**Human rights on the agenda**

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There are hundreds of political parties in Pakistan and dozens of them are active, but not many have human rights as a major agenda point on their manifestos. It should be one of the primary foci of any political party worth its name to discuss human rights issues and develop a strategy to address them.

In this backdrop, it is a commendable effort by Senator Farhatullah Babar to reactivate the Human Rights Cell of the Pakistan Peoples Party. On June 16, he invited some leading activists and civil society representatives to present their thoughts on human rights issues in the country. Since these issues normally receive short shrift from the mainstream media, perhaps it is worthwhile to recapitulate them for a wider audience. So, here is the gist of what they discussed.

Harris Khalique of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) was the first to share his thoughts. From the outset he clarified that the HRCP is a non-partisan commission that does not support any political party. If any political party does something significant to address human rights issues, the HRCP appreciates that. He lauded the role the PPP has been playing as a relatively inclusive, liberal, and progressive party.

Thanks to its long struggle for democracy in Pakistan, many civil society organizations expect the PPP to play a proactive role in addressing violations of human rights in the country by advocacy, legislation, and developing mechanisms, wherever required.

Harris Khalique underscored the importance of more progressive legislation in the country so that legal obstacles do not hinder any mechanisms to protect human rights. One of the first points he highlighted was the plight of sanitation workers across the country as they work in highly unhygienic working conditions. From job insecurity to a lack of protective gear and from low wages to high health risks, sanitation workers need immediate intervention. He suggested that since the PPP has recently won the mayoral election in Karachi, perhaps it would be a good idea for a dynamic Murtaza Wahab to take up sanitation issues first. If Karachi becomes a role model for best sanitary conditions, it would serve as a guide to other cities and to the rest of Pakistan.

The second issue Harris thought significant was related to the transgender community in the country. He reminded the audience of how the Transgender Act has faced renewed challenges from the religious lobby that wants to revise the Act and deprive the transgender community of their rights.

Religious minorities was the third issue Harris Khalique thought the PPP HR Cell must take up as religious harmony is at risk in the country. All citizens should have a right to live, pray and work as they please and should have equal status as citizens of this country without facing discrimination anywhere – be it their private or public lives.

Iqbal Detho of the Sindh Human Rights Commission (SHRC) was of the view that the PPP HR Cell under the leadership of Farhatullah Babar has potential to work as a bridge between civil society and the government for suitable legislation. Sindh is the only province that has enacted a law to create a provincial human rights commission and that shows a strong political will of the Sindh government to protect human rights.

Iqbal Detho shared with the audience details about how the SHRC is working to ensure compliance of minimum wage standards for all sanitation workers, irrespective of their community, gender, or religion. All municipal administrations must ensure payment of minimum wages to these workers. He also talked about the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act that sets a minimum age of 18 for both boys and girls whereas in Punjab the minimum age for girls is set at 16. Detho explained how the SHRC is trying to follow the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Cedaw) which is an international legal instrument that requires countries to eliminate discrimination against women and girls in all areas.

Another important point that he highlighted was the practice of many marriage contracts (Nikahnama) without the CNIC number of the bride. He suggested that all such documents must have the bride’s CNIC number to ascertain the girl’s age without any ambiguity. In Sindh, the SHRC is trying to make sure that no underage marriage is solemnized without proper documentation. All registered officials who fill out the marriage form must now see the valid CNIC of the bride, without which no marriage can take place. With the transgender community also Sindh is taking a lead in ensuring their protection and rights.

Women’s rights activist Ambreen Ajaib talked about the role the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus has been playing in bringing about women-friendly legislation in the country. For example, in January 2022, Pakistan’s parliament adopted the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Amendment) Act that revised the 2010 Act; expanding the definition of workplaces to include both formal and informal workplaces. She highlighted gender-based violence as a major issue that most women have faced in their lives either physically or psychologically. The Domestic Violence (prevention and protection) Act, 2020 is a safeguard against such violence.

Ambreen considered civil society as a lab and felt the PPP HR Cell can contribute to this lab by presenting a situation to parliamentarians for suitable legislations that parliament should take up. There is a need for a much closer nexus between civil society and political parties especially on human rights issues focusing on gender discrimination. There should be a wider gender lens, she suggested, to scrutinize all laws already in use or about to become laws. Political parties should apply this lens for all legislative matters. Bonded labour was another issue that Ambreen highlighted.

Bubli Malik represented the transgender community and talked in detail about their issues. She was all praise for the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018 that parliament enacted to legally provide equality to transgender people and to safeguard their rights. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018 is a law which legally provides equality to transgender people and safeguards their rights. The law aims to legally recognize transgender people in the country; sadly now the religious lobby is putting pressure on parliament to amend this landmark law by arguing that it contradicts Islamic teachings on gender identity. Bubli Malik is articulate and well-versed in all related issues of the transgender community. She expressed her apprehensions that amending this law will endanger her community.

Zafarullah Khan, an expert on parliamentary affairs, reminded the audience that Z A Bhutto initiated a Human Rights Award that Zambian freedom fighter and president Kenneth Kaunda was supposed to receive; but before the ceremony could take place, Gen Zia staged a military coup to topple the Bhutto government. Many in the audience did not know that there was any such award that Z A Bhutto announced.

Zafarullah talked about how political activists became a target of public lashings and hangings and how the country has suffered gross human rights violations over the years.

Parliamentarian Mohsin Dawar expressed his dismay at human rights violations and the lack of empathy prevalent in society towards the victims of such violations. Asif Khan, president of the Shaheed Bhutto Foundation, Farhatullah Babar, Nafeesa Shah, and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari also spoke about how they see human rights as a significant issue and how the PPP is trying to tackle any violations that take place.

One can hope that other political parties will get a cue from the PPP and activate their own HR cells to protect human rights in Pakistan.

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