

NoGO areas

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A clear answer to the question — whether the state crackdown against NGOs in various parts of Pakistan is on the basis of geography or has roots in the work profile of the targeted organisations — may not be easy. There is rich evidence that it is both.

For example, NGOs in South Punjab (Multan, Muzaffargarh, Rajanpur, and DG Khan) have been specifically directed (in 2015) to seek a no objection certificate (NOC) before every single activity from the Deputy Commissioner Office. As the NOC almost never arrives on time, they have now moved their activities to Lahore where there is no such restriction.

In Balochistan, too, NOC has become a pre-requisite while the concept notes and programme agendas of NGOs are reviewed to assess the suggested content of their activities. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province institutionalised NOC procedures long before these were introduced in the rest of the country.

The NGOs working in Karachi, other parts of Sindh, Lahore, and Islamabad, however, are not subject to the same restrictions. In addition, the wrapping up of the operations of Save the Children and International Committee of the Red Cross in Balochistan also indicates the presence of no-go areas for the operations of the non governmental sector in certain parts of the country.

However, organisations working on rights all across Pakistan may not agree that these restrictions are specific to certain areas. There have been various examples of rights-based organisations, especially those focusing on human rights and religious minorities, facing the heat of the state's recent outrage against the sector.

South Asia Partnership-Pakistan (SAP-PK) (with offices in many districts of Pakistan), Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER) (Karachi), Women in Struggle for Empowerment (Lahore) and Rozan (Islamabad) are a few examples. All the organisations have faced state pressure to curb their activities. The question then: is it the geography or the issues?

When it was first introduced, the National Action Plan raised hopes regarding a clampdown on extremism. However, the direction of the action seems to be elsewhere. "The most important point to note here is how the rule of law is being violated in the whole process," says Zulfiqar Shah, Joint Director PILER.

The roots of recent crackdowns on NGOs could be found in the expanding assertion of the national security agenda championed by the armed forces of Pakistan, and almost never challenged by the

political forces that are representative of the public interest. A PML-N government in the centre that has a history of hostile actions against NGOs provides a supportive environment.

The earlier Nawaz Sharif governments (1990-93 and 1997-99) are marked by continuous tensions with the civil society that had a vocal position on violation of rights, honour killings, and the Shariat Bill. Back then, several NGOs faced intelligence inquiries and were deregistered while an NGO Bill was also introduced in the parliament to bring the non-profit sector directly under its control and regulation.

When national security is the agenda, it is difficult to identify what exactly qualifies as the criteria for an action against NGOs. The creators and drivers of the national security agenda have expanded it much beyond the realm of terrorism. With regard to terrorism, fundamental rights are seen as an impediment, as indicated by the former Army Chief's statement in Davos early this month.

There is clear evidence regarding intolerance of activism on the economic development projects, such as China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the nuclear power plants. "It seems that three kinds of engagements are particularly targeted: CPEC, minorities and Balochistan," says Abira Ashfaq, a lawyer and activist.

In the face of weakening resistance, NGOs are now being forced into self-censorship, steering clear of controversial topics, such as Balochistan, enforced disappearances, and military operations in various parts of the country. In Balochistan, there is broad consensus that these issues need not be engaged.

A threatening posture doesn't necessarily have to come from state actors. As the state takes up the stick against the non-governmental sector, private actors, including criminals are finding immense encouragement to target organisations for their own agenda. In a recent consultation in Karachi, representative of a Khyber Pakhtunkhwa based NGO shared: "Malicious campaigns by the media portray civil society organisations as Western agents, receiving millions of dollars of funding for imposing a Western agenda. There have been cases of NGOs in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa receiving extortion calls, as a result."

How the state responds when NGOs are threatened by private actors is noted to be a determining factor for the future of these organisations. Sharing his experience, Jan Odhano leading the Community Development Foundation, Jacobabad, an 11-year-old organisation that works on human rights, education and minorities rights recalls how over the years the social fabric of the otherwise peaceful district has changed.

The state has chosen to support the extremists rather than the progressives. "Twenty years ago, Jacobabad had some 50 theatre academies that would frequently conduct cultural activities. They have all been replaced by religious events," says Odhano.

Bolstering these forces, the state makes little effort to protect organisations that are directly threatened by the religious groups. Odhano recalls two activities his organisation did for minority rights. "We did a tableau at a local school on August 14 last year. The programme included songs and performances by little children. Following the programme, a text message campaign was launched, implying that by way

of songs and dances, our NGO is spreading vulgarity in the area. The District Education Officer then issued a notification banning the entry of NGOs in the premises of schools without his office's permission."

"In another one of our consultations on minorities' rights at the local press club, a man who identified himself as an ISI official jumped in the middle of the discussion, terming this as a RAW-funded programme. He later told me that I should expect a call from the security agencies soon."

Odhano notes that local nationalist parties offer immense support in this state of insecurity, issuing media statements defending the NGOs. However, the state by way of its actions and inactions, doesn't lend any support.

In the development discourse, NGOs have been criticised for taking responsibility of service delivery (education and healthcare) while trading off their original agenda of political empowerment. However, in Pakistan's case, service delivery organisations are not subjected to state scrutiny as much as their partners advocating fundamental rights.

It is important to see the role of the media in the whole episode. Deviating much from their job of protecting public interest, media, particularly in small towns, has acted as instruments to lay the groundwork of targeting of NGOs. In Punjab, especially South Punjab, it has been observed that a deliberate negative portrayal of NGOs in the media is followed by notices from the Home Department or other related authorities for NGOs to either explain their actions or bring their activities to a halt.

Odhano says that in the absence of a clear authority regulating the print media, there is no way this tendency can be challenged.

NGOs subjected to victimisation have ended up wasting their time and resources dealing with intelligence officials, processing paper work, filing court petitions and defending against media propaganda. When it was first introduced, the National Action Plan raised hopes regarding a clampdown on extremism. However, the direction of the action seems to be elsewhere. "The most important point to note here is how the rule of law is being violated in the whole process," says Zulfiqar Shah, Joint Director PILER.