

National Convention Press Release

12 January 2008

The national convention of the Women's Action Forum (WAF) held in Karachi reviewed the current deepening crisis in Pakistan, a fallout of the military's consistent and repeated interferences in the democratic/civilian process and expressed grave concern at the developments in 2007: the collusion of the state in the rise of religious fundamentalists, the increasing state use of military force against citizens, the attacks on women, on girls schools, on civil society, the media and the lawyers community and the threat to the federation; a crisis exacerbated by an external imperialist design under the aegis of the United States of America. WAF believes that only a democratic set up in which all political parties are enabled to fully participate, supported by an independent judiciary and free media will enable Pakistan to meet the serious challenges it now confronts.

Condemning Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto's assassination, and noting that no tribunal or inquiry under the current set up is acceptable to Pakistani citizens, WAF reiterates its demand for a full independent inquiry by a commission headed by Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and others and an investigation by the U.N.

Despite reservations regarding the electoral process, in the light of national imperatives WAF believes that elections are an essential vehicle for strengthening the democratic process. It calls upon everyone to participate in the elections and calls upon its own members as well as others to mobilize for ensuring free, fair and transparent elections that must be held on 18th February, 2008 without any further delays.

Denouncing the illegitimate super-structure carved out by the military, an institution that is undemocratic both in process and outcome, WAF stands with all those forces upholding democracy and challenging the militarized state machinery. WAF calls upon all parties – those boycotting as well as those participating in these elections – to work together to strengthen democracy and democratic processes in Pakistan.

With respect to the elections, WAF condemns the deliberate arrests of mainstream political party activists and candidates, particularly those of the PPP, and the malafide intention of including tens of thousands of "unnamed persons" in the FIRs. This is an attempt to subvert the electoral process and to undermine the holding of free and fair elections. WAF demands the immediate release of those arrested in the aftermath of Benazir's assassination and the withdrawal of all cases against them. WAF also calls for the immediate release of Aitezaz Ahsan, Ali Ahmed Kurd and Tariq Mehmood, as well as all the detained judges, lawyers, and civil society and human rights activists. The rampant use of the state machinery to promote its chosen candidates should be stopped immediately. Taking particular note of the inordinate time and coverage given by

the state controlled electronic media to PML (Q) leaders, WAF calls for a high-powered inquiry into campaign financing.

WAF condemns the attacks on women politicians and the use of abusive, slanderous and misogynist language. This includes media campaigns, such as specific advertisements in print media of the PML (Q) and the open letter of Altaf Hussain, that fan ethnic and national divisions as well as statements made by PML (Q) leaders, Pervaiz Elahi and Arbab Rahim, that are extremely disrespectful and insensitive to people's sentiments. WAF strongly denounces the way in which ethnic and provincial conflict has been fanned in the wake of the tragic death of Benazir and the chaos created which appear designed to fuel anti-Sindhi feelings.

WAF calls for an empowered, independent, and transparent election commission that ensures decency in electioneering through a code of conduct agreed upon by all political parties and that local governments be suspended until after the elections given the large number of candidates who are close immediate relatives of sitting Nazims, Ministers etc.

Women's Action Forum upholds the spirit and the core principles of the original 1973 Constitution. It strongly believes that Constitutional promises of equal citizenship regardless of ethnicities, languages, religions, geographical locations and gender and the promise of equal opportunities, aspirations, and economic social and political rights can only guaranteed through a secular state.

Legitimate feelings of deprivation amongst smaller provinces and deprived areas are being exploited in the current situation. Popular leadership has been eliminated, further fueling ethnic tensions following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. Fuller provincial autonomy within a federal structure is required to address these legitimate grievances in which the Centre merely facilitates the federation and provinces. Provincial autonomy must not compromise equality and justice for all citizens regardless of class, gender and religion and the distribution of resources and finances must be premised not merely on the basis of population but equally on geography, area, needs, and provincial contributions to national resources. Contentious issues need to be resolved through national consensus. Noting that the power of the military and its control over all aspects of Pakistani state and society has been underwritten by the billions of dollars in aid from the US and other global powers due to Pakistan's strategic location, WAF demands public oversight of and accountability for all military aid through the Public Accounts Committee of the Parliament.

Democracy is impossible without a strong independent judiciary and media. WAF salutes the unprecedented struggle of the lawyers and judges for the rule of law; it calls for the restoration of the judiciary of November 2nd, 2007 and the withdrawal of amendments introduced to the Army Act 1952 that provide for permanent military courts parallel to the judiciary.

WAF appreciates the struggle of the media to enable citizens' right to information; it pays tribute to the many who have given their lives and their personal freedom. WAF calls for ungagging the press, upholding the freedom of the print and electronic media as guaranteed under Constitutional Article 19; the repeal of the PEMRA Ordinance and its amendments, and the full provision of physical and human security to working journalists.

Finally, WAF holds General Musharraf's government responsible for the current crisis and deteriorating situation in which an unprecedented number of media and women politicians have been murdered, in which thanks to collusion of the global neoliberal forces and the Pakistani elite and privatization agenda, the economic crisis has led to an acute manufactured shortage of wheat, and a severe energy crisis has exacerbated the already heavy burden of people and adversely impacts economic productivity. The resulting acute food insecurity, loss of livelihood and soaring inflation have driven people to poverty-related suicide for the first time in our history.

WAF calls for the immediately stepping down of the present regime and formation of a neutral government of national-consensus to take forward the democratic process and allow democracy to take root. The time is one for healing. We demand the immediate end military interference in the political processes of the state and an end to the divisive imperialist policies that must be replaced by the creation of a just, secular and people-centered federation.