

Protection of Women Bill: Hanging in the balance

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THE fate of the Protection of Women Bill continues to hang in the balance. The bill was introduced by the government in the National Assembly more than two months ago to bring about amendments in the Hudood Ordinances. These were ostensibly designed to do away with the provisions which make women vulnerable to injustice of the worst kind. Any law which equates rape with adultery and allows the victim to be punished and provides an opening for the police to abuse the provision is a bad law and needs to be either repealed or amended. The bill has undergone drafting and redrafting a number of times and has been debated by a parliamentary select committee and another extra-parliamentary body of religious leaders in a bid to produce a consensus but to no avail. Last week, the women's development minister had promised to have the bill adopted in the next session of the Assembly. Will the minister succeed this time remains a big question.

If the wrongs of the Hudood Ordinances - basically the product of the perverse thinking of a military dictator - are to be righted, the ideal measure would be to repeal them and restore the legal provisions for the punishment of rape under the PCC as they were before 1979. This, unfortunately, seems to be beyond the government's capacity, given its political strategy of not provoking the religious parties. The MMA clerics have adopted such a rigid and unreasonable position on the bill that the government would find it difficult to win their support. It is plain that the debate on the Protection of Women Bill has a strong political dimension and its religious interpretation is being used by the MMA merely for its political ends and to promote its narrow-minded misogyny. It is intriguing why the government, whose head claims to be moderate and enlightened, does not go ahead with the revised draft that has the approval of the PPPP and the MQM as well. The backing of these parties would ensure the passage of the bill even if the MMA opposes it. It is, however, widely suspected in parliamentary circles that many members of the ruling party who are supporters of General Ziaul Haq are not in favour of the Hudood laws being softened in any way. This in itself does not explain the prevaricating approach of the government on the women's bill when it is known to bring its members in line when voting for an issue it considers vital.

In spite of President Musharraf's statements projecting himself as a champion of women's rights, it seems his government does not consider this issue important enough to go ahead and pass this bill. For the

time being he has managed to reassure his western backers that he is not such an anti-woman tyrant as the human rights activists have made him out to be. It seems he will let the matter rest there until the tyranny of the Hudood laws comes under the spotlight again. One only hopes that the ordinance of July 16 making the offences under the Hudood laws bailable will not be allowed to lapse on November 16, as it would in normal course. If the Protection of Women Bill fails to be adopted, the government would do well to revalidate the July ordinance.

P.S.

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