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Pakistan: End election-related violence, prioritize human rights in election campaigning

The Pakistani authorities must investigate the wave of attacks and threats on political candidates and election workers, Amnesty International said in an open letter released before the country goes to the polls for general elections on 11 May.

The organization also called on all political parties, and candidates to commit to specific measures for improving the country's human rights situation during their election campaigns.

"This has been a particularly deadly election period marked by an alarming surge in attacks and intimidation of political activists and election officials," Mustafa Qadri, Amnesty International's Pakistan Researcher, said.

Campaigning ahead of Pakistan's upcoming general elections has been marred by human rights abuses. At least 37 people have been killed and 183 injured in attacks on election officials and political party representatives and supporters countrywide.

This includes bombings that appeared to target an office of the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) political party in Karachi and a leader of the Hazara Democratic Party in Quetta on 23 April. Further bombings on 24 April appeared to target a Pakistan People's Party candidate in Peshawar and an independent candidate in Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Two election candidates have been assassinated in separate incidents by the Pakistani Taliban since the elections were called in March.

Election officials as well as candidates and supporters have faced threats from a range of groups, and in the northwestern Tribal Areas the Taliban have banned certain parties from campaigning for being "too secular".

The Awami National Party (ANP) and MQM have been particularly singled out for attack, although members of other parties have also been targeted. On 16 April at least 17 people were killed when a Taliban suicide bomber targeted an ANP rally in Peshawar. The same day the Baloch Liberation Army accepted responsibility for a bomb attack on a Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz candidate in Khuzdar, Balochistan that claimed four lives, including the candidate's son, brother and nephew.

"With these deliberate attacks, the Taliban and other armed groups have shown flagrant disregard for human rights, including the rights to life, freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly," Mustafa Qadri said.

The authorities must ensure adequate protection for those at risk of attack and in particular protect the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association and the right to life.

“Candidates themselves also have a responsibility not to incite violence against rivals or segments of society such as religious minorities,” Qadri said.

In its open letter, Amnesty International urged all political parties and election candidates to prioritize human rights in their election pledges and their policies.

Pakistanis will go to the polls to choose a new government on 11 May, marking the first time that the administration has transitioned from one elected government to another.

The past five years have seen some improvements in Pakistan’s enshrining of human rights into law, including advances on women’s rights and the ratification of key international human rights treaties.

But human rights abuses by both state and non-state actors have continued and in some respects worsened over the same period, while most of those responsible for abuses walk free.

“Pakistan’s political parties and election candidates must demonstrate that they are genuine about addressing the failure of successive governments to address impunity for human rights abuses,” Mustafa Qadri said.

“All candidates must ensure that human rights are at the forefront of their election campaigning.”