**The human rights agenda**

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Now that the elections are over, it is time for the new administration to live up to its election promises. They range from popular slogans, like the right to education and right to healthcare, to ambitious ones, like the right to free speech and right to life.

Human rights are the lynchpin of a democratic system. A citizen is at the very core of the concept of democracy and therefore, democratic governments are expected to ensure that every citizen enjoys the rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world, from birth until death. These fundamental rights apply regardless of where you are from, what you believe in or how you choose to live your life.

This is precisely what the National Commission on Human Rights (NCHR) advocates for tirelessly. And it is here to guide the new administration as to how it can best and most effectively achieve this.

The NCHR would like to remind the new government that Pakistan is party to seven out of the nine core international human rights conventions. These lay out the rights each person has as a citizen of the state. Yet, Pakistan has found the implement of these commitments challenging. One such covenant is the United Nations Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Pakistan became a party to the convention in 2010, and its performance was reviewed last year.

The committee repeatedly kept asking the state delegation about when it could expect torture to be criminalised in Pakistan.

Frighteningly, the government of Pakistan is yet to pass a law that explicitly criminalises torture. Police torture is effectively deemed to be an acceptable method of criminal investigation, largely due to lack of resources and training, as well as a pervasive institutional culture that disregards human dignity. Confessions and testimonials obtained under torture are used as the primary form of evidence in order to ‘resolve’ cases expeditiously. These statements in turn result in harsh sentences including life imprisonment and the death penalty.

The NCHR is investigating over 1,500 cases of torture, uncovered by the Justice Project Pakistan, in only one district of Punjab, Faisalabad. We learned of the immense abuse in the area of men, women and children, of the innocent and the guilty. Torture methods range from severe beatings to solitary confinement and sexual violence. The police routinely cover up their actions and the NCHR is working fervently to bring this violence to light. But an important first step to dismantle this culture is to make these practices legally unacceptable.

On March 2015, the Senate unanimously passed the Torture, Custodial Death and Custodial Rape (Prevention and Punishment) Act, 2015. But before this bill can become a law it has to pass the National Assembly and be signed by the president. Since it passed the Senate, the bill had been tabled, but the government, as of yet, has given no indication of opening it up to vote. We hope that the new government will not become another administration to ignore this most critical legislation.

But changing a culture of violence, one that has persisted for decades, is not an easy feat. The NCHR functions on very limited resources and is not financially independent. The government is still to release funds as per Article 23 of the NCHR Act, so that the agency can carry out its mandate effectively.

With the new administration in power, reform of the criminal justice system, a pressing matter for the thousands tortured daily, must become a priority. It is time for people to reap the benefits of democracy, and to judge our leaders on the basis of their performance towards protecting and promoting human rights.

If we are ever to curb police abuse, the new government must pass a comprehensive anti-torture bill. Emulating the successes of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), the government must strengthen the NCHR and make it an independent watchdog to provide relief to those in need. While the NCHR works hard with what it has, to be effective, we must be financially independent.

Torture is a crime by the state against its citizens, and we must correct our transgressions, and at long last, help hold the police accountable for their actions. The NCHR is here to help facilitate the journey to a Pakistan where the rights of our citizens are upheld at all costs.

The writer is the chairman of the National Commission on Human Rights.