

# Human rights

Human Rights

WE live in a country where some citizens are clearly more equal than others. Article 25(1) of the Constitution of Pakistan informs us that "All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law." Compare this ideal to the sordid reality on the ground. Article 27(1), which relates to discrimination in services, states that "No citizen otherwise qualified for appointment in the service of Pakistan shall be discriminated against in respect of any such appointment on the ground[s] only of ... religion". Everyone knows how Article 25(1) is flouted in a country where the rich and the connected get away with murder while the underprivileged are routinely implicated in false cases. Let's move on to Article 27(1). If religion poses no hurdle "in the service of Pakistan", why then do applications for government jobs require aspirants to disclose their religion? Is this mere curiosity or something more sinister? A tool perhaps for sidelining the 'undesirable'?

Released on Monday, the annual report of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan makes for depressing reading. According to the HRCP, the human rights situation in Pakistan deteriorated in 2008 despite the installation of a democratic government. The high point: an elected government largely respected the right to freedom of speech. Should we be thrilled by this development?

What else should be expected of a democratic set-up? It hasn't done us any favours. Now to the dark side. 'Honour' crimes, rape and gang-rape, domestic violence, sexual abuse of children, trading women and little girls to settle disputes — that was the Pakistan of 2008. Girls' and boys' schools were blown up, and people who earned the wrath of the Taliban were flogged and even had their throats slit. Bodies were displayed in public squares and graves dug up of people deemed unworthy of a burial.

If the government was unequal to the task in the battlefield, it could have made an effort to right wrongs in parts of the country that are backward but not at war. How much police reform have we seen since the elected government took office? As things stand, the victims of oppression stand in mortal fear of the police and are effectively denied access to justice. How many powerful landlords have been taken to task for presiding over jirgas that order the 'marriage' of six-year-old girls to men in their 40s and 50s to settle 'honour' and blood feuds? If the state cannot subdue the terrorists and the Taliban, it can at least try to enforce the law in areas where its writ could apply if an effort were made. Mindsets that have evolved over generations need to be changed and the battle ahead will necessarily be long. A beginning must be made.