

Pakistan 2023 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Pakistan during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearance; torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government or its agents; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary detention; political prisoners; transnational repression against individuals in another country; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for alleged offenses by a relative; serious abuses in a conflict, including reportedly unlawful civilian deaths and enforced disappearance; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence against journalists, unjustified arrests and disappearances of journalists, censorship, criminal defamation laws, and laws against blasphemy; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the operation of nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations; restrictions of religious freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement; coerced or forced return of individuals to a country where they would likely

face torture or persecution; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on domestic and international human rights organizations; extensive gender-based violence, including domestic or intimate partner violence, sexual violence, child, early, and forced marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting, and other forms of such violence; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting members of religious, racial and ethnic minorities including members of the Pashtun and Hazara communities; threats of violence motivated by antisemitism; enforcement of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and significant or systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association.

The government rarely took credible steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses.

Violence, abuse, and social and religious intolerance by militant organizations and other nonstate actors, both local and foreign, contributed to a culture of lawlessness. Terrorist violence and human rights abuses by nonstate actors contributed to human rights problems, with terrorist violence increasing during the year. Terrorist and cross-border militant attacks against civilians, soldiers, and police caused hundreds of casualties. Military, police, and other law enforcement agencies continued to carry out significant campaigns against militant and terrorist groups.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were numerous reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings, during the year. Human rights organizations claimed government agents continued the policy of “kill and dump” in Balochistan, where dissidents were kidnapped, tortured, and killed. There were reports members of marginalized racial and ethnic communities were overrepresented among the victims of some abuses. Security forces reportedly committed extrajudicial killings in connection with conflicts throughout the country. Government entities generally investigated whether security force killings were justifiable and whether to pursue prosecutions via an order either from the inspector general of police or through the National Commission for Human Rights.

Physical abuse of criminal suspects in custody allegedly caused the injury or death of individuals. Lengthy trial delays at the start and conclusion of trials and failure to effectively investigate, discipline, and prosecute those responsible for killings contributed to a culture of impunity.

There was a significant increase in attacks against police and security forces. According to the independent think tank Center for Research and Security

Studies, there were at least 386 reported deaths of police and military personnel in terrorist attacks and counterterror operations during the first three quarters of the year. The number of attacks and casualties were higher than in 2022 or 2021.

On May 4, unidentified gunmen killed seven Shia Muslims, including four teachers, at a school in Upper Kurram, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in apparent retaliation for the nearby killing of a Sunni Muslim earlier in the day. The school was in a majority-Sunni village; the gunmen reportedly gathered the Shia victims in a separate room before shooting them.

On September 29, a suicide bombing on a religious procession in Mastung, Balochistan, on the occasion of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday killed at least 60 persons, and a separate September 29 attack on a mosque adjacent to a police station in Hangu, Khyber Pakhtunkwa, killed an additional five persons. Although no terrorist group issued a definitive claim of responsibility for either attack, local security analysts suspected Islamic State (ISIS) was likely responsible for the Mastung bombing.

On November 4, the Tehreek-e-Jihad, an offshoot of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), attacked Pakistan Air Force Training Base M.M. Alam in Mianwali, Punjab, reportedly resulting in the deaths of nine militant attackers.

b. Disappearance

Kidnappings and enforced disappearances of persons took place across the country. Some officials from the intelligence agencies, police, and security forces reportedly held prisoners incommunicado and refused to disclose their location. In May 2022, the Islamabad High Court directed the federal government to serve notices to former Army Chief and President General Pervez Musharraf and all successive “chief executives,” including former Prime Ministers Imran Khan and Shehbaz Sharif, for following an “undeclared tacit approval of enforced disappearances.” Following the court verdict, the federal government constituted a seven-member committee headed by the minister of law and justice to “deliberate a policy” related to enforced disappearances. In August 2022, a similar committee was formed to investigate missing-person cases by the Balochistan provincial government. In November, the caretaker federal government formed a three-member committee headed by the interior minister to resolve missing-person cases.

According to figures released in August by the government’s Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, of the 9,967 missing-person cases reported to the commission since 2011, 7,714 were solved, while 2,253 remained pending. Members of the judiciary and civil society activists criticized the commission for failing to initiate proper timely proceedings on missing-person cases and provide support to the relatives of missing

persons.

Human rights organizations reported authorities arrested and caused the disappearance of Pashtun, Sindhi, and Baloch human rights activists, as well as Sindhi and Baloch nationalists, without cause or warrant. They also alleged children were detained to pressure their parents. Activists claimed 500 Sindhis were missing, with more than 142 disappearing in 2022 alone. The Voice for Sindhi Missing Persons reported 80 Sindhi persons disappeared in Sindh Province alone between January and August. Activists said most of the victims were affiliated with Sindhi nationalist parties.

According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Voice for Baloch Missing Persons, 177 Baloch persons disappeared in the province between January and July, with an alleged 6,808 persons forcibly disappeared since 2000. The Human Rights Council of Balochistan claimed 351 individuals were forcibly disappeared (including 63 students).

State agencies routinely harassed activists working on missing-person issues, with some activists becoming victims of enforced disappearances themselves.

On February 22, a judicial commission formed by the Islamabad High Court to probe alleged enforced disappearances of Baloch students submitted its report to the Islamabad High Court. The commission, headed by former National Assembly member Akhtar Jan Mengal, held 21 meetings and found

state agencies responsible for enforced disappearances and racial profiling of Baloch students in universities across the country.

According to January figures by the government's Commission on Enforced Disappearances, 3,380 persons were reported missing in KP in 2022.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and Other Related Abuses

Although the constitution and a 2022 federal law prohibited torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, the penal code had no specific provision against torture. The penal code prohibited criminal use of force and assault against those who were detained; however, there were reports security forces, including the intelligence services, tortured and abused individuals in custody. The federal government approved the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention and Punishment) Act in November 2022. The law criminalized torture, custodial death, and rape against persons in the custody of public officials. The law authorized the National Commission for Human Rights and the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to refer cases for possible prosecution based on complaints.

Custodial deaths were charged under section 302 of the penal code, which carried the death penalty.

Human rights organizations claimed that torture was perpetrated by police,

military, and intelligence agency members, that they frequently operated with impunity, and that the government did not make serious efforts to curb the abuse.

On September 12, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reported 27 persons died in police custody due to torture from January to June. The HRCP expressed concern regarding the use of torture by civilian and military agencies and the absence of a legal framework to effectively prosecute police brutality. The HRCP reported frequent allegations of custodial killings and torture in detention centers, police lockups, and prisons and noted most instances of torture remained invisible. The HRCP stated that torture was not only underreported but was also difficult to prove in medical reports.

Media and civil society organizations reported cases of individuals dying in police custody allegedly due to torture. On January 30, Sarfraz, a man age 50, died in police custody in Sahiwal District of Punjab. His family alleged that Sarfraz was tortured to death, but police claimed he died of cardiac arrest. On August 14, a man was allegedly killed in Punjab Highway Patrol custody in Faisalbad District. The Punjab Highway Patrol refuted the relatives' allegations of torture leading to his death in custody.

There were reports police personnel employed cruel and degrading treatment and punishment. Police abuse was often underreported.

Impunity was a significant problem in the security forces due to

politicization, corruption, and a lack of effective mechanisms to report and investigate abuses. On September 25, the Punjab government suspended five constables in Mandi Bahauddin, Punjab, on charges of bribery, illegal detention, and torture of a citizen.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Conditions in some civilian prisons and military detention centers were harsh and life threatening due to gross overcrowding, inadequate food and medical care, and unsanitary conditions.

Abusive Physical Conditions: Prison conditions often were extremely poor due to gross overcrowding and inadequate food, water, sanitation, heating, ventilation, lighting, and medical care. Overcrowding was a serious problem, largely due to inadequate and ageing facilities and structural problems in the criminal justice system that led to a significant rate of pretrial detention.

Inadequate food and medical care in prisons contribute to chronic health problems. Malnutrition was a problem, especially for inmates unable to supplement their diets with help from family or friends. In many facilities, the sanitation, ventilation, lighting, and access to potable water were inadequate. Most prison facilities were antiquated and lacked means to control indoor temperatures. A system existed for basic and emergency medical care, but access was sometimes slowed by bureaucratic procedures.

Prisoners with disabilities usually lacked adequate care.

Representatives of Christian and Ahmadi Muslim communities claimed other prison inmates often subjected their members to abuse and violence. Civil society organizations reported prison officials frequently subjected prisoners accused of blasphemy to harsh prison conditions. NGOs reported many individuals accused of blasphemy remained in solitary confinement for extended periods, sometimes for more than a year. The government asserted this treatment was for the individual's safety, in view of the likelihood that prisoners accused of blasphemy faced threats from the general prison population.

Authorities held women prisoners separately from men. During the year there were 1,144 women in 43 prisons across Punjab; 931 of these women were under trial. By law transgender persons should have separate places of confinement, but NGOs reported prison officials held transgender women with men, which led to harassment. Balochistan had no women's prison; authorities confined women in separate barracks from male convicts.

Due to a lack of infrastructure, prison departments often did not segregate detainees from convicted criminals. Human rights organizations called for ending prevalent (and legal) discrimination towards prisoners based on their socioeconomic status. The Pakistan Prisons Rules 1978 classified inmates into superior, ordinary, and political classes that determined the quality of treatment and services they received.

Prison officials kept juvenile offenders in barracks separate from adults. There was no behavior-based classification system that separated petty offenders from violent criminals or provided opportunities for inmates to join rehabilitation programs. According to the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child, prisoners and prison staff subjected children to rape and other forms of violence.

Administration: By law, prison authorities were required to permit prisoners and detainees to submit complaints to judicial authorities without censorship and to request investigation of credible allegations of inhuman treatment and conditions. Prison officials had expanded channels for reporting complaints, and all prison departments had mechanisms for investigating allegations. There were reports, however, that prisoners refrained from submitting complaints to avoid retaliation from prison authorities.

Independent Monitoring: International organizations responsible for monitoring prisons reported difficulty accessing some detention sites, particularly those holding security-related detainees. Authorities did not allow international organizations access to detention centers in areas most affected by violence in KP, Balochistan, and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), also referred to as newly merged areas. Authorities at the local, provincial, and national levels permitted some human rights groups and journalists to monitor prison conditions of

juveniles and women inmates.

Improvements: In June, the Punjab Prison Department (PPD) started providing internet service to inmates as a pilot project. The PPD also provided prisoners meat five days a week and red beans for the remainder of the week and added new items to the breakfast menu. In July, the PPD established an audio and video calling facility for inmates of jails in Lahore. Prison officials in Punjab also improved their facilities, including by redesigning prison layouts, implementing rehabilitative practices, improving search and security techniques, and enhancing prisoner nutrition and medical care.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court, but authorities did not always observe these requirements.

Corruption and impunity compounded this problem.

The military had the authority to detain civilians indefinitely without charge in internment camps, occupy property, conduct operations, and convict detainees in KP solely using the testimony of a single soldier. The military was immune from prosecution in civilian courts for its actions in the province and was not required to release the names of detainees to their families. The families were therefore unable to challenge detainees'

detentions in a civilian court. The military retained control of its detention centers in KP, although the transition to civilian law enforcement in the former FATA continued.

On February 14, Ali Wazir, a former National Assembly member and activist with the Pashtun Protection Movement (PTM), was released from prison after 26 months' detention in Karachi. He was arrested in Peshawar in 2020 and extradited by Sindh police on charges of criminal conspiracy and defamation of state institutions and the army. On August 19, Wazir was rearrested on sedition and terrorism charges in Islamabad after addressing a PTM public rally during which he criticized the military for enforced disappearances. He was released again September 12 and rearrested on November 15, after addressing a sit-in protest in Chaman, Balochistan. Human rights lawyer Imaan Mazari was also arrested on August 20 for addressing the same rally. She was rearrested outside the Adiala Jail in Rawalpindi, hours after an Islamabad antiterrorism court granted her bail in a sedition case.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

A first information report (FIR) was the legal basis for any arrest, initiated when police received information concerning the commission of a “cognizable” offense. A third party usually initiated a FIR, but police could file FIRs on their own initiative. A FIR allowed police to detain a suspect for 24 hours, after which a magistrate could order detention for an additional

14 days if police showed detention was necessary to obtain evidence material to the investigation. Police sometimes held persons in investigative detention without seeking a magistrate's approval and often held detainees without charge until a court challenged the detention. Magistrates generally approved investigative detention at the request of police without requiring justification.

Many police agencies did not have the investigative or forensic resources to carry out the investigations required after a FIR filing. Local police sometimes attempted to discourage FIRs for lower-level offenses, instead encouraging individuals to find other avenues for justice, such as mediation. There were reports of police asking for money from complainants to fund investigations. Some authorities reportedly filed FIRs to harass or intimidate detainees or failed to file them when provided with adequate evidence unless the complainant paid a bribe.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not routinely notify embassies or consulates of the arrest of foreigners. The government required that diplomatic missions request access by diplomatic note to their arrested citizens 20 days in advance. Many missions reported that requests for access to arrested citizens were unanswered for weeks or months. Foreign prisoners often remained in prison long after completion of their sentences because they were unable to pay travel costs for deportation to their home countries.

A functioning bail system existed, although observers alleged judges frequently did not grant bail. Human rights groups noted that judges sometimes denied bail until bribes were paid and that well-connected individuals could bribe judges to allow them to pay bail for nonbailable offenses such as murder, kidnapping, and assault. NGOs reported authorities sometimes denied bail in blasphemy cases because defendants who faced the death penalty if convicted were likely to flee or were at risk from public vigilantism. Officials often simultaneously charged defendants facing lower-order blasphemy charges with terrorism offenses, which were nonbailable. NGOs also reported that lawyers representing individuals accused of blasphemy often asked that their clients remain in pretrial custody to protect them from vigilante violence.

By law detainees had to be tried within 30 days of arrest. The law provided for exceptions: a district coordination officer had authority to recommend preventive detention on the grounds of “maintenance of public order” for up to 90 days and might, with approval of the Home Department, extend it for an additional 90 days.

The government provided state-funded legal counsel to detainees accused of crimes for which conviction included the death penalty, but it did not regularly provide legal representation in other cases. The constitution recognized the right of habeas corpus and allowed the high courts to demand that a person accused of a crime be present in court. In many cases

involving enforced disappearances, authorities failed to present detainees according to judges' orders.

In some instances, police held detainees incommunicado.

Arbitrary Arrest: Police reportedly detained individuals to extort bribes for their release or detained relatives of wanted individuals to compel suspects to surrender. Ethnic minorities, stateless persons, Afghans, and refugees in the country who lacked official identification documents reported arbitrary arrests, requests for bribes, and harassment by police authorities. There were also reports police, including officers from the Federal Investigation Agency (a border control, criminal investigation, counterintelligence, and security agency), made arrests to extract bribes.

Afghans, including those legally present and documented, and stateless populations alleged police routinely arrested relatives for the sole purpose of obtaining bribes from family and community members. There were reports that arbitrary arrests and extortion attempts increased following the implementation of the Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan on November 1. Community leaders claimed police routinely confiscated or destroyed documents establishing residency claims to extract larger bribes.

Balochistan human rights groups asserted police engaged in hostage arrests, the practice of detaining family members of wanted individuals. They reported siblings and parents were most commonly arrested to provide

leverage against Baloch nationalists in hiding.

On October 8, a district police officer in Qambar-Shahdadkot, Sindh, dismissed a police constable for arresting and torturing a man in a village while on patrol. The constable allegedly released the man from illegal detention only after taking a bribe from him. On February 9, police raided homes of a community in Pir Jo Goth, Sindh, and baton charged men, women, and children. The families complained that the police action, which left many injured, came on instructions of Pir Pagara, an influential politician.

Pretrial Detention: According to provincial prison departments, as of September, an estimated 75 percent of prison detainees were either awaiting or on trial. Some individuals remained in pretrial detention for periods longer than the maximum sentence for the crime with which they were charged. Authorities seldom informed detainees promptly of charges against them.

Special rules applied to cases brought to court by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), which investigated and prosecuted corruption cases. The NAB could detain suspects for 15 days without charge (renewable with judicial concurrence) and deny access to counsel prior to charging. Offenses under the NAB were not bailable, and only the NAB chairperson had the power to decide whether to release detainees.

Security forces could restrict the activities of terrorism suspects, seize their assets for up to 48 hours, and detain them for as long as one year without charges. Human rights and international organizations reported security forces held an unknown number of individuals allegedly affiliated with terrorist organizations indefinitely in preventive detention, where they were often allegedly tortured and abused. There were reports this practice was particularly commonplace in Balochistan, where civil society activists were routinely held in pretrial detention and were formally charged with terrorism only after months or years. In many cases, authorities held prisoners incommunicado, denying them prompt access to a lawyer of their choice. Family members often did not have prompt access to detainees.

There were reports of persons arrested or detained who were not allowed to challenge in court the legal basis or nature of their detention, obtain relief, or receive compensation.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provided for an independent judiciary, but according to NGOs and legal experts, the judiciary often was subject to external influences, such as fear of reprisal from extremist elements in terrorism or blasphemy cases and public politicization of high-profile cases. Civil society organizations reported judges were often reluctant to exonerate individuals accused of blasphemy, fearing vigilante violence. Media and the public generally

considered the high courts and the Supreme Court more credible, but media discussed allegations of pressure from security agencies on judges of these courts.

Extensive case backlogs in the lower and superior courts undermined the right to effective remedy and to a fair and public hearing. Due to the prevalence of pretrial detention, these delays often led defendants in criminal cases to be incarcerated for long periods as they awaited trial. Antiquated procedural rules, unfilled judgeships, poor case management, and weak legal education caused delays in civil and criminal cases.

According to the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan, as of September 27, the country's superior and lower judiciaries were dealing with a backlog of 2.2 million cases.

Many lower courts' staff and judges were corrupt, inefficient, and subject to pressure from wealthy persons and influential religious or political figures.

There were incidents of unknown persons threatening or killing witnesses, attorneys, or investigating police officers in high-level cases.

The use of informal justice systems that lacked institutionalized legal protections continued, especially in rural areas, and often resulted in human rights abuses. Large landholders and other community leaders in Sindh and Punjab and tribal leaders in Pashtun and Baloch areas sometimes held local council meetings (*panchayats* or *jirgas*) outside the established legal system,

at times with the support of local police officials and judges. Such councils settled feuds and imposed tribal penalties, including fines, imprisonment, and sometimes the death penalty. These councils often sentenced women to violent punishment or death for so-called honor-related crimes. These councils, meant to provide “speedier justice” than traditional courts, in some instances also issued decisions that significantly harmed women and girls. For example, women, and especially young girls, were affected by the practice of *swara*, in which girls were forced into marriage to compensate for a crime committed by their male relatives. The Federal Shariat Court declared *swara* or *vani* to be against the teachings of Islam in 2021; secular courts subsequently issued rulings declaring the practices illegal, but rural areas continued to use them. Jirga and panchayat decisions were often discriminatory towards women and girls, frequently issuing harsher sentences than for men.

In the former FATA, judgments by informal justice systems were a common practice. After the Supreme Court ruled the way jirgas and panchayats operated was unconstitutional, the court restricted the use of these mechanisms to arbitration, mediation, negotiation, or reconciliation of consenting parties in a civil dispute. A jirga, formed in 2020 to resolve a high-profile 150-year-old land dispute between two tribes on the boundary of Mohmand and Bajaur after the disputants refused to recognize a government commission on the matter, continued. As of October, the boundary dispute remained unresolved.

Trial Procedures

The constitution provided for the right to a fair and public trial, but access to fair, timely, and transparent justice was not guaranteed, especially for marginalized individuals and those with less resources. The civil, criminal, and family court systems were supposed to operate with the presumption of innocence, cross-examination, and appeal, but this did not always happen. Although defendants had the right to be present and consult with an attorney, courts were required to appoint attorneys for indigents only in capital cases. Defendants generally bore the cost of legal representation in lower courts, but a lawyer could be provided at public expense in appellate courts. Due to the limited number of judges, a heavy backlog of cases, lengthy court procedures, frequent adjournment, and political pressure, cases routinely lasted for years, and defendants made frequent court appearances. Police lacked training to properly handle child delinquency, and there were reports of police brutality against juveniles. Many juveniles spent long periods in detention because they could not afford bail. According to an NGO, juveniles were at risk of sexual and physical assault by police, adults, and other juveniles as soon as they entered the judicial system, including transportation to detention. Juveniles did not have facilities separate from adult detainees.

Some court cases, particularly those involving high-profile or sensitive matters such as blasphemy, lacked transparency. NGOs reported the

government often held such trials in jails due to concerns for the safety of defendants, lawyers, judges, prosecutors, and witnesses. Although NGOs acknowledged these safety concerns were well founded, they expressed concerns regarding transparency.

The law allowed the government to use special, streamlined antiterrorism courts (ATCs) to try persons charged with terrorist activities and sectarian violence. In other courts, suspects were required to appear within seven working days of arrest, but ATCs could extend that period. Human rights activists criticized this parallel system, claiming it was more vulnerable to political manipulation. Authorities continued to expedite high-profile cases by referring them to ATCs, even if they had no connection to terrorism.

On May 15, army officials announced military trials of civilians accused of rioting on May 9 following former Prime Minister Khan's arrest. In June, the National Assembly passed a resolution demanding trials of May 9 rioters – specifically, those involved in attacks on military and state installations – under the Pakistan Army Act, 1952. The HRC and other human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, opposed the move and called for the process to take place under civilian laws and in civilian-run courts where fair trial standards were far more likely to be upheld than in military courts. In June, the Ministry for Law stated that 74 cases had been referred to military courts and no case against any woman had been sent to such courts. On October 23, the Supreme Court declared the trial of civilians

accused of rioting on May 9 in military courts unconstitutional.

On July 24, an ATC initiated the process of declaring 22 Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party (PTI) leaders and workers, including former Prime Minister Imran Khan, four other PTI leaders, and Khan's sisters, offenders in the attack on the IV Corps commander's house in Lahore. On August 1, the court issued nonbailable arrest warrants for PTI leader Farrukh Habib in a case related to attacking police during the May 9 riots. On September 12, the court initiated proceedings to declare four PTI leaders – Mian Aslam Iqbal, Ghulam Abbas, Jamshed Iqbal Cheema, and Musarrat Iqbal Cheema – offenders in the May 9 attacks in Lahore.

Civil society groups stated courts often failed to protect the rights of religious minorities against Muslim accusers. While the majority of those imprisoned for blasphemy were Muslim, religious minorities were disproportionately affected. Lower courts often failed to adhere to basic evidentiary standards in blasphemy cases, which civil society groups and lawyers ascribed to fear of retaliation from religious groups if they acquitted blasphemy defendants, and most convicted persons spent years in jail before higher courts eventually overturned their convictions or ordered their release.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were reports of political prisoners and detainees. Prominent

politicians tended to receive favorable treatment, while rank-and-file political detainees were sometimes subjected to worse abuse and mistreatment than the rest of the prison population; NGOs were granted limited access to political detainees. The NAB continued to press corruption charges against opposition political figures, but corruption charges were rarely pursued against figures aligned with the federal coalition government, and the NAB sometimes dropped investigations or prosecutions after a change in administration. Although multiple cases remained pending with the NAB, in June 2022 the government amended the NAB law's anti-corruption provisions, greatly curtailing the watchdog's powers. On September 15, the Supreme Court restored the NAB's powers by rejecting amendments made to the National Accountability Ordinance, 1999.

Many ethnic and religious groups claimed authorities detained their members based on political affiliation or beliefs.

f. Transnational Repression

The government allegedly engaged in transnational repression to intimidate or extract reprisal against individuals outside its borders, including civil society activists, human rights defenders, and journalists.

Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, Forced Returns, or Other Violence or

Threats of Violence: Some activists alleged the government killed and kidnapped persons in other countries for politically motivated reprisal.

Journalists and civil society members in exile in Europe and elsewhere reported targeted harassment and physical violence they believed was linked to their investigative work into the military's actions and human rights abuses. In August, the mutilated bodies of exiled Baloch activist Hani Baloch and her husband Sameer Baloch were found in the town of Iransheher, in Iran. The couple was abducted from Iran by unknown men two weeks before their bodies were found in Western Balochistan in Iran, where they were living in exile. Baloch human rights activists said that Hani had been protesting enforced disappearance since she and her then fiancé Muhammad Naseem Baloch previously were abducted by security forces in 2019 in Karachi.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion: On June 21, authorities registered sedition cases against four journalists based abroad for their alleged role in inciting unrest across the country on May 9, following the arrest of former Prime Minister Khan. The International Federation of Journalists and its affiliate, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, condemned the charges and urged authorities to stop targeting journalists.

g. Property Seizure and Restitution

The constitution provided for the protection of private property rights.

On April 11, Human Rights Watch reported that authorities forcibly evicted thousands of farmers near Lahore to clear the land for the development of

an infrastructure project.

h. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibited such actions, requiring court-issued warrants for property searches, but there were reports the government failed to respect these prohibitions. Police sometimes ignored this requirement and on occasion reportedly stole items during searches. Authorities seldom punished police for illegal entry. Police at times detained family members to induce a suspect to surrender. In cases pursued under the Antiterrorism Act, law enforcement agencies had additional powers, including search and seizure without a warrant.

Several domestic intelligence services monitored politicians, political activists, suspected terrorists, NGOs, employees of foreign entities, and media professionals. These services included the Inter-Services Intelligence, Police Special Branch, Intelligence Bureau, and Military Intelligence. There were reports that authorities routinely used wiretaps, monitored cell phone calls, intercepted electronic correspondence, and opened mail without court approval. There were credible reports the government used technology to arbitrarily or unlawfully surveil or interfere with the privacy of individuals. The government also used technologies and practices, including internet and social media controls, blocking or filtering of websites and social media

platforms, censorship, and tracking methods.

i. Conflict-related Abuses

As of October, terrorism fatalities stood at 1,088, compared with 971 fatalities in 2022, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, a database compiled by the public interest advocacy organization Institute for Conflict Management, which collected data on terrorism and low intensity warfare in South Asia.

Military and paramilitary organizations conducted regular counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations against militants. Law enforcement agencies also acted to weaken terrorist groups, arresting suspected terrorists and gang members who allegedly provided logistical support to militants. In raids throughout the country, police confiscated caches of weapons, suicide vests, and planning materials. Police, paramilitary, and army operations increased in ungoverned areas in Balochistan in response to an increase in insurgent violence, although such operations often were not reported in the press.

Poor security, intimidation by both security forces and militants, and limited access to Balochistan and the former FATA impeded the efforts of human rights organizations to provide relief to victims of military abuses and of journalists to report on any such abuses. For example, the Jani Khel tribal conflict in Bannu, KP, continued following the government's failure to

negotiate or satisfy a settlement agreement to investigate the killings, remove militants from the area, and compensate the families.

Militants carried out numerous attacks on political party offices and candidates. On July 29, a suicide attack at a Jamiat-Ulema-e-Islam Fazl political gathering in Bajaur tribal district, KP, killed 54 persons, including 23 children. According to the Counter Terrorism Department, at least 83 persons were injured. The Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K) claimed responsibility for the bombing.

Political, sectarian, criminal, and ethnic violence in Karachi continued, although the incidence of violence and gang wars was in decline.

Killings: There were reports government security forces engaged in extrajudicial killings during operations against suspected militants throughout the country.

There were numerous media reports of police and security forces killing terrorist suspects in “police encounters.” On March 7, police shot and killed two suspected militants in an encounter in Karachi, claiming the suspects were involved in a February 17 attack on the Karachi police chief’s office. Family members of the deceased protested and said the two men were not terrorists and were killed in a fake encounter.

Data showed Punjab police encounters rose in the past five years. From 2018 to 2022, Punjab police were involved in 544 police encounters, in

which 612 suspects accused of various crimes were killed. Of the 154 encounters in 2022, there were active judicial inquiries in 10 cases and departmental inquiries in 44 cases, with no timeline for completion.

Security forces in Balochistan continued to cause the disappearance of pretrial terror suspects, along with human rights activists, politicians, teachers, and bystanders wrongly linked to Baloch nationalist groups, according to the Baloch Human Rights Council. Baloch activists asserted security services were forcibly disappearing an increasing number of Baloch nationalists and civil society leaders to stem increasing attacks from Baloch insurgent groups. On November 19, Baloch students Adil Asa and Nabi Baksh, and a third unidentified individual, were killed by a car bomb in Kech, Balochistan, in what civil society groups claimed was an extrajudicial killing. Civil society groups alleged security services forcibly disappeared Adil and Nabi on August 22 from Turbat, Balochistan.

There were numerous reports of criminal suspects killed in exchanges with police and the military. Militants and terrorist groups, including the TTP, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and ISIS-K, targeted civilians, journalists, community leaders, security forces, law enforcement officers, foreigners, and schools, killing and injuring hundreds with shootings, suicide attacks, and other forms of violence. Throughout KP and the newly merged districts, militant groups attacked security forces, tribal leaders, political leaders, and civilians. Militant and terrorist groups often attacked religious minorities.

On June 22, Maulana Noor Muhammad of the political party Jamiat-Ulama-e-Islam Fazal and his brother Zubair Khan were killed and another individual was critically injured when unidentified armed motorcyclists opened fire on a car in Bajaur, KP. ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the attack.

On June 23, a police official was killed and five others were injured after a woman suicide bomber targeted a Frontier Corps vehicle in Turbat, Balochistan. Militant groups continued to target Chinese nationals. Two militants were killed in an August 13 attack on a Chinese convoy in Gwadar, Balochistan, while no Chinese nationals died.

Other Conflict-related Abuse: Personnel protecting polio vaccination teams remained a target of attacks. On May 25, unidentified gunmen wounded three police officers providing security for polio vaccination efforts in Mir Dara, KP. On August 8, armed attackers killed a police officer providing security for a polio vaccination drive in Bannu District, KP. On August 1, armed men opened fire on security personnel escorting a polio vaccination team, killing two police officers in Quetta, Balochistan. Both police officers belonged to the Shia Hazara community.

According to the UN Department of Management Strategy, Policy, and Compliance, in late 2022 a Pakistani peacekeeper deployed to the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo was involved in a sexual assault of a child. The United Nations was leading the investigation as of February. Prior allegations were submitted in 2020-23

and concerned sexual exploitation and abuse by Pakistani peacekeepers deployed to the African Union-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur, and allegedly involving the rapes of adults.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

The law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press, but constitutional restrictions existed. In addition, threats, harassment, abductions, violence, and killings led journalists and editors to practice self-censorship and follow editorial directives from the government. Journalists suffered high levels of violence, or threats of violence, from state and nonstate actors, including political parties.

Freedom of Expression: The constitution provided for the right to free speech and a free press, subject to “any reasonable restriction imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam” or the “integrity, security, or defense of Pakistan, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality.” The law permitted citizens to criticize the government publicly or privately, but court decisions interpreted the constitution as prohibiting criticism of the military and judiciary. Such criticism could result in legal, political, or commercial reprisal. Blasphemy laws restricted

individual rights to free speech concerning matters of religion and religious doctrine. According to the penal code, punishments for conviction of blasphemy included the death sentence for “defiling the Prophet Muhammad,” life imprisonment for “defiling, damaging, or desecrating the Quran,” and 10 years’ imprisonment for “insulting another’s religious feelings.” The courts enforced the blasphemy laws, and although authorities did not execute any person for committing blasphemy, allegations of blasphemy often prompted vigilantism and mob lynching. The government restricted some language and symbolic speech based on hate speech and terrorism provisions in the law.

On August 16, approximately 6,000 persons in Jaranwala, Punjab, attacked and burned 21 churches and damaged more than 90 Christian properties after accusing two Christian brothers of blasphemy. Several Christian families fled their homes because of the violence. Police arrested more than 250 persons, including the three Christians accused of desecrating a Quran, although no one had been held legally accountable for the acts by year’s end.

Violence and Harassment: Security forces, members of political parties, militants, influential landlords, and other groups subjected media outlets, journalists, and their families to threats and harassment. Women journalists in particular faced threats of sexual violence and harassment, including via social media, where they had a particularly strong presence. Security forces

allegedly abducted journalists. Media outlets that reported on topics authorities viewed as sensitive were often the targets of retribution. Additionally, journalists working in remote and conflict-ridden areas lacked basic digital and traditional security skills, which increased pressure to self-censor or not publish a story.

In urban and rural areas, journalists continued to face serious crimes, including a report of an acid attack on a woman media worker. According to Freedom Network, a domestic media rights watchdog that tracks violence against journalists and attacks on freedom of expression, between May 2022 and March, there were 140 cases of attacks and other forms of violence against journalists and other media workers.

Journalists experienced physical threats, economic coercion, harassment, and violence when reporting on sensitive topics critical of the government, ruling political parties, and military establishment. Media personnel reported cases of journalists being drawn into legal proceedings and forced out of jobs, strangling them economically. Journalists reported an increase in abductions and torture. Both the military, through the director general of its Inter-Services Public Relations media service, and government oversight bodies, such as the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) and Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), enforced censorship through a variety of tactics. By law the government could restrict information that authorities considered could be harmful to the national

interest. Rights activists reported the government contacted X (formerly Twitter) and asked the service to take down accounts of activists deemed problematic.

On January 23, veteran journalist Hasnain Shah was fatally shot while parking his car outside the Lahore Press Club. Police stated that two motorcyclists opened fire, killing him on the spot, and fled the scene. Shah was working as a crime reporter for Capital TV.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other

Media, Including Online Media: Government authorities used laws to prevent or punish media criticism of the government and the armed forces. To publish within Pakistan-administered Kashmir, media organizations were required to obtain permission from the Kashmir Council and the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs; journalists therefore depended largely on information provided by the government and military. There were limitations on transmission of Indian media content. Journalists also protested their inability to report freely on human rights abuses, including forced disappearances in Balochistan, the Pashtun movement's activities and protests, and the military's involvement in political affairs and business enterprises.

Journalists alleged PEMRA continued to issue editorial directives to television stations and media outlets, compelling them to refrain from critical reporting on state institutions. On March 5, Qatar-based Al-Jazeera

reported that PEMRA imposed a ban on former Prime Minister Imran Khan's coverage after his speech in Lahore, where he alleged that former army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa was behind his removal from power in April 2022. Al-Jazeera reported that nearly two hours after the ban, PEMRA further suspended the license of ARY News for broadcasting the speech. On August 12, PEMRA issued a list of pro-PTI individuals and journalists, prohibiting their appearance on television.

Media organizations generally engaged in self-censorship, especially in reporting news regarding the military, religious extremism, and abuse of blasphemy laws. Journalists stated they were under pressure to follow the predetermined narrative and PEMRA's editorial directives to media outlets, and were required to cover certain stories that highlighted successes by the military or diplomatic partners of Pakistan. Journalists reported regular denial of permission to visit conflict areas or requirements to travel with a military escort while reporting on conditions in conflict areas. They reported pressure to produce articles with a promilitary viewpoint. Other reporting tended to be relatively objective with a focus on facts, which journalists generally regarded as less risky than analysis. Journalists reportedly were discouraged from reporting on economic protests.

Both local and foreign journalists reported harassment and intimidation by government officials. Blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi laws (laws prohibiting Ahmadis from self-identifying as Muslims) restricted publication on these

topics. Government censors reviewed foreign books before allowing reprinting. Imported movies, books, magazines, and newspapers were subject to censorship for objectionable sexual or religious content. Obscene literature, a category the government defined broadly, was subject to seizure.

Authorities reportedly used PEMRA rules to silence broadcast media by suspending licenses, threatening to do so, or by reassigning the cable channel number of a targeted outlet without notice so that its programming would be hard or impossible to find on most televisions. Many outlets resorted to self-censorship, particularly when reporting on religious or security topics. On August 1, the Punjab Censor Board authorized the release of the Hollywood movie *Barbie* in cinemas across Punjab, 10 days after its release was delayed on grounds of “objectionable content.” On August 3, renowned Pakistani filmmaker Sarmad Khoosat announced the release of his award-winning film *Zindagi Tamasha* on YouTube and Vimeo. The film’s release was postponed for three years due to opposition from conservative factions.

The government continued to use network access as a tool to exert control over media outlets. Media outlets reported the government increasingly used the infrastructure of the media system, as well as government advertising, which made up a large portion of media revenue, to suppress information deemed threatening. The government pressured distributors

into restricting distribution or changing channels of outlets deemed problematic, incentivizing media companies to censor their content. Media houses also reportedly fired outspoken journalists deemed to be a threat to their revenues or continued ability to operate.

Libel/Slander Laws: Defamation and blasphemy were criminal offenses. Blasphemy was punishable by a minimum of two years' imprisonment to a maximum sentence of death. On February 16, a court in Faisalabad sentenced a man to a three-year prison term for his "anti-army" post on social media, following a military helicopter crash in Lasbela, Balochistan, in 2022.

National Security: Some journalists asserted authorities cited laws protecting national security to censor and restrict media distribution of material that criticized government policies or military or public officials, or that described the country's security situation in a negative light. The law included a clause that restricted reporting in any area where a military operation was in progress. The Pakistan Army Act (Amendment) Bill 2023 introduced stricter penalties for unauthorized disclosures of sensitive information and restrictions on political activities. The amendments in the Official Secrets Bill 2023 broadened the definitions of military installations and brought digital and modern means of communication into the law's ambit. The definition of a "document" was broadened to include "any written, unwritten, electronic, digital, or any other tangible or intangible

instrument” related to the military’s procurements and capabilities.

Nongovernmental Impact: Nonstate actor violence against media workers decreased, but an environment where militant and criminal elements were known to kill, abduct, assault, and intimidate journalists and their families led journalists, particularly in the tribal areas of KP and Balochistan, to self-censor.

Following the takeover of Kabul by the Afghan Taliban in 2021, the terrorist organization TTP issued a warning to journalists and media organizations in the country instructing them to refrain from referring to TTP as a “terrorist or extremist” organization. Journalists, particularly those working in KP and Balochistan, continued to receive threats and expressed concern regarding the government’s inability to arrest those involved in the killing of journalists in these two provinces.

Internet Freedom

The PTA was responsible for the establishment, operation, and maintenance of telecommunications and had complete control of all content broadcast through telecommunication channels. Freedom House reported that internet freedom remained restricted as the government continued to use internet shutdowns, platform blocking, and arrests to suppress unwanted online speech.

The government used a systematic, nationwide, content-monitoring and -

filtering system to restrict or block “unlawful” content, including material it deemed un-Islamic, pornographic, or critical of the state or military forces. The government had sweeping censorship powers regarding internet content, which authorities used as a tool for the continued clampdown on civil society.

The government blocked websites because of allegedly anti-Islamic, pornographic, blasphemous, or extremist content. The PTA’s Web Analysis Division was ultimately responsible for reviewing and reporting blasphemous or offensive content for removal, while the FIA was responsible for criminal prosecution. The PTA closely coordinated with other ministries in its enforcement efforts. There were also reports the government used surveillance software in attempts to control or block websites that advocated Baloch independence. There was poor transparency and accountability surrounding content monitoring, and observers believed the government often used vague criteria without due process.

Authorities, particularly in the military, increasingly sought to restrict online space to silence dissidents and curtail content deemed critical of the military.

By law if an account was under suspicion, the social media company was required to provide account data to authorities.

On February 4, authorities blocked Wikipedia on the pretext of hosting “blasphemous content.” Then Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif ordered the block removed a few days later.

On May 9, the PTA shut down mobile internet services across the country due to violent protests and subsequently limited access to social media platforms, where content related to protests was being widely shared. TikTok removed 11.7 million videos from the country in the first quarter of the year, according to a report released by TikTok in June.

The law prohibited homosexual acts and extramarital relationships. Access to popular live-streaming dating applications, including Tagged, Skout, Grindr, and SayHi, remained blocked on the pretext they featured immoral and indecent content. The PTA asserted that the five companies failed to respond to its directive within the stipulated time frame, the duration of which was unclear. Despite the PTA’s continuing engagement with some of these dating websites, the bans remained in place under the pretense that the applications were only used to facilitate what authorities viewed as immoral activities.

Long-term communications shutdowns were reportedly imposed in many rural areas of Balochistan. Some civil society groups and journalists ascribed this to deliberate attempts by the government to restrict communications, while others insisted connectivity was hampered by lack of infrastructure, low internet bandwidth, insurgent groups’ attacks on communications

infrastructure, and slow service.

In late September, the federal government reportedly decided to reverify subscriber-identity-module (SIM) cards across the country, beginning in KP.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution provided for freedom of peaceful assembly and association, but the government restricted these rights.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The government limited the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association. In KP, the government relied less on the use of the West Pakistan Maintenance of Peace Order and the British-era criminal code to maintain order. KP police reportedly arrested approximately 1,400 persons for alleged participation in violent protests following the May 9 arrest of former Prime Minister Khan. They reportedly conducted many of these arrests under the authority of Section 3 of the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance. The Peshawar High Court later ordered many of those arrested under that ordinance released. These statutes effectively allowed authorities to continue the long-standing practice of suspending the right to assemble or speak in the newly merged areas. By law district authorities could prevent gatherings of more than four persons without police authorization. The law permitted the government to ban all rallies and

processions, except funeral processions, for security reasons. More rallies and peaceful sit-ins were reported during the year in the newly merged districts, including South and North Waziristan and parts of KP.

The constitution stated, “A person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves Ahmadis) is a non-Muslim.” Authorities generally prohibited Ahmadi Muslims from holding conferences or gatherings.

Ahmadi Muslims cited the refusal of local authorities to reopen Ahmadi mosques damaged by anti-Ahmadi Muslim rioters in past years as evidence of the continuing severe conditions for the community. At least 18 Ahmadi mosques were desecrated in the first nine months of the year, with local police and administration reportedly often helping attackers demolish minarets.

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) mobilized its predominantly ethnic-Pashtun supporters to participate in sit-ins and demonstrations to demand justice and protest abuses by government security forces. The PTM operated and held massive rallies, although under much greater scrutiny after the 2020 arrest of the PTM’s national leader in Dera Ismail Khan, KP. Security agencies continued to arrest, detain, and file charges against PTM leaders in connection with protests and speeches. On August 19, police arrested dozens of PTM activists throughout KP before they could travel to join a rally in Islamabad at the Supreme Court. Following protests by PTM supporters and Bar Association meetings with the provincial deputy

commissioner, the activists were released. Police also arrested leaders linked to PTM who spoke at a protest at Chaman, Balochistan for antistate rhetoric, while not arresting leaders of other Pashtun organizations.

Many politicians, including from mainstream parties, condemned women's and transgender marches for being counter to Islam and traditions.

An HRCP study released in January reported that between January 2021 and March 2022, 503 assemblies took place in the country, with the highest number in KP (162), followed by Sindh (71). According to the study, 61 assemblies saw violence, with contacts reporting police use of tear gas, batons, and water cannons to disperse protests.

Freedom of Association

The constitution provided for freedom of association subject to certain restrictions imposed by law. Government policies restricted the freedom of international NGOs (INGOs) and domestic NGOs to carry out their work and access the communities they served. INGOs, UN organizations, and international missions generally had to request various levels of government permission in the form of no-objection certificates (NOCs) before they could conduct most in-country travel, carry out certain project activities, or initiate projects. For some UN organizations implementing projects through the government, project NOCs were not required, although if they partnered with local organizations, these entities had to obtain project NOCs.

The INGO registration process lacked transparency and predictability. The NOC requirements, frequent requests for information from the security authorities, as well as periodic harassment, impeded project operations. The Ministry of Interior did not process registration applications within the 90-day timeframe specified by government policy. Many INGOs were involved in appeals cases against the taxation authorities for refusing to pay tax claims levied on funds received from donors under bilateral agreements. To avoid paying value added tax, INGOs were asked to apply for transaction-specific tax exemptions before conducting a transaction, which often resulted in project delays and payment of taxes on donor assistance.

INGOs faced additional barriers to fundraising, opening bank accounts, and obtaining tax-exempt status from the Federal Board of Revenue, as well as visa denials for international staff and consultants. The registration process was laborious, nontransparent, and ultimately elusive for many INGOs. Registration required extensive documentation, including financial statements, a detailed annual budget, and a letter outlining donor support, among many other requirements. Organizations were subject to constant investigation and harassment by security officials and other government offices during and after the registration process. Targeted organizations often included those that focused on topics the government deemed sensitive, such as democracy promotion, press freedom, religious freedom, and human rights.

After floods heavily affected the country in 2022, the Interior Ministry began approving and issuing some NOCs and MOUs to INGOs within two weeks, some within 48 hours. Local NGOs complained that strict government regulations hampered their ability to respond to the catastrophic flooding. In August 2022, the federal government announced permission for all local NGOs to conduct relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction activities in flood-affected areas for six months. With emergency flood relief efforts largely completed, however, INGOs again began reporting delays and difficulties operating in flood-affected areas.

At the federal and provincial levels, the government impeded foreign-funded local NGOs through a separate registration regime, NOCs, and other requirements. Authorities required domestic NGOs to obtain NOCs before accepting foreign funding, booking facilities, using university spaces for events, or working on “sensitive” human rights matters. When local NGOs receiving foreign funding were appropriately registered, the government often denied their requests for NOCs, and they faced regular government monitoring and harassment.

Under directives from federal institutions on security and financial oversight, the Sindh government introduced the Sindh Charities Registration and Regulation Act of 2019 governing registration renewals of NGOs in Sindh Province. In 2020, a group of NGOs challenged these measures through a petition at the Sindh High Court. The petition argued the government was

curbing freedom of association beyond what was permissible under the constitution. It further argued the purpose of the law was not to regulate NGOs but to incapacitate and debilitate them. As of November, the case continued.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The law provided for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, but the government limited these rights.

In September, immigration authorities denied issuance of a passport to Mama Qadeer, an activist and head of the Voice for Baloch Missing Persons, saying his name was put on the Exit Control List (ECL) by the Ministry of Interior. On June 27, human rights activist Jibrán Nasir and his wife were barred from boarding a flight from Karachi to Dubai. Nasir told media he was informed by the FIA that they “had instructions not to allow” them to leave but he was not shown a legal order. On August 31, the Sindh High Court declared the move “without lawful authority,” ruling a person could not be placed on the ECL without a show of cause notice and without the

opportunity of a hearing.

In-country Movement: Citing security concerns, government restrictions on access to certain areas of the former FATA and Balochistan hindered freedom of movement. The government required an approved NOC for travel to areas that officials designated “sensitive.”

Foreign Travel: The government prohibited persons on an ECL from departing the country. The stated purpose of the list was to prevent the departure of “persons involved in anti-state activities, terrorism, related to proscribed organizations, or placed on the orders of superior courts.” According to civil society activists, authorities also included human rights defenders and critics of the government and military on the list. Those on the list had the right to appeal to the courts to have their names removed; however, in April 2022, the Federal Cabinet announced changes to the rules to automatically remove names from the ECL after 120 days. The government retained authority to extend the exit prohibition for another 90 days. Those involved in terrorism cases, considered a threat to national security, under court order, or accused of significant fraud or financial crimes would continue to stay on the list.

The law prohibited travel to Israel, and the country’s passports included a statement that they were “valid for all countries except Israel.” Individuals who visited Israel could face harassment, loss of employment, and death threats upon their return.

Passport applicants listed the bearer's religious affiliation. Applicants for Computerized National Identity Cards (CNIC) and passports who self-identified as Muslims had to sign a statement swearing they believed the Prophet Muhammad was the final prophet of Islam and denounced the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement as a false prophet. Self-identified Muslims who did not sign the declaration had "Ahmadiyya" instead of "Islam" entered in the religion section of their passports.

Exile: The government refused to accept the return of some citizens deported to Pakistan from other countries. The government refused these deportees entry to the country as "unverified" citizens, alleging some passports issued by Pakistani embassies and consulates abroad were fraudulent.

e. Protection of Refugees

The country was not a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (or the 1967 Protocol) and had not enacted national legislation for the protection of refugees or established procedures to determine the refugee status of persons who were seeking international protection within its territory. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations to provide protection and assistance to approximately 2.13 million refugees, asylum seekers, and other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law did not provide for granting asylum or refugee status, and the government had not established a system for providing protection for refugees. The law also did not exclude asylum seekers and refugees from provisions regarding illegal entry or presence in the country. Through the years the government provided temporary legal status to Afghans living in the country. The government issued proof of registration (POR) cards to more than 1.3 million Afghan refugees who registered in 2006 as well as to their children. The country also hosted approximately 840,000 Afghans with Afghan Citizen Cards (ACCs) but did not grant them refugee status.

In 2022, authorities instructed UNHCR to suspend issuing documentation to asylum seekers and refer all asylum applications to the government. In 2022, UNHCR publicly stated it was “discussing with the government the way forward on registration and documentation of asylum seekers.” There was no indication of any progress on a national refugee or asylum framework during the year.

The government allowed the ACCs to expire in June 2020 and did not renew them. The government issued a notice in June 2020 directing agencies and departments to ensure no harassment or adverse action be taken against POR and ACC holders until the federal cabinet made a formal decision. The validity of POR cards lapsed on June 30. On November 10, the cabinet announced a six-month extension of the validity of POR cards, setting the

new expiration date as December 31.

On September 26, the Ministry of Interior published its *Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan* (IFRP), outlining the repatriation of any illegal and undocumented foreigners in Pakistan, including Afghan nationals, starting with the identification and deportation of illegal, unregistered, and overstaying foreigners. On October 3, the Ministry of Interior formally announced an October 31 deadline for all undocumented foreigners to voluntarily leave the country or face expulsion. On October 10, the Ministry of State and Frontier Regions issued a government-wide circular stating that holders of POR cards and ACCs were allowed to reside temporarily in the country and could only be repatriated on a voluntary basis.

By the end of the year, the International Organization for Migration reported more than 490,000 returns since September 15, of which 29,000 were deportations.

Refoulement: Afghans slated for deportation were not always given the opportunity to challenge the action. On October 27, the spokesperson for the UN high commissioner for human rights publicly expressed concern and highlighted that “deportations without individualized determinations of personal circumstance, including mass deportations, would amount to refoulement in violation of international human rights law, in particular the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, to which Pakistan is a State Party, and of

international refugee law.” International human rights organizations reported that the coerced repatriation of Afghans, including women and girls, journalists, and other at-risk populations, who fled Pakistan from specific Taliban threats, put their lives and rights at stake. An Amnesty International official cited specific risks for women and girls, saying “they would be exposed to persecution and other serious human rights violations simply because of their sex and their gender.”

Abuse of Refugees and Asylum Seekers: UNHCR reported 3,215 arrests and detentions of persons of concern by security authorities from January to October, more than a 300 percent increase from 2022. Following the announcement of the IFRP, there was a significant increase in arrests and detentions of documented and undocumented Afghans, although most documented Afghans were eventually released. Human Rights Watch reported that calls by officials for mass deportation instigated increased police abuse against Afghans, including harassment, assault, and arbitrary detention.

The arrests, subsequent campaign to have local landlords evict Afghan tenants, and other harassment prompted many Afghans to return to Afghanistan. According to UNHCR, 92 percent of those returning to Afghanistan reportedly cited fear of arrest in Pakistan as the reason for leaving the country. Afghans returning to Afghanistan said they could face the threat of arbitrary killing, extended arbitrary detention, and other harsh

and life-threatening conditions.

Employment: There were credible reports that the government restricted refugees' ability to work in the public sector. There was no formal document allowing refugees to work legally, but there was also no law prohibiting refugees from working in the country's informal and private sectors. Many refugees worked as day laborers or in the informal economy, and local employers often exploited refugees in the informal labor market with low or unpaid wages. Women and children were particularly vulnerable, accepting underpaid and undesirable work.

Access to Basic Services: The constitution stipulated free and compulsory education for all children between ages five and 16, regardless of their nationality. Any POR cardholding refugee child could be, in theory, admitted to public education facilities after filing the proper paperwork. Generally, undocumented Afghans could not access public education institutions, while ACC holders could reportedly enroll in public education facilities in some parts of the country, such as in KP. For older students, particularly girls in refugee villages, access to education remained difficult. In 2022, of 436,730 school-age refugee children (ages five to 17), only 20 percent were enrolled in formal primary and secondary education, of which half were in public schools. Afghan refugees were able to use POR cards to enroll in universities, although some universities limited seats available to refugees. Afghan students were eligible to seek admission to public and private

colleges and universities.

f. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Large population displacements occurred beginning in 2008 because of militant activity and military operations in KP and the former FATA.

Voluntary returns continued amid improved security conditions. The government and UN agencies such as UNHCR, UNICEF, and the UN World Food Program collaborated to assist and protect those affected by conflict, who generally resided with host families, in rented accommodations, or to a lesser extent, in camps. Several IDP populations settled in informal settlements outside of cities such as Dera Ismail Khan, Bannu, Peshawar, Lahore, and Karachi.

The government required humanitarian organizations assisting civilians displaced by military operations to request NOCs to access all districts in KP and the former FATA. According to humanitarian organizations and NGOs, the application process for NOCs was cumbersome, and projects faced significant delays. The government maintained IDP camps inside and near former FATA districts where military operations took place, despite access and security concerns raised by humanitarian organizations. Humanitarian organization workers faced danger when traveling to and within the former FATA. UN agencies maintained access to the camps and affected areas

mainly through local NGOs.

Many IDPs reportedly wanted to return home, despite the strict control that security forces maintained over returnees' movements through extensive checkpoints and the lack of local infrastructure, housing, and services delivery. Other IDP families delayed their return or chose to stay with family members in the settled areas of KP, where regular access to health care, education, and other social services was available. For IDPs who were unwilling or unable to return, the government coordinated support with the United Nations and other international organizations.

The country experienced unprecedented floods in 2022. More than 33 million persons were directly affected, 20.6 million required urgent humanitarian assistance, 7.9 million persons were internally displaced, and more than two million houses were destroyed. Although the water had receded, more than 1.5 million persons were still displaced as of November, according to the International Organization for Migration. The most basic necessities, such as food and shelter, continued to be out of reach for a large portion of the flood-affected population, more than 40 percent of whom relied on humanitarian aid for survival.

Despite large-scale recurring displacements of individuals due to natural disasters, terrorist activities, and counterterrorist operations, the government had not adopted specific legislation to tackle internal displacement problems. In addition, the law did not provide any clear

definition of IDPs or their rights. The government continued to classify IDPs as Temporary Displaced Persons.

For further information about IDPs in the country, please see the materials of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/>.

g. Stateless Persons

Statelessness continued to be a problem. There was no national legislation on statelessness, and the government did not recognize the existence of stateless persons. International and national organizations estimated there were at least hundreds of thousands of stateless persons largely because of the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan and the 1971 secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan. UNHCR estimated there were sizable populations of ethnic Bihari, Bengali, and Rohingya living in the country, concentrated in Karachi, a large percentage of whom were likely stateless, although comprehensive data did not exist. Government officials typically only interacted with stateless populations through police harassment and arrest, and service provision in stateless-dominated areas of Karachi was minimal.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political

Process

The constitution provided most citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage. Gilgit-Baltistan and the Azad Kashmir area had political systems that differed from the rest of the country, and neither had representation in the national parliament.

Elections and Political Participation

Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections: During the most recent national elections, held in 2018, although independent observers noted technical improvements in the Election Commission of Pakistan's management of the polling process itself, observers, civil society organizations and political parties raised concerns regarding pre-election interference by military and intelligence agencies that created an uneven electoral playing field. Some political parties also alleged significant polling day irregularities occurred.

On August 10, President Arif Alvi dissolved the National Assembly. According to the constitution, elections should be held 90 days after dissolution of the national and provincial assemblies. Government officials claimed that postponement of general elections was needed to finish the delimitations of constituencies following the most recent census. The government completed the delimitation process on November 30. On

November 2, President Alvi and all five members of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) agreed to hold general elections February 8, 2024, six months after dissolution.

After numerous delays following the January dissolution of the Punjab Assembly, the Supreme Court set May 14 as the election date for Punjab Assembly elections. Nevertheless, elections did not take place in Punjab by year's end. Similarly, in KP, Balochistan, and Sindh, after provincial assemblies were dissolved, elections had either not taken place or were significantly delayed.

Political Parties and Political Participation: There were no reports of restrictions on political parties participating in elections, except for those prohibited due to terrorist affiliations.

On March 12, former Prime Minister and PTI chair Imran Khan called off his party's planned election rally in Lahore after the caretaker provincial government refused to rescind its ban on gatherings in the provincial capital.

On May 9, paramilitary forces arrested Imran Khan outside the Islamabad High Court. The arrest led to a series of violent protests across the country as Khan's supporters clashed with law enforcement. Protesters targeted military installations, including the residence of the corps commander in Lahore and the army's General Headquarters in Rawalpindi. In response,

the government launched a crackdown on protesters, arresting thousands of individuals, including PTI political workers and journalists sympathetic to the PTI.

A significant number of the PTI's senior leadership remained imprisoned. The government and the army announced that violent protesters involved in attacking the military installations would be tried in military rather than civilian courts. Since May 9, several senior PTI leaders had been rearrested repeatedly even after being granted bail.

On May 17, Punjab authorities denied permission for the PTI to rally in Muridke and further prevented rallies on October 13 in Lahore, on November 3 in Sialkot and Gujranwala, and November 19 in Shahdra (Lahore).

On August 8, the ECP disqualified Imran Khan for five years after his conviction on corruption charges.

Judges ordered media regulatory agencies to enforce constitutional bans on content critical of the military or judiciary, compelling media to censor politicians' speeches and election-related coverage deemed "anti-judiciary" or "anti-military." Organizations that monitored press freedom reported direct pressure on media outlets to avoid content on possible military influence regarding judicial proceedings against politicians and positive reporting of opposition leaders. In most areas, there was no interference

with the right of political parties and candidates to organize campaigns, run for election, or seek votes. In Balochistan, however, there were reports security agencies and separatist groups harassed local political organizations, such as the Balochistan National Party and the Baloch Students Organization.

Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable

Groups: Women’s political participation was affected by cultural barriers to voting and limited representation in policymaking and governance. Cultural and traditional barriers in tribal and rural areas impeded some women from voting.

Women participated actively as political party members, but they were often not successful in securing leadership positions within parties or positions in the decision-making bodies within parties apart from women’s wings. Of 87 members of the federal cabinet in the prior government led by Shehbaz Sharif including special advisors to the prime minister, only nine were women. There was one member of a religious minority in the federal cabinet. The caretaker cabinet of Prime Minister Kakar had 28 members, including three women and one from a religious minority group.

The government required citizens to state their religion when registering for a CNIC or passport. CNIC cards and passports were used for voter identification, and Ahmadi Muslims were included in a separate, officially “non-Muslim” voter roll where they were designated “Qadianis” – a

derogatory term for Ahmadi Muslims. They were the only minority group with a separate electoral list. Ahmadis considered themselves Muslims, and many did not vote because they did not wish to reject their Muslim identity and vote as “non-Muslims.”

Section 4. Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for official corruption, but the government generally did not implement the law effectively, and officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices at all levels. Corruption was pervasive in politics and government, and various politicians and public office holders faced allegations of corruption, including bribery, extortion, cronyism, nepotism, patronage, graft, and embezzlement.

The NAB served as the highest anti-corruption authority, with a mandate to eliminate corruption through awareness, prevention, and enforcement. The NAB and other investigative agencies, including the Federal Board of Revenue, the State Bank of Pakistan, the Antinarcotics Force, and the FIA, conducted investigations into corruption, tax evasion, and money laundering. The ECP also had jurisdiction to scrutinize funding to political parties and tax returns of lawmakers.

Corruption: Trials of corruption cases filed by the NAB and FIA during the previous government continued. The government pursued corruption investigations and prosecutions of opposition leaders. Opposition parties

alleged these prosecutions selectively targeted their leaders. On August 5, former Prime Minister and PTI chairman Imran Khan was convicted of violating the electoral code and making a false declaration for failing to disclose official gifts from foreign governments, which he sold or retained, on his annual asset declaration to the ECP. Khan was sentenced to three years in prison and disqualified from holding office for a period of five years. The Islamabad High Court later suspended Khan's prison sentence pending appeal August 29, but he remained jailed on unrelated charges.

On September 15, the Supreme Court ordered the restoration of corruption cases against public office holders. The cases affected were withdrawn after amendments were made to the country's anti-corruption laws in 2022. On September 22, the NAB published a list of 80 restored investigations in response to the Supreme Court's order, including investigations of former Prime Ministers Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif, Yousuf Raza Gillani, and Raja Pervez Ashraf, as well as former President Asif Ali Zardari.

Reports of corruption in the judicial system persisted, including reports that court staff requested payments to facilitate administrative procedures. Lower courts reportedly remained corrupt, inefficient, and subject to pressure from higher-ranking judges as well as prominent, wealthy, religious, and political figures. In February and March, lawyers affiliated with the political party Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz filed references with the Supreme Judicial Council asking the body to investigate allegations of

corruption and unexplained wealth involving Supreme Court Justice Sayyed Mazahar Ali Akbar Naqvi.

For additional information about corruption in the country, please see the Department of State's Investment *Climate Statement* for the country, and the Department of State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

The government significantly restricted the ability of domestic and international human rights groups to monitor and report on human rights conditions. Government officials were rarely cooperative or responsive to the views of these groups. Some domestic and international human rights groups operated with significant government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. The government increasingly restricted the operating ability of NGOs, however, particularly the work of those that revealed shortcomings or misdeeds of the government, military, or intelligence services, or that worked on matters related to conflict areas or advocacy. Numerous regulations regarding travel, visas, and registration hampered these groups' efforts to implement

programs and raise funds. The government delayed or denied issuance of visas and NOCs for in-country travel for international staff members of organizations, including those from registered INGOs.

The domestic NGO registration agreement with the government required NGOs not to use terms the government found controversial, such as countering violent extremism; peace and conflict resolution; IDPs; reproductive health; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) persons, in their annual reports or documents. The agreement also prohibited NGOs from employing individuals of Indian or Israeli nationality or origin. Few NGOs had access to certain parts of KP, the former FATA, or certain areas in Balochistan.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The National Commission on Human Rights, an independent committee, was established in 2012. Observers noted the commission's effectiveness was constrained by a limited budget, extended gaps between appointments of commission board members, who had to be elected unanimously by a bipartisan parliamentary committee, and limited mandate over security agencies or armed forces. A stand-alone Ministry of Human Rights was reconstituted in 2015. The Ministry of Human Rights did not have authority over law enforcement agencies as it conducted studies on human rights issues, and it was known for its lack of effectiveness and timeliness. Provincially constituted human rights organizations and ministries were constrained to work only on a limited set of nonsensitive

issues, including violence against religious minorities and labor rights violations. The Senate and National Assembly standing committees on law, justice, minorities, and human rights held hearings on a range of human rights problems.

On August 20, the Pakistan Ulema Council and the united Protestant Church of Pakistan jointly established a 24-member committee to address the August 16 attacks in Jaranwala against Christian churches and homes. On August 24, the Punjab caretaker government formed 10 Joint Investigation Teams to probe the Jaranwala incident from various angles, including terrorism, arson, damage to public property, and blasphemy. On September 15, the Punjab caretaker government constituted a committee to determine the need for a judicial commission to investigate the Jaranwala incident. Christian groups had requested the formation of a judicial commission following the attack. On October 2, the Punjab caretaker government informed the Lahore High Court it had no plans to form a judicial commission to investigate the attacks in Jaranwala because the Punjab cabinet, being satisfied with the police inquiry report, withdrew its decision to form a judicial commission.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape was a criminal offense, with

punishment for conviction that ranged from a minimum of 10 to 25 years' imprisonment and a fine to the death penalty. The penalty for conviction for rape of two or more persons was death or life imprisonment. The law did not explicitly criminalize spousal rape and defined rape as a crime committed by a man against a woman. Although rape was frequent, prosecutions were rare. The law provided for collection of DNA evidence and included nondisclosure of a rape survivor's name, the right to legal representation of rape survivors, relaxed reporting requirements for women survivors, and enhanced penalties for rape of survivors with mental or physical disabilities.

The government did not effectively enforce the Women's Protection Act, which brought the crime of rape under the jurisdiction of criminal rather than Islamic courts. The law prohibited police from arresting or holding a woman survivor overnight at a police station without a civil court judge's consent. The law required a survivor to file complaints directly with a sessions court, which tried heinous offenses. After recording the survivor's statement, the sessions court judge filed a complaint, after which police could make arrests. NGOs reported the procedure created barriers for rape survivors who could not travel to or access the courts. NGOs reported rape was a severely underreported crime.

The Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act provided legal protections for domestic abuse victims, including judicial protective orders

and access to a network of district-level women’s shelters. Centers provided women a range of services, including assistance with the completion of first information reports regarding the crimes committed against them, first aid, medical examinations, post-trauma rehabilitation, free legal services, and a shelter home. The Punjab government funded four women’s career centers in Punjab universities, 12 crisis centers that provided legal and psychological services to women, and emergency shelters for women and children. The Punjab government established 16 women’s hostel authorities in 12 districts to assist women in finding safe, affordable, temporary lodging while looking for work. In October 2022, the Board of Governments approved the establishment of another 30 centers across Punjab.

On March 10, the Punjab caretaker government launched a safety app for women called “Meri Awaz,” which women facing harassment could use to call for police assistance.

The Pakistan National Judicial Policy Making Committee directed all provincial high courts to establish special gender-based violence courts to provide justice to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence on a priority basis and in a gender-sensitive manner. The Lahore Gender-Based Violence Court received the most serious cases in the district, such as aggravated rape, and offered enhanced protections to women and girls. In 2022, special courts for gender-based violence operated countrywide.

All provinces and the Islamabad Capital Territory had enacted domestic

violence bills as of 2021, but observers continued to report slow implementation due to lack of resources and awareness, gender and cultural biases, and weak federal and provincial coordination. There were no reliable national, provincial, or local statistics on rape due to underreporting, and no centralized law enforcement data collection system existed.

According to reports compiled by the Sustainable Social Development Organization and the Centre for Research, Development and Communication, at least 5,551 women were kidnapped, 2,818 were subjected to physical assault, 304 were raped, and 53 were killed in so-called honor killings across the country from May to August.

Prosecutions of reported rapes were rare, although there were reports prosecution rates increased due to police capacity-building programs and public campaigns to combat the lack of awareness regarding rape and gender-based violence. NGOs reported police sometimes accepted bribes from perpetrators, abused or threatened victims, and demanded victims drop charges, especially when suspected perpetrators were influential community leaders. Some police demanded bribes from survivors before registering rape charges, and investigations were often superficial. There were reports of traditional jirga or panchayat systems of community justice, typically used to resolve low-level disputes or cases of rape in rural areas. The traditional system could have resulted in a survivor being forced to marry the attacker, or a family member on the survivor's side being allowed

to rape a family member of the accused/defendant's side. Women who reported or spoke up against violence against women often faced pushback and harassment, including by police officials, who, according to civil society activists, discouraged survivors from coming forward.

On March 2, following large protests, police arrested two suspects for the brutal rape and murder of a girl, age six, whose body was found in a drain in Karachi. The child had gone missing on February 28; her parents accused men from the neighborhood of kidnapping her.

On September 8, the Lahore High Court directed the Punjab government to take immediate action and establish Special Sexual Offences Investigation Units across the province under section 9 of the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021.

In July, five persons abducted and gang-raped a woman for 10 days in Lodhran District of Punjab. Police arrested three perpetrators and registered cases against all five.

The use of rape medical testing increased, but medical personnel in many areas did not have sufficient training or equipment to gather evidence and undertake investigations, which further complicated prosecutions. Most survivors of rape, particularly in rural areas, did not have access to the full range of treatment services. There were a limited number of women's treatment centers, funded by the federal government and international

donors. These centers had partnerships with local service providers to create networks that delivered a full spectrum of essential services to rape survivors.

No specific federal law prohibited domestic violence, which was widespread. Police could charge acts of domestic violence as crimes pursuant to the penal code's general provisions against assault and bodily injury. Provincial laws also prohibited acts of domestic violence. Forms of domestic violence reportedly included beating, physical disfigurement, shaving of women's eyebrows and hair, and – in extreme cases – homicide. While dowries were banned in 2020, dowry and other family-related disputes sometimes resulted in death or disfigurement by burning or acid.

Women who attempted to report abuse often faced serious obstacles. Police and judges were sometimes reluctant to act in domestic violence cases, viewing them as family problems. Instead of filing charges, police often responded by encouraging the parties to reconcile. Authorities routinely returned women to their abusive family members.

The government continued to operate the Crisis Center for Women in Distress, which referred abused women to NGOs for assistance. Numerous government-funded Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Centers for Women across the country provided legal aid, medical treatment, and psychosocial counseling. These centers served women who were victims of exploitation and violence. Officials later referred victims to *dar-ul-amans* – shelter houses for abused

women and children – of which there were several hundred throughout the country. The dar-ul-amans also provided access to medical treatment. According to NGOs, the shelters did not offer other assistance to women, such as legal aid or counseling, and often served as halfway homes for women awaiting trial for adultery, but who in fact were survivors of rape or other abuse.

Government centers lacked sufficient space, staff, and resources. Many dar-ul-amans were overcrowded; some did not offer access to basic needs such as showers, laundry supplies, or feminine hygiene products. In some cases, individuals reportedly abused women at the government-run shelters, and staff severely restricted women's movements or pressured them to return to their abusers. There were reports of women exploited in commercial sex and sex trafficking in shelters. Some shelter staff reportedly discriminated against the shelter residents, based on a belief that if a woman fled her home, it was because she was a woman of ill repute.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): No national law addressed the practice of FGM/C. According to human rights groups and media reports, many Dawoodi Bohra Muslims practiced various forms of FGM/C. Some Dawoodi Bohras spoke publicly and signed online petitions against the practice. Some other isolated tribes and communities in rural Sindh and Balochistan also reportedly practiced FGM/C.

Other Forms of Gender-based Violence or Harassment: Women were

victims of various types of societal violence and abuse, including so-called honor killings, forced marriages and conversions, imposed isolation, and usage as chattel to settle tribal disputes.

Several laws criminalized so-called honor killings and other acts committed against women in the name of traditional practices. Despite these laws, hundreds of women reportedly were victims of so-called honor killings, and many cases went unreported and unpunished. In many cases, officials allowed the man involved in the alleged “crime of honor” to flee. Because these crimes generally occurred within families, many went unreported. Police and NGOs reported increased media coverage enabled law enforcement officers to take more action against these crimes.

In 2021, Noor Mukadam was sexually assaulted and beheaded by a male acquaintance after being tortured and held hostage for two days in Islamabad. Police arrested Zahir Jaffer, but his family used its influence to pressure local police and the victim’s family to settle out of court. After the victim’s family and friends highlighted the case on social media, police arrested and charged all accomplices. In February 2022, an Islamabad trial court convicted Zahir Jaffer, sentencing him to death, and sentenced two codefendants to 10 years in prison. On March 13, the Islamabad High Court upheld Zahir Jaffer’s death sentence and converted his 25-year jail term into the death penalty. On April 16, Zahir Jaffer filed an appeal in the Supreme Court against the Islamabad High Court’s decision to uphold his death

sentence. As of October, the case remained on appeal in the Islamabad High Court.

In August 2022, a study conducted by a women's rights group revealed that 123 persons, including 88 women, were killed during the prior six months in the name of so-called honor or *karo kari* in Sindh. Balochistan also had reports of many cases of so-called honor-related crimes.

The law made maiming or killing using a corrosive substance a crime and imposed stiff penalties against convicted perpetrators. There were reports that the practice of disfigurement – including cutting off a woman's nose or ears or throwing acid in her face, in connection with domestic disputes or so-called honor crimes – continued and that legal repercussions were rare.

Laws provided legal mechanisms to formally register and prove the legitimacy of Hindu and Sikh marriages and allow for the termination of the marriage upon the conversion of one party to a religion other than Hinduism or Sikhism. Some activists claimed the latter provision weakened the government's ability to protect against forced marriage and conversion. The law criminalized the giving of a woman in marriage to settle a civil or criminal dispute; depriving a woman of her rights to inherit movable or immovable property by deceitful or illegal means; coercing or in any manner compelling a woman to marry; and compelling, arranging, or facilitating the marriage of a woman under the Quran, including forcing her to take an oath on the Quran to remain unmarried or forego claiming her share of an

inheritance. These practices, however, continued in some areas.

The law provided for financial and administrative autonomy enabling the National Commission on the Status of Women to investigate abuses of women's rights.

Discrimination: Women faced legal and economic discrimination. The law prohibited discrimination based on sex, but authorities did not enforce it. Women also faced discrimination in employment, family law, property law, and the judicial system. Family law provided protection for women in cases of divorce, including requirements for maintenance, and set clear guidelines for custody of children and their maintenance. Many women were unaware of these legal protections or were unable to obtain legal counsel to enforce them. Divorced women often were left with no means of support, as their families ostracized them. Women were legally free to marry without family consent, but society frequently ostracized women who did so, or they risked becoming victims of so-called honor crimes.

The law entitled female children to one-half the inheritance of male children. Wives inherited one-eighth of their husbands' estates. Women often received far less than their legal entitlement. In addition, complicated family disputes and the costs and time of lengthy court procedures reportedly discouraged women from pursuing legal challenges to inheritance discrimination. The Punjab Women's Helpline received 2,134 complaints on problems concerning property and inheritance rights from

January to August.

Media reported imams and other marriage registrars illegally meddled with *nikah namas*, Islamic marriage contracts that often detailed divorce rights, to limit rights of women in marriage. In other instances, women signing contracts were not fully informed of their provisions. On July 7, a group of local tribal clerics imposed a ban on transgender persons playing music and dancing at weddings in KP's Khyber District. The ban declared that any weddings featuring music and dancing by transgender persons would not have the nikah ceremony performed by clerics.

Civil society actors reported only 7 percent of women had access to credit and financial services.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization by or on behalf of government authorities.

The government provided limited access to or limited availability of sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence. Survivors of sexual violence were given a clinical exam and treatment; women survivors were offered emergency contraceptives. Postexposure prophylaxis could be prescribed. Other services provided to survivors of sexual violence varied by province.

Young girls and women often lacked information and means to access care. Adolescent girls had no access to counseling related to menstrual health.

Unmarried individuals could obtain contraceptive commodities from private pharmacies; however, unmarried persons frequently faced difficulties in seeking reproductive health-care services, including access to medical contraceptives.

Spousal opposition also contributed to the problems women faced in obtaining contraception or delaying pregnancy. Women, particularly in rural areas, faced difficulty accessing education on health and reproductive rights due to social constraints, which also complicated data collection.

According to the most recent *Pakistan Maternal Mortality Survey*, the maternal mortality ratio was 186 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2019, a rate attributed to inadequate maternal and newborn care. Women in rural areas had limited access to skilled birth attendants, including essential obstetric and postpartum care. The survey revealed three in 10 births were delivered at home, putting both mother and babies at risk. Moreover, there were serious delays in contraceptive procurement and limited stocks of most of the contraceptive types across the country. Due to a lack of contraception and impediments to accessing reproductive health services, more than 2.6 million induced abortions occurred in the country each year. According to the UN Population Fund, the 2022 floods affected an estimated 650,000 pregnant women, forcing them to deliver in suboptimum conditions. There was also a rise in unwanted pregnancies with loss of access to contraception, menstrual hygiene issues, mental health issues,

domestic violence, and undernutrition due to the flooding.

Although fines and punishments for conviction existed, laws on child marriage had little effect because they were not well enforced. Almost 21 percent of marriages occurred before age 18, and 3 percent before age 15; this led to childbearing in 8 percent of married adolescent girls. The government had no dedicated program to address the sexual reproductive health services and contraception needs of this age group. UNICEF stated that due to poor menstrual hygiene, lack of access to sanitary products, and lack of proper sanitation facilities, many girls were absent on school days.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The constitution provided that “all citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of the law.” It also stated that “adequate provision shall be made for the minorities to freely profess and practice their religions and develop their cultures,” and that it was the state’s responsibility to discourage parochial, racial, tribal, sectarian, and provincial prejudices among citizens.

Members of ethnic minority groups stated these provisions had never been fully implemented. Observers cited forced religious conversion and enforcement of blasphemy laws as particular concerns for religious minorities. The constitution enshrined every citizen’s “right to profess, practice and propagate his religion,” but contained a stipulation that this

right was not absolute, but “subject to law, public order, and morality.”

The 2017 Hindu Marriage Law gave legal validity to Hindu marriages, including registration and official documentation, and outlined conditions for separation and divorce, including provisions for the financial security of wives and children.

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Rehabilitation of Minorities (Victims of Terrorism) Endowment Fund Act of 2020 established a fund to help minorities and their families who were victims of terrorism by providing compensation, financial support, treatment, welfare, and rehabilitation.

Some Sindhi and Baloch nationalist groups claimed authorities detained their members based on political affiliation or belief. Nationalist parties in Sindh further alleged law enforcement and security agencies kidnapped and killed Sindhi political activists. Pashtuns accused security forces of committing extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and other human rights abuses targeting Pashtuns.

The PTM and secular Pashtun political leaders claimed Pashtuns were targeted and killed by both antistate militants and security forces because of their political affiliation or beliefs, antimilitancy stance, or criticism of the government. PTM leaders and activists claimed they had been threatened, illegally detained, imprisoned without trial, banned from domestic and international travel, and censored. Anti-Taliban Pashtun activists and

political leaders were targeted and killed, allegedly by militants, in Sindh, Balochistan, and KP. Pashtuns from the former FATA complained they were frequently profiled as militants, based on their tribe, dress, appearance, or ancestral district of origin. Pashtun activists claimed that they were subject to military censorship and that sedition laws were used to stifle PTM and other Pashtun critics of the government.

Sectarian militants continued to target members of the Hazara ethnic minority, who were largely Shia Muslim, in Quetta, Balochistan. Hazaras also faced discrimination and threats of violence. According to media and other reports, security concerns prevented Hazaras from moving freely outside of Quetta's two Hazara-populated enclaves. Community members complained increased security measures had turned their neighborhoods into ghettos, resulting in economic exploitation. Consumer goods in those enclaves were available only at inflated prices, and Hazaras reported an inability to find employment or pursue higher education, leading to growing mental health problems, drug use, and out-migration. Hazara observers reported increased surveillance by authorities due to the arrival of Hazaras from Afghanistan following the 2021 Taliban takeover of Kabul.

Community members also alleged government agencies discriminated against Hazaras in issuing identification cards and passports. Authorities provided enhanced security for Shia religious processions but confined public observances to the Hazara enclaves. In late July, Hazaras protested

alleged police misconduct against children and called for the removal of police checkpoints from Hazara areas. On August 2-3, unidentified gunmen killed three Hazara police officers. Hazara community leaders alleged government complicity in the attacks, claiming local police abetted the killings to illustrate the costs of removing police checkpoints.

Children

Education: The most significant barrier to girls' education was lack of access. Public schools, particularly beyond the primary grades, were not available in many rural areas, and those that existed were often too far for a girl to travel unaccompanied under prevailing social norms. Despite cultural beliefs that boys and girls should be educated separately after primary school, the government often failed to take measures to provide separate restroom facilities or separate classrooms, and there were more government schools for boys than for girls. The attendance rates for girls in primary, secondary, and postsecondary schools were lower than for boys. Additionally, certain tribal and cultural beliefs often prevented girls from attending schools.

Child Abuse: The laws against child abuse were not always enforced effectively. The NGO Sahil reported that 2,227 cases of child sexual abuse were reported across the country from January to June. Employers, who in some cases were relatives, abused young girls and boys working as domestic

servants by beating them and forcing them to work long hours.

Many children who worked as domestic servants were human trafficking victims. In some circumstances, trafficked children were forced to beg to gain money for their employers.

Local authorities subjected children to harmful traditional practices such as treating girls as chattel to settle disputes and debts.

The law defined statutory rape as sexual intercourse with a girl or boy younger than age 16.

The Sindh Child Protection Authority had the power to take punitive action against child abusers. Observers stated, however, the authority and provincial government were unable to implement child protection legal provisions law.

In 2021, the Peshawar High Court inaugurated child protection courts in the KP districts of Kohat, Bannu, Swat, and Dera Ismail Khan, bringing the number of child protection courts active in KP to eight. Child protection courts were already present in Peshawar, Abbottabad, and Mardan Districts and in Mohmand Tribal District. There were 12 child protection units operational in Peshawar, Charsadda, Mardan, Swabi, Swat, Bannu, Buner, Abbottabad, Kohat, Lower Dir, Battagram, and Chitral Districts.

In May 2022, the KP assembly passed the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child

Protection and Welfare (Amendment) Act, 2022, which stipulated that convicted child abusers be sentenced to life in prison or the death penalty. According to the law, those convicted of child pornography or child trafficking would be fined and faced a minimum of 14 to 20 years' imprisonment. Anyone convicted and whose name was entered into the Register of Sexual Offenders would not be employed in any organization relating to or dealing with children in the province. The law also stipulated those cases of child sexual abuse be heard in child protection courts and that cases be completed within 30 days. The person named in the Register of Sexual Offenders was prohibited from using public transportation.

From January to June, 74 cases of child sexual abuse were reported by the NGO Sahil. According to Sahil's report, in Punjab, 1,648 cases of child sexual abuse were reported in the same period.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: Despite legal prohibitions, child marriages occurred. Federal law set the legal age of marriage at 18 for men and 16 for girls, and a law in Sindh set 18 as the legal age of marriage for both boys and girls. According to UNICEF, 18 percent of girls were married by age 18. Nearly 19 million were child brides; one in six young women were married in childhood. An individual convicted of child marriage could be imprisoned for no less than five years and no more than 10 years and could also be fined. At times, men evaded Sindh's child marriage law by traveling to a different province for marriage.

The Council of Islamic Ideology declared child marriage laws to be un-Islamic, noting they were “unfair and there cannot be any legal age for marriage.” The council stated Islam did not prohibit underage marriage since it allows the consummation of marriage after both partners reach puberty. Decisions of the council were nonbinding. Judges routinely cited Islamic law to justify child marriages, forcing families to find and appeal cases to judges who would apply existing law.

In rural areas, poor parents sometimes sold their daughters into marriage, in some cases to settle debts or disputes. Although forced marriage was a criminal offense, many filed cases were not prosecuted.

A children’s rights NGO stated authorities received reports of 14 cases of child marriage from January to June.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: Various local laws existed to protect children from child pornography, sexual abuse, seduction, and cruelty, but federal laws did not prohibit using children for commercial sexual purposes or pornographic performances, although child pornography was illegal under obscenity laws. Legal observers reported that authorities did not regularly enforce child protection laws. From January through June, according to the NGO Sahil, there were 2,427 reported cases of child abuse, including 1,207 cases (54 percent) involving girls and 1,220 (46 percent) involving boys. The abuses included child sexual abuse, abduction, missing children, and child marriages.

On June 3, Changa Manga police arrested two suspects and conducted raids to apprehend a third for gang-raping a girl, age 13, in the village of Kot Watwan, Chunian Tehsil, in Punjab Province. The case continued at year's end.

Infanticide, Including Infanticide of Children with Disabilities: Parents occasionally abandoned unwanted children, most of whom were girls. By law, anyone convicted of abandoning an infant could be imprisoned for seven years, while anyone convicted of secretly burying a deceased child could be imprisoned for two years. Conviction of murder was punishable by life imprisonment, but authorities rarely prosecuted infanticide.

Antisemitism

Most of the historic Jewish community had emigrated from the country. Antisemitic sentiments were widespread in the vernacular press. Hate speech used by some politicians and broadcast in some print media and through social media used derogatory terms such as “Jewish agent” to attack individuals and groups or referred to “Zionist conspiracies.”

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based

on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

Criminalization: Consensual same-sex sexual conduct was a criminal offense. The penalty for conviction of same-sex conduct was a fine, two years' to life imprisonment, or both. The law also punished convicted same-sex married couples with up to 10 years in prison. Although not enforced since the 1985 lifting of martial law, the Hudood Ordinance of 1979 criminalized sexual intercourse outside of marriage in accordance with sharia, with penalties of whipping or, potentially, death. There were disputes as to whether the Hudood Ordinance notionally applied to both opposite-sex and same-sex conduct, but there were no known cases of the government applying the ordinance to same-sex conduct, and there were no known cases of executions for homosexuality. LGBTQI+ persons rarely revealed their sexual orientation or gender identity in the public sphere. There were communities of openly transgender persons, but they were marginalized and frequently targets of violence and harassment.

Violence and Harassment: Violence, discrimination, and stigma continued against LGBTQI+ persons. The crimes often went unreported, and police generally took little action when they received reports. Online harassment and doxing (publicly identifying individuals online) were common and used to silence prominent transgender figures.

In 2020, Rawalpindi police launched a pilot project to protect transgender individuals. The project, called the Tahafuz Center, included the first transgender victim-support officer, who was also a member of the transgender community. In February 2022, Islamabad police established the Tahafuz Police Khidmat Markaz and Reporting Center to handle cases perpetuated against transgender individuals. The Islamabad Transgender Protection Unit reported 30 criminal cases and complaints were filed, involving violence or harassment against transgender persons, from January to November. A volunteer at the Tahafuz Center reported that 36 transgender persons had been appointed as protection officers across Punjab Province.

A local NGO reported in 2022 that prison officials in KP held transgender prisoners separately and that the provincial government formed a jail oversight committee to improve the prison situation. KP police stations had a dedicated intake desk for transgender persons and added transgender rights education to police training courses. In November, Gulbar police station in Peshawar established its first “transgender desk” in KP. The desk was a designated space for transgender persons to take criminal complaints, and each desk was staffed by individuals recommended by local transgender associations. Local NGOs working in the Islamabad Capital Territory and Punjab conducted transgender sensitization training for police officers. Balochistan hired a transgender police officer in October to serve as a Transgender Victim Support Officer at the Women and Juvenile Facilitation

Centre Quetta.

KP saw an increase in violence against transgender persons. Transgender activists complained police did not act against targeted attacks on the community and remained indifferent despite several protests.

In September, a transgender rights activist said that TTP militants threatened her and that four transgender persons had already left the country due to such threats. They also accused hardline right-wing religious political parties Jamiat-Ulema-Islam and Jamat-e-Islami of using incendiary and transphobic narratives in their election campaigns.

Discrimination: The law did not prohibit discrimination by state and nonstate actors based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. The law prohibited harassment of transgender persons and outlawed discrimination against them in employment, housing, education, health care, and other services. According to LGBTQI+ NGOs and activists, society generally shunned transgender women, eunuchs, and intersex persons, who often lived together in slum communities and survived by begging and dancing at carnivals and weddings. Some also engaged in commercial sex. Local authorities often denied transgender individuals their share of inherited property and admission to schools and hospitals. Property owners frequently refused to rent or sell property to transgender persons.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: A 2012 Supreme Court ruling allowed transgender individuals to obtain national identification cards listing a “third gender.” Because national identity cards also served as voter registration, the ruling enabled transgender individuals to participate in elections, both as candidates and voters. The 2018 Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act ensured the rights of transgender or third-gender persons, sometimes referred to as Hijra or Khawaja Sira, were protected. The law accorded the right of transgender individuals to be recognized according to their “self-perceived gender identity,” but the government only allowed the registration of gender changes to an “X” third gender and not to a different binary male or female gender.

In May, after a challenge to the provisions of the 2018 Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act from the Federal Shariat Court, the National Database and Registration Agency (NADRA) halted the “X” national identity card registration for transgender persons, causing backlash from the legal community, civil society, and human rights activists. On September 27, facing intense pressure, NADRA resumed registration of “X” national identity cards.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: There were no laws addressing or forbidding so-called conversion therapy. Societal, family, religious, and community discrimination reportedly meant most LGBTQI+ individuals did not self-identify. Psychiatric services were reportedly limited,

and some families of LGBTQI+ persons consulted traditional or religious healers for exorcisms. Occasionally these involved forceful beatings, physical violence, or forceful detention in homes as coercive punishment or an attempt to force a change to the person's sexual identity or expression.

There were no reports of medically unnecessary and irreversible "normalization" surgeries performed on children or on nonconsenting adult intersex persons.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly:

Gatherings or events such as the women's march sometimes faced hardships in obtaining assembly permits because of alleged support to sexual minorities or the alleged support of LGBTQI+ activists. Public venues were reportedly more reluctant to host transgender events as religiously based anti-LGBTQI+ protests increased. The government continued to review movies, books, magazines, and newspapers, which were subject to censorship for objectionable sexual content.

Persons with Disabilities

The law provided equal rights for persons with disabilities, and provincial specialized education and social welfare offices were responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities; nonetheless, authorities did not always implement its provisions. Each province had a department or office legally tasked with addressing the educational needs of persons with

disabilities, and observers reported that most provincial departments had not implemented adequate supportive measures. According to civil society organizations, despite these provisions, most children with disabilities did not attend school, nor did they have access to resources such as assistive devices.

Persons with disabilities faced discrimination in employment and at work. The National Council for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled provided job placement and loan facilities as well as subsistence funding. Access to polling stations was problematic for persons with disabilities because of severe difficulties in obtaining transportation or reasonable accommodations at polling locations. The law allowed for absentee voting for persons with disabilities. To register for an absentee ballot, however, persons with disabilities were required to obtain an identification card with a special physical disability symbol. According to disability rights activists, the multistep process for obtaining the special identification symbol was cumbersome.

Those with disabilities commonly encountered daily obstacles such as barriers to community mobility, reduced access to education and health-care services, and higher risk of suffering from depression. Further obstacles included few accessible shelters or inclusive education programs for persons with disabilities.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Societal violence due to religious intolerance remained a serious problem. There were occasional reports of mob violence against religious minorities, including Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, and Hindus. Shia activists reported continuing instances of targeted killings and enforced disappearances in scattered parts of the country.

At least three Sikhs were killed in targeted attacks during the year. On March 31, an unidentified motorcyclist shot and killed Sikh businessman Dayal Singh in Peshawar. On May 6, unknown assailants killed Malik Sardar Singh in a drive-by shooting in Lahore. Singh was a member of the Sikh separatist Khalistan movement and was wanted on terrorism charges in India. On June 24, gunmen shot and killed Sikh shopkeeper Manmohan Singh in Peshawar. ISIS-K later claimed responsibility for the killing and claimed the motive was Singh's adherence to a "polytheistic" religion.

On July 25, a mob vandalized an Ahmadiyya mosque in Karachi, Sindh Province. On August 16, several hundred persons attacked a Christian settlement in Faisalabad District, Punjab, after two members of the community were accused of committing "blasphemy." The mob vandalized several churches, dozens of houses, and a cemetery. Women's rights groups faced threats of violence from religious groups. The annual Aurat (Women's) March events conducted throughout the country continued to

receive threats from extremist groups, including the right-wing newspaper *Ummat*, which considered the march to be “vulgar and anti-Islamic.” The march was held amid strict government security, but many NGOs did not participate in the event after receiving direct threats. In the aftermath of the march, several groups accused the organizers of blasphemy and tried to book legal cases against them. On March 4, authorities in Lahore denied permission for the Aurat March to mark International Women’s Day, citing “controversial cards and banners” commonly displayed by participants in the march and security concerns. The Lahore High Court later allowed organizers to proceed with the march. The Islamist party Jamiat-e-Islami organized a countermarch under the name “modesty march.”

The country continued to have a concentrated HIV epidemic with a prevalence of less than 0.1 percent in the general population. The country had an estimated 230,000 persons with HIV in 2022. Stigma and discrimination by the general population and by health-care providers against persons with HIV remained significant barriers to treatment access. Sex workers and the transgender community had difficulty accessing health-care services because of stigma and discrimination, as well as harassment by law enforcement officers. Transgender advocacy organizations and activists reported HIV was particularly prevalent in their communities, with little medical help available.

In some cases, police arrested individuals after acts of vigilantism related to

blasphemy or religious discrimination.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The constitution covered a range of basic labor provisions, but most of the labor force was under the jurisdiction of provincial labor laws. The federal government did not effectively implement laws that protected the right to organize, to bargain collectively, and to strike, and the penalties were less than those for other violations involving denial of civil rights, such as discrimination. Penalties were rarely applied against violators. A 1968 ordinance addressed the relationship and contracts between employer and employee. The ordinance applied to all industrial and commercial establishments employing 20 or more workers. A 1934 law governed the conditions of industrial labor in factories, amended by the provincial governments in 2010 to include factories employing five or more workers. A 2012 law took International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions into account but, due to the 18th amendment, it applied only to the Islamabad Capital Territory and to trade federations that operated in more than one province. The only federal government body with any authority over labor matters was the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, whose role in domestic labor oversight was limited to

compiling statistics to demonstrate compliance with ILO conventions.

The law provided some private-sector workers the right to form and join unions but denied this right to public servants, workers in export processing zones, agricultural workers, and workers in a broad list of essential services. At the provincial level, laws providing for collective bargaining rights excluded banking- and financial-sector workers, forestry workers, hospital workers, self-employed farmers, and persons employed in an administrative or managerial capacity. There were limits on the number of unions that could exist within an enterprise. Unions representing less than one-third of workers in an enterprise did not have standing to bargain collectively. The law did not protect workers from antiunion discrimination.

The law stipulated the National Industrial Relations Commission could adjudicate and determine industrial disputes within the Islamabad Capital Territory to which a trade union or federation of trade unions was a party and any other industrial dispute determined by the government to be of national importance. This provision did not provide a forum specifically for interprovincial disputes but appeared to allow for the possibility the commission could resolve such a dispute. Worker organizations noted the limited capacity and funding for labor relations implementation at the provincial level.

The law prohibited state administrators, workers in state-owned enterprises and export-processing zones, and public-sector workers from striking.

Authorities could prohibit strikes if they found them “prejudicial to the national interests” and refer disputes to arbitration.

Provincial industrial relations acts also addressed and limited strikes and lockouts. For example, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Act specified that, for power distribution, gas, and other essential public service providers, when a “strike or lockout lasts for more than 30 days, the government could, by order in writing, prohibit the strike or lockout” and was required to refer the dispute to a labor court.

Federal law defined illegal strikes, picketing, and other types of protests as “civil commotion,” which carried a penalty if convicted of up to life imprisonment. The law also stated that gatherings of four or more persons required police authorization, which was a provision authorities could use against trade union gatherings. Unions were able to organize large-scale strikes, but police often broke up the strikes, and employers used them to justify dismissals. Enforcement of labor laws was weak, in large part due to lack of resources and political will. Most unions functioned independently of government and political party influence. Labor leaders raised concerns regarding employers sponsoring management-friendly or only-on-paper worker unions – so-called yellow unions – to prevent effective unionization. Despite restrictions on gatherings, state-owned enterprises slated for privatization faced continuous labor strikes.

The International Federation for Human Rights and the HRCP noted workers’

registration levels were low across all provinces, inhibiting the right to unionize. Union parties reportedly lacked capacity, and workers had little incentive to register because corruption in contract bidding led to the perception that unions were ineffective in obtaining better paying jobs for their members. Authorities also had broad discretion to administratively deregister, suspend, or dissolve unions without judicial review.

Labor NGOs assisted workers by providing technical training and capacity-building workshops to strengthen labor unions and trade organizations. They also worked with established labor unions to organize workers in the informal sector and advocated policies and legislation to improve the rights, working conditions, and wellbeing of workers, including laborers in the informal sector. NGOs also collaborated with provincial governments to provide agricultural workers, brick kiln workers, and other vulnerable workers with national identification so they could connect to the country's social safety net and access the benefits of citizenship (such as voting, health care, and education).

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for

Employment

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

d. Discrimination (see section 6)

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: Under the 18th amendment of the constitution, provinces were responsible for the regulation of labor and minimum wage setting. The federal government regulated labor and wages for the federally administered Islamabad Capital Territory. Minimum wage laws did not cover significant sectors of the labor force, including workers in the informal sector, domestic servants, and agricultural workers. According to an ILO report, "The scope and coverage of minimum wage regulations, as well as wage-setting mechanisms and processes, varies from province to province, thereby make the system quite complex."

The law provided for a maximum workweek of 48 hours (50 hours for seasonal factories) with rest periods during the workday and paid annual holidays. The national labor code also required time off on official government holidays, overtime pay, annual and sick leave, health care, education for workers' children, social security, old-age benefits, and a workers' welfare fund. Many workers, however, were employed as contract

laborers with no benefits beyond basic wages and no long-term job security, even if they remained with the same employer for many years.

Furthermore, these national regulations did not apply to agricultural workers, workers in establishments with fewer than 10 employees, or domestic workers. Workers in these types of employment also lacked the right to access labor courts to seek redress of grievances and were extremely vulnerable to exploitation.

The private sector did not always comply with orders regarding the minimum wage. Media reported labor departments struggled to enforce minimum wage laws across all provinces. The Pakistan Institute of Labor Education and Research estimated that as of April, 80 percent of unskilled workers were not receiving the minimum wage.

Occupational Safety and Health: There was no independent legislation on occupational safety and health (OSH) regulation, although some national laws and subsequent provincially derived legislation provided OSH standards for industries with employees in factories and related workplaces. The Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development was the government agency responsible for implementing these laws at the federal level, while provincial labor ministries did it in the provinces. The laws did not cover informal-sector implementation, and enforcement of OSH standards in multiple sectors of labor were weak, particularly at provincial levels throughout the country. Across all industries, workers could not

remove themselves from dangerous working conditions without risking loss of employment.

There was a serious lack of adherence to mine safety and health protocols.

Many mines had only one opening for entry, egress, and ventilation.

Informal-sector employees, such as domestic and home-based workers, were particularly vulnerable to health and safety dangers. There were no statistics on workplace fatalities and accidents, but observers asserted they were common and rarely reported to government inspectors or media.

Factory managers were often unable to ascertain the identity of fire or other work-related accident victims because these individuals were contract workers and generally did not appear in records.

Labor rights activists stated workers often had to work in dangerous conditions and that private-sector mining companies failed to provide workers with health and safety facilities. Mines in the country regularly reported injuries and deaths among their workers. The government did not effectively enforce OSH laws; penalties for violations of such laws were not commensurate with those for crimes such as negligence and penalties were rarely applied against violators.

The comprehensive OSH law enacted by Sindh Province in 2017 had yet to be implemented. In 2020, the Punjab government enacted the Medical Teaching Institute (Reform) Ordinance, which amended several existing pieces of health-care legislation and instituted boards of governors

composed of private-sector professionals for state-run teaching hospitals. Mayo Hospital Lahore, Punjab's largest state-run teaching institute, became the first public-sector teaching institute where the ordinance was enforced. A board of governors took over administrative and financial control of the hospital.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: Provincial governments had primary responsibility for enforcing wage, hour, and OSH regulations. Enforcement was ineffective due to limited resources, corruption, and inadequate regulatory structures. Minimum wage and labor law disputes were settled by internal dispute resolution mechanisms as opposed to being dealt with by national courts, further contributing to corruption. Penalties were less than those for conviction of similar crimes, such as fraud. Penalties were rarely applied against violators.

The industry-specific nature of many labor laws and the lack of government enforcement gave employers in many sectors relative impunity regarding working conditions, treatment of employees, work hours, and pay.

Inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions. The number of labor inspectors employed by the provincial governments was insufficient. Many workers, especially in the informal sector, remained unaware of their rights.

A Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives labor force

survey covering 2020 and 2021 stated the informal sector accounted for 72.5 percent of employment in main jobs outside agriculture – more in rural areas (76.2 percent) than urban areas (68.5 percent). OSH laws and inspections did not apply to the informal sector. The government did not effectively enforce labor laws in this sector.