

Pakistan

Incidents of human rights violations in Pakistan reached an alarming level in 2012. The law and order situation remained volatile, terrorist attacks against innocent citizens continued in many parts of the country, and the space for moderate, liberal and progressive voices kept shrinking. An example of this trend was the terrorist attack on Mala la Yousuf Zai, a young school girl advocating for girl's education, by Taliban forces.

Marginalised minorities in general and Dalits in particular are very seriously affected by the worsening law and order situation and the deteriorating state of human rights in Pakistan. Religious minorities live in fear and have fallen prey to numerous violent attacks. The kidnappings and killings of Hindu traders – and the forced conversions of Hindu girls – made hundreds of Hindu families migrate to India in 2012.

The Dalit community is one of the poorest and most marginalised in Pakistan. Although the Constitution prohibits discrimination on the ground of caste, the Government of Pakistan has done very little to eliminate caste discrimination. It has not initiated any affirmative action programmes for the promotion and protection of the Dalit community. Years of denial has aggravated the situation, as successive governments have not bothered to put in place any measures to prevent this form of discrimination.

A major problem for Dalits is overwhelming illiteracy and poverty, which hinders them from entering the education system. Dalit students are discriminated against and discouraged by teachers and fellow non-Dalit students. Health indicators reveal Dalits to be in the poorest condition of all. Access to basic health services is sometimes blocked by health workers who deny them proper treatment or refuse to touch their bodies.

Under these difficult circumstances, the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN) continued its struggle for Dalit rights in Pakistan. 2012 saw a wave of mobilisation among Pakistani Dalits. Different groups emerged with their own demands and organised several demonstrations and public meetings, calling for equal treatment for Dalits in Pakistan and an end to caste discrimination. PDSN members either participated in such events or co-organised them.

Pakistan's human rights record was reviewed by the UN's UPR mechanism on 30 October. The PDSN contribution to the shadow report was an important initiative to raise the issue of caste discrimination in Pakistan at an international level. PDSN delegations visited Geneva twice in 2012 and, together with IDSN, lobbied many countries to raise the issue with the Government of Pakistan during the UPR.

Many states expressed concern about the human rights situation of religious minorities, including scheduled castes. Two states – Austria and the Holy See – made recommendations on the situation of scheduled castes, which is considered a religious minority in Pakistan.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, paid a visit to Pakistan in June. During a press conference, she raised the issue of equality before the law and mentioned that she had heard from various groups, including Dalits, about their "sense of injustice and despair when acts of violence (...) against their communities go unpunished".

Following cases of kidnappings and forced conversion of Hindu girls in Sindh province, the President formed a three member parliamentary committee to look into the grievances of minorities. The committee's visits to affected communities resulted in a lot of media coverage, and committee members remain vocal in support of victims. This has resulted in a halt in kidnappings. PDSN had raised the issue of forced conversions with the media.

At the end of the year, Parliament was considering a bill to increase the number of seats for minorities. There has been no increase in seats for minorities for 23 years, although seats for Muslims have doubled during the same period.

If a bill is passed in 2013, there may be increased Dalit representation in Parliament. Currently, there are only two Dalit members in the Senate and National Assembly. In a rare case, the government appointed Dr Jaimal Dhanani, a Dalit from Tharparkar, as Vice Chancellor of the newly established Benazir Bhutto International University of Veterinary & Animal Sciences in Sindh province. This is the highest position a Dalit has ever held in Pakistan.

The PDSN secretariat continued functioning on a volunteer basis as the network has not yet applied for any funding. Network members and key individuals devoted their time free of charge and kept the network alive and active.

PDSN issued a number of media statements on key issues concerning Dalits. PDSN members contributed articles in newspapers and appeared in talk shows highlighting the plight of scheduled castes. On the basis of PDSN statements, many TV-channels broadcast talk shows and news items on Dalit issues. The network also contributed material for international interventions, including four case studies on Dalit women for the alternative CEDAW report for 2013.

In 2012, the census process in Pakistan was once again suspended for political reasons. Due to the faulty process, Dalits have been short-counted in previous censuses. According to figures from the last census carried out in 1998, there are only 330,000 Dalits in Pakistan. However, Dalit representatives claim that the number may be as high as five million or more. PDSN has called for research to be carried out because of the lack of disaggregated data on the socio-economic situation of Dalits.

PDSN members visited many victims of violence and expressed solidarity and took up issues with authorities. In one such case, PDSN intervention averted the demolition and encroachment of a Dalit graveyard in district Badin in Sindh province. PDSN members also visited and raised their voices against the eviction of scheduled castes in Karachi by authorities.

Through its member organisations, PDSN continued its efforts to end bonded labour. Several hundred bonded labourers were released from agriculture and brick kilns. The majority of bonded labourers are Dalits. The Green Rural Development Organisation (GRDO), one of the key members of PDSN, managed to release 3,000 people from bonded labour in 2012. Of these, 90 per cent were Dalits. A network was formed exclusively to demand government land for Haris (mainly Dalits). On 27 November 2012, the Scheduled Caste Rights Movement (SCRM) organised a rally in Islamabad for Dalit land rights in Pakistan.

Pakistan suffered heavy losses in 2010 and 2011 due to heavy floods. In 2011 alone around 10-12 million people were affected, mostly in the lower districts of Sindh province. A large number of them were Dalits. PDSN members, notably PILER, continued advocacy efforts for the proper rehabilitation of Dalits affected by flood. Other PDSN members continued to deliver aid to Dalits in Thatta district.