

Why We Must Address Our Human Rights Crisis

by
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My speech of 29 August before the National Assembly and my recent letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations urging his attention to what I feel is a deep and pervasive crisis of human rights have generated considerable and sometimes disturbing discussion here in Pakistan. Unfortunately, there are some in this country who feel that my intentions in raising these issues -- and the way in which I raised them -- may not have been in the our nation's best interests. Allow me the courtesy of a clarification.

First and foremost, while the unjust and politically motivated incarceration of my husband and the harassment and systematic abuse of close associates have caused me deep private (as well as public) anguish, my motivations for raising the issue of human rights, both at home and abroad, is borne not of self-serving interests. Rather, our country, so long in the grips of power too much concentrated and held unaccountable, must create more open, free and democratic institutions -- and respect for those institutions -- if we, as a nation, are to survive in the coming century.

The notion of human rights is one deeply rooted in our religious beliefs, traditions, constitution and international convention -- universal principles to which we should all aspire. Indeed, our movement for independence and the creation of a Muslim nation in South Asia was founded on the belief of justice and equality for humanity.

Some in Pakistan have wrongly perceived my open letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations to be an attempt to 'air our dirty laundry' in front of the international community and besmirch the reputation of our great nation. While some may have misinterpreted this as such, my intention and the end result were altogether different.

As I emphasized in my 29 August speech on human rights, twice serving as Prime Minister of this great nation, I know all too well how difficult it is to transform a government long impervious and blind to the public's needs into a government responsive, just and fair.

Nawaz Sharif and I bear the burden, alone, of twice making efforts to right the deep historical wrongs of generations of despots and murderers at the helm of our nation, individuals who had turned for the majority of our people the promise that is Pakistan into a nightmare of torture, repression and economic enslavement.

Pakistan has seen successive governments succumbing to powerful entrenched interests, where self-enrichment had a higher value than public service for the betterment of our people. Bureaucracies too long entrenched do not easily change. Thus, out of my personal experience while serving as Prime Minister of the difficulty to wholly change a corrupt system, I sought to

highlight human rights issue by writing to the Secretary General of the United Nations. The result of this effort: Our nation, if only for a few weeks, has begun a healthy and vibrant debate on human rights.

More importantly perhaps to the annals of history, the spotlight on those who would abuse power is stronger and brighter than ever, making further abuses of power more difficult to hide. Thus, despite the Secretary-General's unfortunate decision not to take formal action, my objectives of increasing awareness and attention have been achieved. That is good for Pakistan. That is good for our people. That is good for our children.

My speech to the National Assembly was the second and more important part of my focus on human rights. As I sought to increase awareness and pressure through the UN letter, I also offered to the nation a constructive, positive and encompassing approach to address the crisis.

It is clear that only through newfound cooperation between all parties in Pakistan, rising above our petty partisan differences, and bold new approaches by all those who would assume the responsibility of leading this nation with viable, strong and lasting democratic institutions, including checks and balances on the abuse of power.

In this spirit, I reiterate some of those points, and again call upon Prime Minister Sharif to join with me and others in support of these laudable and important initiatives for our nation:

1. Create an Independent Human Rights Commission answerable to the National Assembly, our governing body most responsive to the will of the people;
2. Join with the PPP in calling together the world's human rights experts to assist us in developing comprehensive solutions to our crisis;
3. Create a truly independent judiciary, free from political and monetary pressures from the executive and legislative branches.
4. Take steps to improve our freedom of the press and access to unfettered news for our citizens;
5. Ratify and abide by the basic international covenants on human rights, now considered to be the minimum standard worldwide, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

In closing, it is my strong conviction and personal experience that any debate which draws attention to what has been and continues to be the deplorable state of human rights in this country is a positive development. I stand by my actions, admit that all of us who would lead our people bear some culpability that this situation exists, and continue to call upon the current government to work with me in addressing this crisis for the good of our children, for our country, for our future and for our rightful place as an honorable, proud and respected member of free and democratic nations.

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