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**Re-election to UNHRC**

In the middle of October this year, Pakistan was re-elected as a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council, which works globally for the promotion and protection of human rights and also to address human rights violations around the world.

Pakistan was elected for the fifth time since the establishment of the 47-member UNHRC in 2006, winning a seat after receiving 163 votes in the 193-member General Assembly of the UN.

Pakistan’s victory was not only cheered by the government including the Prime Minister but most importantly by the civil society as well as leading human rights organizations. At this juncture, the civil society organizations while congratulating Pakistan for this victory, asked the government to recall its responsibilities under international human rights law, and the promises accepted and supported on the floor of the UNHRC.

Besides other key initiatives, Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is the most tremendous and pragmatic process which the UNHRC is conducting for the promotion, protection and strengthening of human rights across the world. Throughout the UPR process governments, NHRIs and civil society organizations are provided with a platform to advocate for the promotion and protection of human rights, while interacting with the respective member-state.

Lastly, Pakistan's third UPR was conducted by the UNHRC’s Working Group in November 2017, during which Pakistan received a total of 289 recommendations. Among those Pakistan supported 168 while noting 121 recommendations.

If we evaluate the supported recommendations, they include a recommendation from Portugal asking Pakistan to “take all the necessary measures to ensure that the National Commission for Human Rights is in line with the Paris Principles”.

Disappointedly, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government passed the KP Promotion, Protection and Enforcement of Human Rights (Amendment)Act 2019 which repealed and took away the powers of the KP-Human Rights Directorate to appoint and constitute its regional offices.

Contrarily to the Paris Principles, under the Amended Section 4 of the above law, the regional office has been redefined wherein the respective deputy commissioners have been designated the head of regional office, who shall report to the KP Law, Parliamentary Affairs and Human Rights Department, instead of the Human Rights Directorate. The above-mentioned department has now notified the regional offices, bypassing the KP Directorate of Human Rights and curtailing its mandate and powers for the promotion and protection of human rights.

Similarly, since June 2019, the National Commission for Human Rights has been looking forward to the government for the appointment of its commissioners. And for this reason, since then the NCHR has been practically dysfunctional. Unfortunately, both cases replicate the government primacies for strengthening the human rights institutions.

Likewise, during the third UPR, another recommendation was also supported, requesting “to protect independent journalists and the media against any intimidation or violence, including enforced disappearance”.

In recent days, though, there have been numerous attempts to intimidate and silence independent journalists and media persons; sadly, these incidents are alarmingly increasing and perpetrators are roaming with impunity. The daylight disappearance of Matiullah Jan in Islamabad and the abduction of Imran Ali Syed from Karachi are among those cases where the perpetrators have not been made accountable yet. In addition to these, there have been instances where journalists received life threats or were attacked physically.

There is also a recommendation from Switzerland, demanding Pakistan to “Make enforced disappearance a criminal offence and ensure that all allegations of enforced disappearance and extrajudicial executions are thoroughly investigated and those responsible brought to justice”.

Regrettably, Pakistan hasn’t yet criminalized enforced disappearances and torture as a distinct crime. Still, cases of enforced disappearances and torture have been reported. At the end of October, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (CoIoED) received a total of 6831 complaints of enforced disappearances. Among these, 2083 cases are still under investigation. Although the CoIoED has been able to trace 3761 persons by disposing of 4748 complaints, still the perpetrators’ accountability remains unresolved and their identity stayed as “undisclosed”.

Leading human rights organizations report that custodial torture is still widely practised in the country. We remember the very unfortunate death of Salahuddin in police custody. In another incident, a very disturbing video went viral on social media showing some police officials of the KP Police torturing a young man, forcing him to parade naked and filming his private parts. There have been also reports of torture and excessive use of force against peaceful students protesting for their rights.

Conceptually, the perpetrators of human rights violations are state functionaries or representatives of the state, therefore, to curtail the perpetrators’ impunity, the need for independent and impartial human rights institutions become “imperative”.

In November 2022, the UNHRC will be reviewing the state of human rights in Pakistan in the fourth UPR. It will then be a challenge for the Pakistani government to face the review while carrying contemporary credentials.

Pakistan’s re-election to the UNHRC is important and must be cheered but the real victory would be if the human rights of the people of Pakistan were protected as per the mandate and recommendations of the UNHRC.

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