

Mullahs push back against protection for women in Pakistan

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It may be the 21st century and a female Pakistani film director has just won her second Oscar, but the country's mullahs and militants are determined to drive the country back to the Middle Ages.

Some 30 Islamist parties and banned militant extremist groups have threatened to hold a countrywide protest on March 27 against a progressive bill to protect women that was passed this month in Punjab's provincial parliament.

This is the first law in the province strongly to empower women to take action against domestic and dowry related violence and pursue justice against their husbands and other men who commit beatings and honor killings, and the Islamist protesters are demanding that it be withdrawn. The Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act also promises to set up a women's police force in every district to deal with their complaints and it is hoped that this will help implementation of the legislation.

The religious right says the new law will increase the divorce rate and destroy the family system and claims that it is western law inappropriate to Pakistan. "The current bill has been imposed upon us by foreign countries; it is just to make them happy and not actually for women," [Siraj-ul Haq, chief of the Jamaat-e-Islamic](#), a key Islamic political group, told the daily Pakistan Today.

The JI, which is a part of the global Muslim Brotherhood movement, is a prime organizer of the protest. Although it frequently fights elections it has failed to win more than a handful of seats in parliament. It also fears another big legislative change – a law being considered that amends the controversial blasphemy law which has particularly targeted women and non-Muslim minorities.

Pakistan has an abysmal record of violence against women and [ranks 147th of the 188-country UN Gender Inequality Index](#). Civil society, women's groups and much of the media are all voicing support for the bill.

However, there are larger issues at stake. Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, which is listed as a terrorist organization by the UN, the US and Pakistan itself, is one of several militant groups that are openly mobilizing their supporters in the madrassas (Koranic schools) and mosques to take part in the protests.

The Islamist right and the militants are feeling squeezed by the pressure of the military campaign that has decimated Pakistani Taliban in the north of the country and cracked down on extremists in the industrial city of Karachi.

The Islamist protest movement is seen as an attempt to fight back against encroachments by the government on social mores and laws that the mullahs see as their prerogative.

There has been enormous pressure on the government to clean up the 20,000 or more madrassas, a handful of which train militants and suicide bombers. A 20-point National Action Plan agreed upon by all political parties 15 months ago set out an agenda to counter extremism and reform the educational system, particularly the madrassas.

Yet nothing has changed the culture and the action taken by the government has so far been selective, with some extremist groups with close ties to the army or the government – particularly in Punjab – being left alone.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who has traditionally been close to the Islamist fundamentalist lobby and draws votes from it, has been forced to pay lip service to a more progressive agenda due to pressure from civil society. However, [women's groups still fear](#) that he could put the bill on hold or water it down considerably to stave off the protests.

The issue of women's rights in Pakistan has been attracting attention internationally in large part because of the renowned feminist film-maker, [Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy](#), who last month won her second Oscar in Hollywood with a short documentary, *A Girl in the River – the Price of Forgiveness*, which highlights honor killings. After meeting her the prime minister promised to enact tougher laws against such killings.

[The Aurat Foundation](#), a women's rights group, estimates that [honor killings claim the lives of 1,000 women a year](#).

How the government handles the protests and whether it stands up to the movement will be closely watched domestically and internationally. Reform of outdated laws and social mores is vital if Pakistan is to succeed at a time when so many Muslim countries are becoming failed states.

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