



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

Press release

Human rights forgotten in the election year: HRCP launches 2018 report

Islamabad, 15 April 2019. At the launch of its flagship annual report, *State of Human Rights in 2018*, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has noted that, 'in a year of general elections, it was inevitable perhaps that the progress and observation of human rights issues might be suspended, if not forgotten. The elections themselves were plagued by allegations of pre-poll manipulation and vote rigging – never fully resolved – and some appalling outbreaks of violence. Nonetheless, there were more women candidates for general seats in these elections than in any past election, and for the first time, transgender candidates contested the polls.'

In a statement issued today, HRCP has commented on 'the unprecedented level to which the fundamental right to freedom of expression was overtly violated, particularly in the run-up to the elections,' adding that 'in the guise of "national security concerns", restrictions on media coverage were stepped up, journalists took increasingly to self-censorship, the distribution of a national newspaper was severely curtailed, and a media blackout was imposed on coverage of certain events.'

'2018 began with a horrifying crime against a six-year-old child, Zainab, and the relative speed with which the culprit was apprehended was in no small part due to the public outcry. The sentence handed down proved to be no deterrent – distressing reports of abuse and violence involving children continued to surface.'

'The public conscience was assailed by reports of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, the abuse and murder of children, violence towards women, child labour, religious intolerance, the persecution of minorities, and crimes committed in the name of "honour".'

'Women, children and labour remained highly vulnerable. HRCP monitoring data showed at least 845 incidents of sexual violence against women, and 316 crimes in the name of 'honour' perpetrated against both men and women. In Thar, Sindh, 638 children died of malnutrition in 2018.'

'Scores of mine workers lost their lives in deadly incidents in Balochistan and other provinces with no evidence of progress in the implementation of safety and health standards. In addition, an estimated 12 million children were reportedly involved in child labour.'

'Worryingly, an estimated 16,136 internally displaced families have yet to return home, although the number is likely higher.'

'One bright prospect was the Supreme Court's acquittal of Aasia Bibi, but the ensuing violence against the verdict could only be quelled when an 'agreement' was reached.'

'The excessive and arbitrary use of the Exit Control List (ECL) continued to feature prominently in the news. Pre-emptive detention of activists was frequently employed to restrict or disrupt rallies and protests, particularly in the months preceding the elections.'

'While the interventions of the Supreme Court attracted much attention, the long-awaited reform of the criminal justice system remained on the back burner and the steady accumulation and growth of

the backlog of cases went unchecked in all the courts. By year-end, there were close to 1.9 million cases pending in over 250 lower, special and superior courts. At the end of the year 4,688 prisoners were on death row. At least 500 have been executed since 2014, 14 of them in 2018.

'Particularly notable during the year were the prolific and widely reported activities of the National Accountability Bureau, whose modus operandi was viewed with a mix of approbation and dismay. The axe fell on former prime ministers, politicians, media personalities, CEOs, and university officials alike.

'Never was there a time more in need of the fearless, forthright Asma Jahangir, who passed away in February 2018. This tragic loss left the country bereft of a bold voice prepared to speak out for the underprivileged, the unrepresented, and the vulnerable.'

Dr Mehdi Hasan

Chairperson