

Christian And Hindus Are Part Of Protest Against Emergency In Pakistan

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Pakistan, once again, is in the midst of an emergency (which in reality is martial law). President General Pervez Musharraf has again imposed martial law as Chief of the Army Staff on Nov. 3 against the people of Pakistan. The whole nation has been condemning the undemocratic move especially lawyers, journalists, human rights activists, students and members of various political parties. They are protesting against the bar on the constitution and creating pressure against the government's undemocratic step.

Religious minorities, especially Christian and Hindus are equally, and actively, taking part in the movement for the restoration of the rule of law. Christian leaders are strongly condemning the imposition of emergency and demanding the restoration of the constitution.

Along with fifty others, the only non-Muslim judge of the senior judiciary refused to take the oath under PCO (Provisional Constitutional Order). Since Nov. 3, Justice Rana Bhagwandas, a Hindu, a former acting chief justice of Pakistan, has been under house arrest in Islamabad so he celebrated Diwali (a major Hindu festival) alone without his family. Despite all sort of pressures, the majority of judges of the Supreme Court and High Courts refused to take the oath under PCO, so it created a judicial crisis in the country and the courts are unable to function properly, even after a week.

A Christian political leader, Julius Salik participated on Nov. 9 in the journalists protest camp in Islamabad to show his solidarity with the media, who have been protesting against the imposition of the ban on local and international TV channels and an unseen pressure on print media as well.

The human rights activists were the first to organise a protest meeting in Lahore on Nov. 4 at the office of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP). Asma Jahangir, chairperson of HRCP, was detained in her house before the meeting while police raided the meeting and arrested 54 male and female human rights activists at 2.30pm and charged them under public maintenance law and several other laws. Four Christians were among them, Nadeem Anthony, council member of HRCP, Irfan Barkat, staff member of National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP), Miss Ayra Indreas from Women Desk of the Church of Pakistan's diocese of Lahore and her sister Miss Mona Indreas. They were all released on Nov 6 at approximately 8pm (after 52 hours) on bail. "It was a real agony and misery I suffered during three days detention. I have a breathing problem and just triggered it in those days, thanks to God I am OK now," Miss Indrea told Minorities Concern of Pakistan (MCP). Another Christian human rights activist, Joseph Francis, national coordinator of CLAAS, was also supposed to participate in the same meeting but luckily he slipped away and evaded arrest.

The lawyers have been constantly protesting against emergency rule. The Christian and Hindus lawyers are taking active part in those protest rallies. Police brutally beat up the lawyers and thousands of lawyers across the country were sent to jails. A Christian lawyer from Lahore, Pervaiz Aslam Chaudhry was also arrested and sent to jail. He was granted bail on Nov. 9 and was released on Nov. 10.

The Pakistan People Party (PPP) announced a public rally on Nov. 6 in Rawalpindi. Although police

put Benazir Bhutto, chairperson of PPP, under house arrest to stop the rally, thousands of PPP workers, including many Christians, gathered outside the Liaqat Bagh, Rawalpindi to show their strength. Police arrested hundreds of PPP workers. Moreover, many Christian members of All Pakistan Minorities alliance (APMA) were also arrested. According to APMA sources, many of their workers are still missing and nobody knows where they are.

Minorities Concern of Pakistan strongly condemns the imposition of emergency on Pakistan and demands:

1. The government should withdraw emergency without any delay. There is no justification, however, for this dictatorial move, which will only destroy the democratic culture of Pakistan.
2. The 1973 constitution should be restored and PCO should be withdrawn.
3. All lawyers, journalist, human rights activists, including members of other civil society organisations, and political workers should be released without any condition and charges against them should be withdrawn.
4. The ban and pressure on the media and especially electronic media should be removed and newspapers and TV channels must function freely.
5. All High Courts and Supreme Court judges, who are under house arrest, especially Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, Chief Justice of Pakistan, should be released and all judges who were sacked by the government should be restored and allow to take their duties to ensure the rule of law in the country.
6. All human rights activists, lawyers and political leaders who are under house arrest should be released, especially Mrs Asma Jahangir, chairperson HRCP, Noor Naz Agha advocate from Karachi, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, amir of Jamaat-e-Islami and many others.
7. All detained lawyers, teachers and members of civil society should be released unconditionally, especially Supreme Court Bar Association president Aitzaz Ahsan should be released immediately.
8. People should have the right to hold peaceful protests against emergency, so police should stop torturing members of the civil society and political parties.
9. Although President Musharraf has announced the date of the forthcoming general elections, it is visible that under emergency no elections will have any moral or legal legitimacy and definitely will be rejected by the people of Pakistan. Moreover, no elections can be free without a free media and an independent judiciary.
10. The new Military Ordinance is unwelcome and has created more fear amongst the people of Pakistan, especially political workers, so the law should be withdrawn without any delay.
11. To ensure the fair and free, forthcoming, general elections, the government should call All Parties Conference (APC) and ensure the nation that the recommendations of APC will be adopted in its letters and spirit.
12. All political parties should be on a level playing field for elections so Mian Nawaz Sharif, former prime minister and leader of Muslim League (N), should be allowed to come to Pakistan and take part in the political process.
13. An independent Election Commissioner should be appointed and a natural caretaker government should be installed in consultation with all opposition parties to ensure transparent elections.
14. The international community, especially human rights organisations, should raise their voice for true freedom in the country without discrimination.
15. We urge all religious, social and political leaders to take part in the protest camps of journalists to show their solidarity with media and freedom of expression in Pakistan.

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