this article is presented to

fill the gaps in a complex history of human rights development in Pakistan and the gaps that need to be dealt with to bring to convergence the constitutional guarantees, international promises, and reality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though the government is constitutionally obligated, as well as undertaking international obligations on the rights to human rights, the rendering of these rights is economical and not unswerving most of the time. Women are systematically discriminated and brutally assaulted, religious minorities are socially discriminated against and attacked, and blasphemy laws are often misused to muzzle criticism and spread intolerance. This gap between international norms of human rights and the local reality has also raised serious concerns concerning the capability of Pakistan to guarantee and observe the basic rights of all its citizens in the fields of women's rights, rights of minorities, and the freedom of religious beliefs and speech.

METHODOLOGY

The given research is based on a qualitative and descriptive research design that is based on secondary data analysis of the Constitution and other laws related to human rights, court decisions in Pakistan, and international protocols ratified by Pakistan, like ICCPR and CEDAW. It reviews the literature on academics, reports on human rights, and media case studies to understand the difficulty regarding the establishment of human rights protection. To define structural, legal, and socio-political factors that lead to these challenges, a thematic content analysis method is performed. As the indicators of the study, rights of women, minority, and blasphemy laws are chosen as the main ones, and the analytical insight into the discrepancy between the Pakistani pledges to human rights and the realities on the ground.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding Human Rights in Global and Local Context

Human rights are the rights of all human beings that are universal and inalienable regardless of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status (Donnelly, 2013). The civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights necessary to achieve human dignity and freedom are outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 (UN General Assembly, 1948). UDHR, although it is not a legally binding document, has influenced customary international law and has shaped it about the drafting of international legal documents that are legally binding such as the international covenant on Civil and political rights (ICCPR) and the international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights (ICESCR) in 1966 which constitute the main body of the international bill of human rights (UN OHCHR, 1966a; 1966b). Additionally, the CEDAW (1979) requires states to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, which can be achieved by promoting gender equality in both law and practice (UN, 1979). Pakistan is a signatory to the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and has

passed the major treaties such as ICCPR (2010), CEDAW (1996), and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1990) (Ministry of Human Rights, 2021). Chapter 1, Part II of the Constitution of the country (1973) entrenches the basic rights of the people by giving the assurance of equality before the law (Article 25), freedom of speech (Article 19), freedom of religion (Article 20), and protection against discrimination (Article 27) (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). These commitments form a legal framework that aims at safeguarding and advancing human rights within the national countries.

Nevertheless, there is a continuous divide that exists between international standards and local social and political facts. Patriarchal systems, religious fundamentalist interpretations, and socio-political instability restrict the realization of treaty obligations (Rehman, 2021). As in the case of Pakistan, the country is obliged by CEDAW, women are still underrepresented in political institutions, have little access to property rights due to legal and cultural constraints, and suffer extensive gender-based violence, such as honour killings, domestic violence, and forced marriages (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Zaman, 2018). Along the same lines, the blasphemy laws enshrined in Sections 295-B and 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code stipulate severe penalties, including liability of death, for committing an offense that is deemed blasphemous. Although such laws are meant to safeguard religious sensitivities, they are often abused against religious minorities and those with little bargaining power, which is tantamount to violating the freedoms of thought, conscience, and expression as stipulated in ICCPR (International Commission of Jurists, 2015; Malik, 2002).

Moreover, the rights of minorities are still not covered properly. Ahmadis are treated as non-Muslims by law, characterized by systematic discrimination and social/cultural ostracization despite the provisions of religious freedom in the Constitution (Yusuf, 2012). As the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has continuously reported, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Shia Muslims have consistently faced violence in the form of mob violence, forced conversions, and discriminatory killings (HRCP, 2021). These trends indicate the mismatch between the international commitments of Pakistan and the national human rights situation, which is informed by the socio-cultural practices, political interests, and failure of the expert authority to ensure such norms (Hussain, 2017). Such complex measures must address this gap as the development of the legal framework, empowerment of human rights institutions, building awareness through anti-discrimination education, and aligning local laws and policies with international obligations and agreements (ICJ, 2015; Rehman, 2021). It is not just combining these efforts up to treaty obligations but also creating a society with inclusive universal human rights that embraces human dignity and non-discrimination to the norms of human rights as set forth by international will.

Historical Evolution of Human Rights Discourse in Pakistan

The Pakistani experience of human rights discourse can be described as a complex intertwining of colonial history, constitutionalism, dictatorship, judicial activism, international commitments, and the struggle of civil society.

At its independence in 1947, Pakistan had inherited the colonial system of law and administration that had greater interests of the state than the interests of individuals (Newberg, 1995). According to the Objectives Resolution of 1949, Pakistan was dedicated to democracy and the basic rights in an Islamic setting, enshrining a conjunctive ideology of both universal rights and Islamic projections (Khan, 2005). Equality in the face of law, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion were the first principles to be codified in the 1956 Constitution. Nevertheless, the same guarantees were weak at the practical level owing to political instability. Martial law in 1958 under General Ayub Khan overrode the Constitution enacted in 1956 to be replaced with the Constitution of 1962 that introduced a cautious form of democracy based on a presidential type of system. Preventive detention legislation and denial of freedom of political speech undermined the constitutional protection of civil liberties (Ziring, 1971; Shafqat, 1997).

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, under whose leadership the 1973 constitution was promulgated, restored parliamentary democracy and had a very detailed chapter on fundamental rights. But with the declaration of martial law by General Zia-ul-Haq in 1977, several democratic progressions were erased. The Hudood Ordinances, blasphemy laws, and Qisas and Diyat laws were introduced as part of Zia's Islamization drive and institutionalised religious and gender discrimination (Lau, 2006). The contemporary human rights discussion at the time was dominated by states executing a policy of widespread censorship, moral policing, discouragement of female roles in the social sphere, and persecution of religious minorities, including the Ahmadis (Jahangir & Jilani, 1990; HRCP, 2022). Activism of civil society again took place during the democratic interlude of 1988-1999. The civil society groups, such as the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), were recording human rights abuses, launching gender justice movements, and advocating for legal reforms (HRCP, 2022). The legislative advancement had consisted of efforts to overturn the discriminatory laws, but the deeply rooted religious conservatism and unreliability of the politics restrained the development (Weiss, 1999).

The human rights trajectory of General Pervez Musharraf in 1999-2008 can be defined by paradox. His government signed core international agreements that include CEDAW (1996) and ICCPR (2008), as well as enacted legislation like the Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act 2006 to alleviate the effects of the Hudood Ordinances (Bari, 2015). Nonetheless, the civil liberties were impaired by enforced disappearances, restrictions on the freedom of the press, and militarization of the counterterrorism efforts in Balochistan and the tribal areas (International Crisis Group, 2009). The reestablishment of democracy in 2008 highlighted major reforms in law. The 2010 amendment to the constitution, the 18th amendment, re-established parliamentary supremacy, enhanced provincial autonomy, and fundamental rights were re-established (Waseem, 2012). Another progressive law passed by Pakistan included the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2010, Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2016 (against honour killings), and Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act 2011 (Human Rights Watch,

2023). Nonetheless, the situation in terms of human rights in Pakistan was ambiguous between 2013 and 2022. National Action Plan (NAP) against terrorism (2014) resulted in military courts that tried civilians, posing a problem of fair trials (International Commission of Jurists, 2016). Suppression of dissent, enforced disappearances, and limitation of the media worsened, especially in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Amnesty International, 2021). Religious minorities continued to be the targets of blasphemy laws, and efforts to forcefully convert Hindu and Christian girls resulted in both domestic and international condemnation in Sindh and Punjab (HRCP, 2022).

However, some developments towards progressive ideas have also been established. In 2023, to oversee the infringement of minority rights, the Sindh Minorities Rights Commission Act was enacted in the Sindh Assembly (HRCP, 2023). The Aurat Marches, organised annually by women's movements, are still emphasising the call for gender justice, reproductive rights, and the elimination of gender-based violence (Ali, 2024). Conservative backlash increased when, in 2024, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of securing the rights of transgender persons by upholding the provisions of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 (Dawn, 2024). Moreover, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in early 2025 at the UN Human Rights Council emphasizes the intentions to enhance the freedom of expression, further empower the National Commission for Human Rights, and harmonize negative developments in countering terrorism with human rights standards. Nevertheless, anti-triviality is observed by the longstanding political instability, religious fanaticism, ineffective rule of law, and economic disasters that limit the capability of the state to deliver rights to the citizens (UNHRC, 2025).

Women's Rights in Pakistan

Women's rights in Pakistan are related to the legal, social, economic, and political freedoms and rights of women as equal citizens of Pakistan, as pronounced in the Constitution and provided by international human rights law. Nevertheless, these rights rely on a compound interrelation of international conventions, domestic laws, cultural values, and patriarchy. The rights of women in Pakistan are a multi-dimensional issue as it encounters controversial practices like sexist legislation, sexual violence, lack of freedoms, and direct involvement in decision-making, at the same time as it experiences enlightening practices, legislative changes, and counteraction to the discriminatory systems. Notwithstanding the constitutional pledges and international commitments, quite a number of challenges are experienced by women in Pakistan. These are variations between the international standards and the local realities, in such a way that global standards that promote gender equality are not fully practiced in the country. The right of women is further limited by legal and cultural barriers, and the patriarchal tradition and the discriminatory laws uphold the disparity. One of the modern forms of grave violation of women's rights continues to be the violence perpetrated towards them in different forms, viz., domestic violence, honour killing, and sexual harassment that are as under.

Gender Equality in International Norms

Gender equality is an extremely significant concept that international human rights systems support. The most important international agreement explicitly devoted to the rights of women is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which offers a broad definition of discrimination and obliges its state parties to eradicate discrimination of every kind (United Nations, 1979). In 1996, Pakistan ratified the CEDAW, although with reservations, and as such, committed to the enforcement of the provisions in local law and policy (UN Treaty Collection, n.d.). Moreover, Pakistan is a signatory of higher value human rights covenants like the International Covenant on Civil and political rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on social, economic and cultural rights (ICESCR), which have direct commitments of non-discrimination in terms of sex and equality before the law (UN General Assembly, 1966a; 1966b). Moreover, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), in spite of the fact that it is not legally binding, establishes normative principles, which guide the constitutional development in Pakistan, and their implementation on the international level (United Nations, 1948). Such formal ratifications notwithstanding, international monitoring agencies have regularly reported on implementation gaps and inconsistencies between international commitments and what is happening locally in Pakistan whether when it comes to family law, inheritance or in the treatment of crimes and offenses where cultural and religious interpretations carry more weight than international practices (Shirkat Gah, 2020; Zia, 2017).

Legal and Cultural Barriers to Women's Rights

Despite Article 25 of the Pakistani Constitution, which promises equality before law, equality of protection, in practice, there are limitations to women's rights as enshrined in various laws and even cultural practices. The Ordinances on adultery offenses (Hudood ordinances 1979) merged the borders between adultery and rape, which resulted in the miscarriage of justice of rape victim's incapable of getting four male eyewitnesses (Human Rights Watch, 1999). Though some of it was reformed in the framework of the Women Protection Act (2006), it is still implemented in a discriminatory way due to patriarchal views of courts (Ali, 2014). Legislations like the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (1961) offer some protection, such as the need to seek approval for polygamy, but implementation is lax (Khan, 2018). Examples of cultural barriers are the norms of patriarchy, male guardianship, and conservative translation of purdah, restricting the freedom of movement, schooling, and economic activities of women (Critelli, 2010). Rural communities have not been responsive to the legal minimum ages of marriage, as the issue of early and forced marriage continues to occur (Ali & Gavino, 2008). In addition, there is low political participation. Women have 60 reserved seats in the National Assembly, and although they contribute and have a far-reaching control in this house, this is hampered by the patriarchies in parties, funding shortage, and socio-cultural divisive (Bari, 2010). Institutional misogyny affects female gender justice in the police, the judiciary, and the bureaucracy, even in the cities.

Violence Against Women

Pakistan has a multi-dimensional form of violence against women. Domestic violence can be experienced by a huge number of women; a national survey found that more than 70 percent of married women were abused by their husbands either physically or psychologically (Ali & Gavino, 2008). Nevertheless, with the implementation of the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2013 (Sindh) and corresponding provincial legislation (as well as other initiatives recognizing Domestic Violence as a significant issue), no actual enforcement is performed because of the lack of institutional capacity and social stigma (HRCP, 2021). There is still a depressing reality of honour killings where women are killed on the grounds of dishonouring the family. The Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences in the Name or Pretext of Honour) Act, 2016, eliminated the family pardons under such an eventuality, but still hundreds are murdered annually because of the weaknesses in the enforcement and the social inclusion (Zia, 2017). Rape, sexual harassment, and other sexual violence are underreported because of the victim-blaming, the fear of reprisal, and due barriers to the procedure. It is because the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, does not cover this issue, but gives legal recourse against workplace harassment, yet many women do not raise a complaint through a lack of awareness and fear of ruining their reputation (Mahmood, 2020). Cyberbullying has also taken the form of an increasing menace, and there is a lack of institutional strength to manage the matters of online abuse (Shirkat Gah, 2020).

Recent Reforms, Activism, and State Responses

Though somewhat hindered by the structural aspects, recent decades have seen a gradual change in the status quo, coupled with the increasing popularity of women's rights activism. The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Ordinance, 2020, and Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences Relating to Rape) Act, 2021, added special courts, reduced the time to trial, increased the severity of punishment suffered by rapists, and included protection of the identity of raped victims (Government of Pakistan, 2021). Aurat March, which has taken place every year since 2018, has become an influential voice that demands reproductive rights, equal equality in the workplace, and the elimination of gender-based violence, although it has faced the opposition of conservative layers (Mahmood, 2020). Programmes just like BISP (Benazir Income Support Programme) initiated by the government, still target women and are known to empower people at the household level thereby enhancing economic empowerment of women (Jamal, 2010). Also, there exists a National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), which is an oversight and advisory body to policy implementation regarding matters of gender, but in case of its suggestion, it is not always enforceable (Bari, 2010). Civil society organisations still play a major role in law advocacy, shelter provision, and awareness gap created by the state institutions.

Rights of Religious and Ethnic Minorities

The minorities in Pakistan are religious and ethnic, and they are a sizeable but a minority group in Pakistan. Religious minorities are composed of Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Ahmadis, Parsis, etc., whereas the ethnic ones

include Baloch, Pashtun, Hazara, Sindhi, Saraiki, and a smaller linguistic group (HRCP, 2023). The national identity of Pakistan, based on the Islamic ideology, had long been the area of conflict between the majority Sunni Muslims and the minority, as they contributed to social exclusion and the development of discriminatory policies and violence.

Constitutional Provisions and International Obligations

The fundamental rights are ensured in the Pakistan Constitution to every citizen irrespective of religion or ethnic group. Article 20 guarantees the freedom of religion, which provides a person with the right to profess, practice, and spread his faith (Government of Pakistan, 1973). Article 36 prescribes that the state is under an obligation to protect the rights of minorities, whereas Article 25 has to follow equality before the law. Moreover, there are reserved seats in the legislative assemblies reserved for non-Muslims to represent them. Pakistan is party to a series of major human rights treaties at the international level, by which it is bound to defend religious freedom, non-discrimination, and minority rights, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (UN OHCHR, 2024). These obligations are further reaffirmed in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992), which focuses on the need to protect minority identities, cultures, and security by the state. Nevertheless, the gap between constitutional promises and practices is very big. The discriminatory acts present in the legal system of Pakistan go against it since the Second Amendment (1974) and Ordinance XX (1984) are declared against Ahmadis and their religious activities criminalised (Khan, 2022).

Situation of Religious Minorities (Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, Sikhs)

1. Christians and Hindus

The Christians and Hindus are the two largest religious minorities in Pakistan, and they are primarily located in Punjab and Sindh, respectively. They are socially discriminated and economically marginalised, in addition to being susceptible to coerced conversions, though they have constitutional provisions. Young Hindu and Christian girls are reported to be kidnapped, forcefully converted, and married to Muslim men, especially in rural Sindh, and there are hardly any courts being heard (HRCP, 2023). Christians are equally assassinated due to charges of blasphemy, resulting in mob beatings, expulsions, or murder. As an illustration, the aftermath of blasphemy claims provoked an attack in 2013 on Joseph Colony in Lahore, where many Christian abodes were destroyed (Amnesty International, 2023).

2. Ahmadis

Ahmadis are the most persecuted people as far as the law is concerned in Pakistan. In 1974, it was declared non-Muslim, and they remained criminalised in 1984 under Ordinance XX, and they are forbidden to be identified as Muslims, to use any Islamic terms, and to spread their faith (Yousaf, 2021). Ahmadis' graves and mosques will be desecrated, and their voting would be separated using different voter lists, which would be against the equality rights stipulated in ICCPR.

3. Sikhs, Parsis, and others

Sikhs are a small group; they struggle with their property rights, lack of education in the native language, and the security of religious grounds despite the fact that the Kartarpur Corridor is on the positive path (International Crisis Group, 2023). A relatively powerful community, such as the Parsis, is becoming less numerous through emigration, population fall, and a lack of efforts to preserve their culture.

Ethnic Minorities and Identity-Based Exclusion

1. Baloch

Baluchistan is the most backwards province of Pakistan, even after being blessed with abundant resources. The sources of grievance are political marginalisation, economic deprivation, forced disappearances, and security forces' extrajudicial killings in the name of such counterinsurgency measures (International Crisis Group, 2023). Alienation is carried by a lack of local control and the militarisation of government systems.

2. Pashtun

The concern of Pashtuns, especially in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and former FATA territories, addresses all the issues of displacement, ethnic profiling, arbitrary detention, and the absence of political representation (Yousaf, 2022). As a counter response, Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) has risen and has been demanding constitutional rights and the abolition of extrajudicial killing and demining of tribal lands.

3. Hazara

The sectarian killings of the Hazara Shia community in Quetta have plagued the community since the 60s. This has prompted extremist attacks that have caused ghettoisation, extreme mobility constraints, and psychological crisis associated with fear and trauma (HRCP, 2023). Even with the increased security measures, the community is susceptible to attacks because there are no active counter-extremist policies.

Recent Developments and Gaps in Policy Implementation

Over the past few years, Pakistan has seen several policy initiatives and judicial efforts to safeguard the rights of the religious and ethnic minorities, but there still exists a huge gap in implementation. One case in point was the Supreme Court verdict of 2014, whereby the federal and provincial governments were ordered to form a National Council of Minorities to keep an eye on their rights. The ruling included the orders to establish special police forces tasked with guarding places of worship, proposed reforms of the curriculum to foster religious harmony, and ordered the development of a policy that would serve to dampen the hate speech against minorities (Supreme Court of Pakistan, 2014). The transformative potential of the measure has not fared better with the proposed National Council of Minorities not being initiated with enough autonomy and resources, and the practice of security in places of worship being uneven, with reported attacks on the religious sites of minority communities in various provinces. The efforts to enact some minority protection laws, especially the anti-forced conversion laws, have also been repeatedly blocked. In Sindh, bills against forced conversion of underage girls, especially those of Hindu and Christian communities, have been rejected or

blocked many times because of their opposition by conservative religious parties, saying such bills hurt the Islamic values of conversion (HRCP, 2023). Punjab has also not been able to consider complete legislation against forced conversion. Such legislative backlog contributes to the vulnerability of minority girls who continue to suffer the risk of being abducted, converted to religion against their will, and forced into marriage without much legal redress.

Moreover, Pakistan launched the National Action Plan (NAP) in 2014 to fight against terrorism and extremism, and it has been criticised that the implementation of the National Action Plan used to fight against terrorism and extremism should have been done more effectively to combat religious extremism of the minorities (Amnesty International, 2023). The NAP targets millions of militant outfits, which pose a direct threat to state security and pay no attention to interest groups that are conducted through hate speech, that incite violence and social exclusion of minority groups. As a result of this, although there has been a curtailment of some extremist networks, there are still no repercussions for everyday religious discrimination, the vigilantism upon blasphemy, and intimidation of minority groups. Policy changes to include minorities in political decision-making, to improve their social and economic standing, and to remove hate rhetoric are not unified into a national strategy, but rather applied consistently at a provincial level.

Blasphemy, Blasphemy Laws, and Human Rights

There is a long history of blasphemy laws in Pakistan, which have given rise to serious human rights concerns both on international and national levels. Although such laws seem noble in the name of guarding religious feelings, they have been misused many times to breach core rights and encourage the usage of vigilante action as well as threaten the existence of religious minorities and those speaking out in civil society.

Legal Framework and Context in History

Pakistan takes its roots in the British Indian Penal Code of 1860, where the British introduced the law to control riots amid religious groups under the provision of 295 (protection of places of worship) (Cheema & Gilani, 2021). These provisions were, however, limited in scope and intent. It was in the Islamization policies of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) that the Islamization policies extended not only offences relating to heresy but also established Section 295-B in 1982 (desecration of the Quran, life imprisonment) and 295-C in 1986 (derogatory remarks against Prophet Muhammad, death penalty mandatory or life imprisonment) (Yusuf, 2012). These amendments formalised a more rigid and retributive system that was easily pitted as an instrument of religious and personal vendettas, with no corresponding check against falsely made accusations.

Human Rights Criticism at an International Level

The international bodies that have harshly criticised the legislation of blasphemy in Pakistan are international bodies under human rights, are accusing the government related to Pakistan in violation of violating freedom of expression and freedom of religion as stipulated in the international instruments including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

(ICCPR) (UN Human Rights Committee, 2011). The laws are disproportional in terms of punishment, do not demand intent, and do not block malicious prosecution. The freedom of expression is contained in Article 19, and the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is contained in Article 18 of ICCPR; the blasphemy laws violate these rights as criticism of religion or peaceful expression of beliefs is criminalized (Amnesty International, 2016).

Effects On Freedom of Religion and Equity of Minorities

The introduction of blasphemy laws is resulting in a large number of abuses. Religious minority groups, especially Christians, Ahmadis, and Hindus, are overrepresented in the cases of the allegation, usually to hash out personal or business enmity (ICJ, 2015). Even the allegation of blasphemy can trigger mob violence and lynching, and vigilantism since the police and judicial system are yet unable to protect because they fear retaliation by extremists (HRCP, 2020). Additionally, the laws have a chilling effect on civil society and restrict academic freedom, inter-religious dialogue through limiting religious freedom, and send a message of fear and self-censorship to the minority population and liberal Muslims.

Pegged on Cases of High Profiles and Legal Workouts

A couple of high-profile cases give testament to the serious ramifications of blasphemy laws on human rights. Christian woman Asia Bibi was condemned to death in 2010 on Section 295-C because of an argument with Muslim colleagues. Although she was later exonerated by the Supreme Court in 2018 because of insufficient evidence, she had spent the past ten years almost in solitary confinement and had death threats even after being released (Mahmood, 2018). In the same sense, former Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer was shot to death in 2011 by his bodyguard because he supported the freedom of Asia Bibi and spoke against the laws of blasphemy (Shaikh, 2019). These are some of the cases that depict a more comprehensive picture of how legal provisions, intolerance, and extremist ideologies can be interconnected to destabilize justice, embolden violence, and instill fear in society.

Freedom of Expression and Media Rights

Media rights and freedom of expression are still very important but debatable areas in the human rights scenery in Pakistan. The freedom of speech and press is guaranteed by the Constitution of Pakistan (which is set under Article 19); however, that may be restrained by the reasonableness of such restrictions made in the name of Islam, security, and public order (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973, Article 19). Such generalized warnings have eased systematic media control and censorship. In Pakistan, censorship occurs in the form of direct state actions, informal pressure, and regulatory limitations. PEMRA, established under the PEMRA Ordinance 2002, has been accused of exceeding its mandate by banning, preaching show-cause notices and suspending channels that are critical of the government or security establishment (Rehmat, 2021). The journalists have been threatened, intimidated, kidnapped, and attacked, and the result has been self-censorship. According to Reporters Without Borders (2024), Pakistan is listed as a country with severe limitations to press freedom, due to the killings of journalists without punishment and the

disruption by harassment of the journalists through legal charges, cybercrime manifesting the laws, and sedition allegations.

Online liberties are also curtailed. Acclaimed to reduce the level of cybercrimes, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 was repeatedly used to stifle dissident voices, suppress online criticism, and criminally investigate journalists and activists based on their generalized interpretation of the rather unspecific terms of fake news or defamation (Shmyla, 2022). This not only subverts the freedom of expression but also widens the democratic accountability by suppressing the capacity of the citizens to challenge the state institutions, organise to promote human rights, or to seek changes. These curbs violate international standards of human rights, one of them being Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of which Pakistan is a party. The United Nations Human Rights Committee (2011) has underlined that other limits on freedom of expression have to be necessitated, justified, and presented comprehensively, which, in the tradition of the regulation process in Pakistan, is never fulfilled. Consequently, threats to media freedom in Pakistan weaken democratic governance, erode transparency, and hinder the protection of human rights overall (Rahman, 2019).

Socio-Economic Rights and Structural Inequalities

The area of socio-economic rights is an underlying part of the human rights discourse, and it addresses the right to education, the right to health, access to clean water, decent housing, and the right to employment. Structural inequalities based on history, politics, and economics in Pakistan are the main factors that negatively affect the realisation of these rights. Education is also highly stratified in terms of classes, gender, and geography. Even though the Constitution, namely Article 25-A, states the right to free and compulsory education to all children between the age of 5 and 16, over 22.8 million children or the vast majority of the nationwide number (including girls) do not have access to school because of poverty, cultural limitations, and a lack of infrastructure (UNICEF, 2022). This educational disadvantage is contributing to intergenerational poverty and limitations in the ability to exercise their civil and political rights.

On the same note, poor public healthcare systems, inadequate government expenditures (less than 2 percent of GDP), and disproportion between the rural and urban settings undercut health rights. The levels of mortality among women and infants are high, and the rural population of women encounters considerable difficulties in receiving quality reproductive services because of the absence of facilities and qualified workers (World Bank, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic also demonstrated the structural weaknesses in the Pakistani health system, and the poor were more affected. The capacities of clean water and sanitation are also very uneven. Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources (PCRWR) also indicates that 80 percent of drinking water in Pakistan is unsafe because it is polluted and it has very poor infrastructure (PCRWR, 2021). Rural communities and slum dwellers in urban slums are the most affected, bringing about water-borne diseases and health crises that cut

across the line of poverty. Informalisation of labour, precarious working contexts, and absence of social protection are characterised by employment rights. More than three-quarters of the Pakistani workforce are involved in the informal labour force, which has very little access to minimum wages, job security, and health insurance (ILO, 2022). Gendered socio-economic inequalities are further cemented by the overrepresentation of women in informal, unpaid labour and agricultural labour.

Besides, there is a rights deprivation due to the urban-rural divide. Cities, on the other hand, possess better services, display appalling inequalities in the form of slum dwellings that lack basic accommodations and basic amenities, whereas rural regions experience systematic neglect, lack of infrastructure, and lack of land. The propensity towards feudal land holding systems and the established patronage relationships also inhibit fair socio-economic growth, with poor people having few bargaining powers, and justice being out of reach (Gazdar, 2007). In general, the socio-economic rights in Pakistan are not only limited by a dearth of resources, but also due to the structural inequalities that exist in the economic and political systems of governance. The inequalities contravene international obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which Pakistan is a signatory which stipulates that socio-economic rights must be progressively realised with non-discriminatory regard.

Tensions Between Global Norms and Local Realities

One of the ongoing problems in Pakistan is the tension that exists between the universal human rights norms and local socio-cultural realities. The tension is that the argument on cultural relativism versus universalism in the discourse of human rights lies at the centre of it. Universalists believe in the existence of human rights; they are universal since they apply to all human beings irrespective of culture, religion, and political system as stipulated in documents including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations, 1948). Cultural relativists, in their turn, believe that rights and ethical norms should be interpreted through the prism of a particular culture, religion, and historical background, and that one should be cautious of applying the Western-based concepts to any non-Western society (Donnelly, 2013). Cultural relativist in Pakistan the cultural relativistic arguments tend to be raised in opposition to international criticism of human rights, especially that of women, blasphemy, and minority protection. Resistance based on religion lies in the fact that Islamic traditions offer a complete world of morality and law that is better than international conventions. As an example, follow, the adoption and enforcement of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has been hampered by resistance because the convention is perceived to be against Islamic family laws and gender roles (Jilani & Ahmed, 2004).

In addition, these tensions are also influenced by the political resistance. The issue of human rights reform is normally framed as an external agenda that is a danger to national sovereignty, culture and religious practice thus whipping public sentiment against reforms. The deepening of this difficulty has

been the politicization of religion in which the religious parties and the conservatives associate more universal campaigns of human rights with blasphemy or immorality (Shaheed, 2010). In practice, such tensions hamper the process of rights-based reforms. As an example, when an effort was made to reform the Hudood Ordinances or even bring in acts to prevent forced marriage or conversion of children, it was blocked or stalled under the pressure of these religious and political forces despite the treaty requirements of Pakistan (HRCP, 2020). This is the way the local power systems utilize the cultural and religious discourses to sustain the social hierarchies and oppose the reforms that undermine the traditional arrangements of the local balance of power (Merry, 2006).

Role of Civil Society and Human Rights Activism

The role of the civil society in Pakistan has been instrumental in enhancing human rights even when challenged by the state, socio-cultural opposition as well as the threats posed by extremist groups. Such activism involves non-governmental organizations, legal practitioners, media professionals, human rights advocates as well as grass-root groups, which unite together in an effort to raise awareness, offer legal support, advocate legislative changes and oppose rights abuses both in law and the community. The human rights organizations (NGOs) like Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), Aurat Foundation, and Shirkat Gah have been recording the rights violations, fighting to change the legislation, and assisting the marginalized section of society, i.e., women, religious minorities, bonded laborers, and transgender persons (HRCP, 2020). Their reports and campaigns also played a key role in ensuring that the human rights concerns remain on the national and international radar, although they have been accused of propagating the so-called Western political agendas or getting shut vulnerability to an increasingly strict regulation of NGOs (ICG, 2019). Legal networks (and lawyers) have also played a great role in the protection of rights especially in terms of public interest litigation. A case in point is the Lawyers Movement (2007-2009) when the civil society, lawyers and the judiciary opposed the military authoritarianism to reclaim their judicial autonomy (Khan, 2014). Moreover, human rights lawyers have contested discrimination laws, represented those accused of blasphemy, and sought rights of the imprisoned even at the threat of death, isolation in society and lapse of practice (International Commission of Jurists, 2015).

Journalists, academics, and activists are human rights defenders (HRDs), who keep raising awareness concerning such issues as enforced disappearance, extrajudicial murder, gender-based violence, and religious discrimination. Nonetheless, HRDs in Pakistan are dealing with significant threats, harassment, enforced disappearance, and assassinations on the part of state and non-state actors (Amnesty International, 2020). One of the examples is that activists, who deal with missing persons in Baloch, or minority rights, are often intimidated to quash the voices that speak against them (HRW, 2021). The bottom-up movements play an important role in interpreting the rights into local contexts. Rural women groups in the Punjab, bonded labour movement in Sindh and

student movements to demand academic freedom confront structural inequality on their very doorsteps (Shah, 2014). Where national NGOs and urban activists develop legal and policy frameworks, the local movements reforge norms in an upside-down fashion and steep issues of justice in day-to-day struggles. Nevertheless, working against the repression of human rights activism or the state counter-strategies, censorship, or co-optation of civil society spaces, a development in activism is still present in Pakistan. According to scholars, there must be synergy between policy advocacy and grassroots mobilization to eliminate deep-rooted systems of power to achieve lasting transformational change (Bano, 2012). In addition, global networks assist the local organizations by steadfastly broadcasting their message to the other parties of the world, essentially coercing the state to comply with their international commitments (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

Pakistan's International Human Rights Reputation

The situation regarding human rights in Pakistan has a substantial impact on the international image of the country, making it affect its political status in international affairs, trade, and multilateral groupings. Regular reporting, as with the reports of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, is always characterized by the lack of adherence to enforced disappearances, misinterpretation of laws on blasphemy, gender-based violence, and restrictions on freedom of expression (UNHRC, 2017). Although numerous UPR recommendations were accepted, the practical commission is limited and, in most cases, is restrained by political, religious, and security reasons (ICG, 2019). Furthermore, the membership status of Pakistan in the UN Human Rights Council has not gone very well. As much as it plays the role of a member and raises its voice against the issues of Islamophobia, Palestine, and Kashmir, it is also alleged to be criticized due to its abuse of domestic rights. These inconsistencies diminish its ethical channels of global stature in the discussion of human rights (Yusuf, 2020).

The case also overlapped with human rights issues in Pakistan as the Pakistani Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey-listing, 2018-2022, concerned the country over counterterrorism funding and tackling extremist groups, including the issues of human rights. As FATF has only primary concerns with financial systems, there was a global discussion according to which the inaction of Pakistani authorities against extremist groups was associated with the full scope of the human rights situation in the country, such as the persecution of minorities and violent extremism (FATF, 2022). Compliance with financial issues was not the only requirement to come off the grey list, but a sign of political will to fight against violent non-state actors, who stood under ideological or religious labels. Moreover, since 2014, Pakistan has been enjoying the status of the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), which the European Union awards to other nations based on the implementation of so-called 27 international conventions that cover core human rights treaties, employment, environmental protection, product safety, among others (European Commission, 2020). Prolonged civil space, restrictions on the

freedom of the press, violence in connection with allegations of blasphemy, and the absence of law reform in favor of women and minorities are issues that are evoked over and over again in EU monitoring reports regarding potentially problematic proceedings under GSP+ in Pakistan about textile exports (European Parliament, 2020). Pakistan is under the threat of losing its GSP+, which can also be used as a foreign policy instrument to make Pakistan comply better. In bilateral relations, human rights are some of the factors that dictate interactions with Western democracies. The US has expressed apprehensions about the violation of religious freedom in Pakistan, making it a country on the Special Watch List by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 due to acts of violation against minority groups like Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, and Shias (US Department of State, 2021). On the same note, Canada, the UK, and Australia most often refer to human rights in their diplomatic speeches, laws, or regarding refugees, and by development observations of Pakistan. According to critics, although international pressures made the Pakistani elite reluctant to ensure that they have a minimum rights standard, usually geostrategic interests trumped human rights conditionalities. In an example, US security partnership or Chinese investment under CPEC are rarely tied with compliance with human rights (Small, 2015). However, constant worldwide focus on the rights record of Pakistan determines its international legitimacy, access to markets, and bargaining power in foreign diplomacy.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Institutions

Pakistan needs to focus on the full legal overhauls and consolidating institutional frameworks as part of an effective strategy against the issues of human rights. This involves repealing or amending any discriminatory laws, enforcing acts that safeguard women, minority groups, and other vulnerable groups, and criminalising acts like enforced disappearances. Incorporating human rights, strengthening institutions such as the National Commission for Human Rights by providing sufficient finances, operational independence, and a wider scope, should teach them how to monitor, report, and punish violations without government interference. Also, it is important to set up autonomous commissions and monitoring organs like minorities rights commissions, women's commissions and torture preventive committees that have statutory bodies. These committees ought to be made of technicians, activists and community spokespersons as a way of credibility, victim-astuteness and confidence by the population in the judicial system.

Promoting Human Rights Education and Awareness

A viable social transformation requires the promotion of human rights education. The inclusion of human rights, gender equality, and constitutional rights in the school and madrassa curricula at lower educational stages will create awareness to the young generations and combat extremist discourses. This content should be passed with the help of teacher training courses, which will help stimulate critical thinking. Moreover, television, radio, and digital media campaigns are supposed to create human rights awareness in the

population, criticize discriminatory behaviour, enlighten the citizens of their legal rights and protection accessibility. Local NGOs and civil society organizations are in a better position to establish a network with people at the grassroots level through their community outreach programs to create awareness on rights-based ways of doing things by running campaigns on rights literacy and training of paralegals and organizing village discussion forums to enable all people to become assertive and demand their rights.

Ensuring Protection for Vulnerable Groups

There should be specific efforts taken to safeguard women and minority groups, as well as journalists and activists, because they are still overrepresented among victims of violations of their rights. In the case of women, these important steps should include expanding safe slums, toughening anti-harassment legislation enforcement, and number of female police officers. In case of religious minorities, security of places of worship, intervention of forced conversions, and interfaith harmony processes must be implemented to guarantee safety and equality. Human rights defenders and journalists must have special protection that is enforced in law, rapid response teams created to deal with threats, and media safety training that should be conducted digitally and physically. Such actions will protect the individuals who are brave enough to point out injustices and promote accountability in society.

Enhancing International Cooperation and Compliance

Pakistan ought to intensify its interaction with international human rights mechanisms through reporting to the UN treaty bodies with all due diligence, act on recommendations, as it appears in the Universal Periodic Reviews, and invite independent experts to evaluate its fulfilment and technical assistance. Cooperation with other organisations, including UNDP and UN Women, will lead to the improvement of legislative changes, the development of institutions, and professional education. At regional levels, Pakistan could be more active in taking part in South Asian and OIC programs in the field of human rights, where it could encourage culturally appropriate human rights mechanisms and peer accountability systems. The synchronisation of the national human rights action plans with Sustainable Development Goals and utilisation of the trade incentives such as the EU GSP+ will make sure that the commitments to human rights are translated into direct socio-economic and diplomatic advantages.

The politics of human rights in Pakistan is critically occupied in the combination of international obligations and national socio-political requirements. On the one hand, Pakistan is a party to the most important international human rights conventions, a member of the UN forums, and is interested in the trade and diplomatic advantages of rights observance. Meanwhile, on the one hand, there are still a lot of issues on the path to making these commitments practical, such as discriminatory laws, religious and political opposition to reforms, institutional flaws, and a threat to journalists and human rights defenders. Such contradiction is manifested in several aspects like women rights, minorities, freedom of speech, and the use of enforced disappearances. Although law structures are in place, accepted social

behaviours, political convenience and religious contexts usually hinder application of such laws. The constant abuse of the blasphemy laws, violence against minorities and restrictions to press freedom further dent the international image of Pakistan, making it vulnerable to criticism in forums like the UN Human Rights Council, threatened with trade preferences like GSP+, and puts at stake bilateral relations of countries that place stronger emphasis on human rights in their foreign policy. Going ahead, this gap needs a multi-dimensional elimination. The reinforcement of law and institutions needs to be followed up by the education of human rights, education of the masses and the community methods of getting human rights to become rooted as part of the geographical environment. Ensuring vulnerable populations and actor of civil society are a major element in building trust and creating inclusion development. Besides, Pakistan has to increase its interaction with international human rights mechanisms not just to comply with it, but as a means of technical help, institutional adjustment and societal development. Finally, realigning its domestic realities to its international undertakings not only will enhance the international status of Pakistan but also will put in place an encompassing, equality, and sustainable growth. The rights based approach will mean that it is not purely economic or infrastructural development but development that is based on human dignity and equality, and justice to all the citizens.

FURTHER STUDY

This research still has limitations, so it is still necessary to conduct further research on the topic.

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