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**Pakistan and the rights agenda**

A few weeks ago, Pakistani diplomacy, known traditionally for punching above its weight, landed another historic win when Pakistan was elected to a fifth, three-year term at the UN Human Rights Council.

Building upon its earlier tally of 151 votes in 2017, Pakistan received 169 endorsements at the UN General Assembly in a contested election that saw five Asian States vying for four slots at the Council. Nearly 90 percent of the General Assembly membership elected Pakistan to remain at the Council, an endorsement of Pakistan’s sound credentials in promoting universal human rights considered sine qua non for an equitable and just world order.

Historically, Pakistan has been in the forefront of human rights issues, much before the UN Human Rights Council came into being. Although not much talked about, Pakistan’s high profile in multilateral diplomacy has always been acknowledged – a host of landmark international conventions were signed with Pakistan’s active participation or with Pakistan’s lead for their adoption.

First, Pakistani delegate Begum Shaista Ikramullah pushed through Article 16, for the equal rights of women and men, to marry and found a family during the negotiation phase of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights back in 1948, which became Article 16 of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Second, Pakistan co-initiated the 1990 World Summit on Children which led to the landmark Convention on the Rights of the Child. Third, Pakistan was a founding member of the Human Rights Council and remained an active participant in its predecessor, the Commission for Human Rights.

Fourth, Pakistan played a seminal role in ending colonization and securing liberties and rights, including the right to self-determination for peoples under subjugation. Many countries of Africa still remember the staunch support provided by Pakistan to their causes for independence within the halls of the UN as well as at other fora. Pakistan’s delegation at the UN has historically been considered a voice for the voiceless.

Within the Council, Pakistan’s conciliatory role has been appreciated by the West and the Islamic World on the one hand, and the developing and developed world on the other. A consensual approach adopted by Pakistan has more often accrued positive, win-win outcomes from a discourse often characterized by abrasive confrontations, Us-vs-Them and blame-and-shame mindsets, and political point-scoring.

One manifestation of our bridge-building diplomacy is the consensus Pakistan secures in the HRC on the EU’s resolution on freedom of religion and belief and the OIC’s resolution on combating intolerance and discrimination on the basis of religion or belief. Pakistan has steered the work of the HRC to focus on eliminating inequalities within and among states for realization of human rights, and the role of states in responding to pandemics and their socioeconomic consequences in the context of advancing human rights. At a time of growing disparities within and among countries and regions, rising xenophobia and intolerance, and uncertainties stemming from unprecedented health and economic shocks, these strands constitute important pillars of the emerging human rights discourse.

Despite fierce opposition from India, it is due to Pakistan’s advocacy through the HRC and its affiliated mechanisms that there is greater awareness of and sensitization to the egregious humanitarian situation in Occupied Jammu & Kashmir. It is in part due to Pakistan’s efforts that these modern-day avatars of fascism are squarely and visibly on the radar of human rights campaigners, and countries with different cultural backdrops and societal mores are more attuned to the adverse impact of hate speech and disinformation.

Pakistan has always advocated a balanced approach between rights and responsibilities, as enshrined in international human rights law. Contemporary challenges with regard to the right to freedom of expression in the form of hate speech, incitement to violence and propagation of fascist ideologies, underscore the need to strike such a balance. Another vital linkage highlighted frequently by Pakistan is one between human rights and human development. Ultimately, promotion and protection of all human rights is contingent upon inclusive and sustainable development. Pakistan’s balanced perspectives stand in sharp contrast to the ongoing dialectic within the UN system that creates an artificial and uncalled for divide between human rights and human needs.

At the national level, Pakistan is advancing human rights through fresh and more strident legislation for protecting society’s most vulnerable, strengthening institutional frameworks, and shoring up reporting and monitoring mechanisms. Currently, the HRC considers Pakistan as one of the most progressive countries with regard to legislation on the rights of transgender people.

While facing impediments stemming from the country’s peculiar geopolitical circumstances and developmental challenges, Pakistan has neither shied away from engaging international human rights mechanisms proactively and constructively, nor from candidly admitting to gaps, and responding to constructive criticisms in areas that warrant attention. At the core of Pakistan’s efforts at both the international and national planes, is the fundamental Pakistani ethos of an unconditional, all-embracing compassion for humanity. This core value stems from both Pakistan’s ideology grounded in its Islamic moorings as well as societal norms and practices that predate the advent of Islam.

This key conviction animates governmental action in terms of the strong assent on social welfare and looking after the poor and vulnerable, and the resultant prioritization of welfare programmes. It is also evident in the visceral support of the Pakistani civil society to those in distress, whenever a disaster strikes, be it feeding the hungry and dispossessed during the Covid-19 pandemic or rescuing the victims of the earthquake of 2005 and floods of 2011.

At a time when many of the developed countries have closed their doors to refugees and migrants, Pakistan continues to host around three million Afghans, now for more than four decades. From Polish and Bosnian to Rohingya refugees, Pakistan has always been a place of shelter for those escaping persecution.

As Pakistan resumes work at the HRC for another term, an expansive agenda on an array of long-standing and emerging human rights issues awaits in Geneva. Besides the need to continue to draw international attention to various dimensions of human rights violations in Occupied Kashmir, the linkage between corruption; its abetment through safe havens; undermining of the right to development and reversal of illicit financial flows has to be more clearly drawn.

Climate change is now leading to climate disasters. It is impacting both human security and human life, with all its attendant rights and liberties. Pakistan’s billion and ten billion tree tsunami projects and advocacy for climate action have set the ground for a more result oriented and proactive response to climate change including at the HRC.

With the world becoming increasingly reliant on digital technologies; big data driving advances in economies and businesses; and privacy issues coming to the fore, it is imperative that a globally accepted framework outlining cyber rights and responsibilities is put in place. Changing drivers and contexts of trans-national migration flows must take into account the evolving multi-dimensional nature of the problem. Given the pandemic situation, Pakistan must lead the charge in highlighting mental health rights as well as rights of caregivers. Rights of hitherto neglected and marginalized segments of society, notably those with disabilities and transgender persons must now be more effectively spotlighted.

Finally, in a toxic environment of hate and blame, and rising xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia, it is imperative that Pakistan further bolsters its role of a country promoting understanding and bridging differences. With its rich history of eclectic influences, Pakistan is better positioned than most to fulfill this role.

The write is a former ambassador.