

Musharraf and the Mullahs

Ali Dayan Hasan

[Asma Jahangir, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion and head of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan was beaten up by police in Lahore, Pakistan on May 14 to prevent her and other women participants to participate in a mixed-gender marathon. In the police action, another human rights defender, Hina Jilani, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders was also arrested. We are reproducing the excerpts of a center page article by Ali Dayan Hasan in International Herald Tribune (June, 15, 2005). Ali Dayan Hasan covers Pakistan for the New York based group Human Rights Watch. He was also arrested alongwith other human rights activists while covering the event. (Editor)].

“Teach the bitch a lesson. Strip her in public’. As one of the police officers told me, these were the orders issued by their bosses. The police beat the woman with batons in the full glare of the news media, tore her shirt off and, though they failed to take off her baggy trousers, certainly tried their best. The ritual public humiliation over, she and others— some bloodied— were dragged screaming and protesting to police vans and taken away to police stations.

“This didn’t happen to some unknown student or impoverished villager. This happened to Asma Jahangir, the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion and head of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, the country’s largest such nongovernmental group. The setting: a glitzy thoroughfare in Lahore’s upmarket Gulberg neighborhood. The crime: attempting to organize a symbolic mixed-gender mini-marathon on May 14.

“The stated aim of the marathon was to highlight violence against women and to promote “enlightened moderation” - a reference to President Pervez Musharraf’s constant refrain describing the Pakistani military’s ostensible shift from state-sponsored Islamist militancy and religious orthodoxy to something else (just what is not entirely clear).

“The marathon was organized by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and affiliated nongovernmental organizations in the light of recent “marathon politics” in Pakistan. Until early April, it was government policy to encourage sporting events for women, so Punjab Province organized a series of marathons in which men and women could compete. The brief experiment ended abruptly on April 3, when 900 activists of the Islamist alliance, the Muttaheda Majlis-e-Amal, or MMA - which was effectively

created as a serious political force by Musharraf and is backed by the military - attacked the participants of a race in the town of Gujranwala.

“The reason is simple: Democracy, human rights and meaningful civil liberties are anathema to a hypermilitarized state. Pakistan’s voters consistently vote overwhelmingly for moderate, secular-oriented parties and reject religious extremists, so the military must rely on the most retrogressive elements in society to preserve its hold on power. Jahangir and others were beaten because they tried - in a symbolic but crucial way - to challenge the mullah-military alliance on the streets of Lahore.

“Instead of allying himself with espousers of hate and intolerance, Musharraf should pursue a genuine path of enlightened moderation by telling the MMA and others that the days of treating women as second-class citizens are over. If human rights defenders can be beaten for running for their rights, will they have to run for their lives before the rest of the world and Musharraf’s patrons wake up?”