

Attempts to maneuver polls unacceptable: HRCP

Islamabad, 16 July 2018. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is gravely concerned over what it sees as blatant, aggressive and unabashed attempts to manipulate the outcome of the upcoming elections. While it is critical that the polls are held as scheduled, there are now ample grounds to doubt their legitimacy – with alarming implications for Pakistan’s transition to an effective democracy.

HRCP has serious reservations about the extraordinary powers accorded to security forces – ostensibly to ensure the integrity of the polls. That some 350,000 security personnel are to be deployed outside as well as inside polling stations, and that military functionaries have been assigned magistrate’s powers on the premises, has blurred the line between civilian and non-civilian responsibility for the electoral process. Such measures are unprecedented and border dangerously on micromanagement by an institution that should not be involved so closely in what is strictly a civilian mandate. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) must ensure that voters are in no way intimidated or influenced by the presence of such large numbers of security personnel.

HRCP is deeply concerned that the political class is being selectively squeezed. This is apparent from reports that members of the PML-N are being pressured to switch political loyalties, that candidates are being asked to return their tickets, and that electoral opposition to two mainstream parties – the PML-N in Punjab and the PPP in Sindh – is being ‘manufactured’ in strategic areas.

HRCP reaffirms the public perception that all parties have not been given equal freedom to run their election campaigns. Candidates from parties such as the PML-N, the PPP and Awami Workers Party have reported being harassed by law enforcement and security personnel during their campaigns, their movement monitored or restricted without good reason, and their election banners removed en masse, again reportedly by security personnel. HRCP urges the ECP to monitor police treatment of different parties and to ensure that all candidates are given a level playing field.

HRCP is alarmed at the stealthy reappearance of banned outfits under other names and the fact that the state has conferred political legitimacy on them by allowing them to contest the elections. That their campaigns have consistently misused religion to peddle a dangerous, divisive rhetoric is cause for serious concern. HRCP demands that the ECP scrutiny process be revisited to determine why such candidates’ nomination papers were accepted without further investigation.

HRCP feels strongly that the political space ceded to banned outfits has emboldened militant groups. This is painfully clear from the carnage wrought in Peshawar and Mastung last week, which has now claimed almost 175 lives in suicide attacks, including that of two political candidates, Haroon Bilour of the Awami National Party and Siraj Raisani of the Balochistan Awami Party. HRCP demands urgent action to secure the right of political candidates to adequate security on the campaign trail.

HRCP is strongly concerned over the recent curbs to the print and broadcast media – specifically, the numerous instances in which journalists perceived as favoring the PML-N or PPP or deemed critical of the security establishment have been subject to censorship, intimidation, harassment and abduction. The undeclared curbs to distribution in the case of *Dawn* and *The News* in cantonments, and earlier attempts to block the transmission of Geo TV are tantamount to denying people access to reports and analysis of electoral issues. Such pressures on the media serve to manipulate public opinion, forestall critical debate and leave powerful institutions unaccountable to the public.

A delegation of senior HRCP office bearers met the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) at the ECP earlier today and conveyed the Commission's concerns. The CEC conceded that the ECP had received and attempted to resolve many complaints, but said it could not take action on allegations of interference. He expressed the ECP's resolve to address specific complaints as and when received. HRCP appeals to all citizens to approach the ECP with the necessary supporting evidence in cases where they feel that any election rules and laws have been violated.

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Chairperson