



Victims of foreign policy

By

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When the interests of the ruling elite need protection through legal cover, parliament acts in an extra-efficient manner. However, when the interests of Pakistani women need protection, such as through the passage of the Bill on Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection), the same parliament starts dragging its feet. On April 4 it deferred the bill to a committee rather than trying to get it passed through majority vote. It probably did so in order to please Maulana Fazlur Rehman of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), whose support at the time was desperately needed by the government on resumption of NATO supplies.

More than five months have gone by, but the bill has not returned to parliament's floor for passage. In other words, it is now in cold storage. This is not the first time that women's rights have become the causality of our foreign policy-in this case, that related to the United States and Nato. It happened earlier when Pakistan decided to fight America's war in Afghanistan in the 1980s against the leftwing government in Kabul. That had a negative impact on the status of women and their rights.

Gen Zia ul Haq used this turn in foreign policy to initiate his process of "Islamisation" to create political legitimacy for his own despotic regime. Innumerable discriminatory laws, such as the Hadd Ordinance, the Law of Evidence and the Qisas and Diyat Law were introduced in the name of Islam, and that unleashed terror on Pakistani women. Thousands of women were imprisoned and lashed under the Hudood Ordinance for "adultery."

Rape victims were unable to access justice due to the requirement of two male witnesses to testify to a rape before rape cases could be registered. Crimes against women, especially honour killings, went unpunished due to the compoundability provision in the Qisas and Diyat Law. The Saudi hijab and the veil were promoted.

The pro-American focus and the strategic-depth policy in Afghanistan as a core foreign-policy issue created conditions for "Islam" to be used as a political tool. Islamist jihadists were recruited from all over the Muslim world and trained in Pakistan to fight the US proxy war against the Russian "infidel." Religious seminaries mushroomed, and billions of rupees were pumped into them so that young students there could be used as cannon fodder in militant jihad. Domestically, this political Islam of Zia ul Haq could not move beyond imposition of restrictions on women, which reduced them to second-class citizens. Zia's political Islam started with women and ended there. Women's lives turned into hell. The religious extremist mindset that was systematically created in that era to serve imperialist interests in the region now poses a serious existentialist threat to Pakistan.

Similarly, in the post-9/11 scenario, Pakistan's decision to become an ally of United States in the "war on terror" led to the rise of militancy and radicalisation within the country. The sudden shift in the state's policy towards certain militant jihadist outfits provoked rebellion and insurgency. In Fata, Malakand and Swat where insurgents took control of the area, once again women and their bodies took central place in the process of Talibanisation in Pakistan. Girls' schools were destroyed and strict restrictions were imposed on women's mobility.

Women's rights to health, work, freedom of expression and security were denied by the militants. There was focus on maintenance of control on women's entry in the public space and the strengthening of male domination within the domestic domain. Thus, women became victims of Pakistan's decision to side with US as its ally in the "war on terror."

The new tensions and conflicts in US-Pakistan relations because of the United States' endgame plans in Afghanistan have also reflected adversely on women's rights in Pakistan. The bill on domestic violence that was moved in the joint session of parliament was simply not passed because of resistance from the JUI and PML-N. Instead of the passage of the domestic violence bill by a simple majority, the legislation was referred to a committee ostensibly for further discussion and consensus-building, because of the government's desperate need to muster support of the opposition parties on the issue of Nato supplies. It is a matter of shame that women's rights are traded off for what are called larger political interests. Violence against women within families is a widespread phenomenon that cuts across class, religion and ethnicity, and rural and urban divides.

According to a research study conducted by the ministry of women's development, almost every other woman in Pakistan suffers from some forms of violence within the family. In view of rampant domestic violence, it is the duty of the state to provide protection to all its citizens by legislating strong laws backed by an effective implementation mechanism and support services for protection and prevention without any further delay. But the way government

succumbed to pressure from religious lobby to arrest the passage of the bill on domestic violence shows that there is little hope for women being treated as equal citizens of Pakistan.

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