

Obituary: Pakistan's bravest citizen is no more

DAWN NEWSPAPER. February 12, 2018

Ahmed Rashid

NOBODY in Pakistan's brief history, which has witnessed four military coups, has matched Asma Jahangir for her dedication to public service, her belief in the rule of law, her relentless defense of democracy and pursuit of free and fair elections. She stood for both peace and justice with all of Pakistan's neighbors.

Indians too mourned her loss as did people around the world. She was loved by millions while her detractors treated her with the utmost respect. At a time when Pakistan is once again facing immense political uncertainties and severe tensions with the US and all its neighbors, Asma's role as a voice for peace and sanity was absolutely vital. Sadly that voice has now gone silent and for the time being there is nobody with the stature or the willingness to take her place.

Throughout her life she took enormous risks. She was the bravest of the brave.

She was born in Lahore in 1952 and educated in the city before being called to the Lahore High Court in 1980. She was first arrested in 1983 for participating in the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy against the military regime of Gen Ziaul Haq. Many more arrests and house arrests were to follow even as she engaged in fighting the cases of those who had suffered at the hands of the establishment.

In 1987 she co-founded the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and became its secretary. The HRCP earned global recognition for its fairness and defense of religious minorities, battered women, children and those who were too poor to seek redress through the courts.

Its annual report on the state of human rights in the country is still one of the most significant and relevant documents put out by any non-state organization. It is also used by foreign governments to determine the state of human rights in Pakistan.

Together with her sister Hina Jilani and two other lawyers she formed the first law firm established by women and for women in Pakistan. The firm took cases gratis in case abused women were too poor to pay, while the law firm quickly became the center for defense of the press and other social causes.

Asma Jahangir was perhaps the most honored Pakistani citizen, receiving multiple human rights awards, honorary degrees and other awards from universities in the US, Canada, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands and the Philippines as well as from think tanks and governments all over the world.

Her most prized cases that she took up were also the most dangerous that she faced — the defense of those accused under the blasphemy law. "It would be hypocrisy to defend a law I don't believe in like capital punishment, the blasphemy law and laws against women and in favor of child labor," she told the media in 2005.

Yet Asma will be remembered for much more than her long list of achievements and the services she rendered to a state that has always grappled between orthodoxy and liberalism. She was a remarkable human being with a wonderful sense of humor, a devoted mother and wife and later reveled in the time spent with her grandchildren.

She kept an open house which at any time of day was filled with her friends, litigants, abused women and children, senior politicians and people from the media. Small in height but fiery in spirit, her finger wagging at assertive anchormen on TV, at lawyers and others in court became just one of her many hallmarks.

Her ability to debate or criticize anyone at any time on virtually any subject ensured that she was as much feared by the media as she was loved. She never hesitated to call a spade a spade be they politicians, bureaucrats or generals.

Her defense of the law and the legal system was at times far stronger and more implacable than that undertaken by even senior judges, lawyers and journalists. In a country that has for at least one third of its existence been bereft of law and a democratic system, Asma's defense of the law was unprecedented.

In moments of crisis, doubt, fears and uncertainty people from all walks of life invariably turned to her and they would come away emboldened, strengthened and ready to take on the world.

She was not for herself, she was for everyone. Her tiny frame knocked up against the harsh world outside and invariably led to her inspiring all those around her. She will be remembered and honored for ever.