

Will the human rights therapy work?

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Had the people of Pakistan known what February 13, 2016 would bring with it, the day wouldn't have passed without celebrations across the country. This celebration would have been different from corporate-sponsored ones that amuse many but allow only a few to participate. Imagine a mela, a basant and a civilised version of Independence Day put together and everyone humming and shaking on Israr Ahmad's [Shakkar Wandan Ray](#). After all, the prime minister of Pakistan had approved the first-ever action plan for human rights. But had the announcement of the action plan come in the joint session of parliament, parliamentarians would have jostled one another to take the floor

to show the electorate how they had already or would be contributing to the action plan.

A glimmer on faces of around 25 million out-of-school and 10 million working children, whose rights had been given a thought, would have illuminated the entire gamut of society. Though the rights of labourers had not been discussed in the plan, they could find solace in being its indirect or remote beneficiaries. For the day at least, the farmers in the country would have forgotten their remorse about the falling price of their produce and rising cost of inputs, and had joined the merriment.

The frustrated lot among lawyers, amassing bad publicity (by thrashing policemen or media persons), could possibly ponder over a connection between the lawyers' struggle for the rule of law, the independence of judiciary (2007 onwards) and the development of the day.

The families that have borne losses and have been traumatised by religious discrimination and extremism, crime, involuntary disappearances, domestic violence, and neglect over physical and intellectual disability might have found consolation and hope for a better future. What an opportunity and what a loss.

The Federal Ministry for Human Rights chose to unveil the plan in a press briefing in Islamabad on February 25, 2016. Considering the amount of effort that must have been invested in putting the 2,400-word plan together and the aspirations that it embodies, the action plan merited a better launch. The plan will cost the nation Rs750 million, including Rs400 million in expenses that will be incurred on raising awareness and educating people about human rights. This objective could have been partly achieved at the very first step by a proper introduction of the action plan and without involving millions of rupees.

The human rights action plan encompasses six broad areas of intervention: 1) policy and legal reforms, 2) access to justice, 3) the implementation of key human rights priorities, 4) international/UN treaty implementation, 5) establishing and strengthening national human rights institutions, and 6) an implementation and monitoring mechanism for the action plan. Hence, it covers an array of issues from law and policy reforms and improving implementation, to aiding the human rights delivery mechanism. It also includes 60 actions and 16 expected outcomes. The time frame for achieving most of the actions begins and ends in the year 2016. A distribution of responsibilities between different ministries and departments is given due consideration.

The plan also pledges Rs250 million for the establishment of a human rights institute and a Rs100 million endowment fund for free legal assistance for poor victims of human rights violations. Hence, the content of the plan is good, but there are still some questions regarding it which need to be answered. For instance, why was the Institute for Human Rights envisioned in isolation rather than in affiliation with a university? There are countless examples where universities around the globe aid their governments in education, research and training for human rights). Will Islamabad be the venue or will it be in a centrally-located city? What would the plan achieve by teaching human rights at school, without removing the bias and hate content in textbooks?

An explanation is due as to why participation of civil society organisations in the drafting process was overlooked when the plan envisions or even welcomes these organisations in its implementation. A clarification in this regard will address reservations about the legitimacy of the action plan and more importantly resolve mistrust between the people and officials, which has accumulated over the decades in the wake of autocratic practices.

Relying on favourites or sidelining rights-based NGOs will not only deprive the Ministry of Human Rights of the benefit of independent voices, but also of quality collaboration, necessary to ensure the outcomes of the action plan.

Using the human rights' framework has worked miracles in several contexts as an inexpensive therapy for reform and gradual change in society. Some of the most difficult social and political transitions to democracy and normalcy have benefitted from such a framework, such as those in South Africa (1994 onwards), South Korea (1997 onwards), Philippines (1987 onwards) and Nepal (2006 onwards).

There is no doubt that the action plan brings an appropriate diagnosis and prescription for social, institutional and political ills.

The question is whether key government stakeholders can prepare their ranks and society for the requisite dosage of the medicine. To repair the damage, the therapy of human rights needs to be allowed to work its way through. In order to secure this plan, the implementers must think beyond the immediate benefits. If this can happen, the missing tranquility in our polity may not seem so foreign and the celebrations, not afar.

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