

Violating Human Rights Legally: Pakistan's new Bill to curbs freedom of Expression

Tuesday 18 August 2020, by [Publishers, bookstores, human rights & research organisations, teachers' & students' collectives, academic platforms, democratic fronts, alternative media, movements](#) (Date first published: 18 August 2020).

Many populist authoritarian regimes in the Third World have been violating human rights, clamping down on protests, charging intellectuals, journalists and poets by misusing anti-terror and sedition laws. Recently we witnessed the murder of a peasant leader in Philippines. India's majoritarian and Islamphobist Parliament passed discriminatory citizenship laws in 2019. Now the Punjab Assembly in Pakistan has passed a bill that legally promises to not only curb freedom of expression but is set to raid, and confiscate any publication if they deem it against the interest of the nation. Clearly, the interest of an anti-democratic regime has been claimed as the 'nation'.

We are giving below a statement signed by Pakistan's civil society that expolains this draconian legislation.

Tahaffuz-e-Bunad-e-Islam Bill; an invasion on freedom of expression and critical thinking

Publishers, booksellers, writers, lawyers, students' collectives, teachers' collectives and human rights and grassroots organisations in Pakistan are extremely concerned about the Tahaffuz-e-Bunad-e-Islam Bill passed by the Punjab Assembly on July 23, 2020.

We believe the Bill is an invasion on freedom of expression and critical thinking and will also spell disaster for the printing and publishing industry in Punjab that employs tens of thousands of people.

The Bill gives a bureaucrat, the Director General Public Relations (DGPR), in section 7, the powers to raid a publishing house, book store or printing press and confiscate copies of material the authorities deem "violatory". The DGPR or his/her authorised officers will also have the power to "inquire into, investigate, assess or ascertain any act or omission".

In section 8 called 'Regulation of national and foreign books', the Bill goes even further and in an unprecedented manner make it mandatory for all books (local or foreign; first editions or reprints) to seek the approval of the DGPR before they can see the light of the day. Section 8(3) enunciates that that the DGPR has the power to "refuse permission to import, print or publish a book" if it is "prejudicial to the national interest, culture, religious and sectarian harmony." The same powers will be exercised by the Muttahida Ulema Board (MUB) for books concerning religion, according to sub-section 8(4).

It is clear that disguised as a law protecting the foundations of Islam, the Bill is an attack on freedom of expression and is in conflict with constitutional provisions protecting the same freedoms. We are concerned that the DGPR/MUB does not have the intellectual and physical capacity to evaluate book

manuscripts.

We are also in principle fundamentally opposed to the very idea of seeking approval from a bureaucrat/MUB prior to publishing or selling a book. Equally, we are fully opposed to the confiscatory spirit of the Bill sanctioning the DGPR to raid offices and stores. This kind of power has no place in a democracy.

We believe the Bill is a ferocious attack on the already-dwindling publishing industry of Pakistan, of which Punjab is a major part. In a province where bookstores are fast turning into stationary shops and publishers are decreasing in number, the Punjab government should devise policies supporting the publishing industry by helping create cheap paper locally, incentivising local publishers and booksellers, encouraging public libraries to procure locally-produced books and creating public events to showcase local writers' and publishers' works to both the local and international audiences.

Instead, the Punjab government has passed a Bill that will suffocate the already-diminishing reading culture in Punjab. The publishing industry in Punjab is finding it incredibly hard to sustain beyond the textbook sphere; this law is an attempt to pave the way for its extinction.

Although the Bill has gone back to the Assembly for discussion, as publishers, book sellers, writers, academics, lawyers, students and human rights activists, we want to send a strong message to the legislators that we will not accept this Bill in any form.

Even after the legislators address the concerns of the Shi'a community, the repressive and confiscatory character of the Bill will remain intact in sections 7(1), 7(2), 8(1), 8(2), 8(3), 8(4) and 8(12), devised to isolate progressive and critical voices and push publishers out of business. If the Bill is not scrapped, we reserve our rights to protest, agitate and challenge its constitutionality in order to preserve our right to freedom of expression.

Signed by:

Folio Books (Publisher, Lahore)

Vanguard Books (Publisher, Lahore)

Readings (Bookstore, Lahore)

Mr Books (Bookstore, Islamabad)

Books and Beans (Bookstore, Lahore)

Fiction House (Publisher, Lahore)

Mavra Books (Publisher, Lahore)

Jamhoori Publications (Publisher, Lahore)

Sanjh Publications (Publisher, Lahore)

Ilmi Book House (Bookstore, Lahore)

Mashal Books (Publisher, Lahore)

Dogar Publisher (Publisher, Lahore)

Auraq Publications (Publisher, Rawalpindi)

Beacon Books (Publisher, Multan)

Maktaba Daniyal (Publisher, Karachi)

Welcome Book Port (Bookstore, Karachi)

Gosha-e-Adab (Publisher, Quetta)

Roshni Publication (Publisher, Hyderabad)

Shah Latif Kitab Ghr (Publisher, Hyderabad)

Humsari Magazine (Publisher, Hyderabad)

Indus Academy (Publisher, Hyderabad)

The following human rights and research organisations, teachers' and students' collectives, academic platforms, democratic fronts, alternative media and movements also signed the statement

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

Haqooq-e-Khalq Movement

Democratic Commission for Human Development

National Commission for Justice and Peace

Progressive Academics' Collective, Lahore

Progressive Academics' Collective, Karachi

ASR Resource Centre

Centre for Social Justice
Aurat March, Lahore

Afkar-e-Taaza

Women Democratic Front

Women Action Forum

Pakistan Kissan Rabta Committee

Daily Jeddojehad Online

Voicepk.net

Progressive Students' Collective

Authors' Alliance

Lahore Education and Research Network

Farooq Tariq
General Secretary,
Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee

P.S.

- <https://aepf.info/violating-Human-Rights-Legally>