

Government faces ire for opposing Women's March in Pakistan

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Government faces backlash from the civil society for opposing the Women's March on International Women's Day in Pakistan

Civil-society organisations, including women rights groups, condemned the government minister's proposal to ban 'Aurat (women) March.' Conservative politicians and a section of the media are also supporting the said proposal. Various women's marches, rallies and events are scheduled to be held on 8 March on the International Women's Day.

Generally, women face gender inequality, marginalisation, violence, harassment, and discrimination in Pakistan. According to Nazakat Hussian, the founder of Digital Time Communication, Pakistan, the general anti-women behaviours and stereotypes prevalent in the society discourages many women from active and effective participation in social, political and economic activities. "However, despite the challenges, women in Pakistan have shown a great deal of resilience. Many have become role models by overcoming the challenges," he writes in a local newspaper.

Aurat March is an annual feature where thousands of women take part in demonstrations by marching, rallying, and organising other similar events across the country to raise their voice to demand basic rights and oppose violence against women by observing the International Women's Day on 8 March. These demonstrations have a history in Pakistan, but the first officially organised Women's March was held in 2018, which was strongly opposed by the right-wing groups.

In a conservative society, every year, women's march faces hostility from the fundamentalist groups and political parties, especially Imrak Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Jamaat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI - F), and Jammat-e-Islami (JI).

Federal Minister for Religious Affairs and Inter-faith Harmony, Noor-ul-Haq Qadri, believes that slogans raised during women's day events are 'un-Islamic' and should be banned. On 9 February, the minister wrote a letter to the Prime Minister Imran Khan regarding his proposal. Imran Khan himself is a conservative politician who gave a couple of negative and unsupportive statements about women's freedom.

Along with human rights activists, some progressive politicians strongly opposed the minister's regressive approach. Senator Sherry Rehman of the Pakistan People's Party opposed the minister's proposal and said in her tweet, "You are conspiring to deprive women of their freedom and rights."

However, the right-wing political parties, including Jamaat Ulema-e-Islam and Jammat-e-Islami supported the minister's idea. Chairman Pakistan Ulema Council and Special Representative to the Prime Minister on Religious Harmony, Hafiz Muhammad Tahir Mahmood Ashrafi said on Sunday, that the 'Aurat March' should respect the values and laws, and feelings of the people of Pakistan.

Organisers of 'Aurat (women) March' are determined to hold rallies on 8 March, International

Women's Day. This year's theme of the March is 'Asal Insaaf (reimagine justice).' The theme focuses on prevention and a culture of care instead of looking to criminal law for a solution to every problem in the society. On Sunday, the organisers had a meeting with lawyers to discuss the theme who shared some helpful suggestions.

Muslim religious right groups tend to relate everything to religion. As the federal minister, Noor-ul-Haq Qadri said that banners, placards, and slogans of the March do not reflect Pakistani society's norms or the political and religious standards. He suggested that instead the day could be celebrated as the 'Hijab Day,' focusing on the discrimination by Hindu hardliners against Muslim women in India. In some Indian states, Muslim girls are not allowed to wear 'Hijab' in educational institutions.

On 21 February, Daily Times, a Pakistani English newspaper, opposed the minister's demand and said, "Attaching the notion of Hijab as an antithesis to a countrywide movement can hardly be expected to bring any constructive contribution to the table."

Ironically, conservative groups support the freedom of choice for the Muslim women in India, but oppose the same rights of Pakistani Muslim women. While hardliners want a conservative Pakistan, Aurat March is a step towards for a democratic and progressive Pakistan where no one should be discriminated against assuming gender, ethnicity, and religion. The ideological battle is on-going. Only time will tell who wins. ###

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P.S.

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