

# **Pakistan: Women activists deplore rape law compromise**

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Islamabad: Pakistani women activists deplored yesterday a government decision to give in to religious conservatives opposed to the amendment of Islamic laws dealing with rape and adultery.

The laws, which make a rape victim liable for prosecution for adultery if she cannot produce four male witnesses, were introduced in 1979 by military ruler Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq and have drawn widespread criticism both at home and abroad.

Human rights campaigners have long pressed for the repeal of the laws, known as the Hudood Ordinances, but nevertheless welcomed government efforts to amend them, including taking rape out of the sphere of religious law.

## **Threat**

But an opposition alliance of religious parties objected to the changes, saying they were a danger to society, and threatened to withdraw from the national and provincial parliaments if they were passed.

In the face of the protests, the government said on Monday it was accepting three of the conservatives' demands, including one keeping rape under the Islamic law, although it will also be a crime under the penal code.

## **Adultery**

The government also accepted adultery being made a crime under the penal code, subject to up to five years in prison.

Rights activists said the concessions would water down the impact of the changes and would be confusing, with rape and adultery being crimes under both Islamic law and the penal code.

Asma Jahangir, chairwoman of the Human Rights

Commission of Pakistan, said: "Last night was the nail in the coffin." "They have hoodwinked women into believing that this is a law for the protection of women. It is a law for the protection of religious extremists," she said.

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