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Pakistan

AWP Multi-Party Conference on "A Collective Response of the Left to the Reaction of Obscurantist Forces on the Recent Legislation for Protection of Women against Violence"

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A multi-party conference arranged by the Awami Workers Party on Saturday vowed to wage a joint struggle against attempts by the religious right-wing to pressure the provincial and federal governments into withdrawing or amending the Protection of Women Against Domestic Violence Act in accordance with their wishes.

Over 50 political parties and social movements participated in the one day conference.

A joint declaration passed at the end of the conference condemned the religious parties for preventing the recognition of the right to women of protection against domestic violence and stressed the need for mobilization of the public in support of a progressive agenda for social change in the country. Speakers stressed the need for an alliance of left-leaning and secular forces to confront the right-wing extremism in all its manifestations, including economic exploitation of working people.

Speaking at the outset, AWP president Abid Hasan Minto said that the laws passed by the provincial assemblies were not adequate to guarantee recognition of women's constitutionally guaranteed rights and protection of women from domestic violence. However, he said it was important for all progressive political parties, social movements, trade union activists and civil society organizations to get together in support of the law and to resist religious parties' opposition to the domestic violence and other pro-women laws. He said that the AWP would continue to play a role to unite progressive forces across the country and would organize these dialogues in other provinces as well. Minto also condemned the provincial government for starting negotiations with the religious parties to address their concerns over the law. He said the progressive forces should not let the government submit to pressure from religious parties and weaken the institutional framework proposed under the law to provide redress to victims of domestic violence. In this regard, he said the government had already agreed to include family members of couples involved in domestic violence cases into the proceedings of the district-level women protection councils. He said this should be resisted. He said that the AWP will lead the process of uniting the left in Pakistan and will extend this dialogue to all provinces.

The conference was jointly chaired by Abid Hasan Minto, president AWP and Farooq Tariq general secretary AWP.

Women Action Forum's Hina Jilani said that the state could not be allowed to shy away from its responsibility to protect its women citizens from acts of violence. She said all crimes that affect women should be recognized as crimes against the state rather than against individuals. She stressed the need for collaboration between all progressive forces to wage a joint struggle against the religious right-wing's political activism. On the tendency to equate support for the law to opposition for the family system, Jilani said the family system that condoned gender violence and placed men in position of unaccountable authority could not be defended. She said progressive forces wanted a family system that promoted egalitarian relationships between its individual members and protected all of them from acts of violence.

Among the shortcomings of the women protection law that needed to be fixed, Jilani mentioned delay in enforcement and the possibility of implementation in selective regions which she said was against the Constitution.

Supreme Court Bar Association president Ali Zafar said that alongside street agitation against religious parties an intellectual battle was also needed to discredit their propaganda on pro-women laws. Among his suggestions for improvements in the law were need for interim protection, gender sensitization of the police force, improved prosecution of cases registered under pro-women laws and reform of family courts to enhance their efficiency.

In his statement in support of the conference, Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP) president Mahmood Khan Achakzai extended support of his party for the declaration passed at the conference and said that his party's activists would join progressive forces in their struggle against the religious right-wing.

Representing the Awami National Party, Mian Iftikhar Hussain (Central General Secretary) extended support for the declaration and urged the gathering to seek allies without the parliamentary parties and state institutions. He said the struggle for a society free of gender-based violence needed to be waged in collaboration with all like-minded forces. He further said that the gathering today reminded him of NAP, the leading progressive force in Pakistan's political history. He said that NAP was the leading progressive force in Pakistan's political history. Left unity must be revived, and the left unity dialogue should be taken by AWP to all provinces.

More than 50 progressive political parties, trade union federations, professional associations, women's rights groups, and students federations attended the conference. These included Awami National Party, National Party, Balochistan National Party (Mengal), Jeay Sindh Mahaz, Sindh United Party, Hazara Siyasi Karkunan, Pakistan Peoples Party -Shaheed Bhutto and Workers, Supreme Court and Lahore High Court Bar Associations, Punjab and Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, Pakistan Trade Union Federation and Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union (Punjab), Anjuman Mazareen Punjab, Pakistan Medical Association, The Struggle, Pakistan Trade Union Defence Campaign, National Students Federation and Democratic Students Alliance and Feminist Collective, Rawadari Tehreek, and others. Solidarity messages were sent to endorse the joint declaration including Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party, Pakistan Seraiki Party, Balochistan National Party, Samoraj Movement, and Vision.

The following declaration was passed at the end of the conference:

A Collective Response of the Left to the Reaction of Obscurantist Forces on the Recent Legislation for Protection of Women against Violence

1. The multi-party conference of Leftwing, secular, democratic, nationalist and non-violent movements, called upon by Awami Workers Party, expresses its deep concern with the statements of religio-political parties and state institutions, many of whom are openly opposing the right of women to be protected from violence i.e. to live a life of dignity.
2. We understand that women face systemic oppression in Pakistan. This situation is exacerbated for women belonging to working classes, oppressed nations and religious minorities. With the growth of productive forces in the shape of capitalism, the living standards of women may have slightly improved but they still experience the worst forms of socio-economic and political inequalities, humiliations, violence and powerlessness, often driven by patriarchal backlash against any limited advances made by women. Even today, women restricted to domestic and familial responsibilities and her identity is reduced to only that of daughter, wife and mother. This situation has its origin in our history and existing feudal and patriarchal structures, which are reinforced by the theocratic and neo-imperialist nature of the state.
3. We therefore welcome any legislative, political, economic and social measures taken for the protection and advancement of women that aims to improve the status of women in society.. We support the recently passed provincial legislation on domestic violence by the Sindh, Balochistan and Punjab assemblies. While the Protection of Women against Violence Act 2016 is insufficient (in that, for instance, it does not criminalize domestic violence), it is a necessary step forward towards a more just social order.
4. We declare that we condemn all those – within and outside the state – who attempt to dismiss or undermine legislation for protection of women against violence, and we will collectively resist them with full force. We therefore

strongly reject the regressive role of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) and the Federal Shariat Court (FSC) in state affairs. We call upon the National Assembly and the Senate to immediately disband the theocratic and patriarchal CII and the FSC. Both of these institutions represent feudal and patriarchal forces and hence remain an obstacle to democracy, and the struggle for radical equality for all,

5. We strongly condemn the religio-political parties opposing the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act, 2016 and other similar legislation by provincial and federal governments. They represent the epitome of feudal brutality and obscurantism that legitimizes a whole range of dreadful customs promoting women's oppression "the monster that the state has fed and fattened for decades at the cost of people's basic rights.

6. We understand that the state and government patronage given to religio-political parties and outfits is at the root of their increasing influence in social and state affairs. The recent attack on democracy by these forces in Islamabad and the hypocritical reaction of the government has reinforced their strength. We believe that until and unless the state and the government do not completely abandon these forces, they will continue to keep hostage the democratic system and the masses in Pakistan.

7. We reject the two committees formed by the Punjab government to address religious parties' concerns over the law. We will not let the government make amendments to the law in accordance with the wishes of the religious extremists and against those of the women's rights activists.

8. We affirm our commitment to collectively exposing, resisting and eliminating the inequities that color women's existence and defeat all forms of patriarchal oppression and violence
