

## **Human rights do not stand in the way of India's ambitions**

### **By Champa Patel, Amnesty International's South Asia Director**

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“Our democracy,” Prime Minister Narendra Modi warned soon after coming to office, “will not sustain if we can’t guarantee freedom of speech and expression.” Importantly, it should be noted, that it is not just the freedom to voice conformist views – it is also the freedom to express views that are unpopular, critical, or even offensive. This is why the Indian constitution guarantees freedom of expression, and why it has signed up to a number of international human rights treaties.

In India, those protections flow from a proud tradition of pluralism and debate. When that tradition has been broken with, such as during the notorious Emergency, it leaves an indelible mark on the country’s history. Sadly, the threats to that tradition are still with us today. In the name of protecting the nation, they imperil India’s identity by endangering pluralism and shutting down debate.

The charges of sedition levelled against Amnesty International India staff are merely the latest in a series of assaults on long-cherished freedoms. Earlier this year, it was students at JNU who were hounded and vilified before being arrested for sedition. Mere days later, SAR Geelani, a former Delhi University lecturer, was also arrested under this crude law that was once favoured by the British Raj as a tool to silence the movement for independence.

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In the first three months of this year, 19 people reportedly faced sedition charges. For years, there have been constant and widespread assaults on peaceful civil society organisations. The irony is that the very people who boast a fiercely independent identity are so beholden to colonialism’s tainted legacy.

No staff of Amnesty International India were involved in the alleged ‘anti-national’ sloganeering at an event on human rights violations in Kashmir. We are an independent human rights organization that campaigns all over the world for states to comply with international human rights law and, accordingly, do not take a side on questions such as self-determination in a given context. But if others were involved in the alleged sloganeering, their human right to do so must be protected, as is made clear in India’s own constitution.

The same right applies to the ABVP, the youth organisation that filed the original sedition claim against us. We absolutely and wholeheartedly support their right to protest peacefully against us. If the police were to take any measures that would threaten their human rights to freedom of expression, assembly or association, we would speak up for their rights but at the same time we will not tolerate any threats against our staff, or be cowed by attempts to shut us up or to delegitimise our human rights work.

Amnesty International is not new to controversy. We have been attacked by numerous governments for documenting human rights violations. As the Nobel Peace Prize Committee [noted in 1977](#) when it presented Amnesty International the award, the organization’s “great and ambitious goal” is to “contribute to the implementation, in every country, of the principles of the Declaration of Human Rights.” We are not always popular in that pursuit.

The hostility the organization is currently facing is reminiscent of some reactions we have faced from many other countries. For example, from critics in Pakistan when we publicised its record as the [third](#)

[most prolific executioner in the world](#), and denounced its government for failing to reform its own colonial-era laws, such as on [blasphemy](#). Or when we called for accountability of the Pakistan military for its record in Baluchistan, including [secret detentions](#), [torture](#), [unlawful killings](#), [mass graves](#), and enforced [disappearances](#).

However, there are also times when the mood in Pakistan has been more sympathetic, such as when we criticised [unlawful killings that the U.S. carried out through drone attacks](#), some of which possibly amounted to war crimes. The report was consistent with our work on violations of international humanitarian law by [U.S. forces in Afghanistan](#).

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In June, we also said that the [U.S. had failed to halt the transfer of arms for use in Yemen](#) despite mounting evidence of war crimes. Saudi Arabia, which is leading the military coalition in Yemen, has also taken [strong objection](#) to our work. [The UN's credibility, we said, was at stake](#) if it continued to have Saudi Arabia on the Human Rights Council without a credible and impartial investigation of its human rights violations in Yemen.

But we did not just focus on the Saudis in Yemen. In a [report published this May](#), Amnesty International detailed how Huthi forces – the focus of Saudi Arabia's war – have presided over a brutal and deliberate campaign targeting their political opponents and other critics. Judging by the [favourable coverage](#) the report received in [the Saudi press](#), it is fair to say that even Saudi Arabia finds it possible to appreciate Amnesty International's work.

As the report on the Huthis shows, we do not just focus on states. Amnesty International always and absolutely opposes attacks by armed groups against civilians around the world. Over recent months, amid a wave of horrific and unconscionable violence, we have condemned attacks by armed groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, France, Belgium, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Nigeria, Cameroon, Thailand and other countries.

In India, we uphold the same principles. In our 2015 report on Kashmir, we criticised the authorities for human rights violations committed in Kashmir under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, including unlawful killings and enforced disappearances. And, in the same report, we point out how the Kashmiri Pandit community has “witnessed a number of attacks by armed opposition groups” that caused “hundreds of thousands fleeing the valley”.

We make no apologies for standing up for human rights everywhere, including India. Human rights do not stand in the way of India's ambitions. Indeed, human rights are an inherent part of these.