

Politics of Human R

Human rights issues have become important in the context of the 'war against terrorism', which is marked by grave violations of fundamental rights and accepted norms of civilised conduct. But, as in other issues of international politics, human rights are also subject to double standards, both by states and civil society.

Three separate but concurrent issues underline this unfortunate reality: the US State Department's annual report recording human rights abuses globally (except within the US), the targeted terrorism in Pakistan which now has developed epidemic proportions and the question of cover-up of the Israeli spies arrested in the US as opposed to continued violations of human rights of Muslims detained without charge since September 11.

The US State Department report, issued on March 4, has criticised Pakistan's human rights record for 2001 and graded it negatively by saying that it "remained poor". It substantiated its critique by referring to the fact that the "police continued to commit serious abuses with impunity, prison conditions remained extremely poor and life threatening, and police arbitrarily arrested and detained citizens".

Predictably, the next day, the Pakistan government responded by terming the American critique "factually inaccurate and unwarranted", and it felt "constrained to reject the assessment of the report about Pakistan", and it even made the rather interesting comment about "the tendency of some states to sit in judgment over others".

The government feels quite happy and satisfied when Washington 'sits in judgment' for its 'bold and courageous steps against religious extremism', even flaunting it here and abroad as a 'certificate' of political support and good behaviour which is viewed as a source of strength, but when Washington criticises some uncomfortable home-truths, it is presumed to be 'unacceptable'. Similarly, the India portions of the US report, which criticise New Delhi's abysmal human rights record in Occupied Kashmir, have been disseminated with satisfaction as if the same source attacking India is okay, but criticising Pakistan is not.

Coinciding with the government's 'rejection' of the US report, a number of incidents broadly corroborated the American critique:

- On March 6, the Lahore High Court Justice Shahid Siddiqui castigated the government for its mass arrest of 900 activists of religious groups saying "What sort of threat the government felt to the solidarity of the country that it blindly arrested the workers by using one order of arrest", adding his 'dissatisfaction with secret agencies report leading to these arrests'. These arrests were part of the 2060 persons detained all over Pakistan pursuant to the 'crackdown on religious extremists' following General Musharraf's January 12 speech, but none has actually been charged as yet in a court of law;

- Notwithstanding these arrests, sectarian terrorism continues unabated with an impunity that is probably without precedent more so under a military regime which is normally assumed to be more 'efficient and tough' on law and order issues. Almost every day, newspapers are filled with reports of targeted terrorism of professionals, with The Nation citing 89 as the number of doctors and professionals murdered by sectarian hit men while Dawn

Mushahid Hussain

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has given the figure of 70. Another case of arbitrary detention and arrest of a citizen is that of Jamat Islami Chief, Qazi Hussain Ahmed. Although released on bail, he is still being tried for fomenting a riot in Lahore on February 20, 1999, on the occasion of Vajpayee's visit, which had been denounced as a 'sell-out' but that case continues to be perpetuated for political purposes;

Similarly, the case of 30 artistes and dancers of Lahore, who were picked up in a police swoop on March 5, on ostensibly promoting 'obscenity and vulgarity' after the government itself allowed and sponsored celebrations of Basant and Spring Festival including sanctioning 'balls' is a travesty of justice since it shows an inconsistency in officialdom's attitudes.

There is merit in the argument that those sitting in judgment must be subject to the same scrutiny on human rights that they apply to others. After September 11, the US administration is guilty of violating the spirit of its own Constitution, laws and universally-accepted norms of international conduct regarding Muslims detained within the US (almost 1000 of them) and prisoners captured from the fighting in Afghanistan who have been transported to Guantanamo Bay in Cuba (almost 500). They have neither been charged nor tried in any court of law nor their legal status defined. Even the war criminals of World War II, who had committed crimes against humanity against the Jews and other peoples, had legal rights including the right to a legal defence and a fair public trial. Slobodan Milosevic, who committed crimes against Muslims in the former Yugoslavia, is getting a fair televised trial under a due legal process, but why are Muslims denied this basic human right in a country that has had the well-deserved reputation of being the repository of freedom, democracy and the rule of law?

The Council on American-Islamic Relations has documented at least 1700 reported cases of profiling on racial and religious lines since September 11, adding that a new law like the USA Patriot Act, "has been used almost exclusively against Muslims and Arabs in America".

Even universal precepts of freedom of press are not

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immune any longer, as the 'war on terrorism' takes precedence over the right to hold a dissenting opinion. Apart from the US official pressure on Qatar to "rein in" Al Jazeera, the Arab world's only independent media network, the Palestinian press too has been targeted. On January 3, 2002, the independent weekly, "Hebron Times" was arbitrarily closed down by the Palestinian Authority, which let it be known that 'CIA officials had recommended the closure of the paper for being overly critical of Israel and US policy toward the Palestinian people'. The Editor of the "Hebron Times", Walid Amayreh, asked somewhat angrily: "It is lamentable that the United States which values press freedom at home is bullying the Palestinian Authority to suppress press freedom in Palestine. What happened to the American First Amendment, or maybe it doesn't apply to non-Americans?"

While innocent Muslims are detained and often vilified and harassed without charge, conversely, the Western press itself has on at least two separate occasions talked of Israeli spies arrested in the US, who have apparently escaped punishment. For instance, the American Fox News TV channel did a four-part story on December 13, 2001, which stated that "Fox News has learned some US investigators believe that there are Israelis again very much engaged in spying in and on the US, who may have known things they didn't tell us before September 11".

The Washington Post first broke the story about detained Israelis in late November, although the Fox story was even more specific:

"There is no indication that the Israelis were involved in the 9/11 attacks, but investigators suspect that the Israelis may have gathered intelligence about the attacks in advance, and not shared it", a startling allegation which was neither picked up by the American media nor ever repeated, since Fox News withdrew it from its web-site a week after airing it.

On March 4, the French daily, 'Le Monde' picked it up quoting another French website, 'Intelligence Online', which said "a huge Israeli spy ring operating in the United States was rolled up by the Justice Department's counter-espionage service", citing "120 Israelis were arrested or deported as a result of the operation".

Such cover-ups only spawn conspiracy-theories as is evident from perceptions in the Muslim World, since a February 26 Gallup Poll of 9 Muslim states found 74% refusing to believe that Arabs had carried out the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Double standards on human rights are not the monopoly of states, whether Muslim or the United States. Pakistan's civil society too maintains a studied silence on this issue, and expresses 'concern' only when it is 'politically correct'. Pakistanis often separate the person from the process, and forget that they may oppose a party or a person politically, but they must uphold his human dignity and values and the inalienable right to a due process.

Credibility will be ensured only if principles rather than partisan politics determine the perspective on human rights. A refreshing exception in this regard is the feisty Irish, Mary Robinson, the UN's Chief Commissioner for Human Rights whose consistent, upfront positions on the rights of the oppressed have won her respect and admiration.

E-mail queries and comments to:
mushahid@nation.com.pk