**[Conservative anxieties](https://www.dawn.com/news/1613931/conservative-anxieties)**

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AS has become customary, this year’s Women’s Day commemorations, and specifically the Aurat March event, resulted in considerable political and cultural backlash from conservative quarters. However, what made it particularly dangerous this time around was the concerted campaign by religious parties, activists and various conservative journalists to portray the event and event organisers as promoters of blasphemous discourse.

Given Pakistan’s sordid history of violence stemming from such accusations, public authorities cannot afford to stand on the sidelines and allow both wilful misrepresentation of the movement and unfettered propaganda continuously emerging from various organised elements. The safety of organisers as well as the rights of citizens are at stake here.

More broadly, the conflict around advocacy of women’s rights seems to be deepening with each passing year. From a situational perspective, some of this exacerbation is likely associated with the spread of digital media technologies. People are coming into contact with viewpoints and representations of realities that they had very little interaction with previously. Similarly, cultural discourse by organised actors interested in propagating particular ways of seeing the world gains new outlets through Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

This has proven to be true for cultural organisers of all stripes, including progressives who have otherwise faced countless challenges in ‘offline’ organising. Students in most big city universities — not just elite private ones — appear to be more aware of the language of gender equality, for example, and the associated politics around it than they were at any point in the past. Some are supportive, others ambivalent, and many remain hostile.

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But it’s not just growing situational exposure and the faux marketplace-esque features of digital media that are responsible for the heightened anxieties around Aurat March. There are also categorical institutional and structural factors at play.

On the former, the history of religious politics in this country is replete with ‘issue-based’ mobilisation by particular political and social entities. Whether it concerns the definition of who gets to be called a Muslim by the state, or the nature of the state’s influence in the familial sphere, or on the very nature of language deployed to discuss religious figures, this issue-based mobilisation helps religious parties and activists retain cultural relevance in a country that has otherwise not given them much formal political space. Their vision for politics is thus almost always reduced to these cultural battles, since all other battles — on the economy, foreign policy, countless domestic affairs — remain monopolised by mainstream parties and the state itself.

Aurat March thus provides these organisational elements a chance to reassert their vision on a societal domain that has long been the arena of conservative movements the world over.

An institutional reading of the backlash also allows us to see the cynical way in which particular messages and advocacy efforts are misrepresented and, in some cases, completely distorted. This suggests that it’s not just about competing cultural visions, but also about enforcement and subjugation of alternatives in a domain the right-wing claims a monopoly on. These distortions and misrepresentations are thus carried out knowing full well that they have the potential to result in violence — the final act of asserting power and enforcing subjugation.

The turn towards violence requires further interrogation from a structural perspective as well. Here it is important to look at the very real social changes taking place across the length and breadth of Pakistani society that act as sources of cultural anxiety.

It is well documented that progressive causes face an uphill task in a society that is dominated by conservative cultural legacies, such as patriarchy and its persisting enforcement in both public and private domains. Simultaneously, however, what is also true is that conservatives face a constant battle in sustaining their monopoly to define norms and interpret social action.

The fact of the matter is that societies change in all sorts of ways. The obvious transformations are those that are overtly political in nature — such as new legislation and policies and changes in the way states themselves are structured etc. These naturally remain active sites of contestation and conflict, which in turn produce the headlines that we are accustomed to seeing.

Many other types of transformations, on the other hand, are diffused and less visible at any given point in time. These include shifts in attitudes and preferences, the slow erosion of norms and their replacement by new ones, the reflection of these norms in the economy and other societal domains. No society is immune to these changes, even those that otherwise appear to be or are characterised as static and/or stagnant.

Pakistan is precisely one such society. Just over the last three decades, there has been considerable change in the way educational attainment functions in this country. There is now almost near-gender parity in higher education enrolment in two out of four provinces. Researcher Nazish Brohi has similarly documented transformative changes in gender relations in agrarian Sindh, where women have found voice and agency in particular domains, even in the face of various types of violence.

These changes have been made possible due to both long-standing cultural advocacy efforts that see a greater public role for women in society and the larger structural shifts induced by economic change and globalisation. Despite concerted efforts, they cannot be shut down unilaterally. Occasionally, the conservatives will gain success in the policy and legislative domain — as and when they occupy offices of influence or when state authorities acquiesce to their vision. But in the long run, they will always have to contend with cultural change and a multiplicity of viewpoints and with the bravery of those who vocalise them.

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