**Human rights in 2021**

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Saturday, Jan 01, 2022

The year 2021 began with families of slain Hazara miners refusing to bury their loved ones unless PM Imran Khan visited them. Their peaceful protest was called an act of “blackmail” by the PM before he eventually visited Quetta.

By the end of the year, in December, a violent mob forced its way inside a Charsadda police station demanding, with a maddening sense of entitlement, that a mentally unwell, blasphemy-accused in police custody be handed over to them. When they couldn’t have their way, they burnt down the police station, vehicles and a number of police posts in the city. This was just a few days prior to the lynching and burning of the Sri Lankan factory manager of a Sialkot industry, and less than two weeks after the release of Tehreek Labbaik’s Saad Rizvi. The government also lifted the ban on the TLP, a group that openly chants slogans calling for murder in the name of religion and has been allowed to incite hatred and violence for years online and offline. This has been the state of human rights for years in Pakistan and, in terms of impunity, 2021 was no different.

The national level notice of the murder of the Sri Lankan national and the perpetrators’ arrest is a mere bandaid, since the root cause of mainstreamed religiously motivated violence keeps festering. Hindu and Ahmadi places of worship as well as graveyards were desecrated; Ahmadi men were target killed; Christian, Hindu and Sikh girls were forcibly abducted and converted. The one good news was the return of Christian minor Arzoo Raja, groomed by a Muslim man in his 40s, to her parents from DarulAman. Civil society and rights experts highlighted how the Islamisation of the Single National Curriculum could further enable religious discrimination in society.

Speaking of impunity, enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions of students and activists continued. Families of the disappeared continued their peaceful campaign for the release of their loved ones. Without parliamentary debate or consultation with families, the draft bill to criminalise enforced disappearances was passed. The Ministry of Interior added section 514, which criminalises civil society and families’ justice-seeking attempts. In Balochistan, a number of the disappeared returned home after years but have remained silent out of fear. The PM met with families of the Baloch disappeared persons, and despite promises, most families are waiting for answers. He also met with the family of the disappeared journalist Muddassir Naru. However, meeting with the PM is not a solution to the crime of enforced disappearances, justice and accountability is.

The year also saw Pakistan’s prime minister making it to the RSF’s list of media predators. Media rights watchdogs assess that the Pakistani press is continuously intimidated by intervention from powerful quarters within the state. For doing their job, journalists were assaulted, fired at, killed and censored brutally. Two citizen journalists were also killed for using their platforms to highlight crimes of influentials in KP and Sindh. The state also continued its hate campaign against critical women journalists. The journalists’ protection bill was hailed as a positive step but its tricky section 6 will enable censorship. Despite criticism, the draconian social media rules were notified with mere unhelpful amendments in October.

Solidarity among various collectives of human rights defenders and political dissidents was seen with suspicion and led to their continuous surveillance and even targeted harassment. Climate and anti-forced eviction activists in Karachi were persecuted for their inclusive protests with Sindhi dissidents, and women’s day protesters were subjected to dangerous hate campaigns on social media and offline, using doctored videos and fabricated accusations. Violence against transgender persons, women, girls, and children continued across Pakistan.

Despite the permissive environment of fear against civil society, citizens across the country continued demanding for their rights. The Pashtun tribe from Janikhel marched with bullet-riddled bodies of four young men asking for protection. After over a month of protest and sit-in, the local administration negotiated with the grieving community in June. Gwadar saw unprecedented protests of men and women marching for livelihoods, healthcare and against illegal fishing. The government eventually accepted the residents’ demands. Students organised for improved and affordable higher education. As we enter the new year, adequate housing remains a key human right concern for Pakistanis. The past year saw thousands in Karachi left homeless due to forced evictions.

Regionally, the takeover of Afghanistan resulted in displacement of Afghans seeking international protection from insecurity and violence. As per the UNHCR, more than 63,000 Afghans entering Pakistan reached out to the agency in 2021, their key concerns being shelter, healthcare, food and livelihood. Pakistan is also a port of departure for the Afghans seeking asylum in other parts of the world and there is further need for streamlining assistance to those crossing over through the country.

The establishment of the new national commissions for human rights and status of women are some silver linings 2021 left us with. However, it remains to be seen how autonomous they will be in helping protect the rights of Pakistanis including the embattled civil society in the face of severely shrunken space.

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