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August 24, 2018

Prime Minister Imran Khan
Prime Minister's Secretariat
Constitution Avenue
Islamabad, Pakistan

Re: Human Rights Agenda for the New Government

Dear Prime Minister Khan,

As your government takes charge, we write to you about the human rights situation in Pakistan and urge that you take some key steps to help address current and longstanding problems. Human Rights Watch is an independent nongovernmental organization dedicated to defending and protecting human rights. We monitor and report on human rights violations in over 90 countries around the world, including Pakistan.

In July, Pakistanis went to the polls, effecting the second successive transition of power through a constitutional process from one elected government to another. In your speech, after your party's successful campaign, you pledged to uphold the rights of women and minority groups. This is very welcome. You and your party have an important opportunity to create a rights-respecting government that abides by the rule of law and restores the public's faith in democratic institutions.

However, as you know, many challenges remain before this goal can be reached. We urge you to take concrete steps to protect fundamental civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights in the areas specified below. A proactive human rights agenda is essential for Pakistan's development.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to a constructive relationship with your government and would be pleased to discuss these and other matters of mutual concern with you at any time over the course of your term in office.

Yours sincerely,



Brad Adams
Asia Director

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1. Freedom of Expression and Attacks on Civil Society

A climate of fear impedes media coverage of abuses both by government security forces and militant groups. Journalists increasingly practice self-censorship after numerous attacks by militant groups, including the Taliban in retaliation to criticism, particularly around their extremist diktats. Media outlets remain under pressure from the authorities to avoid reporting on several issues including criticism of government institutions and the judiciary. Your party has been a strong proponent of free expression, including on social media, to criticize state policy and press for change. An independent media is key to robust dialogue that reflects public concerns. Human Rights Watch hopes that your government will foster a culture of political tolerance for media criticism.

The government should also act to end harassment, intimidation, use of coercion, violence, and other abuses against civil society activists by state security forces and militant groups. The Pakistani government announced the “Policy for Regulation of INGOs in Pakistan” on October 1, 2015, which requires all international human rights and humanitarian groups to register and obtain prior permission from the Ministry of Interior to carry out any activities in the country, and to restrict their operations to specific issues and geographical areas. The ministry is broadly empowered to cancel registrations on grounds of “involvement in any activity inconsistent with Pakistan’s national interests, or contrary to Government policy” – terms that have vague meanings and can be used for political reasons.

Human Rights Watch has received several credible reports of intimidation, harassment, and surveillance of various NGOs by government authorities. The previous government used the “Regulation of INGOs in Pakistan” policy to impede the registration and functioning of international humanitarian and human rights groups. Your government should revise the policy for INGOs so that it does not contravene the rights to freedom of expression and association and cannot be misused for political reasons to restrict the peaceful activities of nongovernmental organizations.

In August 2016, the Pakistan government also enacted the Prevention of Cybercrimes Act, which allows the government to censor online content and to criminalize internet user activity under extremely broad and vague criteria. The law also sanctions government authorities to access data of internet users without judicial review or oversight. Human Rights Watch urges your government to review and amend the Prevention of Cybercrimes Act to ensure that it does not criminalize peaceful use of the internet, safeguards privacy rights, and enables free expression.

2. Freedom of Religion and Belief

At least 17 people remain on death row in Pakistan after being convicted under the draconian blasphemy law, and hundreds await trial. Most of those facing blasphemy are members of religious minorities – including Asia Bibi, the first woman to face a potential death sentence for blasphemy – and are usually victims of personal disputes.

In the past two years, Pakistan has witnessed an increase in blasphemy-related violence while the government continued to encourage discriminatory prosecutions and other forms of discrimination against vulnerable groups by failing to repeal discriminatory laws and using religious rhetoric, inciting hatred against minorities. Human Rights Watch urges the Pakistani government to amend the blasphemy law, as a first step towards its repeal.

Members of the Ahmaddiya religious community continue to be a major target for blasphemy prosecutions and are subjected to specific anti-Ahmadi laws across Pakistan. They face increasing social discrimination as militant groups and extremists use provisions of the law to prevent Ahmadis from “posing as Muslims.” Human Rights Watch calls on the Pakistani government to repeal the ban on Ahmaddiya religious practice and hold to account all who engage in or incite violence against Ahmadis.

3. Violence Against Women and Girls

Violence against women and girls – including rape, so-called “honor” killings, acid attacks, domestic violence, and forced marriage – remains a serious problem. Pakistani activists estimate that there are about 1,000 “honor” killings every year.

Women from religious minority communities are particularly vulnerable to abuse. A report by the Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan found that at least 1,000 girls belonging to Christian and Hindu communities are forced to marry Muslim men every year. The government has failed to act to stop such forced marriages.

Child marriage remains a serious concern, with 21 percent of girls in Pakistan marrying before the age of 18, and three percent married before age 15, according to the United Nations children’s agency UNICEF.

Human Rights Watch urges you to take steps to implement legislation against domestic violence, create and implement a comprehensive national action plan to end child marriages, and take measures to improve investigation and prosecution of “honor” killings and acid attacks, including reforming laws that facilitate impunity.

4. Access to Education

Over 5 million primary-school-age children are out of school, most of them girls. Human Rights Watch research found that girls are excluded from or drop out of school for various reasons including lack of schools, costs associated with studying, child labor, child marriage, and gender discrimination. Human Rights Watch urges the government to increase investment in education and develop measures to get all out-of-school children into education, with a focus on ending the gender disparity.

Attacks on schools and the use of children in suicide bombings by the Taliban and affiliated armed extremist groups continues. In 2017, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights invited Pakistan to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration, which proposes steps to protect schools from attacks and military use during armed conflict. Human Rights Watch similarly urges Pakistan to join this declaration.

5. Restore Moratorium on the Death Penalty

At least 44 people were executed in 2017, of whom 37 were sentenced to death after convictions by military courts. Pakistan has one of the highest numbers of convicts on death row in the world. Many, if not most, of the over 8,000 prisoners on death row have been convicted through a judicial process that does not meet international fair trial standards.

Human Rights Watch opposes the death penalty in all circumstances as an inherently irreversible, inhumane punishment. A majority of countries in the world have abolished the practice. On December 18, 2007, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution by a wide margin calling for a worldwide moratorium on executions. If your government is to be seen as an upholder of human rights standards, it should restore the moratorium with immediate effect.

6. Terrorism and Counterterrorism

Suicide bombings, armed attacks, and killings by the Taliban, al Qaeda, and their affiliates continue, targeting politicians, journalists, and religious minorities, as well as state security personnel. Human Rights Watch calls on your government to promptly investigate, fairly prosecute, and appropriately punish the perpetrators of these violent attacks.

Pakistan faces a serious security threat and has deployed measures to contain attacks by armed militants. However, there are serious allegations of human rights violations including torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings during counterterrorism operations. Suspects are frequently detained without charge

or tried without proper judicial process. Counterterrorism laws also continue to be misused as an instrument of political coercion.

In March, parliament reinstated secret military courts empowered to try civilians after the term for military courts ended in January 2017. Pakistan human rights groups said that many defendants facing military courts are denied the right to a fair trial. Authorities do not allow independent monitoring of military court trials.

Human Rights Watch urges your government to take all necessary measures to end extrajudicial killings and arbitrary detentions, and to prosecute those responsible. Independent monitors must be provided access to all detainees and detained terrorism suspects should be provided access to lawyers and to communicate with family members.