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Pakistan

# Cabinets sans women – “the space is shrinking for the women”

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**The political space of Pakistan has taken turns for the worst over the years. There is an ever increasing influence of Islamists who sell religion to gain power. Increase in their influence means that liberal and progressive elements are losing power, if they ever had any. Political scene is dominated by right wingers, be it mainstream parties like PML-N, PTI or religious parties such as JI and JUI-f. As a result the militancy has surged in Pakistan whereas plurality is taking a steep decline. One of the hallmarks of right wing dominated political systems is always a misogynistic attitude. Same is the case in current political setup of Pakistan where the space is shrinking for the women.**

Taking a glimpse at political history of Pakistan, women had managed to get some role. Pakistan had the first ever female prime minister in the Muslim world, Speaker National Assembly and Deputy Speaker National Assembly. Benazir Bhutto the became prime minister after 41 years of the independence of Pakistan. There was considerable progress in representation of women in the parliament under the Musharraf dictatorship and the Zardari government. However, current regime of Nawaz Sharif and the provincial governments have rolled-back all progress made in this field. This is very unfortunate because Pakistan is moving backwards in terms of being progressive, by not empowering women.

Analysis of the women representation in federal and provincial cabinets reveals that there is almost no representation of women. Women constitute 48% of the population in Pakistan and they should get 40%-50% representation. However, they only have token representation in the current government. There is not a single woman Federal Minister and there are only two women state ministers. One of them is Saira Afzal Tarar who has been given the Health portfolio which holds negligible power after the Health portfolio was transferred to provincial governments following the 18th Amendment. Under the PPP government, women had considerable representation in the parliament and the Speaker National assembly was also a women. However, women parliamentarians could not draw luck this time from a women unfriendly government of Sharifs.

Shifting focus on provincial cabinets will make the case even worse as there is even lesser woman representation. The so-called revolutionary government of the PTI in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa doesn't have a single woman minister. In the Punjab cabinet, there are only two women ministers and that's insignificant considering the fact that Punjab makes up 56% population of Pakistan. The case of Sindh is not much different: Qaim Ali Shah has only one women minister in his cabinet. The restive province of Balochistan doesn't have any women minister. In the last government, there were quite a few women ministers and also a women as the deputy speaker (during the last few months of the provincial assembly). This sums up the case that women have been marginalized everywhere in Pakistan in this political setup.

A positive development in empowering women was made in 2002 when 60 reserved seats were allocated for women the parliamentarians. Women are elected on these seats on the basis of proportional representation of political parties on the general seats of National and provincial assemblies. Similarly, seats were also allocated under same principle in the Senate. However, most of the women who are elected on these seats are wives, daughters, sisters and daughters-in-law of top politicians. In a way, the political elite fills up these seats and women don't get to elect their own representatives directly. At the moment, for the 60 reserved seats for women in the Punjab Assembly, 34 were elected from Lahore. In other words, not merely on the class basis, also on regional basis, deprived women are marginalized.

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