



**Human Rights Commission
of Pakistan**

Press release

'Re-energise human rights discourse': HRCP

Islamabad, 10 April 2019. Concluding its national conference on human rights and democratic participation in Islamabad, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has said that this is 'an opportune time to re-energise the human rights discourse, given that intense political polarisation has overshadowed the human rights enterprise at all levels.' The conference examined crucial questions relating to freedom of expression, assembly and association, federalism, freedom of religion and belief, and rule of law and constitutionalism. Uzma Noorani, HRCP's co-chair, said that it was a critical time for human rights in Pakistan and that HRCP sought to uphold the ethos of its co-founder, Asma Jahangir.

In his keynote address at the beginning of the conference, HRCP's honorary spokesperson, Mr I A Rehman said that it was 'the right of the people of Pakistan to be governed democratically', and that political parties needed to come together to work on a new charter of democracy. HRCP's Secretary-General, Harris Khalique, emphasised that it was imperative that 'we continue to speak the truth about the challenges to human rights in Pakistan.'

Given the growing climate of intimidation and self-censorship in which the media presently operates, the first panel – titled 'Stifling crucial voices of dissent' – explored why freedom of expression and freedom of the press is integral to monitoring and protecting human rights especially with a view to shaping public opinion and rights-based policy. Speakers included senior journalists Ghazi Salahuddin, Zahid Hussain and Shahzada Zulfiqar, broadcast journalists Munizae Jahangir and Asma Shirazi, and digital rights activist Farieha Aziz.

The second panel examined why enabling freedom of assembly and association is perceived as threatening. Looking at the constrained space accorded to workers, students, civil society and social movements, the panel discussed why the state tends to limit what should be inalienable rights, and what strategies can be adopted to strengthen these rights as drivers of change. The panel comprised Malik Naseer Shahwani of the Balochistan National Party (Mengal), Maryam Bibi, founder and chief executive of Khwendo Kor, lawyer and human rights activist Jibran Nasir, Awami Workers Party member Alia Amirali and Mohammad Tahseen, director of the South Asia Partnership – Pakistan.

The conference also raised important issues relating to the right to participatory democracy and the challenges to federalism. The third panel looked at Pakistan's identity as a federation, and the ability and will to build a pluralist democracy as being

key to the integrity of the state. The panel, which included former senators Farhatullah Babar and Afrasiab Khattak, and members of the National Assembly Ahsan Iqbal, Kishwer Zehra and Mohsin Dawar, emphasised that the 18th Amendment must not be rolled back if the rights and interests of the federating units are to be protected.

The fourth panel looked at how the 'spectre of extremism' poses a threat to human rights and democratic participation. Panelists looked at how growing conservatism has rapidly eroded away the right to freedom of religion and belief, and what the state and civil society must do to counter the increasing 'acceptability' of extremist thought and practice. The speakers included Shafqat Mahmood, Federal Minister for Federal Education and Professional Training, Bushra Gohar, former Member of the National Assembly, Khawar Mumtaz, chairperson of the National Commission on the Status of Women, senior journalist and writer Ahmed Rashid, Peter Jacob, executive director of the Centre for Social Justice, and Anis Haroon, member of the National Commission for Human Rights. Minister Shafqat Mahmood said that the government planned to review the curriculum for hate material and take steps to curb extremism in this context.

The final panel, on safeguarding the rule of law and constitutionalism, examined why impunity remains an obstacle to accountability, just law-making, open government and accessible dispute resolution. Justice (Retd) Nasira Iqbal, former Justice of the Lahore High Court, Amjad Hussain, former president of the Gilgit-Baltistan High Court Bar Association, Dr Abid Saqi, former president of the Lahore High Court Bar Association, Fatima Bokhari, human rights lawyer and chief executive of Musawi, Sara Malkani, human rights lawyer and Advocacy Advisor Asia, Centre for Reproductive Rights, and Habib Tahir, advocate of the Supreme Court and vice-chair of HRCP's Balochistan chapter spoke as part of the panel.

In her keynote address, Senator Sherry Rehman, vice-president of the PPP and parliamentary leader of the PPP in the Senate, said that the public conversation must turn to 'our ability to protect the vulnerable, the dispossessed and the discriminated,' adding that 'the rights agenda has to be reset, and it must be reset for Parliament and by Parliament' through 'coalitions for rights-based legislation.'

Concluding the session, senior advocate and HRCP Council member Hina Jilani said that it was important to sustain the conversation on human rights and that the conference sought to 'incite' people to action on this front.

HRCP has said that it hopes this conference 'will lead to agreement on the essential requirements for legislative and institutional reform, policy formulations and implementation plans to instate fuller respect for human rights. It is crucial to bring greater visibility to human rights issues in Pakistan, including that of empowering the more vulnerable sections of the population, and projecting them as a priority for the government to tackle.'

Dr Mehdi Hasan

Chairperson