

Pakistan

The year 2013 was an important one in the history of Pakistan. It was the first time that a democratically elected government completed its five-year term. Despite threats by the Taliban, people went to vote and elected new members of parliament. The transfer of power to the new government happened peacefully.

Unfortunately, the country remained in the shadow of terror throughout the year. The Taliban continued to attack police, para-military forces and common citizens. Violence against vulnerable communities – especially minorities – continued. The worst incident was the attack on a church in Peshawar that killed over 100 Christians. Practices of systematic violence, such as bonded labour which very often involves Dalits, also continued in 2013.

The Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN) carried on its struggle for justice for marginalised communities, particularly Dalits, officially known as scheduled castes. During the election campaign, it held a series of events, highlighting the situation of Dalits, and urging political parties to address their issues and give them due representation.

PDSN also raised awareness through the media of the situation of Dalits took up the issue with official authorities. It paid solidarity visits to affected areas and provided assistance to victims. Network member organisations carried out a number of activities directed at marginalised sections of society.

Unfortunately, the rape of a Dalit woman is considered an act “for granted” because of their inferior social status in Pakistani society, so hardly any action is taken against the influential and wealthy landlords. Scheduled castes are living miserable lives with no protection of their honour and property. Dr. Sono Khangharani, PDSN member

A particularly horrifying case of violence against Dalits was the rape – and subsequent murder – of Kaku Kohli, a young woman from Umerkot district, Sindh province. In October, she and her sister were allegedly gang-raped by the sons of a local landlord. The suspects were briefly detained at the police station, but they were soon freed, and the police took no further action. Six weeks later, on 28 November, one of the rape suspects stopped Kaku Kohli and her mother in the street, held up the young woman at gun point and shot her dead, allegedly asking “how a bloody Kohli girl dared go to the police against us.” Following this incident, PDSN issued a statement which was published in leading papers. A delegation was sent to the area to meet the victim’s family and offer them support. As a result of PDSN’s efforts, the suspect has been arrested, and PDSN is providing legal assistance to the victim’s family.

Another violent incident was the desecration of the body of Bhooro Bheel, a Dalit folk singer killed in a road accident, in Badin District of Sindh Province in October. A mob of Muslims led by a religious clerk dragged his body from the grave and dumped it on a road nearby. They claimed that the burial of a Dalit man would pollute the graveyard.

PDSN released a statement, and Dalit activists went to the area to support the community. They were followed by a three member PDSN fact-finding mission that visited the affected area and produced a report which clearly indicated the level of violence against Dalits. After the mission, a civil society delegation including PDSN members paid a solidarity visit and held meetings with local political leaders. This resulted in the arrests of the responsible people and the announcement of land for a separate graveyard for scheduled castes.

PDSN took up the issue of rising violence against Dalits at different levels and wrote letters to human rights bodies, including the official Human Rights Commission in the province of Sindh. PDSN also raised issues faced by Dalits in a meeting with the law minister who informed the delegation that a four member committee has been formed to work on laws that can benefit Hindus, particularly Dalits.

Prior to the elections in May, PDSN organised a series of dialogue events to raise Dalit issues and urge political parties to address them. The first event titled 'Upcoming elections and representation of scheduled castes in the assemblies' was held at Hyderabad Press Club on 27th March. Participants demanded equality for scheduled castes and urged political parties to include Dalits on their lists of candidates.

Another event was held the same month in Mithi, the main city of Tharparkar, which is home to a large number of Dalits. Four candidates from political parties took part in this event, including a member of the largest party, the Pakistan People's Party. They pleaded to protect the rights of scheduled castes if elected. This was the first event in the area, during the election campaign, that exclusively highlighted the issues of scheduled castes and other vulnerable groups. Similar events took place in Mirpur Khas and Sanghar, two other districts with a sizeable Dalit population.

PDSN also held a series of press conferences in Karachi, Hyderabad, Mithi and Sanghar in which problems of scheduled castes were raised in relation to elections, and political parties were urged to give due representation to Dalits and resolve relevant issues, including discrimination, housing and bonded labour. PDSN also raised the issue of equality in one-to-one meetings with candidates when they visited Dalit villages.

The Scheduled Castes Rights Movement, a PDSN member, also organised a series of events including public meetings in Rahimyar Khan and other cities of southern Punjab province where issues of Dalits were raised and highlighted ahead of the elections.

More than a dozen Dalit candidates contested the elections. Most of them were independent candidates without political party affiliation. The one exception was Mr Gian Chand, an active PDSN member who contested a seat for the Pakistan People's Party. He secured 38,000 votes but lost by a small margin.

Another active Dalit candidate was Vero Kolhi, a released bonded labourer who ran in Hyderabad against a former minister. She lost, but showed great courage and determination in running against a powerful politician. PDSN offered financial and moral support to her and other Dalit candidates.

Although a fair number of Dalits contested the elections, not one was able to win a general seat. However, one Dalit has a reserved seat for minorities in the National Assembly, and two have similar seats in provincial assemblies.

Dalit activists and PDSN members organised a long march from Mirpur Khas to Hyderabad to raise the issue of violation of rights of Dalits. Besides such direct activities by the network, member organisations of PDSN also remained actively engaged in activities and actions that focused on minority rights in general and rights of Dalits in particular.

As in previous years, PDSN was involved in international work through IDS. In January, PDSN and IDS submitted a joint shadow report on Dalit women to the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). PDSN members took part in various UN events, including the side event on Dalit women in Geneva in June, and the South Asian regional consultation on caste discrimination, which was organised by the OHCHR and took place in Kathmandu in December.