**Defending human rights start at home**

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Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi arrived on Sunday night at Islamabad airport after his “very successful diplomacy efforts” for a ceasefire in Gaza. When he spoke to the waiting media, he was the conqueror returned from battle. His admirers were there to shower rose petals on him while shouting their appreciation. The press conference kept up the pretense that the government had played a critical role in the Gaza ceasefire.

Sadly, everyone is well aware of Pakistan’s status in the comity of nations. In fact, we simply were lucky enough to rub shoulders with a handful of high-profile countries that welcomed us to the recent UN General Assembly session on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Great, once again, we efficiently faked our own importance to our own people.

Be that as it may, we must still appreciate the government for their efforts to get Turkey and other countries to raise their collective voice against Israeli atrocities and the violation of human rights in Gaza. Undoubtedly, we are champions of doing this anywhere but here at home.

It is only right and just that we speak out for the children of Gaza. That we cry for their safety as they stand alongside the corpses of loved ones. That we hope they find food and shelter. Yet we must also focus on the plight of our own children who are being raped and subjected to child labour; who starve to death or perish in the absence of medical attention, all under the open sky. While we wipe away the tears of Palestinian and Kashmiri women on the other side of the LoC, we must also spare a thought for our own women, especially those braving extreme conditions far from the metropolises.

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Pakistan is home to multiple longstanding human rights issues. Such as the hundreds of thousand cases pending before the courts. Or else, those missing persons who were taken away extra-judicially. Those who were neither charged nor presented before any court of law; despite Supreme Court orders to the contrary. Some have turned up dead, their bodies found on garbage heaps. Do we not feel the pain and agony of the children whom they leave behind? Minorities are crying out against forced conversions and marriages. Threats to their lives and properties are mounting in the name of blasphemy. Unfortunately, we are unable to put out these flames despite numerous studies and news reports highlighting the situation.

Pakistan established a National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) through the Act XVI of 2012 in accordance with the Paris Principles to comply with international obligations. The preamble to the NCHR outlines the reasons for its creation: “Whereas it is expedient to provide for the creation of the National Commission for Human Rights, for the purpose of promotion and protection of Human Rights as provided in the Constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan and various international instruments to which Pakistan is a state party or shall become a state party.”

The NCHR was established as an independent body directly accountable to Parliament, which receives its financial and performance reports annually. Its primary functions and powers include: “to conduct investigations into allegations of human rights abuses, either on petitions filed by individuals or institutions, or through suo-moto action; review existing and proposed legislation in relation to human rights principles; carry out research and advise on policy matters pertaining to the situation of human rights in Pakistan; review and report on the government’s implementation and monitoring of the state of human rights; make technical recommendations and follow up on the implementation of treaty obligations and develop a national plan of action for the promotion, protection and fulfillment of human rights in Pakistan.” Despite this comprehensive human rights agenda – the NCHR has been dormant since 2019.

The National Commission on the Rights of Child (NCRC), notified on February 28, 2020 under the Act XXXII of 2017. Since then, the NCRC has been facing bureaucratic hurdles. The Commission only managed to secure office premises a few months ago. Its financial and administrative rules are still under development. So, it has no staff, no technical advisors and no funds to do its job. Even its legal framework does not provide for suo-moto authority. One could have no wild guess about the process and the criteria the former federal secretary of the Human Rights ministry adopted to select the irrelevant, retired and, in couple of cases, socially regressive members of the NCRC. They are not getting any financial benefits and salaries, so they are “resting in peace” at their homes except for one or two individuals. Not to worry, they will all receive salaries once the financial rules are approved one fine morning in the near future. One wonders if the ministry will engage in some sort of scrutiny performance before offloading their pay.

It is a similar story with the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), which has been without chairperson for years now. This statutory body was established in July 2000. It is an outcome of the national and international commitments of the Government of Pakistan like Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995; and National Plan of Action (NPA) for Women, 1998.

Why does it suit the government to be a human rights champion at international level before putting its own human rights institutions in order?

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