

STATE OF HUMAN



RIGHTS IN 2023

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION OF PAKISTAN



State of Human Rights in 2023



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

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ISBN 978-627-7602-36-9

Printed by Visionaries Division

90A Airlines Housing Society

Khayaban-e-Jinnah, Lahore

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NOTES ON SOURCES

Sources, where not quoted in the text, include HRCP surveys, fact-finding reports and communications from its correspondents and private citizens; official gazettes; economic and legal documents and other public releases and statements; reports in the national and regional press; and publications of international human rights and development agencies. HRCP is especially grateful to the police and prisons departments in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Islamabad Capital Territory, and Gilgit-Baltistan for providing data on law and order and on jails and prisoners.

Considering the limitation of official reports, press accounts and sample surveys conducted by NGOs, the figures and assessments offered here may not always represent the full or exact picture. They should be taken as a reflection of the trend during the year.

Images have been taken from national and regional newspapers and other online sources.



CONTENTS

Note on sources

Abbreviations

Glossary

Introduction	... 1
A year of economic suffering	... 5
Key issues	... 11
Punjab	... 22
Sindh	... 57
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	... 90
Balochistan	... 123
Islamabad Capital Territory	... 153
Azad Jammu and Kashmir	... 187
Gilgit-Baltistan	... 208
Appendix 1	Human rights legislation in 2023 ... 231
Appendix 2	Key HRCP activities ... 234
Appendix 3	HRCP stands ... 248
Appendix 4	Human rights frameworks ... 307
Image sources	... 320



ABBREVIATIONS

AJK	Azad Jammu and Kashmir	MPO	Maintenance of Public Order (Ordinance)
AQI	Air Quality Index	NADRA	National Database and Registration Authority
ATC	anti-terrorism court	PEMRA	Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority
BAP	Balochistan Awami Party	PHC	Peshawar High Court
BNP-M	Balochistan National Party (Mengal)	PKMAP	Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party
CDA	Capital Development Authority	PLWD	person living with disabilities
CJP	Chief Justice of Pakistan	PPC	Pakistan Penal Code
COIED	Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances	PPP	Pakistan People's Party
CTD	Counter-Terrorism Department	PTI	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
ECP	Election Commission of Pakistan	PTM	Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement
FIA	Federal Investigation Agency	SJC	Supreme Judicial Council
FIR	first information report	TLP	Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan
FWO	Frontier Works Organization	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
GB	Gilgit-Baltistan	WAPDA	Water and Power Development Authority
GBLA	Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly		
HEC	Higher Education Commission		
HED	Higher Education Department		
HRCP	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan		
IHC	Islamabad High Court		
JI	Jamaat-e-Islami		
JKLF	Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front		
JUI-F	Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F)		
KIU	Karakoram International University		
LHC	Lahore High Court		
LOC	Line of Control		
MNCH	maternal, neonatal and child health		



GLOSSARY

<i>Hari</i>	Peasant
<i>Katchi abadi</i>	An irregular or informal urban settlement or shanty town, generally inhabited by low-income households
<i>Khalsa sarkar</i>	A term used in Gilgit-Baltistan for barren or uncultivated land that was originally collectively owned
<i>Mehram</i>	Male guardian/unmarriageable kin
<i>Zina</i>	Unlawful sexual relations



INTRODUCTION

The year 2023 was marked by seemingly irreparable political divisions, spilling over into public acts of violence, and a state that had no compunction in using every tool at its disposal to check dissent. The countrywide PTI-led riots and arson witnessed after former prime minister Imran Khan was arrested, and the state's wholly disproportionate response in terms of cracking down on one political party—to the extent of resurrecting military courts to try civilians, perpetrating enforced disappearances, and allegedly orchestrating public disassociation from the PTI among many senior party leaders—makes for an unhappy chapter in the country's history.

While the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) closely monitored the civil and political rights crisis, we felt strongly that the country's economic rights crisis warranted urgent and sustained mobilization, advocacy and lobbying. Amid unprecedented levels of inflation of almost 40 percent, millions of ordinary people struggled to make ends meet. Consequently, a large part of HRCP's work focused on the struggle for economic justice—the rights to a living wage, housing, education, healthcare, a clean environment, decent working conditions and social security.

As part of this effort, HRCP held a national conference in Karachi on the right to decent work and dignity of labour for all. The organization also produced a series of studies documenting the labour rights concerns of vulnerable groups, including fisherfolk, miners, textile workers, sanitation workers and agricultural workers. These were released as part of the Shakeel Pathan Labour Studies Series, named for our former colleague. HRCP also launched an important campaign calling for the right to health to be enshrined in the Constitution as a fundamental right.

HRCP has traditionally monitored the political and civil rights environment in the run-up to a national election. In 2023, too, we kept close watch on the state's use of repressive tactics to curb political opposition and documented this in our *ElectionsWatch* series. The organization continued to push for electoral reforms through consultations and an extensive report that, among other recommendations, pointed out that linking the right to vote with possession of a national identity card had effectively converted a basic civic right into the citizen's responsibility, thereby leaving a significant population of women and internal migrants disenfranchised.

There was reason for optimism, however. People, we saw, remained invested in the idea of a rights-centric society, especially in marginalized areas. The long march led by spirited young Baloch women in November to protest against extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances

was testimony to this. The government's decision to forcibly deport 'illegal' foreigners—a decision affecting primarily vulnerable Afghan migrants and refugees—galvanized a small but determined section of civil society into action. The brutal mob-led assault on Christian churches and homes in Jaranwala left rights activists shaken but increasingly determined to combat faith-based violence.

Additionally, while HRCP's mandate is generally limited to human rights in Pakistan, the Israeli occupation in Gaza and its genocidal intent has lain heavy on our collective conscience as human rights defenders. To this end, our governing body passed a resolution condemning Israeli aggression and expressing solidarity with our international colleagues, many of whom have lost family and friends in this war.

Through all this, HRCP's nine offices across Pakistan and governing Council remained engaged in advocacy, lobbying, documentation and awareness-raising. Apart from six reactive fact-finding missions, two thematic fact-finding missions were conducted in northern Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Almost 120 mobilisation and outreach meetings, consultations, seminars and training workshops were held, and 41 publications released. HRCP's Knowledge Management System—comprising human rights-related news reports dating back to 1990, digitized and categorized according to 19 broad themes—continued to function effectively, with a view to making this archive publicly accessible in 2024.

The prestigious I. A. Rehman Research Grant was awarded in 2023 to academic Zubair Torwali and breaks new ground for human rights research in Pakistan by focusing on linguistic rights and endangered languages. HRCP also instituted the Fakhruddin G. Ebrahim Human Rights Fellowship in memory of its founding member. Sponsored by the late Justice Ebrahim's family, the fellowship was awarded to lawyer Azwar Shakeel for an investigative feature on the rights implications of human smuggling. The organization's Legislation Watch Cell continued to keep a critical eye on draft laws and policies and released four reports. Our complaints desks and helplines continued to function at all the regional offices, helping survivors of rights violations seek support and redress.

HRCP was deeply grieved by the loss of several committed human rights defenders this year, including HRCP members Iftikhar Butt and Dr Pervez Tahir, labour rights activists Qazi Siraj and Veeru Kohli, and former chairperson of the National Commission for Human Rights, Justice (R) Ali Nawaz Chowhan. They all leave behind a legacy of dedication and commitment to human rights that will be remembered.

As with preceding reports, this edition documents and assesses a wide range of human rights violations, comprising separate chapters on the federating units, Islamabad Capital Territory, and the administrative

units of Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. While each province or territory presents its peculiar human rights challenges, it is worth noting that acute distress over the spiralling cost of living—especially in the absence of adequate social safety nets—was common to all regions.

In the end, I would like to acknowledge the effort put into producing this report by our contributors, including, among others, Adnan Rehmat, Dr Mahvish Ahmad, Alefia T. Hussain, Israruddin Israr, Jalaluddin Mughal, Shujauddin Qureshi, Zebunnisa Burki, Bilal Abbas and Rida Fazal. Special thanks are owed to the director Farah Zia, for editing the report, assisted by the senior manager communications and research, Maheen Pracha. Our colleagues Maheen Rasheed, Salman Farrukh, Aisha Ayub, Ali Haider, Halima Azhar, Drakhshandae Badar and Adeel Ahmed provided immense support. I am especially grateful to the secretary-general Harris Khalique and former chairperson and Council member Zohra Yusuf for reading the report and giving us valuable feedback.

Asad Iqbal Butt
Chairperson



NATIONAL OVERVIEW

A year of economic suffering

The dispatches from all the federating units for the 2023 edition of *State of Human Rights* have one thing in common: they record multiple protests all through the year against food shortages, inflation, delayed or nonpayment of salaries, low wages, exorbitant electricity and fuel bills, and mass layoffs. 2023 will be remembered as a year of economic hardship for a vast majority of the population, who faced spiralling inflation, low growth and limited access to education, healthcare, social security and employment opportunities. The protests included those by government employees such as clerks, teachers, lady health workers and pensioners against changes in pension or service rules. Alongside were political protests, be they women-led Aurat Marches and the Baloch Yakjehti Council's long march against extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances, or those led by political parties, demanding, among other things, timely elections.

The state's response to these protests was indifferent at best and unabashedly violent at worst.

Pakistan is no stranger to political instability and economic injustice, but this year was remarkable for the state's blatant disregard for its own Constitution, adherence to a bare, notional democracy, and civic spaces having shrunk to an all-time low.

2023 was nothing short of a human rights nightmare on many counts, which have been recorded at length in this year's report. Howsoever depressing the violations of human rights, in our case, this only reaffirms that human rights are indivisible and inalienable—that economic rights are as tied to political ones as social and cultural rights to civil rights and freedoms.

Let us take a look at some of the broad trends of 2023 that impacted democratic governance, considering that it was a pre-election environment, as well as violations of fundamental freedoms, not just of mainstream political forces but of all vulnerable groups, including women, children, religious, sectarian and ethnic minorities, labourers, transgender persons, the elderly and people living with disabilities. The status of refugees living in the country and the impact of climate change are other subjects that carry weight because of their human rights implications.

* * *

The political uncertainty of the previous year continued when two provincial assemblies were dissolved for political expediency by the PTI-led provincial governments at the beginning of the year, creating a

unique situation demanding separate and early elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa some months before the general elections. The challenge posed by this anomaly coexisted with selective accountability, media controls, polarization in institutions that ought to have stayed impartial and a sharp rise in militancy.

While the provincial elections kept being postponed on one pretext or another, there came the defining day of 9 May when PTI chief and former prime minister Imran Khan was arrested by the Pakistan Rangers from inside the Islamabad High Court on charges of corruption. His supporters and party workers, who had declared Khan's arrest a 'red line', took to the streets in all major cities and even small towns, and engaged in rioting and arson, attacking state installations, including military symbols and the corps commander's house in Lahore, and public property, including the Radio Pakistan building in Peshawar. The violent protests were unprecedented. The state retaliated with a fierce crackdown and mass arrests of thousands of party workers and leaders, including many women, who were said to be involved in the rioting, through geofencing, with many kept in military custody and not allowed to meet their families. Internet and social media shutdowns were imposed.

In the months that followed the 9 May riots, the human rights situation took a nosedive and civic spaces contracted to an extraordinary degree. The accused persons would not just face penal charges of terrorism; the National Security Committee announced on 16 May that civilians would be tried under Pakistan's Army Act and Official Secrets Act and face trial in military courts. In June, the National Assembly passed a resolution calling for military trials of the 9 May accused, asking them to be 'tried and convicted without a delay of even a single day'. In May, the then defence minister Khawaja Asif said that the government was considering banning the PTI over the 9 May riots; in June, he hinted at blocking social media for its alleged role in inciting violence on 9 May.

There were serious attempts to decimate the party responsible for the 9 May violence, through arbitrary arrests, intimidation, enforced disappearances and legal battles. Despite the hue and cry, many PTI women stayed behind bars for months [the exact number is contested and HRCF commented as early as August about the lack of transparency regarding their numbers as well as the legal processes under which they were tried]. Some are still incarcerated and face multiple FIRs in different cities.

* * *

It appeared that 9 May was being used as a ruse for blatant manipulation of the pre-election situation and postponement of elections beyond what was stipulated in the Constitution. It was a 'ruse' because selected leaders of the PTI, from among those arrested or disappeared, were

released and apparently absolved if they joined the hurriedly cobbled-together Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party or announced they were leaving the PTI or politics or condemned the 9 May riots. Many leaders were reportedly forced to appear on television to do a press conference or interview. Punjab remained the epicentre of this political engineering, which continued in the other provinces too.

The caretaker governments exceeded their mandate and period. The caretaker governments in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa lasted till the end of the year and beyond, while the federal caretaker government, which took charge in August, stayed on for more than 90 days as was constitutionally provided. In June, a Lahore High Court judgment said that the Punjab caretaker government had transgressed its powers by making major policy decisions.

The PDM-led government did little to curb the role of unelected forces in manipulating the system. Some of the appointments made during the year were the subject of criticism, including the appointment of a retired lieutenant general as the new National Accountability Bureau chief in March and the appointment of a serving lieutenant general as head of the National Database and Registration Authority in October. Earlier, in June, the cabinet had set up a Special Investment Facilitation Council to boost foreign investment, which included the army chief as well as several officers in key posts as members—a move that was criticized by both the International Monetary Fund and some independent economists.

* * *

The National Assembly hastily passed a slew of legislation in July without any public debate, including amendments to the Official Secrets Act, that gave intelligence agencies sweeping powers to enter and search any person or place without warrant and broadened the scope for targeting dissidents and political rivals and amendment to the Pakistan Army Act that criminalized defamation of the armed forces, including online.

In October, human rights defenders were overjoyed to see the Supreme Court declare the military trials of over 100 civilians arrested in the wake of the 9 May riots as unconstitutional. Military trials do not meet the standard of fair trial and it was hoped that the verdict would benefit activists such as Idris Khattak. However, in December, to everyone's consternation, another bench of the Supreme Court suspended its earlier order and allowed the cases to proceed in military courts.

This year's report documents cases of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and torture by state agencies, which showed no signs of abatement. The official data provided by the Sindh police mentions 3,296 police encounters in just one year in one province. A

dangerous development is the incidence of mob lynching, which appears to be on the rise. As per HRCP's own media monitoring, about 34 people became victims of mob lynching in at least 26 incidents. Of these 26 incidents, 16 happened in Karachi alone. The actual figure may be more. Not all these incidents were religiously motivated and many mobs reportedly gathered to capture and punish suspected thieves and robbers.

* * *

Freedom of expression faced more curbs, including a ban on Wikipedia in February, multiple internet and social media outages, a ban on televised broadcasts of the PTI, PEMRA's directions against 'hate speech', interpreted as a blanket ban on using Imran Khan's name and image on air. The case of television anchor and YouTuber Imran Riaz Khan was among the most concerning as there was no word about his whereabouts for four months despite several court orders to trace him. He was 'recovered' in September and has not spoken publicly about his disappearance.

The freedom of assembly situation remained particularly poor. There were attempts by individual petitioners or state functionaries like deputy commissioners to stop various Aurat Marches and it was only the courts that allowed these peaceful marches to take place. The Baloch women protest march led by Mahrang Baloch faced arrests and police violence in Dera Ghazi Khan and Islamabad. Section 144 was generously used to pre-empt peaceful assemblies and protests. The exit control list continued to exist and was beefed up with more names from the list of the 9 May accused.

* * *

Unfortunately, there were few positive developments in connection with vulnerable and marginalized groups in 2023. Whatever little that was offered to them had only token value; for instance, if there was better legislation, it was marred by lack of implementation, with no change in the situation on the ground.

Women had to face more violence, 'honour' crimes, cyber harassment; they remained absent or marginalized in public and political spheres including the electoral rolls. A heartening development, however, was to see Baloch women participating in non-violent movements in the Haq Do Tehreek as well as marching 1,600 kilometres from Turbat to Islamabad to protest against enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

In a disappointing move, the Federal Shariat Court declared sections of the historic Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 in violation of Islamic law, even as transgender persons continued to face violence and discrimination at the hands of the state and society.

Child sexual abuse remained rampant and under-reported. As per Sahil's *Cruel Numbers* report, there were 4,213 cases of child sexual abuse reported during the year. A mechanical stating of facts or a matter of collective shame? The truth is that we owe so much more to the children in this country. What stare us in the face instead are facts about 26 million or more out-of-school-children. Of these, one was 14-year-old Rizwana Bibi who was allegedly tortured while working in a civil judge's home in Punjab. Another was Fatima Fariro, a ten-year-old girl who was found dead, amid allegations of torture, in an influential landlord's mansion in Khairpur, where she worked as house help. The list goes on.

Pakistan's record was far from impressive as regards freedom of religion or belief. The attack on the Christian community in Jaranwala, Faisalabad, in August was a watershed moment where dozens of churches and homes were torched and looted after calls for mob action from loudspeakers in mosques, following allegations of blasphemy against a Christian man. There were persistent attacks on Ahmadiyya places of worship, at times with the state's complicity. In a welcome move, however, the Lahore High Court ruled in August that Sections 298-B and C did not mandate razing or altering structures built before 1984. As the blasphemy laws kept being invoked to lodge cases, increasingly in the online realm, there was no let-up in attacks on minorities' places of worship, including Hindu temples in Sindh, nor in the forced conversions of Hindu girls.

HRCP initiated some serious work on industrial and agricultural labour, fisherfolk, occupational safety and health administration. This report takes note of sanitation workers losing their lives due to inhalation of poisonous gases. This is happening in contravention of international best practices that require this work be done by machines. It also records mine workers' deaths, especially in Balochistan but also Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. HRCP prepared a charter of demands in 2023 that includes and demands, among other things, moving away from a minimum wage to a living wage.

* * *

A worrying development in 2023 was the caretaker government's decision, through an executive order, to expel all undocumented foreigners in 28 days, the bulk of whom comprised Afghan nationals, who the government claimed were responsible for the deteriorating security situation. HRCP took strong exception to the order, which it felt could trigger a humanitarian crisis. The decision amounted to forced repatriation, something which is not recognized in international customary law, and affected vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers, including religious and ethnic minorities such as the Hazara, women, children, the elderly, persons living with disabilities, persons from low-income groups, and Afghans at risk because of their professions. It

demanding, among other things, 'a rights-based domestic policy on refugees enabling repatriation that is voluntary, complies with international standards of dignity and safety, and is based on informed consent for return and reintegration.'

Last but not the least is the impact of climate change on the vulnerable. Pakistan experienced unseasonal rains, floods and other climate-induced disasters while still reeling from the impact of similar disasters in 2022. There are local and regional phenomena such as hazardous air quality that hits a good part of the Punjab province for about four months, affecting the elderly and children in particular. Lahore alone recorded hundreds of pneumonia deaths among children, about half of which were said to have been caused by air pollution.

Human rights, as stated earlier, are indivisible and inalienable. We hope that the *State of Human Rights in 2024* report will present a more optimistic, equitable and just and stable Pakistan especially for its marginalized sections.



KEY ISSUES

Laws and law-making

- About 28 bills were introduced and passed in a single session of the National Assembly in July by the outgoing Pakistan Democratic Movement-led government, reflecting a complete disregard for parliamentary procedures.
- Three contentious laws were hastily passed that penalized contempt of parliament, punished disclosure of ‘sensitive’ information related to the country’s security or army, and granted intelligence agencies wide-ranging detention powers.
- Although the Supreme Court declared ‘unconstitutional’ the military trials of 103 civilians allegedly involved in the PTI-led 9 May riots, a few months later, another bench of the apex court suspended its earlier short order and allowed these cases to proceed in military courts.
- In a move that invited criticism from rights activists, the Federal Shariat Court ruled that sections of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 protecting the right to self-perceived gender identity were ‘un-Islamic’.
- The Lahore High Court ruled that caretakers of Ahmadiyya sites of worship cannot be held liable for the construction of minarets at sites that predate the law prohibiting minarets on Ahmadiyya worship sites.
- In an important ruling, the Lahore High Court struck down Section 124-A of the Pakistan Penal Code, establishing that the offence of sedition was repugnant to the protection of fundamental rights.

Administration of justice

- On the World Justice Project’s rule-of-law index, Pakistan scored 0.38 on fundamental rights against a global average of 0.56 and was ranked at 125 out of 142 countries. This score has remained consistent since 2019.
- There were 2,260,386 cases pending in the courts as of the end of the year, including 56,155 cases in the Supreme Court and 342,334 cases in the high courts.
- According to a quarterly report issued by the Supreme Court, the number of pending cases in the apex court has seemingly doubled in the past ten years, with the backlog continually increasing at an average rate of 18 percent.

The death penalty

- According to press reports tracked by HRCP, at least 102 death sentences were handed down in 2023—a slight increase from 98 awarded in 2022. However, no executions were reportedly carried out.
- In two high-profile cases, two policemen were awarded death sentences for the murder of a young man in Islamabad in 2021, while the son of a known political figure was given a death sentence for the brutal murder of his wife.

Law and order

- Following the arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan, PTI-led mobs damaged and destroyed state property in several cities, including the Radio Pakistan building in Peshawar, leading to a state crackdown on party workers and supporters, leading to an unconfirmed number of casualties.
- Around 789 terrorist attacks and counter-terrorism operations took place in 2023, in which an estimated 1,524 people were killed and 1,463 injured. These fatalities mark a record six-year high, with 2023 witnessing a 56 percent surge in violence and a 69 percent increase in militant attacks compared to 2022.
- Both Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan combined accounted for over 90 percent of all fatalities and 84 percent of militant attacks during 2023, including incidents of terrorism and security operations. In two cases, at least 64 people were killed after a bomb detonated at a political gathering organized by the JUI-F in Bajaur, while a deadly suspected suicide attack in Mastung killed 53 people.
- Extrajudicial killings continued to mar law and order, with at least four people killed by Rangers personnel in a security operation in a village near Sakrand in Sindh and a Baloch youth killed allegedly by the Counter-Terrorism Department while in custody in Turbat.
- HRCP's media monitoring shows that at least 618 people were reportedly killed in police encounters, while 33 were killed in custody and 24 out of custody. At least 13 people were also reportedly victims of custodial torture.
- Law and order in the riverine belt in Sindh remained a major cause for concern, with dacoits continuing to operate unhindered despite various police operations.

- Street crime in Karachi reportedly increased by about 11 percent in the year, with over 90,000 incidents reported in the metropolis. A total of 134 citizens were murdered and hundreds injured while resisting robbery.
- HRCP documented at least 26 cases of mobs taking the law into their own hands and lynching suspected ‘criminals’; at least two such cases involved faith-based lynchings in Mardan and Nankana Sahib.
- In a case that sparked a national outcry, provincial lawmaker Sardar Abdul Rehman Khetran was accused of detaining people in private jails in Balochistan as well as sexually assaulting and killing family members of an employee who had not complied with his wishes.

Jails and prisoners

- Data from the provincial prisons departments indicates that, as against a sanctioned capacity of 67,294 inmates, the country’s jails held 97,449 prisoners, implying a very high rate of overcrowding at 145 percent.
- Over 14,000 Pakistani citizens were reportedly imprisoned abroad during 2023, with 58 percent incarcerated in the United Arab Emirates (5,292) and Saudi Arabia (3,100).
- Some 418 Pakistani citizens, including 81 fisherfolk, were lodged in Indian jails.

Enforced disappearances

- According to the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, at least 2,299 cases of enforced disappearances remained unresolved as of end-2023. During the year, in 4,413 cases, the victims returned home; in 994 cases, the victims were traced to internment centres; in 644 cases, the victims were traced to prisons; and in 261 cases, the victims’ dead bodies were found. As in previous years, HRCP believes these numbers are vastly underreported and holds the commission responsible for not holding perpetrators to account.
- HRCP’s media monitoring reveals that 82 men and seven women were forcibly disappeared in at least 62 reported cases during 2023.
- Following the 9 May riots, a number of PTI leaders and party workers were allegedly forcibly disappeared for prolonged periods and then released, presumably as a means of political intimidation.

- In a high-profile case, former news presenter Imran Riaz Khan was forcibly disappeared, allegedly in connection with his support for the PTI. He returned home after remaining missing for four months.
- Journalists, activists and political workers were subjected to short-term enforced disappearances in Sindh and Balochistan in particular. The bodies of several missing political workers were also found in Sindh during the year.
- There were reports of alleged extrajudicial killings of forcibly disappeared people in Balochistan, especially after any major attacks carried out by Baloch militants.

Democratic development

- The political divisiveness and polarization observed in 2022 continued well into 2023, the most evident outcome of which was that people's democratic rights were compromised during the year.
- While the dissolution of the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assemblies was seen as being politically expedient, provincial elections in these provinces were significantly delayed on various grounds in violation of the 90-day period stipulated in the Constitution.
- The arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan in Islamabad on 9 May triggered violent riots countrywide. The rioting and arson carried out by PTI supporters against military and state installations were met with arrests of party leaders and political workers as well as enforced disappearances. The response of the state was understood as excessive given that the rioters, including many women, were charged under anti-terrorism acts and faced trials in anti-terrorism and military courts.
- Against the spirit of true democracy, the caretaker governments persisted well beyond the period prescribed by the Constitution. The federal caretaker government appeared to exceed its purview in several instances.
- The ECP barred PTI chief Imran Khan from contesting elections for five years after his conviction on grounds of 'corrupt practices' in connection with official gifts received while in office.
- Following approval of the seventh census, the ECP said that new delimitations would have to be carried out, which would delay the general election beyond the 90-day constitutional limit.
- The number of National Assembly seats for the former tribal districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was reduced from 12 to six in line with the 25th constitutional amendment.

- The practise of appointing serving and retired military officials to civilian posts showed no sign of abating.
- The political status of Gilgit-Baltistan remained unresolved; the territory has still not been accorded the status of a province despite this being a longstanding demand among most residents of the area.

Local governments

- Local government elections were completed in Sindh and Balochistan, barring Quetta, while local by-elections were held in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- Although local government elections were expected in Punjab in April, amid the political crisis, these did not materialize. Similarly, local government elections in Islamabad Capital Territory took a backseat amid the general political uncertainty in the country.
- In a noteworthy amendment to the local government law, the Sindh assembly reserved seats for transgender persons for the first time.
- In general, local governments remained constrained by insufficient budgets and were effectively dysfunctional on the ground.

Freedom of movement

- Following the 9 May PTI-led riots, hundreds of party supporters faced travel restrictions as they were placed on the exit control list.
- Border closures and protests restricted freedom of movement of thousands in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- A jirga in the Khyber district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa restricted women's right to move freely by banning their visits to wheat distribution points for free flour organized under the Benazir Income Support Programme.

Freedom of assembly

- The caretaker governments frequently resorted to repressive tactics against PTI workers, conducting raids on the homes of senior party leaders and making arrests. [See also *Democratic development*].
- Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure was commonly used to restrict political activities.
- Rising inflation and soaring electricity bills placed significant economic strain on farmers, labourers and traders, prompting them to take to the streets in protest.

- Political associations and trade unions faced police wrath while exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly.
- In an admirable show of strength, young Baloch women mobilized a long march from Turbat to Islamabad to protest against the alleged extrajudicial killing of a 24-year-old Baloch youth as well as enforced disappearances. Despite constant high-handed attempts by the state apparatus to prevent them from reaching the capital (including arrests and baton charges), the protestors reached Islamabad in December. There, the police resorted to violence, including the use of water cannons, to deter the marchers, resulting in injuries and arrests of dozens of protesters, including women and children.

Freedom of expression

- Pakistan improved its position on the World Press Freedom Index by scaling up seven points and was ranked at 150 out of 180 countries, as against 157 on the previous year's index. However, journalists continued to report censorship and self-censorship through the year.
- According to media reports tracked by HRCP, at least five media personnel were reportedly attacked during 2023. Among them, a reporter in Kohat was attacked and injured by unidentified armed men, while a journalist in Bannu was kidnapped and tortured by unidentified men before being released.
- The state's crackdown on the PTI included a ban on airing former prime minister Imran Khan's speeches for 'attacking state institutions'. A directive from PEMRA disallowed media channels from providing airtime to individuals responsible for 'hate speech', which was interpreted as barring Imran Khan's name from being mentioned.
- The ECP, as part of its code of conduct for the 2024 elections, banned the holding of entrance and exit polls.
- At least 15 internet shutdowns occurred in 2023, violating people's right to information.

Freedom of religion or belief

- At least 29 attacks occurred against religious minorities' worship places as well as 11 cases of faith-based killing, according to media reports monitored by HRCP.
- The Ahmadiyya community recorded at least 35 attacks on its places of worship during the year, while 21 Ahmadis were arrested for various offenses against religion.

- In an attack that gained worldwide attention, scores of churches, chapels and Christian homes in Jaranwala, Punjab, were torched and looted by mobs in August, following allegations of blasphemy against a Christian man.
- According to civil society reports, at least 136 cases of alleged forced conversion occurred during 2023, the majority of whom were Hindu women and girls in Sindh.
- According to police data, at least 63 new blasphemy cases were registered across the country.
- As of December 2023, of 552 prisoners in jail for blasphemy offences in Punjab, 485 were under trial, 44 had been convicted and 23 were either ‘unconfirmed’ as condemned or on death row. In Sindh’s prisons, by November 2023, 82 were incarcerated on blasphemy charges, out of which 78 were under trial and four were convicted.
- Vigilante ‘justice’ continued during the year: in one case, a mob stormed a police station in Nankana Sahib and lynched a man accused of blasphemy; in the other instance, a mob lynched a local cleric in Mardan on charges of blasphemy. [See also *Law and order*].
- Rights organizations opposed the National Commission for Minorities Bill passed by the National Assembly, calling instead for a statutory, well-resourced and independent commission similar to other autonomous rights commissions.

Freedom of association

- The state repression targeting the PTI after the 9 May riots led many senior leaders and workers to disassociate publicly from the party, often after spending days or weeks in detention.
- There were unverified reports of government plans to ban the PTI—a potentially gross rights violation that remained restricted to rumours.
- The rate of trade unionization showed no apparent change from just over 2 percent in 2018, according to ILO estimates.
- While Sindh remained the only province to have restored student unions, higher education institutions in the province reportedly did not formulate regulations and procedures for the conduct of student unions.

Women

- According to HRCP’s media monitoring, at least 226 women were reportedly victims of ‘honour’ crimes during 2023, 700 were abducted, 631 were raped and 277 gang-raped; at least 66 women reported having been subjected to domestic violence.
- The Digital Rights Foundation received 2,224 cases of cyber-harassment, a majority of which were registered in Punjab by women.
- In the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report for 2023, Pakistan was ranked at 142 out of 146 countries.

Transgender persons

- HRCP’s media monitoring reveals that at least 9 trans persons were victims of ‘honour’ crimes and 11 of sexual violence in 2023.
- In a welcome move, the federal government incorporated the transgender community into the Benazir Income Support Programme.
- The Federal Shariat Court declared sections of the Transgender (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 in violation of Islamic law. The court ruled that a person’s gender must conform to their biological sex. The decision was challenged in the Supreme Court by rights activists. [See *Laws and law-making*].

Children

- According to HRCP’s media monitoring, at least 79 children were subjected to corporal punishment during 2023, while at least 13 girls were reportedly forced into marriage.
- The NGO Sahil reported at least 4,213 cases of child abuse during 2023, averaging to around 11 children abused per day. Of these cases, 53 percent were girls and 47 percent were boys. There were also 1,938 cases of abduction reported, with 83 percent of these abductions reported from Punjab, in particular, Faisalabad and Rawalpindi.
- In two cases that sparked national outrage, a ten-year-old domestic worker, Fatima Fariro, was found dead in an influential landlord’s mansion in Khairpur with marks of torture found on her body. Teenage Rizwana Bibi, also employed as a domestic helper in a civil judge’s residence, was reported to have suffered sustained physical abuse at the hands of the judge’s wife.

- An estimated 700,000 children were reportedly subjected to child labour in brick kilns across the country.

Persons living with disabilities

- Generally, the provision of rights to persons living with disabilities saw little progress in 2023.
- Differently abled children were deemed more likely to never enrol in school, drop out early or be ignored in the learning process even if in class, according to the Annual Status of Education Report.
- In Punjab, the Council on Rights of Persons with Disabilities submitted a proposal to the chief minister for the formation of special courts to facilitate persons with disabilities as well as for setting up district welfare and rehabilitation units and disability assessment boards. However, disability rights activists called for more transparency in the workings of the council.

Labour

- In the absence of occupational safety and health for most workers, some 87 miners were killed and 74 injured in accidents during 2023, while a number of sanitation workers died as a result of exposure to poisonous gases or drowning in manholes.
- As inflation fluctuated between 25 and 45 percent, workers frequently demanded that the government raise salaries to match the increase in prices.
- Workers suffered delays in disbursement of salaries throughout the year.
- Although Sindh fixed the minimum wage at PKR 32,000 for unskilled workers, no private factory or work establishment was reported as having implemented this change.
- In a positive development, the Bahawalpur bench of the Lahore High Court granted permission to allot 344,000 acres of land in Cholistan to local landless peasants.

Refugees and internally displaced persons

- In October, the federal government set 1 November 2023 as the deadline for undocumented refugees to ‘return voluntarily’. The directive was said to target ‘illegal’ Afghan refugees, who were thought to be ‘responsible’ for Pakistan’s worsening security situation.

- Hundreds of Afghans, including those with legitimate registration papers, were rounded up in police raids and sent to deportation centres with little to no legal recourse.
- Civil society—particularly in Sindh—was visibly divided on the deportation of Afghan migrants and refugees. A large faction of civil society endorsed the government’s repatriation policy, while one group of urban rights activists opposed the action on humanitarian grounds.
- In Gilgit-Baltistan, people displaced by the earthquake in Rondu in 2021, glacial lake outburst floods in Hasanabad and the Attabad landslide in 2010 continued to face problems regarding rehabilitation, schooling for their children, access to healthcare and other issues.

Education

- An estimated 26 million children were out of school in 2023, according to the Annual Status of Education Report, while Balochistan had the highest dropout rates at almost 7 percent for boys and girls.
- Pakistan’s public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP in the fiscal year 2022/23 was estimated at a paltry 1.7 percent as against 1.4 percent in the previous year.
- Irregular funding for public schools, infrastructural damage to educational establishments caused by natural disasters, teacher absenteeism and unpaid salaries for faculty affected the provision of education to students across the country.
- Many schools hit by the devastating floods of 2022 remained in precarious condition and the rehabilitation process was either slow or unsatisfactory.

Health

- The federal budget for the fiscal year 2023/24 allocated PKR 24.25 billion to public health expenditure—around 0.05 percent of GDP.
- There were at least 6,151 Covid-19 cases and six polio cases reported during 2023.
- The spread of the deadly Congo virus set off alarm bells and led to provincial health alerts.
- HRCP recorded at least 1,380 suicides across the country, in which 1,012 men, 396 women and two transgender persons lost their lives.

Housing

- Although the Sindh government announced it was building houses for 2.1 million flood victims across the province, targeting women affected by the floods, implementation was slow and many flood victims kept waiting for the government to honour its promises.
- Drives against encroachment on public land continued throughout the year, often targeting low-income households, street vendors and refugees.
- Residents of various *katchi abadis* across Islamabad protested against the Capital Development Authority and district administration after a spate of demolitions of informal settlements left many people homeless.

Environment and climate change

- Air quality levels in all major cities remained poor at best and hazardous at regular points through the year, leading to a spate of disease in urban areas, particularly in winter.
- The Sutlej River experienced a significant rise in water levels in August, leading to the evacuation of hundreds of families from various villages, displacing almost 100,000 individuals.
- Balochistan was hit by periodic climate change-induced flash floods between March and May, resulting in loss of life and property and the closure of roads.
- In a historic judgment, the Sindh High Court barred any mining and excavation in the Karoonjhar Mountains in Nagarparkar, classifying the range as a protected heritage site.
- In July, the federal cabinet approved the country's first National Adaptation Plan to build the country's resilience against adverse impacts of climate change and environmental degradation.

Pakistan and international human rights mechanisms

- Pakistan underwent its fourth Universal Periodic Review, following which the government accepted 253 of 340 recommendations from peer states.
- Although the government pledged its commitment to addressing gaps in national legislation relating to the prevention of torture, improving respect for fair trial rights, enhancing protection for

journalists and human rights defenders, and providing greater protection to religious minorities, its actions or lack thereof belied this commitment.

- The government refused to accept recommendations relating to the ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; it also refused to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture.
- The government also refused to accept all but one recommendation related to the death penalty, including on the establishment of an official moratorium and the ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.



PUNJAB



HIGHLIGHTS

- Political and constitutional crises gripped Punjab as the provincial assembly became entangled in a power struggle between political parties and state institutions.
- In the absence of functional and effective provincial legislature, contentious political matters were frequently brought before the courts for resolution.
- Against the spirit of true democracy, the interim government persisted beyond the period prescribed by the Constitution.
- The caretaker government of Punjab resorted to repressive tactics against political workers of the PTI, conducting raids on the homes of senior party leaders and making arrests.
- The interim government frequently imposed Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, displaying its ill will to restrict political activities than to ensure peace and security in the province.
- The findings of the new digital census necessitated reallocation of national and provincial seats in the province.
- There was no respite from police encounters, with the primary targets being suspected ‘robbers’.
- The most egregious attack against the Christian minority happened in August with the setting on fire of churches and homes belonging to Christians in Jaranwala, resulting in loss of life and property. There were recurrent attacks on the worship places of the Ahmadiyya community throughout the year as well.
- The Lahore High Court ordered the elimination of forced child labour. The court also directed the Child Protection and Welfare Bureau to take appropriate measures against those who violate the law.
- The number of incidents of violence against women increased in 2023 compared to 2022.
- Rising inflation placed significant economic strain on farmers and labourers, prompting them to take to the streets in protest.
- A large number of people were affected by outbreaks of measles and dengue.
- Shortages of paramedics, nurses and anaesthetists marred the healthcare services provided by state-run hospitals.

- Punjab remained in the grip of smog as various districts, especially Lahore, struggled with dangerously high air quality levels.



OVERVIEW

The political divisiveness and polarization observed in the province of Punjab in 2022 continued well into 2023, the most evident outcome of which was that people's democratic rights were compromised during the year.

The failure of political parties to address their contentions through debate on the assembly floor, preferring court battles instead, led to the dissolution of the Punjab assembly on 12 January on the advice of the then chief minister.

A power struggle ensued among various institutions, including the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the president of Pakistan, regarding the date of the next elections.

The uncertain political situation prompted active adjudication by the courts, particularly concerning the provincial elections, leading the Supreme Court to rule on 4 April that the ECP was obligated to conduct elections within 90 days of the assembly's dissolution under Article 224(2) of the Constitution.

The arrest of Imran Khan in Islamabad on 9 May exacerbated the situation in Punjab. The rioting and arson carried out by PTI supporters on military and state installations, particularly in Lahore and Multan, but also in Rawalpindi, Sargodha, Faisalabad and Mianwali, were met with arrests of party leaders and political workers.



The arrest of Imran Khan in Islamabad on 9 May exacerbated the situation in Punjab.

The response of the state was understood as excessive given that the rioters, including many women, were charged under anti-terrorism acts and faced trials in anti-terrorism and military courts. This impacted the province's law and order, and the caretaker government failed to provide a level playing field for all political parties leading up to the national elections on 8 February 2024. The caretaker government in Punjab's tenure and mandate also extended beyond what was constitutionally provided.

State agencies failed to prevent faith-based crimes. The most egregious attack against the Christian minority happened in August with the setting on fire of churches and homes belonging to Christians in Jaranwala, resulting in significant loss of life and property. Other instances included the damaging of minarets at Ahmadiyya worship places in Wazirabad, sometimes with connivance of the administration, and incidents of mob lynching.

The year concluded without much improvement in the rights of women, children and transgender persons – incidents of gender-based violence increased in 2023 compared to 2022, as recorded by the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women; transgender persons persisted in their advocacy for the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018; and violence against underage domestic workers also increased.

Uncontrollable inflation prompted workers to take to the streets, demanding revisions in salaries to cope with the escalated cost of living. Moreover, despite various environmental awareness campaigns, the government was unable to prevent deterioration in air quality across many districts in Punjab, particularly in Lahore.



RULE OF LAW

Laws and law-making

Legislation passed. On 10 January, amid protests by the PML-N and PPP demanding that then Chief Minister Parvez Elahi should secure a trust vote before any other business of the assembly, as many as 21 bills were passed in the Punjab Assembly.¹ The bills predominantly pertained to the affairs of universities.

On 17 February, the government of Punjab notified the Punjab Home-Based Workers Act 2023. The act recognized home-based workers in Punjab as important stakeholders in the labour market, providing them with safeguards against exploitation and injustice. Though the act marked a landmark development, HRCP highlighted that certain definitions, such as ‘home’ and ‘disablement’, must be reviewed from a human rights perspective.²

Interim set-up. Following the dissolution of the Punjab Assembly, the ECP appointed Syed Mohsin Raza Naqvi as the interim chief minister.³ The appointment, however, faced an unusual delay due to a disagreement between the Parvez Elahi government and Hamza Shehbaz-led opposition regarding the nominees. The matter was referred to the ECP in accordance with the Constitution. Under Article 224-A of the Constitution, the ECP decided to appoint Naqvi as the caretaker chief minister on 22 January for a 90-day interim period.⁴

The delay in holding the general election in Punjab prolonged Naqvi’s 90-day term as the caretaker chief minister; the caretaker set-up in Punjab continued, and hence, no more law-making could be done throughout the year.

Administration of justice

Pending cases. According to the Law and Justice Commission Pakistan, the Lahore High Court (LHC) began the year with 179,425 pending cases. Through the course of 2023, it instituted 154,118 cases and disposed of 139,869 cases. By the end of the year, the LHC had 193,674 pending cases. Interestingly, the net increase in cases pending for adjudication in the last six months of the year was 5.7 percent for the LHC, a rate higher than pendency cases for the country’s other high courts.

Punjab’s district courts began the year with 1,317,770 pending cases; instituted 3,337,353 cases through 2023 and disposed of 3,287,237 cases. By the end of the year, Punjab’s district courts had 1,386,615 pending cases. Similar to the LHC’s pendency rate, the district judiciary of Punjab also witnessed a higher net increase in pendency than other provinces’ district judiciaries in the last six months of 2023 at 4.4 percent.

Landmark rulings. On 1 April, in response to a petition filed by a public interest litigation organization, the LHC halted the handover of 45,267 acres of land in Bhakkar, Khushab, and Sahiwal on a 20-year lease to the Pakistan Army for the purpose of corporate farming.⁵ It maintained that a caretaker government did not have the power to make policy decisions of a permanent nature under the Elections Act 2017. Later, in July, the LHC suspended this order on intra-court appeals filed by the federal and the provincial governments.⁶

In another case, the LHC ruled in an order issued in August that caretakers of Ahmadiyya sites of worship cannot be held liable for the construction of minarets at sites that predate the law.⁷ It held that Sections 298-B and C do not mandate razing or altering the structures built before their inclusion in the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) through a 1984 ordinance. The structure in question was built in Wazirabad in 1922. In its fact-finding report, HRCP maintained that ‘the judgment should also serve to prevent the police from razing minarets at Ahmadiyya sites of worship—a constant pattern in the last eight months.’

Death penalty awarded. Numerous death penalties were handed down on charges of murder and blasphemy in 2023. For instance, a 22-year-old Christian boy was sentenced to death by the district and sessions court on charges of blasphemy under Section 295-C in Bahawalpur in May.⁸ In several other cases, individuals were sentenced to death for rape. An additional sessions district and sessions judge handed down a death sentence to an accused in a rape case, besides imposing a fine of PKR 5 million in Muzaffargarh in June.⁹ In another instance, a judge sentenced a man to death for raping his daughter in the Sialkot district.¹⁰



ENFORCEMENT OF LAW

Law and order

Crime incidence. According to police data, there was a significant uptick in crime in 2023 relative to 2022, with an increase in the number of registered cases of rape and gang-rape (Table 1). HRCP's own data, based on media reports, also indicates that at least 296 police encounters took place during the year, as well as eight mob lynchings.

Table 1: Crime statistics for Punjab in 2023

<i>Offense</i>	<i>Number of registered cases</i>
Murder	4,847
Attempted murder	8,829
'Honour' killing	120
Rape	8,565
Hurt	18,611
Kidnapping/abduction	24,746
Gang rape	774
Acid crime	62
Dacoity	1,708
Robbery	101,032
Burglary	1,708
Theft u/s 382 PPC	3,840
Motor vehicle theft	116,917
Motor vehicle snatching	19,011
Cattle theft	21,751

Source: Punjab Police, in response to HRCP's request for information

Clampdown on PTI after mob violence. After the arrest of Imran Khan from the court premises on 9 May, PTI-led mobs attacked state buildings in Lahore, Sargodha, Faisalabad, Mianwali, Rawalpindi and Multan, damaging and destroying state property. Security forces subsequently unleashed a crackdown on PTI leaders and workers.

Hundreds of them were arrested and their homes raided. Those arrested and, in many cases, rearrested in a series of charges filed against them, faced trial in anti-terrorism courts (ATCs) and military courts.

PTI activists faced a similar crackdown throughout the year. In one incident on 23 October, at least 80 PTI workers were held in a police raid in Lahore, allegedly in an attempt to prevent a party convention from taking place.¹¹

Overall, PTI leaders and supporters were arrested on charges of inciting terrorism, arson and public disorder in Punjab after the 9 May riots. Senior leaders associated with the PTI that were arrested (and often rearrested) included the former Punjab Chief Minister Chaudhry Parvez Elahi, who was arrested by the Anti-Corruption Establishment and police in Lahore in June.

By September, he had been arrested 11 times.¹² Other prominent PTI leaders, including PTI president of the Punjab chapter Senator Ejaz Chaudhry and former Punjab governor, Omar Sarfaraz Cheema, were arrested in May.

One prominent case about illustrating the highhandedness of law enforcement authorities was the arrest of PTI supporter and fashion designer Khadija Shah. Shah was arrested in connection with the attacks on the Lahore corps commander's house and Askari Tower, and torching police vehicles near Rahat Bakery in Lahore's cantonment on 9 May.

Over the next few months, at least four more cases were filed against her in the anti-terrorism court. The court granted her bail on 15 November, but she was rearrested on 17 November under the Maintenance of Public Order (MPO) Ordinance for 30 days. She challenged her detention in the LHC as 'unlawful and unconstitutional'.¹³

On 11 December, the Punjab government submitted a notification in the LHC, stating that it had withdrawn her detention orders 'with immediate effect'. But before she could be released, the Quetta police filed a request in the ATC, seeking her transit remand.

The court accepted the request and granted the investigating officer her custody for two days, after which on 16 December, Shah was produced in the court and remanded in police custody for seven days. She was finally released by the ATC in Quetta for want of evidence on 28 December.¹⁴

Police encounters. There was no respite from police encounters during 2023. In one case in Kasur, the police claimed to have arrested two alleged robbers in injured conditions after an encounter on 15 March. But the police had claimed a shootout with the same suspects at another location and under different circumstances on 6 March, undermining their later claim.¹⁵

Another case that exposed the police's poor performance was reported from Toba Tek Singh, where the relatives of two robbery suspects, killed in an alleged encounter by Dolphin Force personnel, staged a protest demonstration on 28 May. They claimed that the victims were unarmed and had surrendered, yet the force had opened fire on them.¹⁶

Jails and prisoners

Prison capacity. Data from the Punjab Prisons Department indicates that, as against a sanctioned capacity of 37,217 inmates, the province’s 43 jails held 60,668 prisoners, implying overcrowding by at least 63 percent. Under-trial prisoners also outnumbered convicted prisoners at a ratio of 3 to 1. Table 2 gives additional data on the prison population in Punjab.

Table 2: Prisons data for Punjab in 2023

Total number of male inmates	59,652
Total number of female inmates	1,016
Total number of juvenile inmates	791
Total number of under-trial prisoners	44,113
Total number of convicted prisoners	14,862
Number of persons on death row	275

Source: Punjab Prisons Department, in response to HRCP’s request for information

Of the 275 persons on death row, 210 were convicted on murder charges and six on blasphemy charges.

Juvenile offenders. According to Justice Project Pakistan, only 19 percent of juvenile inmates in Punjab were placed in borstal institutes or reformatory centres as of November 2023. This indicates a gap in implementing the Juvenile Justice Systems Act 2018 which aims to provide non-custodial measures for juvenile offenders.

Prisoners’ rights. On 23 January, HRCP expressed concern over the situation in Central Jail in Gujrat, where prisoners protested for their rights. While the commission did not condone reported arson or violence perpetrated by the prisoners, it stood by the complete realization of their rights, stating that ‘this is also a stark reminder of the subhuman prison conditions prevalent across Pakistan’.

Enforced disappearances

The official data from the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (COIED) indicates that, since the COIED’s inception in 2011, of the 1,625 cases received as of end-December 2023, 820 persons had returned home, 94 were traced to internment centres and 183 to prisons, while 72 dead bodies were located over the course of 11 years. 1,365 cases had also been disposed of over the course of the commission’s tenure, of which includes 1,169 missing persons traced. At the end of the year, the COIED still had a balance of 260 cases of enforced disappearance from the province.



Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

Mob violence in Jaranwala. The year 2023 was marked by a watershed moment for minorities in Pakistan. An attack that gained worldwide attention was perpetrated on the Christian community in Jaranwala tehsil in Faisalabad district, where at least 24 churches, several dozen smaller chapels and scores of houses in 11 different localities of the town were torched and looted on 16 August. After believing rumours and allegations of blasphemy against a Christian man and encouraged by calls for action by Muslims from mosque loudspeakers, thousands of men gathered in the town and attacked Christian churches and houses in multiple locations.

An HRCP fact-finding mission found that the incident was a consequence of weakening rule of law, governance and social safety nets. It reported that the use of blasphemy allegations to perpetrate mob violence against religious minorities was ‘a recurring phenomenon that exposed not only the poor capacity of the state to prevent loss of life and property, but also the absence of a sound policy for preventing religiously motivated crimes’.¹⁷



In an attack on the Christian community in Jaranwala tehsil in Faisalabad district, at least 24 churches, several dozen smaller chapels and scores of houses in 11 different localities were torched and looted.

Ahmadi sites of worship. Earlier, in April, miscreants attacked the Ahmadiyya community's worship place in Sargodha.¹⁸ Acting on a complaint from Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), the police dismantled the minaret of the community's worship place in Burewala.¹⁹ Again, in September, two more worship places of the minority community faced desecration by the police in Gujrat and Sheikhpura districts following a TLP complaint, which sought the removal of Islamic wording from the worship place.²⁰ Once again, in September, the minarets of three additional worship places were demolished in Sheikhpura district.²¹ In a welcome move, the LHC barred the authorities from changing the structure of the Ahmadiyya places of worship in an order issued in August.²² [See *Administration of justice*].

At least five first information reports (FIRs) were registered in Toba Tek Singh, Nankana Sahib, Faisalabad and Lahore against the Ahmadiyya community members for sacrificing animals on Eid-ul-Azha.²³ The complaints were registered under Section 298-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, which elaborates on the penalty for persons of the Ahmadi group calling themselves Muslims or preaching or propagating their faith.

Hindu minority's rights. At least 15 students belonging to the Hindu community were injured at the Punjab University when they were celebrating Holi with the permission of the administration in March.²⁴

Members of the Sindh Council and Hindu students had organized the event. The event turned violent as armed members of the Islami Jamiati-Tulaba (the Jamaat-i-Islami's student wing) allegedly attacked the revellers. The misplaced priorities prevalent at higher education institutes were further highlighted in a letter written by the executive director of Higher Education Commission (HEC) to all vice chancellors, rectors and heads of universities. Dated 20 June, and without naming the Punjab University, it referred to the Holi incidents and stated the event 'caused concern and disadvantageously affected the country's image as Pakistan has an Islamic identity'.²⁵ The HEC withdrew the letter on 22 June after it triggered criticism across the country.²⁶

Christians in Sargodha. An HRCP fact-finding mission reported escalation of threats of mob violence against the Christian community in the Sargodha district in July, leading to the community's socioeconomic ostracization, displacement of some residents, and a general sense of insecurity and fear.

The team found a series of FIRs were filed against the local Christians: the first two FIRs were lodged on 1 July and 8 July 2023 for allegedly posting blasphemous content online on two separate occasions.²⁷

This was followed by the Maryam Town incident on 16 July, in which allegedly blasphemous wall chalking by members of the Christian community triggered angry mobs and created fears of mob violence.

Two more FIRs regarding the desecration of the Quran were lodged against unidentified individuals on 20 and 25 August 2023 in Sargodha. The entire community was being held liable for alleged crimes committed by certain individuals and receiving threats of mob ‘justice’.

Cases of offenses against religion registered. A Centre for Social Justice report found that 179 blasphemy cases were registered in Punjab during 2023.²⁸

In terms of other violations of freedom of religion or belief, the report found that 29 Ahmadi communities and 113 Christian communities were attacked in the province, as well as six Ahmadis, 91 Christian homes, 23 Ahmadi sites of worship and 22 churches.

Twenty-eight alleged forced conversions also reportedly took place in 2023. Nineteen children were also among those arrested in Punjab on charges of blasphemy between January and mid-October, according to Sahil’s *Cruel Numbers* report.²⁹ Six of these 19 children were imprisoned while the others were acquitted.³⁰

People in jail on blasphemy charges. Punjab leads in terms of the number of cases of blasphemy recorded across Pakistan by various institutions.³¹ Table 3 provides data as of December 2023.

Of 552 prisoners jailed for blasphemy offences, 485 were under trial, 44 had been convicted and 23 were either ‘unconfirmed’ as condemned or on death row.

Prior to December, according to the ‘crime-wise’ population data for Punjab’s prisons, uploaded by the authorities, the total number of prisoners on blasphemy charges was 431 in August 2023.³² This illustrates an increase of 121 (or 28 percent) in the space of one quarter.

Table 3: Number of prisoners jailed for blasphemy offences in Punjab in 2023 under PPC Sections 295 A–C

<i>Male (adult)</i>	<i>Male (juvenile)</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
534	5	13	552
<i>Under trial (male)</i>	<i>Under trial (juvenile)</i>	<i>Under trial (female)</i>	
470	5	10	485
<i>Convicted (male)</i>	<i>Convicted (female)</i>		
43	1		44
<i>‘Unconfirmed’ condemned (male)</i>	<i>‘Unconfirmed’ condemned (female)</i>	<i>On death row (male)</i>	
17	2	4	23

Source: Punjab government, Prisons Department.

Religious minorities' representation. Earlier, in January, the Centre for Social Justice filed a petition in the LHC where it argued that the census in Pakistan recognizes Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, Scheduled Castes, Buddhists, Parsis, and Sikhs, while overlooking Bahais, Jews, Kalasha, atheists, Jains and other minority groups.³³

Although on 18 January, the court issued a notice to the respondents, setting a response deadline for 9 February, the case was delisted and has not been scheduled for a hearing since then.

First Hindu female assistant commissioner. In a positive development, 27-year-old Sana Ramchand Gulwani, a woman from the Hindu community, assumed the role of assistant commissioner in Hassan Abdal in February. This marks the first instance of a female member from the Hindu community being appointed to such a position.³⁴

Freedom of expression

Sedition laws. In March, the LHC struck down Section 124-A of the PPC, which is about the offence of sedition, for being repugnant to the protection of fundamental rights.³⁵

HRCF welcomed the decision, asserting that the provision is a remnant of an abusive colonial system which criminalized criticism of the federal and provincial governments as inciting disaffection or sedition.

Apparently the LHC decision was not considered valid in other provinces as PTI leader Ali Amin Gandapur was arrested under this law in Dera Ismail Khan in April.

The case of 124-A apart, there are many other speech-related offenses still existing on the statute books which the state uses against citizens in Punjab as well as other provinces, like the Anti-Terrorism Act, the National Security Act, Maintenance of Public Order and the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act.

Forcibly disappeared. In May, former TV news presenter and YouTuber Imran Riaz Khan was arrested from Sialkot airport.³⁶ Neither the police nor intelligence agencies took responsibility for his disappearance.

Ultimately, Khan's family approached the LHC to seek help in finding him. The court issued a warning to the police on 20 September to present the missing journalist on 26 September. Khan returned home on 25 September after remaining missing for four months.

Azhar Mashwani, PTI's focal person for digital media in Punjab, also went missing from outside his house on 23 March, reportedly for criticizing the Punjab police and the provincial government. He returned home after disappearing for a week.

Freedom of assembly

Overuse of bans on public assemblies. The caretaker provincial government in Punjab showed no restraint in imposing Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure all through the year, which grants officials the power to ban activities that may be considered against the public interest. The frequent exercise of this power displayed the ill will of the authorities to restrict political activities rather than to ensure peace and security for its people.

On 21 February, the Punjab government imposed Section 144 on the Mall, Gulberg Main Boulevard, and outside the Punjab Civil Secretariat in Lahore to prohibit all assemblies, sit-ins, and processions ahead of the PTI's Jail Bharo Tehreek ['court arrest' movement]. This prohibition was lifted on 10 March.³⁷ Again, on 9 May, Section 144 was notified across Punjab for two days, following public outrage and mob violence sparked by Imran Khan's arrest in Islamabad.³⁸ It was later extended by four days in the province. The section was notified again for the first 10 days of Muharram (between 20 and 29 July), and to control poor air quality levels in November.

Arbitrary detentions and arrests. The unrest post-Imran Khan's arrest led to the detention of numerous PTI workers in the province on charges of damaging state buildings and military installations.³⁹ Videos circulating on social media showed the arrest of PTI male and female workers in Lahore and Multan by the police.



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Closely afterwards, the government announced its decision to try civilians under the Pakistan Army Act 1952, a move that HRCP and various rights organizations took strong exception to.

In its statement on 31 May, HRCP asserted that such a decision would undermine civilian supremacy: 'while those responsible for the destruction of public and private property must undoubtedly be held accountable, there is ample provision in civilian laws for this'.⁴⁰

Subsequently, all the civilians arrested remained in military custody under MPO laws, and families were not allowed to meet them unless the courts intervened. Subsequent crackdowns on PTI workers and leaders in Punjab, in the form of mass arrests and raids, further restricted the party's right to freedom of peaceful assembly. [See *Law and order*].

Political workers from other parties also faced curbs on their right to freedom of assembly. For instance, Ahsan Bhatti, a worker of the Haqooq-i-Khalq Party that actively protested against spiralling inflation, was arrested by the police in March for three days without formal charges.⁴¹

Denial of permission to hold rallies. In the lead-up to the Aurat March on International Women's Day (8 March), the deputy commissioner for Lahore refused to grant permission to the assembly organizers, citing concerns about potential clashes with the simultaneously organized 'Haya March' by the Jamaat-i-Islami women's wing.

In response, the Aurat March organizers filed a petition in the LHC, challenging the deputy commissioner's decision. However, just two days before the march, the Punjab caretaker government's information minister announced that the government would provide security to Aurat March participants on 8 March.⁴²

Permission for the Aurat March was denied in Multan as well, but then a no objection certificate was eventually granted on 7 March, just a day before the event.

Protests by government employees. Government employees were seen on the streets of Punjab often in 2023, demonstrating against price hikes or changes in pension rules. Teachers, along with clerks, demanded the provincial government to not make changes to their leave encashment, gratuity and pension of public servants rules in Sahiwal in September.⁴³

In Lahore, the police arrested more than 230 protesters of the All Government Employees Grand Alliance Punjab, many of them teachers, who were holding a sit-in outside the Civil Secretariat against the proposed privatization of public schools, amendments to pension regulations and end of leave encashment in October.⁴⁴

Freedom of movement

Post-9 May, hundreds of PTI supporters in Punjab faced travel restrictions as they were placed on the exit control list. On 24 May, the Lahore police requested the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to include 746 PTI leaders and activists on the Provisional National Identification List, temporarily barring them from international travel.⁴⁵

These individuals were reportedly wanted in 14 cases registered by the Lahore police under anti-terrorism and other charges. By 27 May, an additional 164 PTI leaders and activists were added to the no-fly list.⁴⁶

In a parallel development in Rawalpindi on 25 May, the Rawalpindi district police forwarded names of 245 PTI workers and 74 others to the FIA for inclusion in the no-fly list.⁴⁷



DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Political participation

Following the approval of results of the digital census 2023, the ECP decided to postpone general elections beyond the stipulated limit of 90 days in order to conduct a fresh delimitation of electoral constituencies. The new population figures did not change the provincial shares in national legislature, but differences in population growth rates within each province necessitated reallocation of national and provincial seats among the districts of each province.

The ECP published the final delimitation list of constituencies for national and provincial assemblies on 1 December. The stakeholders challenged the ECP notification on the delimitation. In all, 1,327 representations were filed for the national and provincial assembly constituencies – with a majority of them (675) coming from Punjab. The ECP decided all these cases speedily in 30 days. A number of parties approached higher courts challenging the ECP decisions, but the Supreme Court told the complainants that taking up these cases would only cause further delay in holding elections.

In the middle of this confusion about the elections date in Punjab, the rush to file nomination papers for seats in the Punjab assembly with returning officers continued for most part of the year. Once the 8 February general elections date was set, the ECP announced the elections schedule on 15 December. Thereafter, the commission started the process to file nomination papers for national as well as provincial assemblies' seats. Initially, it announced 20 December as the deadline for the filing of nomination papers with the returning officers, which was later extended to 24 December. A rigorous scrutiny of nomination papers then ensued between 24 and 30 December.

Local governments

The year commenced with the expectation of local government elections slated for April 2023, following the conclusion of the previous local government's term on 1 January 2022. However, amid the political crisis, the local government elections remained a pipedream. The LHC set aside the appointment of local government administrators in Punjab, all new development projects initiated by them and the allocation of funds to the members of the national and provincial assemblies on 3 January.⁴⁸ In the 20-page judgment, the court observed that in an interim setup, till a newly-elected local government is constituted, the continuity of public services shall not include exercise of powers conferred upon the elected representatives particularly for identification, fixing of priority and expenditure of development funds.

To facilitate the local government elections in Punjab, the ECP issued a registration schedule on 28 May for electoral groups and panels. The ECP directed independent aspirants to organize themselves into electoral groups and panels, emphasizing that no independent candidate would be permitted to participate in the local government elections.⁴⁹

Shrinking spaces and role of assemblies

On 12 January, then Chief Minister Parvez Elahi recommended to Baligh Ur Rehman, the then governor of the province, the dissolution of the provincial assembly under Article 112(1) of the Constitution,⁵⁰ thus shortening the provincial assembly's term to only four years and five months instead of the constitutionally mandated five years (see timeline below). The province also got caught in a prolonged tussle involving the ECP, President Arif Alvi, and both the LHC and Supreme Court over the date of the next election.

Timeline of developments regarding the Punjab Assembly elections

- 27 Jan: The PTI approached the LHC, seeking orders for the Punjab governor to immediately announce a date for early election in Punjab.
- 10 Feb: The LHC ruled that the ECP was bound to carry out elections within 90 days of the assembly's dissolution and it should issue the election schedule at the earliest.⁵¹
- 18 Feb: The LHC order was challenged by the ECP, holding that the interpretation of the court while 'applying the doctrine of penumbra to read the constitutional provisions is violation of the clear provisions of the Constitution'.⁵² This meant that the deadline of holding elections would be 14 April in Punjab. But the Punjab Governor, instead of announcing the election date, advised the ECP to consult stakeholders to assess if the security and economic situations in the country were conducive for elections.⁵³
- 20 Feb: After the chief election commissioner declined having a role in setting the election dates, President Alvi unilaterally announced 9 April as the date for holding general elections for the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assemblies.⁵⁴ The Supreme Court took a suo moto notice of the president's announcement to determine which government institution had the constitutional responsibility to decide the poll schedule.
- 1 Mar: The Supreme Court in a split 3-2 verdict ordered that since the Punjab governor had not signed the order declaring the dissolution of the assembly, the president had the constitutional responsibility to announce the election date in the province.⁵⁵
- 3 Mar: The ECP wrote a letter to the president proposing dates between 30 April and 7 May for the elections. The same day,

bypassing the ECP's proposal, the president announced the next elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa would be held on 30 April.

- 14 Mar: The armed forces stated that they would not be available to provide security during the general elections of the Punjab assembly, claiming that the troops were preoccupied with maintaining security at the borders.⁵⁶
- 22 Mar: The ECP further extended the date of the elections from 30 April to 8 October.⁵⁷
- 4 Apr: The PTI filed an appeal in the Supreme Court, which ordered the government to hold polls in Punjab on 14 May, and that the ECP had exceeded its jurisdiction by delaying the Punjab election date. The Supreme Court then fixed 14 May as the new elections date and also directed the government to release PKR 21 billion for the elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and provide a security plan to the ECP regarding the polls. In subsequent reports submitted to the court, the ECP said that the government was reluctant in releasing the funds for its lack of feasibility in holding the exercise on one day.⁵⁸
- 10 Apr: Resolutions calling for general elections across the country to be held on the same day were rushed through the joint sessions of parliament, the Senate and the Sindh and Balochistan assemblies. These resolutions hence rejected the Supreme Court verdict ordering polls in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to be conducted within the constitutional provision of 90 days.⁵⁹
- 8 May: The LHC dismissed a plea seeking the restoration of the Punjab assembly as non-maintainable.
- 9 Aug: President Arif Alvi dissolved the federal parliament on the advice of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif—three days ahead of the parliament's five-year term, which expired on 12 August.
- 17 Aug: The ECP announced the schedule of the delimitation process to be carried out as per the new census approved by the CCI on 5 August. The ECP schedule showed that this exercise would take nearly four months, rendering it impossible for general elections to be held within 90 days of the dissolution of the provincial and national assemblies. This also violated its previous stated position that general polls would be held on the basis of the delimitation results published on 5 August 2022. Concerns also remained on the synchronization of electoral rolls with the new increased census blocks after delimitation.
- 3 Nov: The ECP, in pursuant of the order passed by the Supreme Court on 2 November, issued a notification that elections for the National Assembly and the provincial assemblies would be held on 8 February.⁶⁰



RIGHTS OF THE DISADVANTAGED

Women

Violence against women was rampant, with women finding themselves unsafe in their homes, public spaces and workplaces. On 13 February 2023, bodies of a woman and her eight-year-old daughter were found in Faisalabad, allegedly in a case of ‘honour’ killing. On 2 October in Bahawalnagar, the police booked four men on charges of abduction, rape and the murder of a married woman.

Gender-based violence. Based on data collected by the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women, the number of incidents of gender-based violence reported through its helpline 1043 reportedly increased in 2023 (see Table 4).

Table 4: Gender-based violence reported by Punjab women’s helpline in 2023

Period	Family issues	Criminal offences	Property matters incl. inherited property	Harassment	Violence and torture, incl. domestic violence	Other general matters	Total calls
1 Jan–30 Nov 2023	1,324	713	1,289	5,230	5,655	8,257	24,909

Source: Punjab Commission on the Status of Women.

According to HRCP’s media monitoring, there were 166 ‘honour’ crimes in Punjab during 2023, with 100 female victims. The Digital Rights Foundation also reported receiving 1,724 complaints on their helpline during the year related to gender-based violence and cyber-harassment, mostly from women.

Protective and redressal mechanisms. The caretaker chief minister launched a safety app called Meri Awaz for women on 9 March to provide speedy assistance to women subjected to harassment.⁶¹ After establishing the Women and Juvenile Facilitation Centre (WJFC) in Gujrat in 2019, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, in collaboration with the Punjab Police and with financial support from the government of Norway, inaugurated another facilitation centre in Gujranwala in January 2023. The WJFC is designed to assist women and juvenile victims of violence in reporting, recording, and investigating crimes.⁶²

Historical wins for gender representation. On 26 February, the Lahore High Court Bar Association made history by electing Sabahat Rizvi as

secretary, a first in the association's history since its establishment in 1893. Rizvi garnered 4,310 votes in the 2023/24 bar elections, surpassing her two male rivals to secure the position of secretary of the bar. Rabbiya Bajwa also achieved victory by being elected as vice-president of the bar. She secured 3,590 votes, prevailing over five male rivals in the election.⁶³

Transgender persons

The police booked a transgender person on charges of leading prayers as imam for more than 18 months by hiding his gender in a village near Rawat. The case was registered under Section 419 of the PPC and the Punjab Vagrancy Ordinance 1958/59 against the accused in March.⁶⁴

Rollbacks on trans rights legislation. The Federal Shariat Court ruled in May that Sections 2(f), 3 and 7 of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018—that relate to gender identity, the right to self-perceived gender identity and the right of inheritance for transgender persons—do not conform with their interpretation of Islamic principles. The court deemed the sections to be 'un-Islamic'.

At a press conference held in Lahore on 13 July, community members stated that the court's decision was an unconscionable move against a marginalized community.⁶⁵

It must also be noted that the Punjab Protection of Rights of Transgender Act 2022, which would extend the federal legislative framework governing the community's rights to the province, has yet to be passed. In its absence, provincial institutions and law enforcement remain disempowered from rectifying and redressing trans rights violations.

Transport licenses for trans persons. In a welcome development, transgender person Shahana Abbas Shani, a resident of Muzaffargarh, was issued a heavy transport vehicle license in September.⁶⁶ The next month in November, transgender persons were issued motorcycle and car licenses in Attock and motorcycle rickshaw licenses in Rajanpur to provide them easy access to workplaces.

Children

Unrealistic goals for school enrolment. The year began with a ray of hope as the Punjab government set a goal of enrolling around 10 million children during the 2023 academic year. However, the Punjab Teachers Union considered the announcement unrealistic, pointing to deficiencies in classrooms, science laboratories, computers, drinking water, electricity supply and teachers.⁶⁷

Their fears proved real as two months later, on 18 March 2023, a senior official of the Punjab School Education Department told The Express

Tribune that, based on a survey conducted in 36 districts of the province, only 500,000 children would be enrolled this year 'due to the limited capacity at their disposal'.⁶⁸

Push for children's rights. In response to a petition advocating for the safeguarding of children's fundamental rights, including the right to life (Article 9), elimination of exploitation (Article 3), dignity (Article 14), equal protection of the law (Article 25), and education (Article 25-A), the LHC in February issued a directive to the Ministry of National Health Services Regulations and Coordination to provide an account of the measures taken to uphold children's rights in the country.⁶⁹

The Punjab police signed a memorandum of understanding with the Social Welfare Department, the Child Protection Bureau, Search for Justice and Care Foundation whereby homeless children would be taken to child protection bodies and schools. The programme targets those children who are threatened by sexual and drug abuse and violence.⁷⁰ At a conference in February on child domestic labour in Punjab, organized by an NGO called Search for Justice, the National Commission for Human Rights, Punjab Child Protection and Welfare Bureau and other participants highlighted that the Punjab Domestic Workers Act, enacted in 2019, was unable to prevent child domestic labour, and that not even a single case had been registered against employers of children under the age of 15 as domestic workers in contravention of Section 3 of the law. Cases were filed against culprits only if there was evidence of violence against underage domestic help.⁷¹

Torture of child domestic workers. A case was filed in January against three suspects, among them two police officers, for torturing a 13-year-old girl in Lahore. The victim suffered 40 percent burn injuries.⁷² A 13-year-old female domestic help faced torture and illegal detention by a female doctor. She was rescued from the residential quarters of the Mayo Hospital in Lahore.⁷³

Two minor sisters employed as maids in a house in Faisalabad were recovered by a joint team of Child Protection and Welfare Bureau and police in a raid in May 2023.⁷⁴ In June, the LHC ordered the elimination of forced child labour. The court also directed the Child Protection and Welfare Bureau to take appropriate measures against those who violate the law.⁷⁵

Daycare centres in jails. In January, the Punjab Inspector General of Prisons directed jail officials to provide daycare centres for children living with their imprisoned mothers in jails across Punjab. The facility would also be available for the children of women officials posted in female wards.⁷⁶

Child sexual abuse. A report compiled by the Punjab home department made harrowing revelations about incidents of sexual violence against

children in Punjab. According to the study, of the total number of perpetrators facing trial for abuse, 55 percent were neighbours of the victims, while 32 percent were strangers. During the first five and a half months of 2023, some 1,400 children were reportedly abused in Punjab, 69 percent of them boys.

The report admits that many cases may be unreported as ‘cultural taboos make it difficult to report the crime’. Gujranwala topped the list with 220 cases, followed by Dera Ghazi Khan and Faisalabad. Sahil’s *Cruel Numbers* report also indicates that 75 percent of the 4,213 total reported cases of child sexual abuse during the year 2023 came from Punjab. Moreover, 83 percent of the 1,938 total reported child abduction cases came from 10 districts in Punjab, with Faisalabad topping the list at 426 cases followed by Rawalpindi at 356 cases.

Labour

Deaths of sanitation workers. While cleaning a drain in Alipur in January, one sanitation worker tragically lost his life due to poisonous gases, while two others fell unconscious as they were not appropriately equipped with safety kits. Such incidents were not uncommon in 2023, with the same happening to at least three sanitation workers in October in Rahim Yar Khan as they fell while cleaning the sewage line.⁷⁷

Delay in paying wages. Workers suffered delays in disbursement of salaries throughout the year. In January, more than 1,100 employees of the Pakistan Central Cotton Committee demanded the release of their salaries pending for the last seven months.⁷⁸

Railways workers protested at the Pakistan Railways’ Locomotive Shed the same month for not receiving their salaries on time for the past eight months.⁷⁹ Hundreds of daily-wage workers of the health department staged a protest in Rawalpindi in March against the non-payment of their salaries for four months.⁸⁰

Growing demand for increased wages. As inflation fluctuated between 25 and 45 percent in 2023, workers frequently demanded that the government raise salaries to match the increase in prices. The All Pakistan WAPDA Hydro Electric Workers Union took to the street with their demand in March.⁸¹

Hundreds of workers from the local stone-crushing industry demonstrated outside the deputy commissioner’s office in Sargodha again in March, demanding an increase in wages.⁸² Brick kiln workers demanded the same in Kamalia that month.⁸³ In March, the Punjab caretaker government issued a notification setting the minimum wage at PKR 32,000 per month, marking an increase of PKR 7,000 to offset the impact of inflation.⁸⁴

At a rally held in front of the Lahore Electric Supply Company headquarters under the aegis of the All Pakistan WAPDA Hydro Electric Workers Union on 26 January, workers protested against the privatization of distribution companies. They also demanded the Energy Division to allow recruitment of line staff as no recruitment had been made for the last six years.⁸⁵



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Women agricultural workers. A study titled *Gender Roles Related to Work Burden and Child Labour in Agriculture in Punjab*, conducted by the Punjab Economic Research Institute with support from the Food and Agriculture Organization, found that the Punjab government had not formally recognized the role of women in agriculture.⁸⁶

In the surveyed communities of districts Multan, Bahawalpur and Vehari of Punjab, 69.1 percent of women reported their primary occupation to be household work and 24.3 percent reported agricultural labour as their second occupation.⁸⁷ The survey recommended that agricultural policies, advisory services, training activities, and education strategies should acknowledge the central role of women in small-scale agriculture to promote inclusivity.

Land rights to indigenous residents. The Bahawalpur bench of the LHC granted permission to allot 344,000 acres of land in Cholistan to local peasants in July. The Punjab caretaker government abided by the LHC order and awarded 12.5 acres of land each to about 27,000 landless peasants on a five-year term through a ballot on 7 December.⁸⁸ This process had been delayed since 2014.⁸⁹

Occupational safety. HRCP's report, titled *Fighting to breathe: Occupational safety and health in Punjab's stone-crushing industry*, gauged the incidence of silicosis among labourers in stone-crushing factories in Dera Ghazi Khan, Gujranwala, Hafizabad and Sheikhpura.

It found that in Pakistan, despite legislation—Factories Act 1934, Hazardous Occupations Rules 1963 and subsequent provincially derived legislation following the devolution of labour to the provinces after the Eighteenth Amendment—there is no independent legislation protecting occupational safety and health of workers.⁹⁰

Refugees

The caretaker government of Punjab launched a crackdown on illegal foreign residents, mostly Afghan nationals, after the less than one month 1 November deadline for their voluntary return expired, and even before. This spread panic among the community, especially in the Rawalpindi division, where the administration initially issued directives calling for the indiscriminate arrest of Afghan nationals. Later, on 3 November, the Rawalpindi city police officer changed the strategy and directed the police to only focus on 'undocumented or unregistered' foreign nationals or those who had overstayed their visas.⁹¹

By 18 November, around 15,533 individuals were repatriated from the province.⁹² Note that the caretaker chief minister Mohsin Naqvi repeatedly asserted during this time that no undocumented alien would be allowed to stay in Punjab.⁹³

Persons living with disabilities

In its first meeting, the Council on Rights of Persons with Disabilities, formed under the Punjab Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2022 but operationalized almost a year later, approved in September the submission of a proposal to the Punjab chief minister for the formation of special courts to facilitate persons with disabilities. In the same meeting, the council approved setting up district welfare and rehabilitation units, disability assessment boards, and protocols for a Disabled Persons Management Information System.⁹⁴ However, disability rights activists called for more transparency in the workings of the council to ensure that the act does not become another law rendered useless due to lack of sufficient implementation.⁹⁵

In another welcome development, the caretaker chief minister Mohsin Naqvi launched the digital ecosystem Enabled Online Portal, developed by the Punjab Information Technology Board, on 4 December to mark International Day of Persons with Disabilities. This initiative aims to provide specialized assistance to persons with disabilities under the supervision of the Social Welfare Department Directorate.⁹⁶



Education

School closures. The Punjab Higher Education Department (HED) announced closure of all educational institutes—schools, colleges and universities—on 11 and 12 May due to the PTI’s countrywide protests over the arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan in the Al-Qadir Trust case. The HED also postponed all annual secondary school examinations to be held on these dates.⁹⁷ Apart from this, up to 74 public schools had to be closed because of high flooding at River Sutlej in the Pakpattan district.⁹⁸

Hundreds of government schools across the province lagged behind their enrolment targets. The Lahore District Education Authority served show-cause notices to the headmasters of 30 high schools for failing to meet admission targets for the academic year 2022/23.⁹⁹

Compulsory religious studies. On 1 January, the Punjab School Education Department issued a notification that the teaching of the Holy Quran, already introduced as a compulsory subject in all public and private schools up to the primary level, would become a compulsory subject up to the higher secondary level.¹⁰⁰

Delay in appointing vice-chancellors. Dispute and litigation over the Punjab caretaker government’s powers resulted in inordinate delays in the appointment of vice-chancellors in 25 public sector universities. Pro-vice-chancellors or vice-chancellors ran the universities on additional or acting basis instead.¹⁰¹

Health

Disease outbreaks. In June, health officials in Bahawalpur reported the deaths of three children due to measles. The outbreak of the disease was also reported in the Rawalpindi district where as many as 256 children contracted the disease between January and April. In September, some 562 patients reportedly suffering from dengue were admitted in various hospitals of Rawalpindi.¹⁰²

Under-resourced public health system. *Dawn* reported the Bahawal Victoria Hospital in Bahawalpur faced a shortage of over 300 paramedical staff members, including 165 nurses, because according to the medical superintendent, the ECP had imposed a ban on fresh recruitment under the caretaker setup.¹⁰³ In a case of gross negligence on the part of the Primary and Secondary Healthcare Department, all the 64 sanctioned posts of anaesthesia specialists at the 37 tehsil headquarter hospitals in 20 districts of Punjab were lying vacant for many years.¹⁰⁴ These healthcare facilities, working without anaesthesia specialists, also included six trauma centres.

Illegal organ trade. The police and the Punjab Human Organ Transplant Authority in March conducted a surprise raid at a private hospital in Morgah, Rawalpindi, arresting 10 people, including three doctors, and recovered PKR 20 million. In another incident in February, the police unearthed a gang involved in organ trade in Rawalpindi.¹⁰⁵

Organ transplant laws in Pakistan require urgent legislative amendments to allow for stricter punishment of accused individuals to curb this crime, particularly to make the state the plaintiff in such cases or allow for punishment of up to 14 years of imprisonment.¹⁰⁶

Housing

The development authorities tried to check the mushrooming illegal housing societies across the province in 2023. The police raided the office of a housing society in Gujranwala owned by Farhat Shahzadi, a close friend of PTI chief Imran Khan's spouse Bushra Bibi, and her husband Ahsan Jameel Gujjar and detained at least 15 society staffers.¹⁰⁷

In Rawalpindi, several booking offices of illegal housing societies were demolished. Still, more than 318 schemes were operating in the Rawalpindi district without the approval of the Rawalpindi Development Authority, causing a strain on civic amenities and threatening the environment.¹⁰⁸

Environment

Despite numerous climate awareness campaigns, walks, and cycle rides, as well as efforts to crackdown on smoke-emitting vehicles, brick kilns, factories, and the arrest of farmers burning farming residue, the environmental departments struggled to effectively control the dangerously high air quality index (AQI) in Lahore and its surrounding areas.

Measures to counter poor air quality. In a proactive measure to combat pollution in the city, the Environmental Protection Agency reconstituted special anti-smog squads on 1 March.¹⁰⁹ These squads were to utilize GPS map cameras to procure and collect evidence in the form of videos and pictures and were required to submit daily progress reports to the authorities and highlight any issues they encounter.

In June, the district administration imposed Section 144 in the Lahore division mainly to discourage farmers from burning stubble.¹¹⁰ The simultaneous construction of various mega infrastructure development projects not only contributed to increased pollution but also disrupted public mobility in Lahore.¹¹¹ To further address the smog issue, starting from 18 October, the Lahore divisional administration announced the decision to close down all commercial markets of the provincial capital

and its adjoining districts on every Wednesday for a period of two months.¹¹² A few days later, on 2 November, the LHC ordered the caretaker government of Punjab to impose a smog emergency in the provincial metropolis due to constantly hazardous air quality levels.¹¹³

On 17 November, a smart lockdown was implemented in 10 districts of Punjab, including Lahore, Nankana Sahib, Sheikhpura, Kasur, Gujranwala, Gujarat, Sialkot, Narowal, Hafizabad, and Mandi Bahauddin, with the primary objective of controlling smog. As part of this decision, all public and private educational institutions in the specified districts were ordered to remain closed on 18 November as well.¹¹⁴

These efforts appeared to be symbolic as, on 27 December, Lahore's ranking on the AQI reached a hazardous level of 512, posing serious health risks to its residents.¹¹⁵

People complained of dry cough, sore throat, itchy eyes and difficulty in breathing.¹¹⁶ On 27 December, the city's AQI then reached a hazardous level of 512, topping the charts as the world's most polluted city.¹¹⁷

In a novel attempt, the Punjab government used artificial rain to lower pollution levels in Lahore on 16 December.¹¹⁸ The practice, also called cloud seeding, created rain in 10 locations around the city using a small Cessna plane. It created a few millimetres of rain, dropping the city's AQI of more than 300 to 189. But the benefits lasted only a couple of days before pollution returned to its previous level.

Climate experts warned that the effects of cloud seeding could be unpredictable. While talking to the Guardian, Dr Ghulam Rasul, a climate expert, said that while cloud seeding may provide temporary relief from smog, it was not a sustainable solution and could create very dry conditions, possibly causing fog and smog to become even more persistent.

Sutlej river floods. In August, the Sutlej River experienced a significant rise in water levels, leading to the evacuation of hundreds of families from various villages in Kasur, Okara, Pakpattan, Vehari, Lodhran, Multan, Bahawalnagar, and Bahawalpur, displacing almost 100,000 individuals.¹¹⁹

The surge in floodwaters not only disrupted human lives and displaced livestock, but also caused damage to standing rice crops in the affected areas.¹²⁰

Despite receiving flood warnings, the aid efforts were reported to be inefficient. A resident and retired air force officer Saeed Akhtar told *The Third Pole* that though the PDMA officials would come and tell them to leave their houses, they did not know where they were supposed to go.¹²¹

Cultural rights

Theatre raids. In September, the police conducted raids on theatres in Lahore, issuing notices to over a dozen female actors for allegedly promoting ‘vulgarity’ and performing ‘racy’ dances. The commissioner of Lahore declared, ‘We will not allow vulgar dialogues and *mujras* in theatres; it is against our religion and culture’.

As a result, about 14 commercial theatres in the Lahore division were sealed for purportedly promoting inappropriate content. Theatre owners contested the action in the LHC, and on 8 September, the court ordered the theatres to be de-sealed and directed the government to ensure that owners have sufficient time to file a reply before any further action is taken.¹²²

Film censorship. Pandering to the right-wing religious lobby, the Punjab film censor board delayed the release of the film *Barbie* in July over what it termed ‘objectionable content’.¹²³ Later, after widespread criticism and outrage, an edited version of the film was allowed to be screened in August.¹²⁴

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SINDH





HIGHLIGHTS

- During the 9 May riots, at least two public buses were torched in Karachi, two security check-posts were burned down and a number of public and private properties damaged. Over 25 PTI leaders including Ali Zaidi, Firdous Shamim Naqvi, Adeel Ahmed, and former Sindh governor Imran Ismail were arrested.
- The Sindh Assembly unanimously approved an amendment to the Sindh Local Government Act 2013 that paved the way for any unelected person to become mayor/deputy mayor and chairperson/vice-chairperson of a district municipal corporation or district council for at least six months if elected with the majority of votes in a city/district council.
- At least four innocent people were killed and nine others—including four Rangers personnel—wounded in a security operation carried out by law enforcement agencies in a village near Sakrand.
- Street crime in Karachi reportedly increased by about 11 percent over the previous year.
- Civil society was visibly divided on the deportation of Afghan migrants and refugees. A large faction of civil society endorsed the government's repatriation policy, while one group of urban rights activists opposed the action on humanitarian grounds.
- Amid rising cases of kidnapping, the caretaker Sindh cabinet decided to launch a large-scale operation against dacoits in the Katcha (riverine) area with the help of the army, police and Rangers.
- Enforced disappearances of political workers, nationalists, lawyers and journalists continued. According to the Sindh Human Rights Defenders Network, a total of 175 cases were reported from different districts of Sindh during the year.
- The Sindh cabinet approved reserved seats for transgender individuals in local councils.
- Sindh fixed the minimum wage at PKR 32,000 for unskilled workers.
- Following the federal government's policy of deporting 'illegal' foreigners, the provincial caretaker government also deported Afghans who did not possess identity documents.

- The Sindh police continued to use force against protesters through the year.
- Karachi was named the most polluted city in the world in terms of air quality for two successive days in September.



OVERVIEW

The law-and-order situation remained a major cause for concern in Sindh, with a rise in cases of kidnapping for ransom in the Katcha area (along Punjab) in the districts of Ghotki, Shikarpur and Kashmore. Dacoits continued to operate unhindered despite various police operations.

While some dacoits were arrested or killed, the police also lost personnel in such encounters. Law and order in major cities such as Karachi also remained worryingly poor, as street crime continued unabated. Official figures indicated an increase of about 11 percent in street crime in Karachi.

Despite a substantial delay, the local bodies system was restored in Sindh as all local body elections were held and mayors and chairmen elected in all districts. In a noteworthy amendment to the local government law, the Sindh assembly reserved seats for transgender persons for the first time.

Overall, the human rights situation remained compromised in Sindh as cases of enforced disappearance of human rights defenders, journalists and political workers were reported from many districts. The bodies of a number of missing persons were reportedly found in some areas of the province.

Although the Ahmadi population in Sindh is smaller than that in Punjab, multiple attacks and the destruction of Ahmadiyya worship sites were reported in Karachi. Several attacks on Hindu religious places were also reported.

Amid the inadequate public transport systems in both urban and rural areas, the Sindh government launched a robust People's Bus Service in Karachi with a separate 'pink' bus service for women only. There are 57 such buses for women, plying major routes in Sindh.

The Sindh health department claimed to have controlled the spread of polio, compared to other provinces, but at least two polio cases were reported in Karachi.



RULE OF LAW

Laws and law-making

Assembly resolutions. In March, the Sindh Assembly adopted a resolution to consider the recommendations of opposition lawmakers in the upcoming budget for the financial year 2023/24.¹

In May, the Sindh Assembly unanimously approved an amendment to the Sindh Local Government Act 2013 that paved the way for any unelected person to become mayor/deputy mayor and chairman/vice-chairman of a district municipal corporation or district council for at least six months if elected with the majority of votes in a city/district council.² This amendment enabled the PPP to field Murtaza Wahab as Karachi's mayor.

After the 9 May riots that followed the arrest of PTI chairman Imran Khan, in which PTI-led mobs damaged and destroyed public property in several cities, the Sindh Assembly unanimously passed a resolution condemning the violence.³ July saw a volley of legislation proposed and passed in haste, that being the last session—a fact criticized by the opposition leader.

Bills passed. In July, the assembly passed a bill for the e-tagging of habitual criminals to monitor their movement. The Sindh Habitual Offenders Monitoring Bill 2022 allows authorities to attach an electronic device in the form of an anklet or bracelet to the body of criminals or suspected criminals at large or out on bail/parole.⁴

In July again, the Sindh Assembly made several important amendments to the Sindh Local Government Act, giving more powers to mayors and chairmen of municipal corporations.⁵

The same month, the provincial Sindh cabinet approved a bill aimed at fortifying the medico-legal system on modern scientific principles.⁶ Passed in July, the Sindh Immunization and Epidemic Control Act 2023 was designed to tackle comprehensive immunisation and vaccination strategies in the province.⁷

At the end of July, the Sindh Assembly passed the Sindh Faculty of Paramedical and Allied Health Sciences Bill, the University of Mirpurkhas Bill, the Sindh Higher Education Amendment Bill, the Sindh Land Revenue Amendment Bill, and the Sindh Medico-Legal Bill.⁸ It was also brought to people's notice around then that only one private member's bill had been passed by the present house of the Sindh Assembly during its five-year tenure.

The provincial assembly passed the Sindh Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Bill, enabling the government to fix maximum and minimum fares for buses plying dedicated routes and exempting children under three or not exceeding five years from these fares.⁹



The provincial assembly passed the Sindh Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Bill.

Administration of justice

According to the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan, the Sindh High Court had 83,941 cases pending as of end-December, while the district courts in the province had 131,923 cases pending.



ENFORCEMENT OF LAW

Law and order

High levels of crime. Despite tall claims by the provincial government and its police department, the overall crime rate—especially street crime—remained unchecked in the province. According to official data released by the Karachi police for the year, street crime in Karachi increased by about 11 percent in the year. More than 90,000 incidents were reported in the metropolis as compared to 2022, when over 80,000 cases were reported in Karachi.

A total of 134 citizens were murdered, hundreds injured over resisting robberies, and 411 civilians were killed in various incidents. Moreover, more than 59,305 motorcycles and 2,336 cars were stolen or snatched, and over 28,000 citizens deprived of their mobile phones.¹⁰ In the face of rising crime, HRCP documented at least 16 cases of mobs taking the law into their own hands and lynching suspected criminals. Table 1 provides crime statistics for Sindh, with the very high number of police encounters indicating a rise in such cases since 2022. At least 26 police officers were killed in attacks by militants, according to official police data.

Table 1: Crime statistics for Sindh in 2023

<i>Offense</i>	<i>Number of victims</i>
Rape	202
Gang-rape	19
‘Honour’ killings	168
Police encounters	3,296

Source: Sindh Police, in response to HRCP’s request for information

Lawlessness in Katcha areas. Sindh’s rural areas also faced significant lawlessness. The inspector general of police, Ghulam Nabi Memon, announced in May that a ‘katcha police force’ of about 5,000 personnel would be dedicated to fighting criminals in the riverine belt along the banks of the Indus in four districts, Kashmore, Shikarpur, Sukkur and Ghotki.¹¹

In September, the caretaker Sindh cabinet decided to launch a massive operation against dacoits in the Katcha area with the help of the Pakistan army, police and Rangers.¹² Earlier, in April, a joint operation by the Sindh and Punjab police had not produced satisfactory results.¹³

Extrajudicial killings. In September, at least four villagers were killed and nine others, including four Rangers personnel, wounded in an operation carried out by law enforcement agencies in a village near Sakrand to capture militants associated with the outlawed Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army.

A Rangers spokesman said in a statement that an intelligence-based operation was launched against ‘high-value targets’. On seeing the Rangers and police, ‘miscreants attacked the raiding team causing injuries to four Rangers personnel’ and killing three ‘attackers’, he claimed. However, the Sindh United Party claimed that all the villagers were innocent and that this was a one-sided operation by the Rangers.

The caretaker chief minister ordered an inquiry into the incident, which revealed it was a ‘fatal misstep’ by the Rangers. The Sindh government announced compensation for the families of the victims and the injured.¹⁴ An HRCP fact-finding mission said that security forces personnel mismanagement, miscommunication and abuse of process had led to the loss of innocent lives.¹⁵

Jails and prisoners

Overcrowding in jails remained a severe problem in the province, although having improved slightly since 2022. According to data from the provincial prisons department, Sindh has a total of 22 jails and a total prison population of 20,031 (including 197 female prisoners) as against a total capacity of 13,938. The total number of juvenile prisoners was 292, while 49 children were living with their mothers in jail. Under-trial prisoners (16,887) far outnumbered convicted prisoners (4,519). The data also indicates that 158 prisoners were on death row, almost all of them for murder.

Enforced disappearances

Data on victims. Enforced disappearances of political workers, nationalists, lawyers and journalists continued in Sindh in 2023. According to data shared by the Sindh Human Rights Defenders Network, a total of 175 cases were reported from different districts of Sindh—with 135 from Karachi—during the year.¹⁶ The Sindh High Court took serious note of the police’s failure to recover missing persons on several occasions during the year.

Official data from the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (COIED) indicates that, since its inception in 2011, of 1,787 cases received from Sindh as of end-December 2023, 777 persons had returned home,

41 were traced to internment centres and 266 to prisons, while 63 dead bodies were located over the course of 11 years. At the end of the year, the COIED still had a balance of 163 cases of enforced disappearance from the province.

Short-term enforced disappearances. In a high-profile case in June, lawyer and rights activist Jibran Nasir was abducted by a group of 15 armed men late at night; his wife suspected that law enforcement agencies were behind his disappearance. Nasir was reportedly abducted for his critical views of the state crackdown against the PTI. He was released within a day as rights organizations, lawyers' groups, members of civil society and even the then Sindh chief minister, Murad Ali Shah, expressed serious concerns over Nasir's disappearance.¹⁷

Soon after, Geo news producer Zubair Anjum was allegedly picked up by plainclothes men accompanied by the police from his home in Model Colony in the early hours of 6 June. He returned home the following day after protests by media bodies.¹⁸

Another journalist, Syed Mohammed Askari of the *Jang*, was picked up by unknown persons in Karachi on 10 July. He went missing near the Qayyumabad interchange after attending a wedding. His colleagues and media organizations alleged that he was abducted by policemen and men in plainclothes. On his return, the journalist told the media that he had been blindfolded and his abductors had asked him certain questions about his profession. He said he had been dropped off at Sohrab Goth, from where he proceeded home in North Nazimabad.¹⁹

Bodies dumped. The bodies of several missing political workers were also found in Sindh during the year. On 6 February, the body of a missing 35-year-old Sindh United Party activist, Haseeb Junejo, was found dumped near Zero Point, along the Indus River, within the jurisdiction of the Qadirpur police station.

Junejo, who was serving as the party's Sukkur division information secretary, had reportedly gone missing after leaving his home in the New Pind area a day earlier. The area police said the man had been subjected to intense torture and killed with a sharp weapon.²⁰

In another case, on 6 June, the body of an MQM-P activist, Muhammad Azhar Hussain, who went missing from his Malir home a couple of days earlier, was found, bearing torture marks. The party demanded a high-level probe into his killing. Police and rescue officials said that unknown person(s) had dropped the body off at an Edhi morgue and disappeared.²¹



FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

Blasphemy cases. At least 18 cases of blasphemy were registered in the province in 2023, according to official police data provided to HRCP. In Sindh's prisons, by November 2023, 82 were incarcerated on blasphemy charges, out of which 78 were under trial and four were convicted, according to data from the Sindh Prisons Department. Karachi had the highest number of blasphemy-accused in Sindh at 47, including two women, Hyderabad had 14 prisoners, Larkana nine, Mirpur five, and Naushero Feroze, Ghotki and Dadu had one prisoner each.²²

Attacks on worship sites. Reports of attacks on the worship places of religious minorities, especially the Hindu and Ahmadi communities, were published in the local and national media.

Reports said that at least two Ahmadiyya worship places in Karachi were vandalized within a week. The first attack was carried out in the Martin Quarters area in January, whereas the other was in February in the Saddar area. As per the first information report (FIR), some policemen were present but could not control the attackers.²³ The same worship place in Martin Quarters was attacked in September again. No action was taken against the culprits. In another incident in July, in Karachi's Korangi area, four persons damaged the minarets of an Ahmadiyya worship place on Drigh Road within the remit of the Shah Faisal Colony police station.

In Karachi, the 150-year-old Mari Mata Temple in Soldier Bazaar was demolished apparently by a builder in July. The mandir was under the management of the Madrasi Hindu community of Karachi. Since it was being said that it was a very old and dangerous structure that could collapse any day, the mandir management, after much pressure, had reluctantly but temporarily moved most of the temple's deities to a small room near a stormwater drain until they could carry out some renovation work onsite.²⁴ Karachi Mayor Murtaza Wahab said that the plot was owned by the Hindu Panchayat and they had been involved to ascertain the facts. He said that the PPP believed in religious harmony and freedom and no one would be allowed to construct or raze any structure of a place of worship of any minority community.²⁵

A gang of dacoits attacked a Hindu temple, reportedly with 'rocket launchers' in Kashmore in July,²⁶ following which the Sindh police announced the deployment of hundreds of policemen for the security of places of worship of minority communities across the province. Sindh

Assembly lawmakers belonging to the Hindu community expressed their concern over the security of their places of worship, while other lawmakers also spoke up on the issue. Unconfirmed field reports suggest that many Hindu families are seeking to migrate to India as a result of worsening law and order and faith-based attacks.

Disruptions to religious festivals. In March, the Islami Jamiat Tulaba reportedly disrupted Holi celebrations by Hindu students at Karachi University, with some Hindu students beaten up during the incident. The vice-chancellor formed a committee to investigate the incident.²⁷

Inter-faith marriages deemed controversial. The year saw some interesting developments reported widely in both the Pakistani and Indian media regarding at least two Pakistani girls from Sindh who travelled to India and married Indian men.

In January, the case of 18-year-old Iqra Jeevani from Hyderabad was highlighted in the media. She had reportedly married an Indian, Mulayum Singh Yadav. India's Bengaluru police later arrested the couple. Sohail Jeevani, the father of the girl, said that she had gone missing a few months ago. DSP Ghulam Shabbir Sarki told the media that the police and the Federal Investigation Agency had traced the girl, whose travel history indicated that she went from Karachi to Dubai and from Dubai to Kathmandu. On 19 February, the Indian authorities sent the girl back to Pakistan via the Wagah border after arresting the couple.²⁸ The girl was arrested by the Pakistani authorities on her arrival in Lahore.

Reports of a second girl from Sindh went viral as the Indian media reported that a Pakistani girl had converted after marrying a Hindu boy. The Indian police later arrested the couple but they were released after bail by a local court. Seema Haider, a married Pakistani citizen with four children, had entered India illegally through Nepal along with an Indian citizen, Sachin, in July, with whom she reportedly fell in love while playing the online game PUBG. Seema is still living in India as her case is being heard in court.²⁹

Forced conversions. In a rare incident, in March, a judicial magistrate in Karachi handed over custody of an underage Hindu girl to her parents. The girl Ramila, alias Sara, had allegedly been kidnapped in the Shershah area of Karachi by suspect Mohammad Rashid, who purportedly converted her forcibly before illegally marrying her, despite the fact that she was underage. A kidnapping case was registered at the Pak Colony police station on the complaint of the victim's father.³⁰

Around end-March, an alliance of Dalits, including hundreds of women and children from different Scheduled Caste groups, held a rally from the Karachi Press Club to the Sindh Assembly building to highlight a range of issues, including forced conversions and the suspension of the Thar Express railway service from Karachi to India. They also expressed reservations over the then-ongoing digital census, saying that poorer Scheduled Caste Hindus were not being counted properly and their concerns were not being addressed.³¹

In April, Diplo town in the Tharparkar district shut down over the alleged conversion of a Hindu woman. The protest was prompted by reports that a Hindu woman, Summan Lohana, converted to Islam to marry a man named Sajjad Mehar. The protesters said that Lohana had been lured into a love affair by Mehar and then forced to convert to Islam for marriage. They also noted that some ‘controversial religious figures of Ghotki’ were welcoming such conversions and marriages.³²



In April, Diplo town in the Tharparkar district shut down over the alleged conversion of a Hindu woman.

Hindu marriage act. The Sindh Hindu Marriage Registration Act, passed in 2016, was a significant step towards addressing the longstanding issue of marriage registration for Hindus in Pakistan. However, the implementation of this law remains a challenge, despite the framing of rules of business for its execution in 2019. The Act was intended to provide legal recognition to Hindu marriages.³³ In June, the Sindh cabinet constituted a committee to bring the Act into accordance with judicial guidelines. The cabinet pointed out that the court had given guidelines for the marriage law.³⁴

Freedom of expression

Violence against media persons. Press institutions in Sindh remained an easy target. In March, during a Geo News team's coverage of an anti-encroachment drive in Gulistan-e-Jauhar, a group of miscreants attacked the team, assaulting the reporter and his cameraman.³⁵

In July, a reporter from *Jang* was picked up by men in plainclothes and police uniform from Karachi's Baloch Colony area. Syed Mohammed Askari was returning home from a wedding when the incident took place.³⁶

On 14 August, journalist Jan Mohammad Mahar, who was working at a private Sindhi newspaper and TV channel, was shot dead in Sukkur.³⁷ While the police suspected that the incident could be a result of personal enmity, journalist bodies urged law enforcement agencies to arrest the culprit immediately.

In less than a week, the police was able to arrest at least three suspects.³⁸ On 15 August, a large rally was held in Sukkur to condemn the journalist's killing.³⁹

Riots and state crackdown on PTI workers. In May, political unrest in Pakistan reached new heights. The 9 May riots, triggered by the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, led to a crackdown on people responsible for attacking state institutions. In Karachi, a small group of PTI protesters gathered at Shahrah-e-Faisal to protest against their leader's arrest.

The situation got out of control when some people, including elderly protestors,⁴⁰ attacked a Rangers checkpoint and other important military installations. While the situation in Karachi was quickly brought under control, the protests led to mass arrests, including that of journalists.

A Ghotki journalist was arrested under the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance for 30 days for allegedly inciting people to violence.⁴¹ A PTI lawmaker, Firdous Shamim Naqvi, was also arrested by the Karachi police in two cases of 9 May violence.⁴²

Curbs on freedom of expression. In separate incidents, the year 2023 also witnessed comments made by different state institutions and ordinary people regarding the working of the media. In its verdict in the Naezebullah Mehsud case, the Special Anti-terrorism Court in January directed the media to carefully use its right to freedom of expression.⁴³ It said that the right to fair trial 'should not be eroded and infringed upon with overzealous use of the right to freedom of expression.

In February, a report by Reporters Without Borders advised the Pakistan government against criminalizing criticism of the armed forces. It argued that such steps would be an attack on journalistic freedom in the country.⁴⁴

The entertainment industry in Pakistan continued to receive objections from all quarters. The drama 'Jalan' aired on a private TV channel, ARY, was brought to the Supreme Court for 'obscene' content,⁴⁵ but the court did not give in to the petitioner's (PEMRA) demand and held that the 'fundamental rights of freedom of expression and right to information apply not only to ideas that are favourably received, but also to those which offend, shock or disturb the state or any other sector of the population.'

Freedom of assembly

Political demonstrations. Throughout 2023, different parts of Karachi hosted political rallies, where leaders demanded that the government pay attention to their grievances.

In February, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) called for a strike in Sindh against economic conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund and resultant inflation.

A partial strike was observed in several cities, including Karachi. TLP workers tried to implement the strike orders by force, with ensuing chaos in Keamari, but the situation remained under control.⁴⁶

During the 9 May riots, at least two public buses were torched on Shahrah-e-Faisal in Karachi, while several other vehicles were also set on fire. Two check-posts each of the Karachi police and Rangers were burned down and a number of public and private properties damaged.

Over 25 PTI leaders, including Ali Zaidi, Firdous Shamim Naqvi, Adeel Ahmed, and former Sindh governor Imran Ismail were arrested. The protests continued for the next two days and more PTI leaders and workers were arrested by the police. At least 300 protestors, including women, were baton-charged on Stadium Road and many dragged away and arrested.⁴⁷

Earlier, in January, the Karachi police registered cases against leaders and workers of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement on charges of abetting mutiny after a protest outside the Karachi Press Club demanding the release of parliamentarian Ali Wazir and calling on the Sindh government to stop the deportation of Afghans. The police registered an FIR under Sections 153 and 131 of the Pakistan Penal Code.⁴⁸

Women's rally. For International Women's Day, Aurat March organized large marches in Karachi, Hyderabad and Ghotki. The marches demanded equality for women, including minimum wage for women working in both industry and agriculture and as domestic help, as well as the registration of women workers in the informal sector.⁴⁹

In Karachi, the Aurat March took place on 12 March (to encourage working-class women to attend) and saw women, transgender persons, nonbinary persons and male allies gather at Burns Garden to voice their demands.

Assemblies held by workers and peasants. In March, a peasants' protest made headlines after a group of liberated peasant families protested in front of a local press club in Hyderabad to demand legal protection.

Prior to this, several peasants had gone missing and been found in the custody of a landowner who had forced them into bonded labour; some were later freed.⁵⁰ The families demanded that the remaining four prisoners be released immediately.

Political associations and trade unions faced police wrath while exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly, especially in Karachi. Workers of the Pakistan Steel Mills have been protesting against non-payment of their salaries, pensions and other allowances since Pakistan Steel closed down its operations in 2015.

In January, retired employees of Pakistan Steel, along with other trade unions, held a demonstration outside the Karachi Press Club. Their leaders told the media that they had not been getting the interest generated by their provident funds for six years; most of them were not even getting their pension under the Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institution rules.

In July, police and Rangers fired water cannons and tear-gas shells, and baton-charged government schoolteachers, including women, to prevent them from protesting outside the Chief Minister House in Karachi.

The protesting primary schoolteachers were demanding regularization of their services and provision of basic facilities at schools. Police said that 19 protesting teachers were taken into custody.⁵¹ In September, teachers at the University of Karachi protested against non-payment of salaries for many months and delays in promotions.

Crackdown on nationalists. Nationalists arranged rallies and other events to mark the birth anniversary of Sindhi nationalist leader G. M. Syed on 17 January.

A large number of students and nationalist political leaders gathered in Sann, Jamshoro, as different factions of the Jeay Sindh Movement organized rallies, gatherings and other events.

It is common for law enforcement to arrest—before and after this anniversary—nationalist workers and leaders who are expected to deliver what the establishment considers anti-state speeches. In 2023, the practice was repeated.

A gun battle was reported between police and activists of different nationalist groups in Sann when the police tried to arrest some absconding suspects and initiated a crackdown on ‘anti-state’ elements during the anniversary.

Three policemen and two activists were injured while two police mobiles were torched during the violence. Some leaders of certain nationalist groups claimed that one of their wounded colleagues succumbed to gunshot wounds.⁵²



DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Local government

In Sindh, the local government elections were held in two phases. The first phase of the elections in 14 districts was held in June 2022. Elections in the remaining districts, including two major divisions of Karachi and Hyderabad, were held on 15 January 2023, followed by mayoral elections.

Both the Jamaat-e-Islami and MQM-P held several protests and sit-ins in Karachi to protest the delayed local bodies elections and voice objections to the union council delimitations announced by the Sindh government.

A unified MQM-P boycotted the elections just two days ahead of polling day on the delimitation issue.⁵³ The government later agreed to the MQM-P's demands and notified an increase of 53 union councils in Karachi. Due to deaths and other reasons, elections for 11 union council chairpersons were postponed and later held on 7 May.

Elections for the mayors of Karachi and Hyderabad were held on 15 June, in which Murtaza Wahab was elected mayor of Karachi and Salman Abdullah Murad was elected deputy mayor.

Interestingly, both were not elected at the union council level. Thus, according to the latest amendment in the Sindh Local Government Act 2013, they had to contest and win the election at the union council level within six months. In Hyderabad, Kashif Khan Shoro was elected mayor and Sagheer Ahmed Qureshi deputy mayor. All of them belong to the PPP.



RIGHTS OF THE DISADVANTAGED

Women

Steps to protect women's rights. As in the past, 2023 did not bring any significant changes for women. In positive developments, however, Sindh's minister for women's development, Syeda Shehla Raza, launched the Sindh Human Rights Commission's three-year strategic plan in January.⁵⁴

Another noteworthy event was the Family Planning Conference 2023 in January, at which health experts called for effective measures to promote family planning. They noted that unplanned pregnancies put the lives of both mothers and infants at risk and that only women's empowerment could help the country reach its family planning goals.⁵⁵

The Sindh government took some meaningful steps to help women commuters. In February, the provincial government launched a fleet of 'pink' buses⁵⁶ specifically for women, allowing them to travel freely without fear of harassment.



In February, the provincial government launched a fleet of 'pink' buses specifically for women.

The National Commission on the Status of Women, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women, held a consultative session in Karachi in February⁵⁷ and discussed ways to draft a code of ethics to prohibit hate speech against women politicians and parliamentarians.

While the province saw numerous seminars and conferences, many workers remained deprived of their rights. In October, labour leaders and rights activists held a press conference to remind the provincial government of its responsibility for following court orders and ensuring that the rights of lady health workers and of the legal heirs of deceased workers were met.⁵⁸

Aurat March. In March, a day before International Women's Day, the Sindh High Court dismissed a petition seeking a ban on Aurat March, an annual march held by women and allies in different parts of the province.⁵⁹ The petition itself highlighted people's lack of willingness to accept women-backed initiatives.

Violence against women. Karachi's streets remained largely unsafe for women. In July, in the Gulistan-e-Jauhar neighbourhood, a woman was groped by a man in broad daylight.

According to the CCTV footage recovered, he parked his bike in front of a random house, removed his shorts and waited for the woman to appear before he tried to assault her. Fortunately, the woman escaped.⁶⁰

According to the police surgeon, more than 500 women and underage girls were sexually assaulted in Karachi alone during 2023, which also saw 4,042 cases of physical assault against women and girls. [Note: this data is higher than that provided by the Sindh police; see *Law and order*].⁶¹

Women in political spaces. In August, the MQM-P's Rana Ansar made history after becoming the first-ever woman opposition leader in the Sindh Assembly.⁶² Her achievement was lauded by PPP lawmakers as well, who were in government.

Children

At a seminar in October, it was revealed that 2,000 children were sexually abused in the first half of 2023. The seminar was organized by Dow Medical College and Dr Ruth K. M. Pfau Civil Hospital Karachi in connection with International Day of the Girl Child.

According to Sahil's *Cruel Numbers* report for 2023, of a total of 4,213 reported cases of violence against children, 13 percent of these cases were reported from Sindh.

Fatima Fariro, a 10-year-old girl, was found dead in August in an influential landlord's mansion in Ranipur, Khairpur. Initial reports claimed that the girl was killed and that marks of torture were found on her body. She had worked as a domestic helper in the landlord's house

and was buried without a post-mortem examination. Her body was later exhumed on court orders; police claimed that she was also raped before she died.

After protests by rights activists and extensive reporting by the media, the police arrested some of the suspects. Later, Asad Shah, the son-in-law of a leading political bigwig and a pir in Ranipur, was also arrested. The police also recovered four other minor domestic helpers from the haveli where Fatima had worked.⁶³

Transgender persons

Positive developments. In early January, the Sindh cabinet approved reserved seats for transgender individuals in local councils, along with reserved seats for women, youth, labourers or farmers, non-Muslim members, and persons living with disabilities.⁶⁴ Also in January, the federal government incorporated the transgender community into the Benazir Income Support Programme.⁶⁵

On 31 March, International Day of Trans Visibility was observed in Sindh, with events held in Karachi. In November, Karachi's transgender community celebrated the country's first Hijra Festival⁶⁶ while the second Sindh Moorat March took place in Karachi.⁶⁷

Transgender community concerns. Transgender rights activists voiced their concerns at a press conference in May a day after the Federal Shariat Court ruled that some of the provisions of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 were against Islamic injunctions.⁶⁸

On 4 June, the Sindh High Court issued notices to the provincial health secretary and medical superintendent of the Dr Ruth Pfau Civil Hospital Karachi in connection with a petition filed against non-provision of treatment to HIV-positive transgender persons.

Two transgender rights activists along with three HIV-positive transgender persons had petitioned the court, stating that the infected petitioners required immediate medical treatment, but were denied this due to their HIV status.⁶⁹

In July, it was reported that UNDP Pakistan had suspended its HIV effective prevention and treatment programme in Sindh, leaving around 18,000 HIV-positive transgender persons in the lurch.⁷⁰

Without naming any entity, UNDP said that some of its sub-recipients were under investigation by its independent Office of Audit and Investigations in New York.

Labour

Minimum wage. Although Sindh fixed the minimum wage at PKR 32,000 in July for unskilled workers, no private factory or work establishment was reported as having implemented this change. Earlier, the minimum wage was PKR 25,000; that too was not implemented.⁷¹

According to the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research, an estimated 80 percent of unskilled workers were not receiving even the previous minimum wage of PKR 25,000 per month. Furthermore, a recent World Bank report found that 83 percent of households in Pakistan were not receiving the minimum USD 2 a day needed to sustain their basic needs. Since this report, inflation has almost doubled while the rupee has lost over half its value against the US dollar.⁷²

In May, the Sindh Human Rights Commission launched a campaign to redress complaints over the non-implementation of minimum wages.⁷³ Speaking at a provincial consultation on the implementation of the Sindh Minimum Wage Act, chairperson Iqbal Detho said that the commission would provide an online complaint form with the assistance of the Labour Department's Sindh Wage Board.

Opposition to privatization. Workers in Sindh continued to oppose the government's plan to privatize state-owned enterprises such as Pakistan International Airlines, the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA), Pakistan State Oil, and Pakistan Railways. In Sindh, the All Pakistan WAPDA Hydro Electric Workers Union threatened to launch countrywide protests in January if the government did not shelve its plan for the privatization of national enterprises.

At the same time, WAPDA union workers brought out a rally from the Labour Hall in Hyderabad to the local press club in January in protest against the outsourcing of some feeders' reading and billing functions.⁷⁴

Industrial accidents. Industrial fires continued to haunt Karachi throughout the year. In April, at least four firemen were killed and five of their colleagues injured when a multi-storey factory building collapsed early in the morning after its structure was drastically weakened by a fire that had broken out a day earlier in the industrial unit located in New Karachi. Four other persons were also injured in the collapse.⁷⁵

Sanitation workers. Sanitation workers continued to fight for their right to minimum wage during the year. The Sindh High Court in January directed the Sindh government to comply with a legal minimum wage of PKR 25,000 for sanitation workers deployed in all departments across the province.

The direction came after a petition seeking the implementation of the minimum wage law for all sanitation workers employed by the local government department and Sindh Solid Waste Management Board.⁷⁶

At least six sanitation workers from Sindh died as a result of poor occupational safety and health such as inhalation of noxious fumes. On 7 May, the body of 32-year-old Babar Masih was found several days after he had drowned in a manhole in Karachi.⁷⁷

Miners. At least four coal miners died when a coal mine caved in in Jhimpir in January. The Jhimpir SHO said that the labourers had become trapped after water seeped into the mine and caused it to collapse. No efforts have been taken to prevent and pre-empt such incidents.⁷⁸

In another incident, at least three miners died and five suffered injuries in different accidents while working in coalmines in Lakhra, Jamshoro, in November.⁷⁹ In a second incident in November, three miners were injured when a generator collapsed on top of them in a mine.⁸⁰

Persons living with disabilities

In February, Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah urged the corporate sector to adopt inclusiveness by providing more employment opportunities to speech- and hearing-impaired youth.⁸¹

In the same month, former president Dr Arif Alvi asked the banking sector and state institutions to employ and facilitate differently abled people to make Pakistani society more inclusive, besides making disabled persons active and productive citizens.⁸²

Refugees. Following the federal government's policy of deporting 'illegal' foreigners within a one-month deadline, the provincial caretaker government also took steps to deport Afghans who did not possess identity documents. In Sindh, civil society was visibly divided on the deportation of Afghans. A large faction of civil society endorsed the government's policy, while one group of urban-based rights activists opposed the action, citing fears that those with legal documents were also being deported.

Academics, lawyers and civil society activists in a statement requested the government to deport all irregular migrants from the country, especially from Sindh, in accordance with the country's laws and UN conventions. The statement, issued by 86 persons, including noted activists Arfana Mallah, Amar Sindhu and others in Hyderabad, argued that irregular migrants had become a burden on Sindh's resources, jobs, education, healthcare system, language and culture.⁸³



In Sindh, civil society was visibly divided on the deportation of Afghans.

In contrast, the Joint Action Committee for Refugees, a collective platform of Karachi-based lawyers, activists, academics and progressive quarters called on international human rights watchdogs and the caretaker government to give immediate access to legal counsel to all Afghan detainees as the allegedly indiscriminate crackdown continues.⁸⁴

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL RIGHTS



Education

In September, after Karachi University teachers launched protests demanding payment of salaries, the Karachi University Teachers Society president, Dr Saleha Rehman, criticized the vice-chancellor for non-payment of salaries to evening class teachers and emphasized that teachers were also denied increments. The vice-chancellor Dr Khalid Mahmood Iraqi, however, dismissed these demands as baseless and pointed out that 70 percent of students had not paid their fees over the last three years, and that the Higher Education Commission had not increased the university's grant since 2018 despite inflation.⁸⁵

Due to the 9 May riots in the city, the British Council cancelled its 'O' and 'A' level exams scheduled for 9 and 10 May; the matriculation boards across the province, however, decided to hold the annual Secondary School Certificate exams as scheduled.⁸⁶ Although Sindh was the first province to lift the ban on student unions through an act in 2022, no union activity was formally restored in 2023.

Health

Poor air quality. The start of 2023 was difficult for the people of Karachi in terms of health. In January, at least 18 people died in the city's Keamari district due to inhalation of toxic chemicals from factories in the area.⁸⁷ All these deaths occurred between 10 and 16 January. Around three adults were among the dead; the rest were children.

In February, a group of medical experts tried to draw the attention of the Sindh government to the matter of toxic air quality in Sindh and called it the biggest public health threat. They asserted that since the level of air pollution in Karachi was not as high as it was in Lahore, the issue of toxic air quality remained ignored. They urged the authorities concerned to reactivate the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency and establish a mechanism to keep regular checks on air quality and impose bans on the release of hazardous emissions in the city.⁸⁸

Spread of disease. May rattled the entire country when reports of two Congo virus-related deaths surfaced.⁸⁹ The first death from the virus was reported in Karachi. The unavailability of life-saving facilities in Balochistan also pushed Congo virus patients in the province to travel to Karachi to get the necessary treatment. In November, an infected doctor travelling from Quetta to Karachi died en route,⁹⁰ once again exposing flaws in the country's public health infrastructure.

The overall picture suggests that Sindh became a hot spot for all kinds of viruses. In September, the province reported its first malaria death in Tharparkar. The same month, a news report suggested that Sindh had reported 4,608 malaria cases in 24 hours.⁹¹ In addition, by September, Karachi had already reported 900 dengue cases.

Karachi's water became deadly for residents when experts detected the presence of the *Naegleria fowleri* amoeba in the water, leading to at least one death.⁹² Another health scare that the city faced throughout the year was the presence of the polio virus in sewage samples collected at regular intervals in Karachi. At least two polio cases were reported from Karachi in 2023,⁹³ including a 31-month-old child.⁹⁴

In March, Covid-19 made a comeback in the province. By 19 March, the positivity rate in Karachi had reached over 35 percent.⁹⁵ However, the situation remained under control.

In September, a contagious eye disease, conjunctivitis, led to several infections among adults and children in Karachi.⁹⁶ Medical experts blamed low rainfall and poor air quality in the city for the spread of the virus. The situation was exacerbated when the eyedrops used to treat the infection started disappearing from the market, resulting in black market prices. In the wake of this crisis, the Drugs Regulatory Authority of Pakistan approved a 20 percent hike in the price of the eyedrops.⁹⁷

Vaccination. The city remained far behind in meeting its vaccination targets. In October, authorities launched a vaccination campaign in Sindh to vaccinate 10.3 million children.⁹⁸ The five-day campaign was extended to a week in Karachi, which had several 'super high-risk' union committees. These collectively had 89,000 children who either refused vaccination or were unavailable when the vaccination team reached their homes.

Suicide. According to data from the Edhi Foundation, at least 180 men and women committed suicide in Karachi during the year.⁹⁹

Healthcare systems. Irregularities in the healthcare system continue to mar the province. The Sindh government's decade-old initiative of transferring the management of service of provincially run basic health units to public-private partnerships continued to inconvenience dozens of patients.¹⁰⁰ The inefficiency of such programmes led not only to the shortage of medicines but also the unavailability of surgeons and other medical professionals at the health units. The health situation was also dismal in the province's prisons. Because of the floods in Sindh in 2022, many prisoners remained exposed to waterborne diseases. In Sindh, 19 prison facilities were housed in flood-affected areas.¹⁰¹

Housing and public amenities

Homes for flood-affected persons. The Sindh government started the year with the challenge of rebuilding the homes destroyed or damaged by the 2022 floods. On 1 February, the Sindh chief secretary announced that flood victims would get PKR 300,000 per damaged house in instalments from 8 February.¹⁰²

A survey had concluded that around 2.058 million houses were partially or completely damaged; PKR 50,000 was earmarked for partially damaged houses. The chief secretary also announced that the World Bank had committed USD 500 million for the housing project. He said that the Sindh government was giving USD 250 million while the federal government had also promised to provide USD 250 million for rebuilding homes.

In the first week of August, the Sindh government announced it was building houses for 2.1 million flood victims across the province. The programme was set up under the Sindh People's Housing for Flood Affectees and ownership of these houses was to be given to women affected by the floods.¹⁰³

While these announcements seemed promising, implementation was slow. Many flood victims kept waiting for the government to honour its promises for months.¹⁰⁴ Displaced people whose homes had been damaged by the floods remained in Karachi, living in the city's slums to make ends meet.

Low-income housing. The Sindh minister for local government and housing and town planning, Syed Nasir Hussain Shah, announced the government's plan to start a low-cost housing project for people from low-income households. Under the programme, single-unit bungalows spanning 80, 100, 120, and 200 square feet were supposed to be built. The programme was to be carried out under the Malir Development Authority.¹⁰⁵ No additional information about the programme is available.

August also saw the term completion of the provincial government and the reins of governance handed over to a caretaker government. In the same month, the setup announced a ban on the approval of new housing projects and the construction of multi-storey buildings across Sindh for an indefinite period.

Sources privy to the matter believed the decision was taken to halt the construction of 'portion' houses, which had led to violations of building laws in several instances.¹⁰⁶

A welcome development during the year was the announcement by the caretaker chief minister of Sindh, Justice (R) Maqbool Baqar, of a project for people living in Karachi's Martin, Clayton and Pakistan Quarters. Under the project, the residents who would otherwise be displaced under the urban rejuvenation plan would have newly constructed homes in residential towers.¹⁰⁷

The fate of thousands of families living along the Gujjar and Orangi Nullahs did not see any significant change. Most families continued living amid the rubble of their now-demolished homes. While some families received the compensation promised by the provincial government, most waited for the authorities to honour their promises of providing alternative housing units to affected people by 2022—a promise that remained unfulfilled in 2023.¹⁰⁸

Building checks. After the 2022 floods, authorities in Sindh proactively ran checks on the health of buildings to avoid any large-scale destruction in the monsoon season. The survey, conducted by the SBCA Technical Committee on Dangerous Buildings, was carried out in May; it was found that at least 550 buildings in Karachi were in dilapidated condition.¹⁰⁹

Infrastructure and transport problems. The provincial government's lackadaisical approach towards resolving Karachi's infrastructure problems allowed open drains in the city to remain a death trap for several unsuspecting civilians. In May, the tragic story of a boy in Gulshan-e-Iqbal shook the nation.¹¹⁰ The boy fell into an open drain and his body could not be pulled out for months. Three months later, in August, a toddler fell into an open drain in the city's Memon Goth area and lost his life.¹¹¹

Karachi's roads also remained dug up in major residential areas. The Sindh government's decision to simultaneously launch different reconstruction projects left the city in poor shape, with residents facing problems during commutes. The provincial government had started projects worth PKR 10 billion.¹¹²

The government's performance regarding the bus rapid transit project was dismal throughout the year. The caretaker chief minister also showed irritation over the slow progress on the merger of two major bus lines—Green and Orange. This delay kept millions of people from utilizing an economical bus service in the city.¹¹³

The Sindh government also learnt little from the 2022 Shahrah-e-Faisal accident where a father and his two daughters were killed when his motorcycle was run over by a dumper. Heavy vehicles continued to ply the roads during peak hours, leading to several deaths.

A journalist at *The News* lost his life after his motorcycle was run over by a speeding truck near the Akhtar Colony signal in May.¹¹⁴ In November, another speeding water tanker claimed the lives of a woman and her infant son when it collided with the motorcycle the woman was on.¹¹⁵

Environment

Although Lahore is now infamous for its poor air quality, the air quality in Karachi was vying for this slot in 2023. Karachi was named the most polluted city in the world for two successive days in September, in terms of air quality.

It is worth noting that an AQI reading in the range of 151–200 is considered unhealthy, while an AQI reading between 201 and 300 is even more detrimental to health. [See also *Health*].¹¹⁶

In a briefing given to the Senate Standing Committee on Climate Change, it was said that while the overall cover of mangroves in the Indus Delta had increased over the years, Karachi continued to lose these ‘protected’ forests on account of land allotments by the Board of Revenue and Karachi Port Trust.¹¹⁷

In a historic judgment, the Sindh High Court barred any mining and excavation in the Karoonjhar Mountains in Nagarparkar, Tharparkar district. A two-judge bench stated that the Sindh Mines and Minerals Department did not enjoy jurisdiction over the mountain range because it was a protected heritage site.¹¹⁸

Culture

Sindhi Culture Day is celebrated every year across Sindh on the first Sunday of December. Also known as ‘Sindhi Ajrak and Topi Day’, the day is celebrated to highlight the province’s rich culture. In 2023, activities related to the day started in the morning and continued through the night.¹¹⁹

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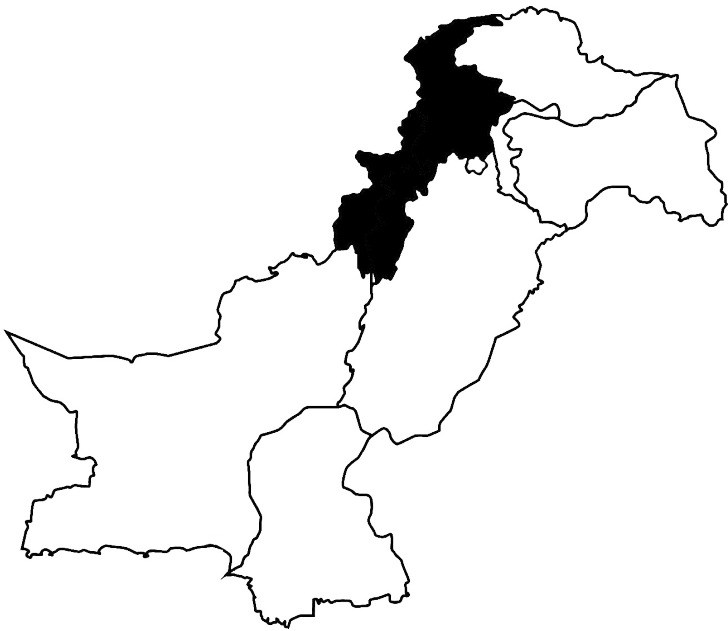
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KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA



HIGHLIGHTS

- The premature dissolution of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly in January and no provincial election meant that the residents of the province remained unrepresented, and not a single piece of legislation was enacted throughout the year.
- Hundreds of PTI leaders and workers were arrested after they led violent protests against the arrest of party leader Imran Khan in May, and were subsequently prevented from election campaigning.
- Over 160 policemen, more than 70 military personnel, over 60 civilians and more than 170 alleged militants were killed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023 in dozens of targeted militant attacks and security operations.
- There were 4.7 million children out of school in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023, including 66 percent girls, mainly due to a lack of schools.
- Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was home to nearly 150,000 registered persons living with disabilities in 2023, but ramps and braille markers meant to assist their navigation remained missing from most public and private buildings despite court orders.
- Hundreds of teachers, doctors, health workers and sanitation workers protested against delays in payment of salaries and other government dues in separate demonstrations across the province in 2023
- By end of 2023, Pakistan was home to over 1.5 million documented and 0.7 million undocumented Afghan refugees, including 0.7 million documented and 0.3 million undocumented refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Over 212,000 were forced back into Afghanistan through the Torkham border.
- According to the government, 11 percent of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's population is suffering from drug abuse with methamphetamine users on the rise.
- At least 40 persons were killed by rains, flash floods and dust storms that hit Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023 after roofs of houses collapsed or were swept away by floods in several districts.
- In May, Justice Musarrat Hilali became the first ever female chief justice of the Peshawar High Court. In July, she was elevated to the Supreme Court as the second ever female judge in the top court.

- After the Election Commission of Pakistan lost a legal challenge in the Peshawar High Court to delay holding of local elections, local elections were held in August for 72 key positions in 21 districts.
- In January, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa cabinet approved the Domestic Violence Against Women (Prevention and Protection) Rules 2022 allowing law enforcement authorities to prosecute domestic violence against women, including physical, psychological, and economic abuse.
- The provincial government announced a salary increase of 35 percent for its employees up to grade 16. Pensions were also increased by 17.5 percent.
- Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's first mental health-specific infrastructure, the Institute of Mental Health Sciences, was inaugurated in Peshawar to provide specialized psychiatric, counselling and rehabilitation services.



OVERVIEW

The overall situation of human rights in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023 remained turbulent, manifested, among other things, in the premature dissolution of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly in January and a year-long delay in elections. This aberration violated the right to political representation, resulting in not even a single legislation being passed by the parliament during the year.

A growing and consistent crackdown on the PTI in the province also prominently figured during the year after its supporters went on a rampage to protest the arrest of the party's leader Imran Khan in May; dozens of its leaders and supporters were arrested and made to face legal cases, including trials in military courts. The courts repeatedly intervened to provide them relief but there was no effective let-up in the persecution.

The province also witnessed an escalation in terrorism-related violence that saw dozens of militant attacks, resulting in the death and injury of hundreds in the province, including civilians and security personnel. The rights of women, children and other vulnerable groups, as well as under-trial prisoners, also remained distinctly overlooked during the year.

This included a pendency, by the end of 2023, of over 41,000 cases in the Peshawar High Court (PHC), and a backlog of more than 280,000 cases in the district judiciary. Some 4.7 million children also remained out of school, and a gender voter gap persisted with nearly two million fewer women voters compared to men in the updated provincial voters list by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP).

Another major grievance that emerged in the last quarter of 2023 was the state's crackdown against Afghan refugees lacking legal documentation, ordered to return to Afghanistan voluntarily or face deportation. Thousands of Afghans from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were forced back into Afghanistan, potentially facing a bleak social, political and economic future from which they had fled into Pakistan.



RULE OF LAW

Laws and law-making

Seven months before the completion of its five-year constitutional term, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly was dissolved on 18 January 2023 after the provincial governor accepted the dissolution advice issued by the chief minister.¹

In December 2022, PTI chairman Imran Khan had announced his party's decision to dissolve provincial assemblies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab in protest against his ouster as prime minister through a no-confidence vote in *The National Assembly*.

The dissolution of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly incapacitated the ability of its elected members to represent their electorate and legislate on their behalf. A protracted political stalemate prevented elections for a new Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assembly and government within the mandated 90 days.

Towards the end of the year, the ECP announced general elections, including elections for the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly, on 8 February 2024. Consequent to these unusual political developments, no legislation was enacted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023.

However, two legislation-related policy developments took place in 2023. In January, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Urban Policy 2030 and its action plan were approved by the Land Use and Building Control Authority, making Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the first province in Pakistan to adopt an official urban policy.² In August, the UNDP held a consultation in Peshawar on prison reforms, attended by the PHC chief justice, that agreed on supporting the effective implementation of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Prisons Act to tackle challenges such as overcrowding and the abundance of under-trial prisons in prisons.³

Administration of justice

Courts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—including the PHC, district, sessions, local, anti-terrorism and family courts—struggled with disposing justice to litigants in 2023, with the pendency of cases remaining high as in recent years. However, the courts remained active in providing relief to political workers, and issued several verdicts and directives aimed at improving the procedures for administration of justice in cases involving children and family and arbitrary arrests.

Death penalty. According to HRCP's media monitoring, there were 19 reported cases of the death sentence being awarded to convicts during the year in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Pendency of cases. According to the Law and Justice Commission Pakistan, at the start of the year, the PHC had a backlog of 41,911 cases, and during 2023, a total of 26,297 new cases were filed with the court and 25,926 cases disposed of.

As of December 2023, a total of 42,409 cases were pending for adjudication at the PHC. The district judiciary had a backlog of 261,212 cases at the start of the year.

A total of 515,877 new cases were filed with the province's district courts during 2023, with courts disposing of 510,069 cases in the same period. At the end of the year, 273,762 cases were pending at the district tier.⁴

Judicial vacancies. With Khyber Pakhtunkhwa struggling to fill judicial vacancies, 15 of the sanctioned strength of 20 judges were serving at the PHC towards the end of 2023.

In January, the Judicial Commission of Pakistan confirmed recommendations for three additional judges of the PHC.⁵ In February, the PHC directed the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Public Service Commission to fill vacant positions of 84 civil judges in the province's district judiciary.⁶

Breaking the glass ceiling. In May, Justice Musarrat Hilali was appointed as the first female chief justice of PHC. Before this, she served as the only female judge on the PHC judges' panel. In July, she was elevated to the Supreme Court, becoming the second female judge of the apex court.⁷



Justice Musarrat Hilali was appointed the first female chief justice of the PHC.

Suo moto jurisdiction case. The Supreme Court, in January, ruled that high courts in Pakistan cannot exercise suo moto powers. This was in response to a petition filed by a private citizen challenging the PHC's jurisdiction of directing price mechanism committees, with the Supreme Court observing that such decisions by provincial high courts went against the principle of the trichotomy of powers.⁸

Reinstating local bodies. The PHC, in March, provided relief to petitioning local functionaries by striking down an order issued by the ECP to suspend local bodies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa until the holding of provincial elections and reinstating their legal status under the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government (Amendment) Act 2019.⁹ This allowed elected local representatives to continue provision of services to their electorate.

Protecting juveniles. In April, the PHC ruled that juveniles in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa accused of terrorism-related offences should be tried in juvenile courts under the Juvenile Justice System Act 2018, and not by an anti-terrorism court.¹⁰ The court opined that this would ensure safeguards, such as the protection of privacy and mental health.

Faster justice and greater relief. In May, the PHC chief justice ordered speedier disposal of cases, especially those related to family disputes.¹¹ In June, he directed an end to torture at police stations.¹² In June, a court in Charsadda ordered the release of over 50 PTI supporters alleged with disrupting public disorder.¹³

In November, the PHC warned the provincial government and the ECP against curbs on PTI workers and leaders seeking to mobilize voters for elections.¹⁴ It also suspended police cases against some PTI leaders in North Waziristan for alleged sedition. From May to December, the PHC, under several separate orders, directed the authorities to free PTI leaders, issuing bails for their release.

In November, the PHC ordered the federal government to remove from the Exit Control List the names of the family members of Dr Shakil Afridi, who is accused of aiding the Americans in locating Osama bin Laden.¹⁵

In August, the PHC directed the district and sessions judges in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to ensure that nominees in a case are not arrested by the police and other departments after they are granted interim bail by a court of law.

It also, under a formal order, mandated the authorities to first seek a court's permission if they want to arrest a person who is on an interim bail in one case on basis of a second FIR. In a separate case, the PHC ruled that it cannot make appraisal of evidence recorded by a family court even if the finding of facts recorded by the court is erroneous.



ENFORCEMENT OF LAW

Law and order

Gender-based violence and other crimes continued to be committed in the province during 2023 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Crime statistics for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023

Offense	Number of cases
Rape	293
Gang-rape	4
'Honour' killings	127
Blasphemy cases	41
Police encounters	153

Source: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Police, in response to HRCP's request for information

HRCP's media monitoring for 2023 also recorded at least 20 cases of domestic violence, 72 cases of sexual violence, 49 'honour' killings and 246 femicide-related murders that reportedly took place in the province.

In a major uptick in extreme violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023, hundreds of citizens, policemen, military personnel and militants were killed and many more injured. A rise in attacks on law enforcement personnel—both military and civilian—target killings, explosions, kidnappings, firing incidents and border clashes was recorded across the province.

In fact, both Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan combined accounted for over 90 percent of all fatalities and 84 percent of militant attacks during 2023, including incidents of terrorism and security forces' operations.¹⁶

Policemen killed. At least 164 policemen, including 18 officers of the Counter-Terrorism Department, were killed during 2023 while on duty in various districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, compared to 105 killed in 2022.

At least 31 were target killed by assailants, including one policeman guarding a team conducting census duties—eight in the Dera Ismail Khan district, six in the Khyber district, five each in the Lakki Marwat and Peshawar districts, two in the Tank district and once each in the Buner, Hangu, Mardan, North Waziristan and South Waziristan districts.

At least 61 policemen were killed when their patrolling parties and vehicles were attacked by unknown assailants with guns in various

districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Dozens of others were killed in attacks on religious sites, security and other government installations, including 50 killed after a bomb detonated inside a mosque located within the police headquarter compound in Peshawar, after a Counter-Terrorism Department facility in Swat was attacked by unknown persons,¹⁷ three guarding check-posts in the Lakki Marwat and Khyber districts, and one tortured by unknown militants after they kidnapped him in the Lakki Marwat district.

Military personnel. At least 72 military personnel, including 63 army soldiers and nine Frontier Corps troopers, were killed during 2023 in various Khyber Pakhtunkhwa districts.

These included 42 army soldiers killed in separate attacks in the North Waziristan and South Waziristan districts, five in Khyber, two each in Bannu and Tank, and one each in the Lakki Marwat, Orakzai, and Peshawar districts.

Politicians and political workers killed, injured or threatened. In July, at least 64 people were killed, including 29 children, and over 150 injured after a bomb detonated at a political gathering organized by the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-F (JUI-F) in Bajaur district, with the proscribed Islamic-State Khorasan claiming responsibility.¹⁸ In June, the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz leader Amir Muqam's convoy was attacked by armed assailants in Shangla district.¹⁹

Militants. At least 177 persons, described either as 'militants' or 'terrorists' by the authorities, were killed in 2023 by security forces in 41 official raids or attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's various districts. Of these attacks, 29 were categorized as intelligence-based operations and 12 as retaliatory gunfire or border clashes. Of those killed, at least 84 were reported as Tehreek Taliban Pakistan militants and two as members of Lashkar-i-Islam.

Violence against officials and citizens. At least 132 professionals and citizens were killed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in target killings and explosions. These include 64 people, including 29 children, attending a JUI-F rally in the Bajaur district, 20 during sectarian and tribal violence in the Kurram district, eight school teachers in the Khyber and Kurram districts, a teenager in the Lakki Marwat district, four tribal elders in the North Waziristan and South Waziristan districts, a cook working at a police station in the Khyber district, one in the Bannu district when a motorcycle fitted with an explosive device detonated, a Sikh shopkeeper and a Christian sanitation worker in the Peshawar district, and three children in mortar shell explosions.

Abductions. In January, four non-native employees of exploration companies working at an oilfield in Miranshah were kidnapped. They were later recovered by the authorities from North Waziristan. Four of

the alleged kidnappers were killed.²⁰ In April, media persons and social media activists organized a protest in Bannu after the police refused to register an FIR following the abduction and torture of journalist Gohar Wazir, allegedly by 'pro-government' militants, despite repeated written requests by the victim.²¹

Jails and prisoners

Despite some positive developments related to the establishment of an online prison management system, inmates in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa prisons experienced a generally difficult year in 2023. In April, prison police resorted to firing tear gas shells to quell rioters in the Peshawar Central Jail.

Overcrowded prisons. A total of 39 jails were operational in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during 2023 according to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Prisons Department. These prisons housed 11,326 under-trial prisoners, 2,447 convicted prisoners and 375 juvenile inmates against a sanctioned capacity of 13,375. Of the persons on death row, 143 were jailed for murder, four on blasphemy charges and six for other offenses.

Overall, total inmates included 13,625 men, 139 women and 28 children living with their mothers in jail. In November, the ombudsperson's office urged authorities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to counter overcrowding in jails by building additional accommodations, especially for women and juvenile prisoners.



Inmates in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa prisons experienced a generally difficult year in 2023.

Unsanitary conditions. In April, the PHC chief justice reprimanded jail authorities in Peshawar for housing juvenile inmates in cramped barracks, ordering their relocation to facilities with better sanitary conditions.²² In May, the chief justice directed jail authorities in Nowshera to ensure adequate health facilities for prisoners. According to a report, 196 prisoners in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's jails were suffering from various illnesses including tuberculosis, Hepatitis B and C, and immunodeficiency disorder.²³

Right to appeal denied. In blatant incidents of denial of the right to appeal verdicts, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government refused to send the appeals of five death-row prisoners, convicted by military courts, to the Supreme Court with their execution orders intact.²⁴

Digitized prison management. In November, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government inaugurated an online case hearing and prison management system in Peshawar.²⁵ The new system will allow prisoners to be produced before court and receive bail orders through virtual mediums, with the ombudsperson's office urging the implementation of a province-wide digital interface to link jail records with *The National Database Registration Authority's* records.

Enforced disappearances. People continued to be forcibly disappeared in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023. According to the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, there have been 3,485 cases reported in the province since 2011 till date, of which 635 were resolved with the victims returning home, 832 traced to internment centres, 126 traced to prisons, and 77 disposed of after the victims' dead bodies were found. As of the end of 2023, the commission has 1,336 pending enforced disappearance cases left to resolve.

In January, a family accused Counter-Terrorism Department officers of conducting an unlawful raid of their house in Bara without policewomen, and taking away one young male member of their family.²⁶

In March, addressing a press conference in Swat, a mission headed by HRCP chairperson Hina Jilani expressed concern over forced disappearances of the district's residents and demanded that authorities present such missing persons in court if they were accused of a crime. The mission also urged security forces to vacate abandoned school buildings in Swat housing illegal prisons run by proscribed organizations.

Protests. In May, families of 500 persons, either missing or languishing in jails in the Haripur, Kohat, Mardan and Peshawar districts since 2009, protested their forceful detention without recourse to law in Swat.

The families alleged that the authorities had refused to either set their relatives free or present them in court despite the PHC deciding the missing persons' case in their favour.²⁷



FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

Freedom of expression

Actions against journalists. In March, the home of Geo TV reporter Yasir Shah in Kohat was attacked by unidentified men who lobbed grenades and fired shots. He remained unharmed.²⁸ In October, he was attacked again with gunshots on a road as he drove home, sustaining injuries.

In April, journalist Gohar Wazir of Bannu was kidnapped and tortured by unidentified men before being released. HRCP issued a statement seeking justice for him and other journalists being harassed. In June, police acted on a complaint filed by a resident of Tank by registering a case against journalists Shaheen Sehbai, Wajahat Khan and other social media activists for ‘abetting mutiny and waging war against Pakistan’.²⁹

Victimized for expression. In March, authorities in Mardan district charged over 20 PTI workers for alleged hate speech and ‘attempting to incite people to revolt against the government’.

In June, Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement leader and member of *The National* Assembly Ali Wazir was arrested in North Waziristan for speaking against enforced disappearances.³⁰

In August, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government banned its employees from using their personal social media handles to post content related to official matters.³¹ In July, a group of religious clerics in the Khyber district banned music during marriages.³²

Freedom of assembly

Several public protests and demonstrations were held in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023 by women, parents, politicians, political workers, tribesmen and government employees, seeking enforcement of various rights.

At the start of May, a pronounced pattern emerged of the authorities cracking down on leaders and workers of PTI. They were repeatedly prevented from first protesting the arrest of party leader Imran Khan on 9 May, secondly for seeking early elections for the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly, and then seeking to hold election rallies.

Protests by parties and arrests. In February, PTI leaders in Peshawar announced a ‘Jail Bharo [court arrest] Tehreek’ to push for the announcement of provincial elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. As in other parts of the country, the arrest of Imran Khan in May triggered largescale protests across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. PTI-led mobs damaged and destroyed state property in several cities, notably setting the Radio Pakistan building in Peshawar ablaze.³³ Subsequently, in a largely

disproportionate response, police authorities arrested thousands of PTI leaders and workers in the Abbottabad, Bajaur, Charsadda, Kurram, Lower Dir, Malakand, Mardan, Peshawar, Orakzai, North Waziristan, Shangla, South Waziristan and Swabi districts, charging them with damaging public property, inciting violence and violating a ban on public gatherings.

After the 2024 election schedule was announced by the ECP in December, PTI leaders and workers consistently attempted to hold public meetings to mobilize supporters, but were repeatedly thwarted.

In September, dozens of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) leaders and workers were booked by the police in Peshawar for protesting against inflation.³⁴ In October, tribal elders protested a move to abolish national and provincial seats in Hangu and Orakzai districts following the ECP's delimitation exercise.³⁵

Restricting political gatherings. In August, the district administration in Peshawar imposed Section 144, banning unauthorized gatherings, protests and rallies.

Protests over economic issues. In January, JI activists protested against inflation and unemployment in the Lower Dir district. Women protesters blocked the Pakistan-Afghanistan Highway in the Khyber district, demanding reduction in wheat flour prices.

Awami National Party workers gathered in Mardan district to demand government action against excessive load-shedding and shutting down of gas stations.³⁶

In April, Christian sanitation workers congregated in Peshawar against delays in the release of outstanding salaries in time for them to celebrate Easter.³⁷

In August, residents of the Mansehra, Mardan, Peshawar and Swat districts took to the streets to protest exorbitant power bills.³⁸ In September, traders, commercial transporters and labourers demanded the resumption of stalled economic activity at Torkham.³⁹

Freedom of movement

Border restrictions. Border closures and protests restricted freedom of movement of thousands in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023. In January, over 7,000 trucks loaded with perishable goods were said to have been stranded at the Torkham border after it was closed by authorities for two weeks.⁴⁰

In September, the border again remained closed for a week after an exchange of fire between border forces, leaving hundreds of people and trucks stranded on both sides.⁴¹



Nomadic families were denied entry to South Waziristan at the Angoor Adda border without verification

In March, contrary to an established practice of allowing seasonal access, nomadic families were denied entry to South Waziristan at the Angoor Adda border without verification, leaving them stranded in extreme cold and without assistance.⁴² The border closure caused a reported loss of USD 10 million in commercial activity, and stranded Afghan travellers were forced to take refuge in mosques and local homes while relying on charity for survival.

Blocked access. In May, following the arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan, PTI supporters went on a rampage across the province blocking roads, highways and the motorway, forcing market closures, torching public property, and crippling public movement on a large scale.⁴³ The protests were especially noticeable in the Abbottabad, Bajaur, Charsadda, Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber, Lakki Marwat, Lower Dir, Malakand, Mansehra, Mardan, Mohmand, Peshawar, Shangla and Swabi districts. Law enforcement authorities imposed Section 144 to restrict movement in the Khyber and Mohmand districts to quell protests. The blocking of national highways restricted inter-city and inter-provincial movement of people and goods in large parts of the province.

Banned entry. In July, the local administration banned the entry of 24 clerics to Abbottabad during Muharram under Section 144.



DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Political participation

Clampdown on PTI. Elected representatives and workers of PTI remained the target of political victimization, government overreach and indiscriminate arrests following violent protests in May after their party's chairman Imran Khan was arrested in Islamabad on charges of corruption.

In December, the ECP enlisted the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Parliamentarians, allowing a name change from the unregistered Pakistan Tehreek-e-Islahat Pakistan, with former Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chief ministers Pervez Khattak and Mehmood Khan elected as its chairman and vice-chairman respectively.

Local polls. After the ECP lost a legal challenge in PHC to delay holding local government elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa until national and provincial elections were conducted, the local government elections were held in August for 72 seats in 21 districts of the province. Independent candidates won a majority (40) of the seats, with PTI winning 14, JUI-F six, JI five, PPP two and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan one.

More voters. In February, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Election Commissioner had chaired a meeting of the Gender and Disability Electoral Working Group and sought support from civil society for the election commission to encourage women to enrol and cast votes in the 2023 local government elections and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa seats of the eventual national and provincial elections in 2024.⁴⁴

In December, the ECP, while sharing the latest data about *The National* voters' list ahead of the February 2024 national and provincial elections, said that the total number of voters had surpassed 126 million, including 21.26 million in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – comprising 11.79 million male and 9.82 million female voters.

Constituencies and seats. In October, announcing new delimitations – the first after the 2018 merger of tribal districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – for electoral constituencies for *The National* and provincial assemblies based on the latest approved census, the ECP said that the number of National Assembly seats for the tribal districts had reduced from 12 to six in line with the 25th constitutional amendment. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa would now have a total of 55 National Assembly seats, including 45 general and 10 women's reserved seats.⁴⁵ The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly would have 115 general seats, plus 26 for women and four for non-Muslims, taking its strength to 145.

Ten out of 36 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa districts did not attain the population threshold for an exclusive National Assembly seat, so their constituencies

were merged with those of the neighbouring districts. The Peshawar district also lost a constituency in the provincial assembly, lowering its strength in the house from 14 to 13.

Local government

Suspension of local bodies. In February, the ECP unilaterally suspended local government bodies across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, anticipating ‘undue influence’ on voting patterns during scheduled provincial assembly elections in spring 2023, which were subsequently postponed to February 2024.⁴⁶

In response, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa governor promised the promulgation of an ordinance to restore tehsil, village and neighbourhood councils. In March, the PHC provided relief to petitioners challenging the ECP’s decision by issuing a stay order, effectively reinstating Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s local functionaries elected in 2021 and 2022.⁴⁷

By-elections. In August, by-elections were held for 72 seats in 21 districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Independent candidates won on 40 seats with PTI winning 14, JUI-F six, JI five, PPP two and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan one.⁴⁸

Financial difficulties. In January, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa cabinet approved amendments to the rules governing village and neighbourhood councils, increasing monthly remunerations and fuel allowances for mayors and chairpersons.⁴⁹

Women councillors from the Khyber district protested the denial of development funds to help constituents of their areas. Office-bearers of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s local government employee associations gathered in the Charsadda district demanding the release of their salaries, with payments due since December 2022.

In February, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa governor assured the release of PKR 35 billion earmarked under *The National Financial Award* for local government. Representatives of the Local Government Employees Union in the Mansehra district demanded the release of salaries and pensions for their members.

In September, local government employees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa threatened to strike if their personal ledger accounts were not restored.⁵⁰

In October, chairpersons of union and neighbourhood councils in Miranshah urged the functional implementation of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government (Amendment) Act 2019, ensuring the provision of sanctioned funds and office resources for continued service provision.⁵¹



RIGHTS OF THE DISADVANTAGED

Women

There were some positive developments related to the rights of women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023, while other developments remained consistent with routine violations against them. In January, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa cabinet approved the Domestic Violence Against Women (Prevention and Protection) Rules 2022. The rules allow law enforcement authorities to prosecute domestic violence against women, including physical, psychological, and economic abuse.

Gender-based violence. According to HRCP's media monitoring for 2023, there were at least 20 cases of domestic violence, 72 cases of sexual violence, 49 'honour' killings and 246 femicide-related murders that reportedly took place in the province [see *Law and Order*]. The Digital Rights Foundation also reported that their helpline received 112 complaints related to cyber harassment and gender-based violence from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Sexual violence incidents were also registered by law enforcement personnel.

Breaking the glass ceiling. After becoming the PHC's first female chief justice in May, Justice Musarrat Hilali established a women-only facilitation desk and waiting area at the high court premises mandated with providing free legal advice and case resources to female litigants. In September, Samreen Amir was appointed as an SHO in the Kurram district, becoming the first female Christian officer to be appointed at this position in any of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's tribal districts.

Disempowered and denied. In January, women councillors from the Khyber district elected in the 2021 local government polls protested the denial of functional authority and development funds to help female constituents of their areas. They said that while over 100 women contested in the polls and several were elected, they had neither been provided offices nor resources unlike their male counterparts, thereby lowering their status in people's perceptions.⁵²

In March, a jirga in the Khyber district restricted women's right to move freely by banning their visits to wheat distribution points for free flour organized under the Benazir Income Support Programme, allowing only male members of their families to collect flour bags on their behalf.⁵³ In October, authorities in the Swat district were forced to look for an alternative venue for a women's cricket match after it was halted midway by protesting imams. In November, clerics in the Shangla district warned female staffers at non-governmental organizations against interacting and working with their male colleagues.

Budgets, schools and female students. In May, at a seminar on education held by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commission on the Status of Women,

experts urged improvement in female literacy rates as over three million girls under the age of 14 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa did not attend school despite the presence of 20,447 educational establishments reserved for them.

The seminar was told that, of the 4.7 million children out of school in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 66 percent were girls. This was mainly due to a lack of an adequate number of schools, even though out of every 10 new schools built since 2019, seven were for girls, and 17 percent of the provincial budget in 2022/23 had been allocated to education, including PKR 14 billion for girls' education.⁵⁴

Fewer registered women voters. According to the ECP in December, the updated national electoral rolls documented over 127 million voters including 21.69 million (17.1 percent of *The National* count) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. However, there is a gender disparity in the number of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa voters. A total of 11.83 million voters in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are male and 9.86 million female – a gap of 1.97 million. In June, district authorities in Khyber announced the registration of 70,431 new women voters.



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Inheritance rights. Women in newly merged districts are said to have started to actively pursue legal remedies for their right to lawful inheritance. At least 69 cases were filed by female residents under the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Endorsement of Women Property Rights 2019 and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Letter of Administration and Succession Act 2021 before provincial courts and the ombudsperson's office.

These cases related to the acquisition of share in inheritance, distribution of family assets and a fair share in government compensation in the purchase of their jointly held landholdings.⁵⁵

Transgender persons

Attacks against trans persons. Two transgender persons were killed, one each in Kohat and Mingora, and another two injured, including one in Peshawar, in three separate targeted attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023.⁵⁶ The transgender persons were returning home after performing at private parties when they were attacked.⁵⁷

Blocked registrations. In January, the ECP and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Welfare Department jointly launched a campaign to register transgender persons in Peshawar.⁵⁸

In May, the PHC accepted a petition filed by a transgender person for the unlawful blocking of their national identity cards by *The National Database Registration Authority*, as ordered by a sessions judge, and reversed the verdict. The PHC judge in her judgment said that transgender persons in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were being deprived of their constitutional rights, which cisgender people did not face such violations.⁵⁹

Children

Numerous crimes against children, including rape and murder, were reported from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023.

According to Sahil's *Cruel Numbers* report, there were 4,213 cases of child sexual abuse reported in Pakistan during the year, three percent of which (at least 126 cases) took place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Rape. Five members of a jirga were arrested in May for arranging a settlement with a rape-accused who had assaulted a girl;⁶⁰ two persons were arrested from Peshawar in September for gang-raping and murdering a six-year-old girl; a man was nabbed in September for raping a 10-year-old deaf and mute boy in Peshawar;⁶¹ a school principal was arrested from Charsadda in September for sexually assaulting a 12-year-old boy;⁶² and a schoolteacher in Dera Ismail Khan was accused of sexually assaulting a four-year-old female student in November.⁶³

Murder. In September, a man was arrested in Mardan for beating to death his underage daughter⁶⁴ while members of a family were arrested in Swat after confessing to killing a four-year-old girl over differences with their neighbour.

In October, a mentally challenged woman was arrested in Hangu for slaughtering her two children.⁶⁵ In April, a man was awarded three

death sentences by a child protection court for sexually assaulting, killing and burning the body of an eight-year-old girl in Peshawar. In October, the PHC set aside the conviction of two men accused of raping and killing an eight-year-old girl in Nowshera.

Children in jails. In April, the PHC chief justice reprimanded jail authorities in Peshawar for holding juvenile prisoners in cramped barracks, ordering their relocation to facilities with better sanitary conditions.

Separately, the PHC ruled that juveniles accused of terrorism-related charges should be tried by a juvenile court under the Juvenile Justice System Act 2018 to safeguard their privacy, and not an anti-terrorism court.⁶⁶

In September, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Home and Tribal Affairs Department notified the Juvenile Justice System Rules 2023, promising the establishment of specialized rehabilitation centres for child offenders in all divisional headquarters.⁶⁷

In June, the Child Protection and Welfare Commission decided to set up child protection units in all districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with such facilities currently operational in only 12 districts.

Labour

Mine accidents. At least 44 coal and phosphate mine workers were killed and 23 injured in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during 2023 according to HRCP’s media monitoring (see Table 2).

Table 2: Mining accidents in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023

<i>Date</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Killed</i>	<i>Injured</i>
1 Jan	Kohat	2	1
31 Mar	Abbottabad	2	-
6 Jun	Kohat	2	-
26 Jul	Dara Adam Khel	3	5
26 Jul	Shangla	1	-
31 Jul	Shangla	1	-
17 Aug	Shangla	2	-
18 Aug	Shangla	3	-
24 Aug	Shangla	1	-
27 Aug	Shangla	2	-
29 Aug	Kohat	3	-

<i>Date</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Killed</i>	<i>Injured</i>
30 Aug	Shangla	1	-
11 Sep	Kohat	3	-
11 Oct	Hangu	-	11
16 Oct	Khyber	3	1
18 Oct	Shangla	1	1
19 Oct	Dara Adam Khel	1	1
25 Oct	Hangu	1	1
17 Nov	Shangla	1	1
18 Nov	Shangla	2	1
18 Nov	Shangla	3	1
25 Nov	Kohat	1	1
1 Dec	Dara Adam Khel	2	1
14 Dec	Nowshera	1	4
20 Dec	Swat	2	2

Source: HRCP's media monitoring

Payment boost. In June, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government announced a salary increase of 35 percent for its employees up to grade 16. Pensions were also increased by 17.5 percent.

Financial issues. In January, the PHC stopped the Khyber Teaching Hospital from reducing remuneration and allowances for its employees. Local government staff in the Charsadda district protested against the non-payment of salaries since December 2022.⁶⁸

In March, staffers at the Timergara Teaching Hospital in the Lower Dir district demonstrated against a private company for its failure to pay salaries for the preceding four months.⁶⁹

In April, Christian workers employed by the Water and Sanitation Services Peshawar protested a delay in release of their salaries.⁷⁰ In June, an employee of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Expanded Programme on Immunization committed suicide in the Hangu district, with his salary receivables extending to over a year.⁷¹

In July, office-bearers of the Shangla Teachers Association put forth a charter of demands, including the release of their pending salaries and an improved service structure for its members.⁷² In August, the University of Peshawar management wrote to the Higher Education Department, admitting its inability to pay employees and demanding additional funds.⁷³

In October, the Water and Sanitation Services Peshawar requested the district government to release PKR 2.1 billion in outstanding funds, required to pay its employees.⁷⁴ Over 1,300 doctors and staffers employed at three medical training institutes in the Swabi district protested a delay in salary payments.⁷⁵

Reopening of mines. In June, the federal government announced the reopening of 62 coal mines in the Kurram district, with employment opportunities for over 5,000 workers projected.⁷⁶

People living with disabilities

The provision of rights to persons living with disabilities (PLWDs) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa saw little progress during 2023. A report in January stated that while Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was home to 149,917 registered PWDs, ramps and braille markers meant to assist their navigation remained missing from most public and private buildings despite court orders.⁷⁷

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Model Building By-Law 2017 mandating ramps for PWDs remained largely unenforced while a draft bill, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Empowerment of PWDs, tabled in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly in 2021, remained unpassed in 2022 and 2023.

In May, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa caretaker chief minister addressing a gathering of special children, admitted that there was a lack of facilities for them in the province and urged public-private partnerships to deliver an inclusive environment for children with special needs. The same month, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa governor distributed fee-waiver certificates to 60 differently abled students enrolled at the Khyber Medical University to support their progress in various specialization programmes.⁷⁸

Refugees and internally displaced persons

Expulsion of Afghan refugees. Announcing the ‘Illegal Foreigners’ Repatriation Plan’ in October, the federal government set 1 November 2023 as the deadline for undocumented refugees to ‘return voluntarily’.⁷⁹ The directive was said to have been directed at illegal Afghan refugees, who were thought to be somehow responsible for Pakistan’s worsening security situation. This created a chaotic situation related to the rights of refugees, security and emigration in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

According to official statistics in the last quarter of 2023, Pakistan was home to over 1.5 million documented and over 0.7 million undocumented Afghan refugees. Residing in 29 districts and 43 refugee camps across the province, the number of Afghan refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa exceeded 0.7 million, with over 0.3 million remaining undocumented.⁸⁰

The Commissionerate of Afghan Refugees reported over 1.5 million refugees from Afghanistan arriving in Pakistan following the takeover by the Taliban government in 2021, including transit passengers and those seeking political asylum.

According to a report in November, over 317,000 undocumented Afghan refugees had been repatriated within the first four weeks of the policy, with 212,000 crossing through the Torkham border in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 105,000 through Chaman in Balochistan.⁸¹ Government officials in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan said they would continue this effort into 2024.

Police authorities raided areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with large Afghan populations, resorting to indiscriminate arrests and extortion.⁸² Artists and rights activists gathered in Peshawar, urging authorities to indefinitely delay deportation of musicians as their freedom to express and perform would be heavily curtailed under Taliban rule. In November, unannounced closures of the Torkham crossing left hundreds of refugees, including pregnant women and children, in the cold struggling to find shelter with little support.⁸³ Refugees near border areas reported unprecedented hikes in prices of food stuff and medicines, demanding government intervention to ensure affordability. Jail authorities in Peshawar reported the release and deportation of over 50 Afghan inmates, denying them the right to seek legal remedies.

In November, JUI-F leader Fazlur Rehman accused the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government of blackmailing documented Afghan refugees, with their properties being allegedly seized to force their return.⁸⁴ Local authorities in the Peshawar district issued strict guidelines for property agents, warning them against arranging rental homes and shops for undocumented refugees, with mosques instructed to make announcements informing such refugees to ensure their return. To nab them, authorities in the Peshawar district utilized geo-mapping tools to process the whereabouts of over 9,000 illegal immigrants.

Amid the forced exodus of Afghan refugees and its financial difficulties, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government in November requested the federal government for PKR 1 billion to ensure efficiency in the repatriation process, citing the prime minister's earlier promise of ensuring that every province would bear equal expense for this exercise.⁸⁵

Internally displaced persons. In February, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Provincial Disaster Management Authority released PKR 352 million in cash financial assistance to be distributed among 18,000 registered persons displaced and affected by the Zarb-e-Azb operation in North Waziristan.



SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS

Education

Irregular funding for public schools and infrastructural damage to educational establishments caused by natural disasters affected the adequate provision of accessible education to students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023.

Inadequate infrastructure and facilities. With only one college for girls in the Bajaur district, accessibility to higher education remained a challenge and, according to some reports, about 500 female students are forced to terminate their education each year. In May, FATA University, the only higher education institution in the newly merged districts, was catering to its 800 enrolled students in just 10 rooms of a government college since 2016. The same month, strong winds uprooted makeshift tents, housing classes for 20,000 students in Bara put up as a temporary solution after school buildings were damaged because of Lashkar-i-Islam's activities.



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In May, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Disaster Management Authority held a meeting with non-governmental organizations in Peshawar to strategize the establishment of 47 temporary schools in Tirah Valley of the Khyber district. In June, some schools were reopened after nine years in Upper Bara in the Khyber district for children of returning families displaced by militancy.

In August, a study highlighted the lack of educational establishments for Afghan girls in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Research showed that there was no dedicated secondary school for Afghan girls in Haripur, despite a refugee population of over 100,000.

The same month, seven children had to be rescued after being stuck in a cable car for 16 hours in Battagram. The cable car, part of the children's daily travel to attend school, malfunctioned at a height of over 180 meters.

Shortage of schoolbooks. Financial difficulties affected the provision of learning in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's public sector schools during 2023. In January, printing companies stopped printing 60 million school textbooks over PKR 7 billion unpaid dues out of PKR 10 billion by the government.⁸⁶

In April, public schools in the Khyber district were directed to return 30 percent of government-provided textbooks, which were then redistributed to other schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In July, in a meeting in Peshawar attended by the prime minister, a laptop scheme was launched for students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Reduced inclusivity. In February, the administration of Gomal University issued a directive banning all interaction and mixed gatherings between male and female students. The directive also prohibited students from organizing political events.

In a statement, HRCP took exception to the banning, saying that such segregation would reinforce a culture of ignorance and inequality. In April, the Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Women University in the Upper Dir district banned students from wearing jeans and tights while on campus, warning violators would face a fine of PKR 1,000.

Unpaid salaries. Several public protests and rallies were held by public sector schoolteachers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during 2023. In January, 234 male and 108 female double-shift teachers in Bajaur demanded payment of salaries pending since August 2022.

In May, teachers employed at 1,447 community schools across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa protested and threatened a strike if their financial issues remained unaddressed,⁸⁷ putting at risk accessible education to 55,000 students.⁸⁸

Over 1,500 teachers employed at these schools had not been paid since 2021. In July, the All Primary Teachers Association of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, representing teachers from all 34 districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, established a jirga to hold talks with the government and political parties to prioritize primary educational facilities and the welfare of teachers.

Health

Viruses. Responding to a rise in Covid-19 cases and concurrent emergence of newer variants, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Health Department in January resumed random screenings at the Peshawar Airport and border crossings with Afghanistan.⁸⁹ For the remainder of the year, various reports indicated dozens of positive Covid-19 cases but no fatal casualties. In February, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response Cell sought PKR 900 million in additional funds to upgrade the province's public diagnostic infrastructure, an essential service for controlling viral outbreaks.

According to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Health Department, 2023 marked a 97 percent decline in dengue cases in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with 747 confirmed cases reported compared to 22,960 cases and 18 fatalities in 2022.⁹⁰ Unfortunately, there was a resurgence of polio cases in Pakistan, with four out of the six total cases reported in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Bannu and Orakzai districts.⁹¹

Sehat Card. Costing the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government PKR2.5 billion a month, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Health Department released PKR 4 billion in February to the State Life Insurance Corporation for the continuation of health services insured under the Sehat Card.⁹²

Following complaints of substandard facilities in April, the government decided to assess empanelled hospitals for delisting under the Sehat Card Plus programme.⁹³ Government hospitals in the province reported increased revenues from the Sehat Card Plus, a micro-health insurance programme for all citizens of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.⁹⁴

In August, the State Life Insurance Corporation suspended payments to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's public hospitals for insured treatments owing to non-payment of dues by the government.⁹⁵ In September, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Health Department clarified that the Sehat Card Plus services would be offered to individuals earning a monthly remuneration of less than PKR 37,000, making 35 percent of the province's residents liable to pay partial health costs under a cost-sharing policy.

In October, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government delisted over 70 private hospitals listed under the Sehat Card Plus programme, with the delisted hospitals failing to meet a standardised criteria.⁹⁶

Outsourcing hospitals. In January, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Health Department suspended the process of outsourcing the management of 58 public hospitals assessed as 'low performing' by the World Bank, prioritizing payments to already contracted health facilities.⁹⁷ In March, the department urged the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa cabinet to approve outsourcing of these 58 hospitals.

In February, private administrations of 11 public hospitals in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa threatened to suspend medical services over non-payment of outstanding dues.⁹⁸ In May, an outsourced public hospital in the Kohistan district suspended its services citing lack of funds. In November, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Health Department flouted tenders to privatize the management of eight public hospitals in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's tribal districts and the Chitral district.

Counterfeit medicines. In January, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Health Department seized over 300,000 counterfeit intravenous cannulas and their packaging material from a private company's warehouse in Peshawar district.⁹⁹ In October, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Drug Control Cell inspected over 1,500 drug formulations in the Peshawar district through the use of mobile laboratories, identifying over 60 as unsafe for consumption.¹⁰⁰ The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Health Department found anomalies in the procurement of medicines worth PKR 5 billion for public hospitals, raising fears of heightened distribution of unsafe drugs and medical supplies.

Mental health. In November, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's first mental health-specific infrastructure, the Institute of Mental Health Sciences, was inaugurated in Peshawar. The institute will provide specialized outpatient, intensive care, psychiatric, counselling and rehabilitation services to residents dealing with mental health issues.

Addiction. According to statistics issued by government in 2023, 11 percent of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's population suffers from drug abuse.¹⁰¹ In September, according to a report published by *The News*, methamphetamine users in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are on the rise, with police authorities claiming to arrest hundreds of drug dealers in 2023. In November, a seminar in the Mansehra district stressed the necessity of combating drug abuse among Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's youth.

Housing and public amenities

Illegal housing schemes. Illegal housing projects remained a problem in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023, with 297 of 442 housing societies across the province declared illegal by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Rural Development Department in December. This led to cases being filed by hundreds of citizens in the PHC who claimed that they had been misinformed and defrauded by unauthorized land-purchase schemes.

Anti-encroachment. Drives against encroachment on public land continued throughout the year. In January, the mayor of Peshawar announced 40 open courts to address public complaints regarding encroached land and logistical difficulties.¹⁰² Over 151 acres of state land was recovered in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by the railway department during anti-encroachment operations in the Peshawar, Rashakai and Mardan districts.¹⁰³ An operation during October in Peshawar's Board

Bazaar area targeting roadside stalls triggered protests, with rights activists claiming the drive targeted Afghan refugees who had worked there since the 1980s.

Environment

Rains and floods. As many as 40 persons were killed by rain, flash floods and dust storms that hit Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023. These included 16 children, two women and 22 men after roofs of houses collapsed or were swept away by floods in the Swat, Bajaur, Kalam, Mardan, and Malakand districts. Heavy rains and windstorms triggered flash floods and landslides, causing widespread damage to properties, including hotels, vehicles, livestock and crops.

Complaints of inadequate government assistance abounded. The scenic tourist destination of Kalam sustained extensive damages. In response to complaints registered by the residents of Bajaur, Malakand and Swat regarding delays in the reconstruction of damaged properties and infrastructure, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government launched a dedicated Climate Change Cell with assistance from international donors in July to counteract the effects of the phenomenon and address post-flood reconstruction campaigns.¹⁰⁴ In June, federal Minister for Climate Change Sherry Rehman warned that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan would be majorly affected in the coming years by melting and disappearing glaciers, and urged for the regions to be formally prepared for adverse climate-induced natural disasters and how to manage them.

Air pollution. Air quality in Peshawar was categorized as 'very hazardous' by the Peshawar Clean Air Alliance in November.¹⁰⁵ Construction of a bus transit corridor and unprocessed emissions from stubble burning, motor vehicles and brick kilns were listed as key causes of growing respiratory ailments.

Earthquakes. Some instances of earthquakes rattled residents and properties in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including at least two serious ones, one in January that had a magnitude of 5.5 on the Richter scale and one in March which was registered at 6.8.¹⁰⁶ These quakes killed at least 10 persons and injured over 150, with dozens of buildings sustaining considerable damages. Affected areas included Peshawar, Chitral, Dir, Abbottabad, Mardan, Buner, Khyber, Orakzai, and Kurram.

Endnotes

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BALUCHISTAN



HIGHLIGHTS

- Enforced disappearances remained an egregious human rights violation, with short-term disappearances being used increasingly to silence dissent, compounded by impunity for perpetrators.
- Baloch militants continued to launch attacks on security forces, but also killed civilians either on suspicion of being ‘state informants’ or to instil a general climate of fear.
- Insurgent and religiously motivated outfits carried out at least 110 attacks in the province, killing 229 and wounding 282.
- In November, six Punjabi labourers were shot dead by unidentified men in Turbat.
- Women remained especially vulnerable to violence, with an alarmingly high rate of domestic violence at 48 percent.
- Baloch women activists played a key role in mobilizing local communities in protest against enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in Turbat as well as the arrest of Haq Do Tehreek chief Maulana Hidayatur Rehman in Gwadar.
- Several political leaders—among them JUI-F leader Hafiz Hamadullah and Jamaat-e-Islami chief Sirajul Haq—survived near-fatal attacks in different parts of Balochistan, including Zhob and Mastung.
- A prolonged armed battle in the Wadh area of Khuzdar saw rival groups under Shafiq-ur-Rahman Mengal and Sardar Akhtar Mengal taking positions against one another. At least ten persons lost their lives amid heavy exchanges of fire and mortar shelling. Shafiq Mengal, an allegedly establishment-backed tribal leader and politician, has been accused of running ‘death squads’ in the province.
- In September, six football players travelling from Dera Bugti to Sibi were abducted by unknown armed assailants. All of them were later released.
- A jailbreak in July in Chaman revealed that prison security remained precarious: 13 under-trial prisoners escaped.
- The provincial caretaker government included Jamal Raisani as a minister, who did not have a Pakistani national identity card at the time of taking his oath of office.
- The local government system remained dysfunctional through the year, constrained by insufficient budgets.

- In a positive development, a women’s police station was established in Turbat.
- The shortage of teachers in government-run schools remained a grave concern, rendering at least 3,500 schools unable to provide students with educational services.
- An estimated 81,000 children were reportedly subjected to child labour in brick kilns in Balochistan.



OVERVIEW

As in previous years, the practice of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings remained a particularly serious concern in the province of Balochistan, with impunity for the perpetrators and indifference on the part of the government.

Towards the end of 2023, however, young Baloch rights activists—led by Baloch women associated with the Baloch Yakjehti Council and Voice for Baloch Missing Persons—mobilized around the extrajudicial killing of a Baloch youth allegedly at the hands of the Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) in November. A long march was organized from Turbat to Islamabad, where several hundred activists set up camp in December. They were subjected to harassment and their right to freedom of peaceful assembly continually violated in the form of violent police action.

Baloch residents continued to exercise their right to protest despite state crackdowns. A fierce tribal clash between rival factions of the Mengal tribe in Wadh unleashed a wave of protests by the Balochistan National Party (BNP-M).



A clash between two Mengal tribes in Wadh unleashed a wave of protests by the BNP-M.

In Gwadar, the Haq Do Tehreek continued to demand action against state-led rights violations, including enforced disappearances, hyper-securitization and failure to ensure people's access to livelihoods, schools, healthcare and electricity.

The political situation in the country was echoed in Balochistan. PTI workers blocked various roads across the province as the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan sparked a country-wide protest in May.

At least 44 PTI workers were arrested in the first wave while police raided the homes of the former governor Zahoor Agha and deputy speaker Qasim Khan Suri.¹ As a result of firing by the police on protesting PTI workers in Quetta, at least one party worker was killed.²

The rule of law in the province remained poor. In a case that sparked a national outcry, provincial lawmaker Sardar Abdul Rehman Khetran was accused of detaining people in private jails as well as sexually assaulting and killing family members of an employee who had not complied with his wishes.³

Additionally, separatist outfits continued to create fear, with major attacks reported on security check-posts in Harnai, Chaman, Bolan, Quetta, and parts of Makran division.

A suicide attack on a police convoy in Bolan claimed the lives of nine police personnel, while over 50 people, including civilians were killed in a suicide attack near a mosque in Mastung. The climate of fear was compounded by attacks attributed to religious far-right outfits in Zhob and Mastung.

The grip of the military establishment was seen mirrored in the appointment of Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar as caretaker prime minister in August.

Many political analysts and politicians connected the appointment to Kakar's previous position within the establishment-backed Balochistan Awami Party (BAP).⁴



RULE OF LAW

Laws and law-making

Laws passed. The Balochistan Assembly passed seven acts in 2023, including the Balochistan Daanish Schools and Centres of Excellence Authority Act, which allowed the establishment of Daanish schools across the province,⁵ and the Balochistan Local Government (Amendment) Act.

Resolution passed. The year was also marked by the adoption of several resolutions by the provincial assembly, including one calling for an end to discrimination against ‘non-locals’ (people not of Baloch origin who had nonetheless been resident in the province for decades).⁶

Many lawmakers remained concerned about the financial crisis prevailing in the province. Despite an appeal for financial aid to alleviate the situation of people affected by the 2022 floods, the federal government remained indifferent to repeated requests from the provincial assembly to increase Balochistan’s share of the National Finance Commission award to PKR 50 billion.⁷

In two subsequent resolutions, the provincial government was asked to exempt mosques, government schools and seminaries from electricity and gas bills⁸ and urged to enhance women’s quota in government departments from 5 to 30 percent.⁹

The provincial government also passed a resolution supporting the decision to hold general elections.¹⁰ In July, a house committee was formed to assess the demands of protesting teachers at Bolan Medical College, who had demanded that their contracts be regularized.¹¹

Administration of justice

Cases pending. According to the Law and Justice Commission Pakistan, at the start of the year, the Balochistan High Court had a backlog of 4,471 cases, and during 2023, a total of 6,659 new cases were filed with the court and 6,177 cases disposed of. As of December 2023, a total of 5,012 cases were pending for adjudication at the high court. The district judiciary had a backlog of 16,020 cases at the start of the year. A total of 64,804 new cases were filed with the province’s district courts during 2023, with courts disposing of 63,957 cases in the same period. At the end of the year, 17,818 cases were pending at the district tier.

Pleas and petitions. The year began with the Supreme Court of Pakistan admitting a plea for regular hearing from the Balochistan government against the appointment of the special assistant to the chief minister.¹²

In 2018, the Balochistan government had passed the Special Assistants to the Chief Minister Balochistan Act to create legal grounds for such appointments. In 2020, the Balochistan High Court had declared this act null and void. The provincial government had then appealed to the Supreme Court against the verdict.

In March, the Balochistan High Court debarred the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) from continuing with by-polls in the NA-265 constituency after PTI president Qasim Khan Suri filed a petition seeking to suspend an ECP order de-notifying him from his seat.¹³

A division bench of the Balochistan High Court stopped the allotment of 15,000 acres of land in the command area of Winder in Hub district. A petition was filed by National Assembly member Mohammad Aslam Bhootani against the allotment of the land, which was deemed a violation of land rights.¹⁴

In May, the Balochistan High Court started hearing a petition against former Prime Minister Imran Khan, seeking his trial for high treason under Article 6 of the Constitution.¹⁵ The case was later adjourned by the court. In June, Khan was indicted in yet another case related to the murder of a senior lawyer.¹⁶ The court upheld Khan's arrest warrant.¹⁷ Subsequently, the court issued sedition notices against Khan for not complying with a Supreme Court order dated 7 April 2022, concerning the dissolution of the National Assembly.¹⁸



ENFORCEMENT OF LAW

Law and order

Crime statistics. Gender-based violence and other crimes continued to be committed in the province during 2023 (see Table 1). According to the provincial police, there were 137 law enforcement personnel killed in attacks by militants in 2023.

HRCP's media monitoring for 2023 also recorded at least two cases of domestic violence, 14 cases of sexual violence, 22 'honour' killings and 43 murders (associated with femicide) that reportedly took place in the province.

Table 1: Crime statistics for Balochistan in 2023

Offense	Number
Rape	24 victims
'Honour' killings	28 victims
Blasphemy cases	4 cases
Police encounters	9 cases

Source: Balochistan Police, in response to HRCP's request for information

In terms of gender parity, the police shared that their law enforcement personnel included 37,920 men, 889 women and one transgender person.

Private jails run by lawmaker. In a horrifying incident, on 21 February, police raided the house of the provincial minister for communication and works, Sardar Abdur Rehman Khetran, after several bodies—one woman and three children—were found in a well near the minister's house. The raid came after Marri tribesmen entered the Red Zone in Quetta to protest the killings. The victims were said to be family members of Muhammad Khan Marri, formerly Khetran's private guard. Marri accused Khetran of killing his family members and keeping five of his siblings in private jails.¹⁹ In June, five people working on the installation of a water pipeline in the Gaza area of Kalat were kidnapped by unknown armed men.²⁰

High levels of militancy. The province stood the second-most affected in terms of law and order after Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Insurgents and religiously motivated outfits carried out at least 110 attacks in the province, killing 229 and wounding 282.²¹

Suicide bombings continued to hit the province, with direct attacks by insurgent groups on security forces. In two separate incidents, the office of the National Database and Registration Authority in Kech was

attacked twice, first in January and then in March.²² A subsequent attack (using a remote-controlled improvised explosive device) targeted the son of a PTI provincial assembly member, Sardar Khan Rind. Although he survived, his private guards were killed.²³ On 12 September, two consecutive blasts in Quetta left four people dead and 21 injured. The first attack was carried out by the banned separatist outfit, the Balochistan Liberation Army, which had targeted police officer Naseer Ahmed Shah.

In a high-profile attack, the Jamaat-e-Islami emir Sirajul Haq survived a suicide bombing in Zhob district in May.²⁴ In July, militants carried out attacks in Zhob and Sui, which left 12 soldiers dead.²⁵ In the same month, a terrorist attack in Zhob Cantt was repulsed by security forces.²⁶ However, earlier in March, nine constabulary personnel in Bolan lost their lives when their convoy was hit by a suicide bomber riding an explosive-laden motorbike.²⁷ In another attack in Kuchlak, four CTD personnel were killed when armed militants said to be involved in the Bolan bombing—cordoned off by security forces—resorted to indiscriminate firing.²⁸ A landmine blast in August killed seven people in Panjgur, including a union council chairman. The mine was reportedly planted by militants.²⁹

On 28 September, a deadly suspected suicide attack in Mastung killed 53 people and left hundreds injured. The bombing was claimed by the proscribed outfit, the Islamic State. The attack targeted a large gathering of Sunni sect adherents who were to leave for an Eid Milad-un-Nabi rally in Mastung.³⁰

Three more incidents took place in September. Six football players were abducted by armed assailants while travelling from Dera Bugti to Sibi.³¹ By October, all six had been released. JUI-F leader Hafiz Hamadullah came under attack in Mastung.³² The province also witnessed an intense battle between the Abro and Lehri tribes in the Kachhi area of Dera Murad Jamali.³³

In November, six Punjabi labourers in Turbat were shot dead by unidentified men.³⁴ In a second incident, 24 soldiers lost their lives when two security force vehicles came under heavy attack in Gwadar.³⁵ Subsequently, in another attack on a security check-post, militants took three policemen hostage.³⁶

Tribal clashes. Apart from militant attacks, the province saw a surge in violent tribal clashes. In the Wadh area of Khuzdar, two rival factions of the Mengal tribe engaged in heavy firing and mortar shelling, which continued for several months from August to October.

At least ten people, including ordinary commuters along the Quetta-Karachi Highway, lost their lives in the prolonged armed battle, while much of the town was forced to close for long stretches.³⁷ By the end of the year, the violence had largely subsided.

Jails and prisons

A total of 12 jails were operational in Balochistan during 2023 according to the Balochistan Prisons Department. These prisons housed 1,631 under-trial prisoners, 964 convicted prisoners and seven juvenile inmates against a sanctioned capacity of 2,764. Of the persons on death row, 74 were jailed for murder. Overall, the total inmates included 2,716 men, 41 women and 11 children living with their mothers in jail.

In terms of maintaining a safe and healthy environment across jails in Balochistan, some initiatives included reforms to convert prisons into vocational training centres³⁸ and the decision to have at least one male and one female doctor in each jail. Balochistan has 11 jails in all, of which only one has a doctor.³⁹ A jailbreak in July in Chaman, in which 13 under-trial prisoners managed to escape, indicated the precarious security in the province's jails.⁴⁰

Enforced disappearances

Continued enforced disappearances remained cause for grave concern in Balochistan in 2023, including short-term disappearances, which were calculated to instil fear among dissidents, political workers and rights activists. While dozens of new cases were reported throughout Balochistan, there were some instances in which victims returned home. There were also reports of alleged extrajudicial killings of forcibly disappeared people, especially after any major attacks carried out by Baloch militants. As in previous years, Baloch activists continued to demand an end to enforced disappearances and accountability for those involved in this practice, adding that people deemed guilty of any crime should be produced before a court and their right to due process upheld.

Number of cases. According to the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, there have been 2,752 cases reported in the province since 2011 till date, of which 1,990 were resolved with the victims returning home, two traced to internment centres, 20 traced to prisons, and 37 disposed of after the victims' dead bodies were found. As of the end of 2023, the commission has 468 pending enforced disappearance cases left to resolve. HRCP has continued to maintain that the number of cases is likely vastly underreported. According to the organization Defence of Human Rights, as of end-December, out of 82 people reported as having been forcibly disappeared from Balochistan, the whereabouts of 67 remained unknown, 12 had been released, two traced and one extrajudicially killed.⁴¹

Provincial commission. In January, following a Balochistan High Court order, the provincial government formed the first-ever commission to tackle enforced disappearances. At its first meeting, the commission decided to extend its support to the families of missing persons in the province.⁴²

However, no mention was made of financial compensation for victims or their families. Disappointingly, the commission remained in hibernation through the rest of the year.

Cases of enforced disappearance. Despite the constitution of such a commission, illegal abductions of Baloch citizens continued. In January, the bodies of two missing Baloch youth were found. Both Sarang Marri and Waheed Zehri had been missing for over a month.⁴³ On 3 February, Rashida Bibi, along with her husband, mother and two siblings, were abducted from their home in Quetta. Rashida, her mother and her children were subsequently released but her husband remained missing.⁴⁴

In July, Salim Baloch, a Punjab University history graduate, and his friend, Ikram Naem, were abducted from their homes in Turbat, allegedly by security agency personnel. Similarly, Shams Baloch, a student at Sargodha University, was forcibly disappeared from Khuzdar in August. Two days later, his uncle Fazal Yaqoob Baloch was reportedly disappeared after unidentified persons broke into his home and threatened his family. Both were released several days later.

Raising concerns over the lack of resolution of cases of enforced disappearance, the BNP-M warned in February that the party would part ways with the federal government if the issue was not resolved.⁴⁵ In April, the Young Doctors Association held a protest in Quetta, demanding the release of two doctors, Nabi Dad Bugti and Fayyaz Laskhari, who had been kidnapped from Ziarat by armed men.⁴⁶ In July, HRCP member Salim Baloch was abducted from Turbat.⁴⁷ In the same month, a Baloch youth, Shahan, went missing from Kalat.



In April, the Young Doctors Association held a protest in Quetta, demanding the release of two doctors who had been kidnapped from Ziarat by armed men.



FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

Freedom of assembly

The province remained in the grip of prolonged protests and sit-ins. Hundreds of women rallied against the arrest of Haq Do Tehreek chief Maulana Hidayatur Rehman in Gwadar, after he was taken into custody in January on charges of attempted murder, which his supporters alleged were fabricated.⁴⁸

In another incident, the highway connecting Karachi to Quetta was blocked by protesters in Dalbandin, Chagai, after the murder of a Baloch youth, Sanaullah Notezai, allegedly by sectarian outfit Jaish-ul-Adl.⁴⁹

In the same month, protesters in Wadh, Khuzdar district, blocked the highway connecting Khuzdar to Karachi for 20 hours after the killing of two persons associated with the BNP-M, Kahor Khan and Ali Ahmed.⁵⁰

As tension in Wadh escalated, BNP-M chief Sardar Akhtar Mengal vowed to lead a long march to Quetta in protest. The provincial government imposed Section 144, preventing assemblies, and citing growing security concerns in the province.⁵¹

Highly charged PTI workers led protests in Quetta after the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan sparked countrywide protests in May.⁵² At least one PTI worker was killed and six injured as protestors burnt two police vehicles and were tear-gassed in return. In July, owing to the unrest in Wadh, Khuzdar, BNP-M supporters protested along the N-70 highway, calling for an end to lawlessness and extortion.⁵³ Protestors also demonstrated in July against the alleged enforced disappearance of a Baloch youth from Kalat, who had gone missing in 2022.⁵⁴

Soaring electricity bills also ignited protests, with traders in Quetta demanding a reduction in bills.⁵⁵ In November, several landowners blocked roads at multiple locations in Quetta to protest prolonged power outages.⁵⁶

Protest against extrajudicial killing. Notably in late November, Turbat saw large-scale protests against the alleged extrajudicial killing of 24-year-old Balaach Mola Baksh, who was in the CTD's custody when he was killed. The protests gathered rapid momentum and morphed into a long march led by the Baloch Yakjehti Committee to Islamabad.⁵⁷ Hundreds of young women and men mobilized around demands for an end to enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, with rights activist Mahrang Baloch playing a key role.

Despite constant high-handed attempts by the state apparatus to prevent them from reaching the capital – including arrests and baton charges en

route that left many injured—the protestors reached Islamabad on 20 December. There, the police used excessive force against protestors trying to enter the city as well as those camped outside the National Press Club: teargas, water cannons and batons were used and attempts made to forcibly load the protestors onto Quetta-bound buses.⁵⁸ Over 300 people, including women, children, students, and the elderly, were arbitrarily detained.

Freedom of expression

The state of freedom of expression in the province remained, as in previous years, markedly poor. An investigative news report revealed that most media persons were unwilling to go on the record even to discuss curbs on press freedom, saying that there were myriad actors, including security forces, separatist groups and tribal chiefs who, if angered by a news report, were likely to resort to violence to prevent such reportage.

Reporting on facts, especially with respect to security operations, was deemed virtually impossible, while issues such as enforced disappearances were rarely covered, with the broadcast media unable to do so at all. The situation was compounded by poor working conditions in the shape of low wages and little security when reporting from conflict zones. The Balochistan Union of Journalists reportedly had only 145 members, including four women.⁵⁹

In December, Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement chief Manzoor Pashteen was arrested by police in Chaman on his way to Quetta, reportedly to express solidarity with the Baloch Yakjehti Committee march against enforced disappearances. He had just addressed a sit-in organized by the All Parties Tajir Mehnat Kash. Reports suggest that both the police and Pashteen's security detail exchanged fire.⁶⁰

Unlike Sindh, Balochistan was unable to enact a provincial law to secure the safety of media personnel due to procedural delays. On 12 September, the Balochistan Union of Journalists expressed its concern over the safety of journalists breaking news from Balochistan.⁶¹

Situation of religious minorities

The situation of religious minorities remained largely the same. The government was relatively active, however, in bringing some relief to minority communities in the province.

In August, the provincial government announced an increase in the job quota for religious minorities from 2 to 5 percent.⁶² Earlier, in April, it had allocated PKR 300 million for the renovation of the centuries-old Haglaj Mata temple in Lasbela.⁶³

In Quetta's Shanti Nagar area, the lower-caste Hindu Lachi community remained confined to makeshift homes, with poor access to livelihood opportunities, water and sanitation, and electricity. The community has waited years to complete the construction of a local temple, but their efforts have been hampered by insufficient funds, bureaucratic hurdles and lack of prioritization by the authorities.⁶⁴



DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Political participation

By-election. Political events gained momentum in early February, with a by-election held in constituency NA-265 after it fell vacant when PTI MNA Qasim Khan Suri was de-notified by the ECP. Some 32 candidates submitted their nomination papers, including Mahmood Khan Achakzai, head of the PKMAP, Qasim Khan Suri, Rahila Hameed Durrani of the PML-N, Ali Muhammad Jatak of the PPP and Muhammad Jamal of the BNP.⁶⁵

PPP ranks swell. A broader political change in Balochistan was observed in January as many political stalwarts began to join the ranks of the PPP after being invited to do so by co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari. In the same month, former provincial ministers Nawabzada Gazin Marri and Tahir Mahmood, coordinator to the Balochistan chief minister Nawabzada Jamal Raisani and Mir Fareed Raisani joined the PPP. Former chief minister Mir Qudoos Bizenjo had already announced he would join the party.⁶⁶

PTI-led violent protests and disproportionate state response. Following former Prime Minister Imran Khan's arrest in May and ensuing riots countrywide, former deputy speaker of the National Assembly, Qasim Khan Suri, provincial minister Mobeen Khilji and other PTI leaders were booked for inciting violence in the province, after a series of protests in Quetta in which at least one person was killed.

According to the police, 70 PTI workers and leaders were arrested for their alleged involvement in violent protests in Quetta and other parts of the province.⁶⁷ Similar to several other PTI leaders, Sardar Yar Muhammad Rind, a member of the Balochistan Assembly, strongly condemned the 9 May riots and called for action against those responsible.⁶⁸

Caretaker government. In August, while the country's political landscape remained tense, caretaker governments were installed at the centre as well as in Balochistan and Sindh. The nomination of a member of the BAP, Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, as caretaker prime minister raised concerns, given the BAP's reported backing by the military establishment.⁶⁹ After a long delay, Ali Mardan Domki was made caretaker chief minister of Balochistan in August.⁷⁰

Towards the end of the year, once the general elections had been announced, politicians began to put their weight behind the mainstream political parties.⁷¹ Some 30 politicians joined the PML-N⁷² including the former head of the BAP, Jam Kamal Khan Alyani. In contrast, Sarfraz Bugti, who was the caretaker interior minister, withdrew from his post and joined the PPP.⁷³

Local government

In February, with the completion of the third phase of local elections in Chagai, local government elections were completed in the province. Mayors of municipal corporations, chairmen and deputy chairmen of municipal committees and union councils were elected in 32 out of the province's 34 districts.⁷⁴

Elections could not be held in Quetta district due to the disputed delimitation of local government constituencies.⁷⁵ The local governments remained constrained, however, by insufficient budgets and were effectively dysfunctional on the ground.



RIGHTS OF THE DISADVANTAGED

Women

Gender-based violence. Violence against women continued to be reported through the year. In February, a man in Dera Murad Jamali killed his teenage daughter for refusing a marriage match.⁷⁶ In another incident in March, a 35-year-old woman was killed in Barkhan allegedly in the name of ‘honour’.⁷⁷ ‘Honour’ crimes and femicide did not ease as the year progressed.

In April, a man hanged his wife in the Sui area, claiming she had had illegal relations with another man.⁷⁸ In May, a man killed his wife and a male friend, accusing them of adultery.⁷⁹ In a separate incident in June, two women lost their lives when armed men barged into a house in Dera Murad Jamali, leaving two others injured.⁸⁰

Earlier in June, in a shocking incident, a teenage girl was sentenced to death by a local jirga in Chagai after being accused of ‘illegal’ relations with a man, who was spared.⁸¹

In August, 20-year-old Rukhsana was murdered by her father in the name of ‘honour’ in Mastung,⁸² while two minor girls were shot dead by unknown assailants in the Kachhi area of Dera Murad Jamali. The province was also ranked second after Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in terms of the incidence of domestic violence, estimated at 48 percent.⁸³

The Balochistan government made some efforts to mitigate violence against women in the province. One year after the establishment of the first women’s police station in Quetta in March 2022, a second women’s police station was established in Turbat in February.⁸⁴

Women’s political participation. In March, the provincial assembly adopted a resolution calling for an increase in the quota for women in government departments, enhancing it from 5 to 33 percent and establishing a separate women’s directorate at the divisional level to resolve problems encountered by women while performing their duties.⁸⁵

The spirit of the resolution was not reflected in much action on the ground, however. Women’s political participation in Balochistan remained low. In 2018, Balochistan had 1,813,241 female voters, and by 2023, the number increased to 2,316,804. Despite the increase, Balochistan still had the lowest number of female voters among all the provinces.⁸⁶

Transgender persons

In a bid to give relief to marginalised communities—including transgender persons—affected by the 2022 floods, the Trust for Democratic Education and Accountability, in collaboration with the

United Nations Development Programme, initiated a project under which 36,000 national identity cards and 49,000 replacement cards were to be released for the target groups in question.⁸⁷

Children

Violence against children. According to NGO Sahil's *Cruel Numbers* report, there were 4,213 cases of child sexual abuse reported in Pakistan during the year, 2 percent of which (at least 84 cases) took place in Balochistan.

HRCP's media monitoring also recorded two instances of corporal punishment against students reported in Balochistan—Gwadar and Quetta specifically. In one horrific incident in September, a 35-year-old woman in Quetta poisoned her four daughters before committing suicide.⁸⁸ In a separate incident, an eight-year-old child, the son of a daily-wage labourer, went missing in Khuzdar and was later found dead in the Nall area.⁸⁹

Child marriage. To counter early child marriage through legal reforms, the provincial government reportedly notified the Federal Shariat Court on 22 March that a bill prohibiting child marriage had been completed and would shortly be submitted to the provincial assembly for approval.

The draft law, known as the Balochistan Child Marriage Prohibition Act 2021, was brought to the fore during a 2022 suo motu hearing regarding the forced marriage of a five-year-old girl in Khuzdar. Following allegations that a resident of Khuzdar had married off his minor daughter under duress from tribal chiefs, the court had initiated the suo motu hearing. The provincial law officer of Balochistan was questioned about the steps being taken by the provincial legislature to prevent child marriage as well as forced marriage.⁹⁰

Child labour. According to reports, out of an estimated 700,000 children subjected to child labour in brick kilns across the country, 81,000 worked in brick kilns in Balochistan while 3,251 children were working in the agricultural sector.⁹¹

Labour

Mining accidents. Balochistan continued to witness a high number of mining accidents across the approximately 15,000 coal mines in the province. At least 36 mine workers were killed and 40 injured in Balochistan during 2023 according to HRCP's media monitoring (see Table 2).

In the first three months of 2023 alone, 30 miners lost their lives as a result of cave-ins, explosions or inhalation of poisonous gases.⁹² In Harnai in March, six coal miners were killed after exposure to poisonous

gas. In an unfortunate incident, the bodies of two coal miners trapped in a mine in Dukki were recovered after a 40-day-long rescue operation, reflecting the lack of adequate rescue equipment and expertise in this sector.⁹³

Table 2: Mining accidents in Balochistan in 2023

<i>Date</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Killed</i>	<i>Injured</i>
24 Jan	Harnai	-	1
25 Jan	Dukki	-	1
31 Jan	Dukki	1	-
10 Feb	Harnai	1	5
11 Feb	Dukki	3	-
27 Feb	Harnai	-	1
28 Feb	Harnai	4	3
4 Mar	Harnai	6	9
21 Mar	Dukki	2	-
4 Apr	Dukki	1	2
8 Apr	Harnai	1	-
26 Apr	Dukki	1	3
12 May	Harnai	1	-
14 May	Dukki	1	-
28 May	Dukki	1	3
28 May	Dukki	1	5
7 Jun	Harnai	-	1
25 Jun	Dukki	2	2
13 Jul	Mach	1	1
8 Aug	Dukki	2	-
14 Aug	Harnai	2	-
23 Aug	Harnai	-	1
29 Aug	Hub	-	1
15 Sep	Quetta	1	-
18 Sep	Quetta	1	-
20 Sep	Harnai	1	-
1 Dec	Quetta	2	1

Source: HRCP media monitoring.

Amid the province's deteriorating security, four coal miners were shot dead by unidentified armed assailants in Harnai in February.⁹⁴ The growing security problem in the province and around coal mines also caused many mines to close, leaving hundreds of workers unemployed. Security concerns were particularly high in the Margat coalfield in Bolan.⁹⁵



Out of an estimated 700,000 children subjected to child labour in brick kilns across the country, 81,000 worked in brick kilns in Balochistan.

Labour status of fisherfolk. In a positive development in January, the Balochistan government decided to give the province's fisherfolk community the status of labour, a key demand of the Gwadar-based Haq Do Tehreek. The decision was intended to secure the economic rights of fisherfolk in Balochistan by bringing them within the ambit of the province's labour laws and ILO conventions. The government also established a technical working group chaired by the secretary of the Fisheries and Coastal Development Department, which was tasked with introducing a new fisheries policy while revising the legal framework governing this sector.⁹⁶

Refugees

The number of registered Afghan refugees in Balochistan is over 300,000, according to UNHCR estimates.⁹⁷ Most refugees in the province are settled in residential areas outside the refugee camps. Many are engaged in business based on their identity cards.

After the caretaker federal government announced in October that all ‘illegal’ refugees were to be deported from the country, the provincial government launched a crackdown on refugees in the province, the overwhelming majority of whom were Afghan or of Afghan origin.

Five centres were established for the registration of Afghan refugees across Balochistan, including in Quetta. In November, the caretaker information minister claimed that around 66,000 ‘illegal’ immigrants had returned to Afghanistan through the Chaman border crossing, of which 26,000 ‘illegal’ immigrants had travelled to Chaman from Sindh.⁹⁸

Numerous Afghans complained of harassment by the Pakistani authorities, with many claiming that despite possessing the legal documents needed to stay, police and authorities were harassing them to leave Pakistan.⁹⁹ Reports from the field suggest that those being deported were kept in poor conditions in camps in Chaman before being deported to Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰



Education

Out-of-school children. Despite adopting legislation to institute Daanish schools for underprivileged children in the province, teacher absenteeism and the closure of over 3,000 government-run schools as a result of teacher shortages contributed to poor education indicators in 2023.¹⁰¹

The number of out-of-school children in Balochistan was estimated at 3.13 million,¹⁰² with a significant 78 percent of all girls out of school.¹⁰³ The 'ghost teachers' phenomenon continued to take a toll on education in the province: around 5,000 teachers were reportedly listed as 'ghost teachers'. In August, students in Barkhan and Naseerabad resorted to protesting publicly against the absence of teachers.¹⁰⁴

Higher education. Higher education in the province fared no better. In January, students closed the University of Turbat in protest against fee hikes announced by the administration.¹⁰⁵

Faculty at the University of Balochistan took to the streets in September to protest against the financial crisis being faced by the institution, which was unable to pay its faculty and could not increase tuition fees because this would prevent students from underprivileged backgrounds from attending. Teaching ground to a halt as a result.¹⁰⁶ The protests ended after the government provided a grant to the university, but the larger problem of resource constraints to higher education remains.

In June, students at Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University staged a protest against the administration, highlighting the lack of basic facilities at the institution.¹⁰⁷

In November, the Lasbela University of Agriculture, Water and Marine Sciences was plunged into chaos when clashes erupted between law enforcement personnel and students over a decision to impose stricter regulations at the university's hostels while increasing charges. The university remained closed as a result for several weeks.¹⁰⁸

Balochistan's higher education campuses remained heavily securitized as in previous years. Students continue to be banned from holding 'political' events and security agencies maintain a constant presence on campuses.¹⁰⁹

Schools after floods. Many schools hit by the devastating floods of 2022 remained in precarious condition and the rehabilitation process was either slow or unsatisfactory. Prior to the floods, there were over 30,260 primary, middle and high schools spread across the 34 districts of Balochistan.

Of these, 2,869 public schools were affected by the floods in 2022,¹¹⁰ although a UNICEF estimate puts this figure at around 6,000 schools. As a result, more than 386,600 students and 17,660 teachers and staff were significantly affected by damaged school infrastructure.¹¹¹

Data obtained from the Balochistan education department reveals that out of 12,260 schools (8,315 boys' schools and 3,425 girls' schools) and 520 co-educational schools surveyed after the 2022 floods, 61 percent had been affected: 8 percent had been destroyed, 6 percent left in poor and dangerous condition, 9 percent damaged but with some classrooms safe, and 37 percent partially damaged but considered safe.¹¹² The renovation and repair work on damaged schools was still in progress as of end-2023; most of these schools were located in Naseerabad division.



More than 386,600 students and 17,660 teachers and staff were significantly affected by damaged school infrastructure due to floods.

Health

The province's health infrastructure remained poor in 2023 as before. The 2022 floods and ensuing displacement and loss of homes and livelihoods were associated with poor mental health outcomes.¹¹³ A high incidence of malaria was also reported in Sohbatpur, which witnessed malaria outbreaks following the heavy floods that hit the district.¹¹⁴

Congo virus. In May, a woman in Quetta lost her life to the Congo virus. The spread of the virus set off alarm bells in government circles and the health ministry initiated an alert across the province.¹¹⁵

This state of affairs worsened to the extent that the authorities declared a two-week curfew on private slaughterhouses in Quetta, under Section 144. The authorities attempted to shift animal slaughter houses to facilities located away from densely populated regions in an effort to stop the virus from spreading further.

Two doctors tested positive for the Congo virus at the Civil Hospital in Quetta, bringing the total number of afflicted medical workers to eight by November.¹¹⁶ By year-end, however, the virus had been brought under control.

A health crisis persisted in Kech as 45 cases of dengue fever were reported by the authorities in June.¹¹⁷ The provincial health department declared an emergency in the Aranji area of Khuzdar district to contain a severe outbreak of diarrhoea in July.¹¹⁸

Health workers. Hospitals in the province were also affected by doctor absenteeism. In February, responding to the issue, the health ministry started disciplinary proceedings against 57 doctors.¹¹⁹

Moreover, the only cancer treatment facility in the province, Cenar in Quetta, suffered from a continuous shortage of essential cancer treatment medicines.¹²⁰

Health card. In January, the government announced it was launching a Balochistan 'health card'. This facility came at the cost of PKR 5.914 billion and was intended to provide health insurance facilities of up to PKR 1 million to 1.875 million families.¹²¹

Housing and public amenities

In a move to facilitate the fisherfolk community in Gwadar, the government approved a housing scheme in January under which the Gwadar Development Authority would allocate 200 acres for the establishment of homes for low-income fisherfolk families.¹²²

Environment

Flash floods. The province was hit by periodic climate change-induced flash floods between March and May, resulting in loss of life and property and the closure of roads.

In March, a family of eight was swept away and killed while trying to cross a seasonal stream in Awaran. On the same day, two others lost their lives after being washed away by a flash flood in Zhob.¹²³

In May, in 24 hours alone, eight people were killed in rain-related incidents across the province. Quetta, Lasbela, Khuzdar and Musa

Khel remained in the grip of heavy rainfall.¹²⁴ Two teenagers lost their lives in Panjgur after a wall collapsed in the rain and buried them both. Taking notice of the worsening situation, the prime minister announced an emergency in the province in May to prevent further loss of life.¹²⁵ However, as the monsoon hit the region in July, six people were killed in rain-related incidents.¹²⁶

On 27 July, heavy rains washed away several causeways in Pinjra Pull and Lasbela, bringing traffic between Balochistan and Sindh to a halt.¹²⁷ On the same day, the rains killed five more people.¹²⁸ In separate rain-related incidents in August, 11 people lost their lives and more than 400 houses were destroyed.¹²⁹

Earthquakes. The province remained prone to intermittent earthquakes. In one such incident in April, three members of a family lost their lives in Chaman when the roof of their house collapsed in the wake of a jolt.¹³⁰ In April, earthquake jolts were felt in Chaman and other parts of the province.¹³¹

According to surveys conducted by Foresight Research, a Karachi-based research organization, the province's residents are increasingly concerned about climate change in Balochistan. About 45 percent of respondents expressed concern over high rainfall, while 50 percent of respondents in Turbat cited 'less rainfall' as a major climate problem.¹³²

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ISLAMABAD CAPITAL TERRITORY



HIGHLIGHTS

- The Pakistan Democratic Movement government, especially towards the end of the National Assembly's tenure, displayed an unfortunate disregard for parliamentary procedures while enacting legislation, and in one ignominious example saw the introduction and passing of 28 bills in a single session.¹
- Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa's ascent to the Supreme Court's top saw the start of a much-needed and long-delayed streamlining of judicial affairs, from the acceptance of the previously suspended Supreme Court (Practice and Procedure) Act and movement on establishing selection criteria for judges, to the live transmission of court proceedings.
- The state's crackdown on the PTI became more concentrated after the party's violent reaction to Imran Khan's arrest on 9 May. The resulting assault on the PTI included dozens of enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions of party leaders and sympathizers, arrests of top leadership including several women, as well as a ban on uttering Khan's name on news channels by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority.
- Positively, the Islamabad High Court ruled the capital administration's frequent detentions under the controversial Maintenance of Public Order law, mostly of PTI leaders, as illegal.
- The much-hailed law guaranteeing rights and protection to the transgender community was struck down by the Federal Shariat Court, which declared some of its provisions opposed to Islam, depriving thousands of trans persons the ability to choose their gender identity.
- The Supreme Court's successive rulings guaranteeing the protection of disabled persons vis-à-vis the 3 percent job quota was a welcome development.
- The state and society's simmering xenophobia revealed itself when the caretaker government, lacking any popular mandate, ordered the expulsion of refugees said to be residing 'illegally' in the country, on the pretext of security.
- Protection of the city's Margalla Hills received a boost with the passing of a law that strengthened the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board, whereas the government's National Adaptation Plan was hailed as the first step towards combating the climate crisis.



OVERVIEW

The year 2023 was supposed to be the year of elections—instead, it witnessed an unfortunate resistance on this front from none other than the country's elected lawmakers themselves.

The PDM government not only attempted to delay the provincial elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by any means necessary, but also, in some ways, the general election. These undemocratic moves led the Supreme Court to once again interfere in the Parliament's affairs, leading to tit-for-tat moves between the two constitutional pillars. However, in the end the government prevailed in having its say, but at a steep cost for democracy.

The role of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) was also regrettable in this saga, from its failure to ensure timely elections to its inability to maintain a modicum of fairness regarding the state's crackdown after the PTI-led 9 May riots. The ECP also remained unable to hold local government elections in the capital, an exercise it has been attempting to undertake since 2021.

While the new chief justice of Pakistan raised hopes of systemic change in the administration of justice in the highest court, the Supreme Court's decision in December to continue with the trials of civilian suspects in military courts did not bode well for democracy and the rule of law. However, the elevation of another female judge, Justice Mussarat Hilali, in the Supreme Court in June was a welcome development in terms of improving gender parity.

In a case on prison conditions, the Supreme Court ruled in May that the probationary release of prisoners was a fundamental right made all the more essential when rampant overcrowding and the poor state of jails is taken into account.

Though unfortunate that it took a gruesome torture case of a minor domestic worker, the Islamabad High Court (IHC)'s hearing into the enforcement of child labour laws in the capital in November was another hopeful development that may result in ending this illegal practice.



RULE OF LAW

Laws and law-making

Laws passed. The country's 15th National Assembly stood dissolved on 10 August, three days before its term expired.² While parliament watchers appreciated the assembly's increased legislative output, repeated flouting of parliamentary procedure remained a hallmark of both the PTI and PDM governments.³ Nevertheless, several significant pieces of legislation were passed in 2023:

The Supreme Court (Practice and Procedure) Bill, passed by the National Assembly and Senate in March, curtailed powers of the Supreme Court chief justice in initiating suo motu proceedings.⁴ After the president returned the bill for being 'beyond the jurisdiction' of parliament,⁵ a joint sitting of parliament passed the bill again, ensuring it became a law regardless of presidential dissent.

However, the law was immediately suspended by the Supreme Court,⁶ only to be restored later in the year. The Elections Act (Amendment) Bill, passed in June, limited a lawmaker's disqualification under Article 62(1) (f) to five years, and empowered the ECP to set the date for polls without consulting the president.⁷

The Contempt of Majlis-e-Shoora (Parliament) Bill, passed in July, proposed six months' punishment for contempt of parliament or any of its committees.⁸ In a statement, HRCP criticized the law, saying it 'not only violates people's constitutional right to freedom of expression' but also makes it harder to hold elected representatives accountable.

The Pakistan Army (Amendment) Act was passed in July. The law amended the Pakistan Army Act 1952, fixing a five-year jail term for disclosing sensitive information related to the country's security or army. Senior Senator Raza Rabbani, while criticizing the haste in passing the 'blind legislation', termed it a 'black day' in parliamentary history.⁹

The Official Secrets (Amendment) Act 1923 was amended in August, granting intelligence agencies wide-ranging detention powers and expanding the mediums of communication pertaining to 'official documents' under the law.¹⁰

The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Amendment) Bill, passed in a joint sitting of parliament in August, expanded the definitions of disinformation and misinformation. The law also made substantial changes in PEMRA's structure and operations, while also tying the timely payment of media workers' dues with disbursement of government advertisements and streamlining the procedures to register and monitor TV ratings.¹¹

In its statement in early August, HRCP criticized the slew of hastily passed legislation. Among other things, it noted with concern that the Pakistan Army (Amendment) Act 2023 criminalized defamation of the armed forces, including online; violated the freedom of expression of retired military personnel as well as their right to participate in public life; sanctioned the armed forces' engagement in the 'national development and advancement of national or strategic interest'.

Likewise, it called the Official Secrets (Amendment) Act draconian in scope, giving intelligence agencies sweeping powers to enter and search any person or place without a warrant, violating people's right to privacy. Furthermore, the act may be used to indiscriminately charge people who have no intent of committing an offence, and it also broadened the scope for targeting dissidents and political rivals in the future.

Public hangings for rape. In September, the Senate's interior committee worryingly approved amendments stipulating the public hanging of rape convicts.¹² However, in December, the Senate's human rights committee passed a motion opposing public executions, arguing that the practice is not only inhumane but also fails to serve as a deterrent.¹³

Missing bills. In August, Senator Irfan Siddiqui demanded that a bill he authored – the Code of Criminal Procedure Amendment Act – be traced as it had been missing for over a year after being passed by parliament in 2022.¹⁴ In November, another bill – the Protection of Family Life and Wedlock Bill – passed by both houses of parliament was reported missing as the presidency said it had not received it.¹⁵

Administration of justice

Constitution of judicial benches. Controversy about the chief justice of Pakistan's (CJP) unfettered authority continued in 2023 when, in early February, after a nine-member bench hearing the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa elections delay case was reconstituted midway, four justices made their objections regarding the use of suo motu jurisdiction public.¹⁶

Similarly, in March, Justice Qazi Faez Isa, after the arbitrary reconstitution of his bench, sought procedural clarity about the formation of benches and refused to partake in further proceedings.¹⁷

Following CJP Umar Ata Bandial's retirement, Chief Justice Isa's first hearing was significant not only for its near-vacating of the court's April order suspending enforcement of the Supreme Court (Practice and Procedure) Act, but also because it was a full-court – something his predecessor had not ever undertaken despite calls to do so.¹⁸ Moreover, the hearing was also the first to be broadcast live – a practice which continued throughout the year for major cases.¹⁹

A few days later, the chief justice constituted a committee of judges to devise a mechanism to reduce pending cases and decide the fate of complaints against judges pending before the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC).²⁰

Misuse of power. In October, the five-member SJC issued a show-cause notice to Supreme Court Justice Mazahar Ali Naqvi over several complaints against him regarding misuse of power, which the judge denied.²¹ In December, in an unprecedented open hearing, the SJC gave him until January 2024 to respond.²²

Judges' appointments. In December, the CJP-headed Judicial Commission of Pakistan formed a committee to devise criteria for the appointment of superior court judges. Earlier on, the commission functioned in an opaque manner. The committee constituted is supposed to determine criteria for nomination and appointment of judges in a fairer and transparent manner.²³

Chief justice's powers. In October, the Supreme Court registrar declared that petitions challenging suo motu decisions can be filed as intra-court appeals as per the recently restored Supreme Court procedures law. The law also devolved the CJP's earlier sole authority to constitute benches and fix suo motu cases to a panel of three senior-most judges.²⁴ In its detailed judgment regarding the law's restoration, the court also rejected using the term 'master of the roster' for the CJP, reflecting their hitherto absolute power.²⁵

Second woman Supreme Court judge. In July, women's representation in the superior judiciary reached a new milestone as Peshawar High Court Chief Justice Mussarat Hilali—also the first woman to hold the position—took oath as a Supreme Court judge, becoming the second woman to do so after Justice Ayesha Malik in 2022. This increased the Supreme Court's strength to 16, out of the total 17 justices.²⁶

Upgraded court buildings. The new purpose-built building for the capital's district courts, after several delays, was finally inaugurated in November, prior to which the lower judiciary had been housed under ad hoc arrangements in a commercial area.²⁷

Pending cases. According to the Law and Justice Commission Pakistan, the Supreme Court began the year with 52,603 pending cases. Through the course of 2023, it instituted 20,425 cases and disposed of 16,988 cases. By the end of the year, the Supreme Court had 56,155 pending cases.

The net increase in cases pending for adjudication in the last six months of the year was 1.5 percent for the Supreme Court. In fact, the net pendency of cases across the different judicial tiers during the second half of the year increased by approximately 3.9 percent, whereby 2.38

million cases were instituted and 2.30 million cases decided. The figures for pending cases as of the end of the year was 17,298 in the IHC, 85 in the Federal Shariat Court and 51,694 in the district courts.

Alternative dispute resolution. In November, the IHC opened a mediation centre for swift resolution of cases involving family matters, and issues of inheritance and partnership to reduce backlog of cases. The IHC was reported to be drafting rules to penalize litigants who bypass the alternate dispute resolution process and directly approach the court.²⁸

Digital innovations. In November, the Supreme Court chief justice reconstituted the National Judicial Automation Committee to use digitization to enhance citizens' access to justice and improve case management. Subsequently, the IHC chief justice directed authorities to utilize video-conferencing to mark case attendances of under-trial prisoners.²⁹

Suspension of military trials revoked. In December, the Supreme Court suspended operation of an earlier short order declaring 'unconstitutional' the military trial of 103 civilians alleged to be involved in the PTI-led 9 May riots. The court ruled that the military trials in question can proceed, though without any decisions on the cases until the appeals are decided.³⁰ HRCP expressed concern at the 'deeply worrying' continuation of civilians' trials in military courts.



ENFORCEMENT OF LAW

Law and order

Extrajudicial killings. In August, a report in *Dawn* stated that over 21 suspects were shot dead and dozens injured in as many as 90 police encounters between January 2021 and July 2023.

In these incidents, six policemen were also killed and 19 injured. As is mostly the case, the official version of these incidents featured a similar story that alleged criminals opened fire at police during a stop-and-search and were resultantly killed, or criminals, while attempting to free their arrested accomplices, killed their own instead.³¹

The rape of a young woman at gunpoint by two men in the capital's popular F-9 Park in February made headlines, especially as police investigation made no initial headway. Then, a couple of weeks after the incident, it was reported that two people shot dead after opening fire at a police checkpoint in Sector D-12 were in fact the accused in the case, who were also allegedly wanted in other cases. Human rights activists accused the police of extrajudicial killing, and it remains unknown whether the deceased were in fact responsible for the crime.³²



The rape of a young woman at gunpoint by two men in the capital's popular F-9 Park in February made headlines.

Police excesses. Human rights activist Imaan Mazari-Hazir and Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) leaders continued to find themselves in the state's crosshairs in 2023.

Mazari and PTM's Ali Wazir were arrested under various controversial charges in August after a PTM protest rally in the capital against enforced disappearances.

The manner of Mazari's arrest in an overnight raid at her home was condemned by rights organizations, including the HRCP which said it 'points to a larger, more worrying pattern of state-sanctioned violence against people exercising their right to freedom of expression and assembly'.³³ After about two weeks in custody, Mazari was eventually freed on bail by an anti-terrorism court.³⁴

Wazir, the former lawmaker from South Waziristan who was only released from Karachi jail in February after two years in detention, was released on bail in September.³⁵

In December, PTM chief Manzoor Pashteen was produced in an Islamabad anti-terrorism court days after being detained by authorities in Balochistan. He was later remanded into custody over sedition charges related to the same PTM rally in August.³⁶

Criminal cases. A total 24,326 cases were registered in police stations across Islamabad in 2023, with investigations completed in 20,148 of them, according to the Islamabad police. Table 1 provides crime statistics for the territory.

Table 1: Crime statistics for Islamabad in 2023

<i>Offense</i>	<i>Number of victims</i>
Rape	46
Gang-rape	12
Murder	177
'Honour' killings	No information
Blasphemy cases	0
Police encounters	No information

Source: Islamabad Capital Territory Police, in response to HRCP's request for information

While no information for 'honour' killings or police encounters were provided by the police, HRCP's media monitoring for 2023 recorded at least one 'honour' killing case and six police encounters that reportedly took place.

Moreover, the capital police reported arresting 23,928 suspects involved in various crimes in 2023. They further apprehended 6,614 gang members implicated in financial cases, and recovered stolen valuables worth PKR 2.49 billion, including 1,106 motorcycles and 568 cars.³⁷

Gender diversity in law enforcement. According to the police, law enforcement personnel in the capital constituted 10,288 male officers and 554 female officers. Transgender officers, however, have not been recruited yet.

Jails and prisoners

Adiala Jail conditions. In January, representatives of the National Commission for Human Rights visited Adiala Jail after a prisoner's death by suicide. The team noted that the facility lacked some basic medicines and permanent psychiatrists, and continued to be crowded beyond capacity with 6,000 prisoners being housed in a space for about 2,200.³⁸

Death penalties awarded. The Islamabad police said in December that 20 death sentences were awarded in murder cases in 2023.³⁹ In November, a news report stated that 279 death row convicts, including seven women, from both Rawalpindi and Islamabad districts were held in Adiala Jail.⁴⁰

In February, two policemen were awarded death sentences for the brutal murder of a young man in the capital in January 2021. Osama Satti, 21, was shot dead after police opened fire on his vehicle, reportedly mistaking him for a runaway robber. The policemen challenged their sentences in the IHC.⁴¹

In December, newly married Shahnawaz Amir was given a death sentence for the brutal murder of his wife Sarah Inam in September 2022—a case that gained much media attention due to the convict's father being a known political figure.⁴² The conviction was challenged in the IHC.⁴³

Probationary release of prisoners. In September, the Supreme Court directed authorities to ensure the release of eligible prisoners on probation, as guaranteed under the law.

Hearing a case on the state of prisons, Justice Athar Minallah observed that 'grave conditions affecting fundamental rights prevail in prisons across the country', stating that these poor conditions make probationary releases a crucial means to protect these rights.⁴⁴

Delay in jail construction. In October, a report estimated that the construction of the capital's much-delayed 'model jail' was only one-third complete, while its cost had escalated several times.⁴⁵

The under-construction facility plans to house 2,000-plus prisoners and would help reduce overcrowding at Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail where the capital's inmates are currently housed.

Pakistanis imprisoned abroad. Justice Project Pakistan reported in December that over 14,000 Pakistani citizens are imprisoned overseas,

with 58 percent of them incarcerated in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia on various charges (see Table 2). Moreover, 183 Pakistani citizens were executed overseas between 2010 and 2023.⁴⁶

Table 2: Pakistani citizens imprisoned abroad

Country	Number of Pakistanis imprisoned
United Arab Emirates	5,292
Saudi Arabia	3100
Greece	811
India	683
Iraq	672
Italy	586
Oman	540

Source: Justice Project Pakistan

Enforced disappearances

People continued to disappear in the federal capital, and across Pakistan, in 2023. While the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances continued to record cases, their function was still criticized as being merely performative, without leading to true accountability (see Table 3).

Table 3: Enforced disappearances reported during 2011–23

Province	Number of cases reported since 2011	Disposal of cases up to 31 December 2023					
		Returned home	Internment centres	Prisons	Dead bodies found	Traced	Deleted*
Punjab	1,625	820	94	183	72	1,169	196
Sindh	1,787	777	41	266	63	1,147	477
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	3,485	635	832	126	77	1,670	479
Balochistan	2,752	1,990	2	20	37	2,049	235
Islamabad	361	179	21	36	10	246	60
AJK	68	11	3	13	2	29	24
GB	10	1	1	-	-	2	6
Total	10,008	4,413	994	644	261	6,276	1,477

Province	Total cases disposed of since 2011	Pending cases as of 31 Dec 2023
Punjab	1,365	260
Sindh	1,624	163
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	2,149	1,336
Balochistan	2,284	468
Islamabad	306	55
AJK	53	15
GB	8	2
Total	7,789	2,299

* Cases closed because they (a) were established as not being cases of enforced disappearance, (b) provided incomplete addresses or (c) were withdrawn by the complainants.

Source: Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances.

In December, the NGO Defence of Human Rights, headed by Amina Janjua whose husband went missing in 2005, recorded 51 more cases of enforced disappearances in 2023, bringing the country's total to 3,120.

The organization claimed further that in Islamabad, 47 people remained missing while 32 were released, seven were traced and three killed out of custody.⁴⁷

Condemnation from courts. During the hearing of around a dozen petitions related to missing persons in October, including that of journalist Mudassar Naaru who had gone missing around five years ago, IHC Chief Justice Aamer Farooq expressed the court's embarrassment on the matter remaining unresolved for so long. During the hearing, Justice Miangul Hasan Aurangzeb recalled that a former prime minister [Shehbaz Sharif] had assured the court of addressing the issue but failed to stop the practise.⁴⁸

PTI leaders and supporters detained. Cases of arbitrary detentions kept being reported in 2023, becoming more frequent and pronounced due to the heavy-handed crackdown on the PTI and its supporters after the 9 May riots in which PTI-led mobs damaged and destroyed public property in several cities. Scores of party supporters and leaders, as well as seemingly sympathetic journalists, were picked up by security agencies with a delayed acknowledgement of their whereabouts and alleged crimes.⁴⁹ Several PTI leaders disappeared, only to reappear, often in front of a camera, holding a press conference or doing a one-on-one interview with a television anchor-person, disassociating publicly from the party and condemning the recent violence.⁵⁰

TV anchor Imran Riaz Khan's case was perhaps the most worrisome among media professionals, as there was no word on his whereabouts despite several court orders to trace him. He was 'recovered' after four months in September⁵¹ and has not spoken publicly since.



TV anchor Imran Riaz Khan's case was perhaps the most worrisome among media professionals, as there was no word on his whereabouts despite several court orders to trace him.

The IHC in December declared unconstitutional the powers of the capital's district magistrate to detain citizens under the 1960 Maintenance of Public Order law. Ruling on the detentions of PTI leaders, Justice Babar Sattar declared they could only be ordered by the federal cabinet on concrete and tangible evidence.⁵²



FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

Steps to implement Hindu Marriage Act. In April, the Islamabad administration notified rules for the Hindu Marriage Act 2017, more than five years after the law's enactment, finally enabling members of the minority community to solemnize their marriages in line with their religious practises.⁵³

Commission for minorities' rights. In August, the National Assembly passed the National Commission for Minorities Bill. However, rights organizations opposed it for being against the principles of the Supreme Court's landmark Jilani judgment related to minorities' rights, and called for a statutory, resourceful and independent commission similar to other autonomous rights' commissions.⁵⁴ Given the bill that has been dropped from the Senate agenda, it will have to be reintroduced by the new National Assembly hopefully incorporating the stakeholders' grievances.

Rights violations against Ahmadis. In a ministerial presser on 5 January, it was declared that the government would prepare a standard version of the Quran and its translation which would be unanimous, authentic and 'better' in all respects. The Ahmadiyya community were pointedly maligned during this presser by Mufti Abdul Shabeer. In June, the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern on the treatment of Ahmadis in Pakistan after its special rapporteurs reported that the community does not enjoy the freedoms and rights granted by international law to all individuals regardless of their religion, caste, creed or colour.⁵⁵ They referred to the growing discrimination and increasing incidents of hate speech and incitement to violence against the community, including attacks on their worship places.

Talha Mahmood, the federal minister of religious affairs and interfaith harmony, expressed 'intense pain' in a public statement over serving products from Shezan (an Ahmadi-founded bakery) on PIA flights. The federal government took up 54 items to revisit the Election Act in the assembly in July. However, it lacked the courage to raise the discriminatory clauses regarding Ahmadis in that act.⁵⁶ Twelve members of the German Bundestag wrote a letter to then prime minister Shehbaz Sharif on 28 September regarding violations of the community's fundamental rights. There was no response to the letter reported, however.

Restrictions on Hindu students. In July, after much hue and cry, the management of Quaid-i-Azam University withdrew disciplinary notices issued to students for celebrating the Hindu festival of Holi on campus without permission. The students were accused of creating

an ‘unpleasant/uncomfortable environment for others’. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) went a step further, directing universities to ban such events which had ‘caused concern and disadvantageously affected the country’s image as Pakistan has an Islamic identity’. The HEC letter was criticized across the board, with the education minister affirming it had acted on its own.⁵⁷

Increased blasphemy law punishments. In August, the Senate amended the penal code to increase punishments for disrespecting the family and companions of the Holy Prophet. The amendments had already been passed by the National Assembly and were deemed controversial by members of the Shia community which claimed it targeted them.⁵⁸ The bill was later returned unsigned by the president. HRCP said it infringed on religious minorities’ freedoms of expression and thought, conscience and religion, and urged lawmakers not to pass it again.⁵⁹

Freedom of expression

Restricted access to Wikipedia. In February, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority banned the popular free online encyclopaedia Wikipedia for failing to ‘block/remove sacrilegious content’.⁶⁰

The Wikipedia Foundation said it does not make decisions on content posted or maintained on its site. Two days later, the prime minister ordered its reopening, noting that ‘blocking the site in its entirety was not a suitable measure to restrict access to some objectionable content’.⁶¹

Voter surveys and polls. In August, the ECP, as part of its code of conduct for the upcoming elections, banned the holding of entrance and exit polls, as well as voter surveys, to ensure citizens have a ‘free choice of casting votes’.⁶² While the use of election surveys differs globally, their utility in highlighting voter attitudes and priorities is deemed crucial.⁶³

Ban on televised broadcast of PTI. The state’s crackdown on the PTI included a ban on airing Imran Khan’s speeches for ‘attacking state institutions’,⁶⁴ which was first imposed in March 2023⁶⁵ and followed by the suspension of ARY News’ licence for defying orders. The move was criticized by HRCP, which had ‘always opposed measures to curb voices in the past’, and demanded the ban be ‘lifted immediately’. Following the 9 May riots, PEMRA’s directions against airing ‘hate speech’ translated into a blanket ban on taking Khan’s name or using his picture⁶⁶—a practice which continued throughout the year with Khan being referred to only as the ‘PTI founder’ or Bani PTI.

Internet and social media outages. According to Surfshark, a Lithuania-based internet shutdown tracker, 2023 witnessed service blockages of various social media platforms five times. Bytes for All, a Pakistani

internet rights group, counts at least 15 internet shutdowns in 2023.⁶⁷ Citizens especially suffered prolonged mobile network and social media outages following the 9 May riots, with services only gradually restored several days after.⁶⁸ In December, as the PTI held its first ‘virtual political rally’, internet disruption was reported across major cities.⁶⁹

Freedom of assembly

Baloch women’s demonstration. A 1,600-kilometre-long Baloch women’s protest march organized by Baloch Yakjehti Committee, led by Mahrang Baloch against extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances, entered Islamabad on 20 December, but was prevented from reaching the National Press Club to join a sit-in camp. The police resorted to violence to deter the marchers, resulting in injuries and arrests of dozens of protesters, including women and children. HRCP decried the use of ‘unwarranted force’ and demanded the immediate release of all those detained. Following the severe backlash, the caretaker government said the next day that all detained women and children had been released.⁷⁰

Opposition to Aurat March. Attempts were once again made to scuttle the annual gathering to mark International Women’s Day, with a relatively unknown party petitioning the IHC to cancel permission for the Aurat March. While the petitioner alleged the march would ‘not only spoil the basic family structure of an Islamic state but also promote vulgarity’, the IHC chief justice dismissed the plea, on grounds that the constitution provided the women marchers a right to freedom of peaceful assembly.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the women’s march resulted in a violent episode when police initially used force to prevent participants from gathering at the Press Club. The protesters later marched to D-Chowk – the site of major demonstrations – and dispersed thereafter without incident.⁷²



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Raid on talk about refugee rights. In October, a public talk on the inhumane repatriation of Afghan refugees at a private community space was raided by the police and forcibly cancelled. Former senator and rights activist Afrasiab Khattak, who was at the event, condemned the police action in a post on X, calling it an ‘unannounced martial law violating fundamental rights’. The police claimed the organizers did not have a no-objection certificate, putting them in violation of the Section 144 ban on gatherings in the capital.⁷³ The ban was also used to disrupt the Jamaat-e-Islami and the PTI’s pro-Palestine protests in October.⁷⁴

Freedom of association

The repression targeting the PTI after the 9 May riots led many senior leaders and workers to disassociate from the party, and some from politics altogether, often after spending days and weeks in detention. While expressing sympathy with those departing under pressure, Imran Khan claimed party leaders were being made to jump ship ‘at gunpoint’,⁷⁵ terming the process a ‘forced divorce’.⁷⁶ The desertions continued year-round, with those leaving often sticking to the same script.⁷⁷ There were also unverified reports of government plans to ban the PTI – a potentially gross rights violation which remained restricted to rumours.⁷⁸

Freedom of movement

Limited movement during Muharram. In a first, the police banned the entry of motorcycles in the city’s Red Zone for 10 days as part of security measures for the month of Muharram, when Shia Muslims hold religious gatherings as part of their faith. While the city administration claimed to have provided a shuttle bus service into the high-profile security zone, most people were forced to hire private transport.⁷⁹ Pillion riding was also banned in the city for the same period, inconveniencing low-income earners and their families.⁸⁰

No-fly list. In December, the IHC ordered the removal of former PTI leader Shireen Mazari’s name from the Passport Control List, which was added to the no-fly list after 9 May. The IHC declared that Mazari’s fundamental rights were jeopardized by the police’s unjust and illegal action.⁸¹ Several other PTI leaders, including former chairman Imran Khan and his wife, were reported to have been put on the Provisional National Identification List, a sub-part of the Exit Control List following the 9 May riots.⁸²



DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Political participation

Restricted PTI participation in elections. The ECP barred Imran Khan from contesting elections for five years after his conviction in the Toshakhana case in August.⁸³ Afterwards, several of the party's candidates were prevented by various means from submitting their nomination papers, leading HRCP to remind the ECP and caretaker governments to ensure fair political representation and free elections.

Hurdles to holding provincial elections. In a complete disregard of democratic norms and constitutional adherence, lawmakers in the National Assembly strived to ensure that elections are not held in the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces after the PTI-led governments there dissolved both assemblies in January 2023.⁸⁴ Lawmakers even rejected funds for the provincial elections despite the Supreme Court's orders as part of efforts to hold the polls with the general election.

Delimitation concerns. Following approval of the seventh census, the ECP said new delimitations would have to be carried out which would delay the general election beyond the 90-day constitutional limit.⁸⁵

The prevalent atmosphere of uncertainty led HRCP to express 'immense concern' and insist on a prompt announcement of the election schedule 'as close as possible to the stipulated 90-day period'.⁸⁶ Finally, on 3 December, the ECP declared 8 February 2024 as the date for holding simultaneous elections across the country.⁸⁷

Voter gender gap persists. In September, it was revealed that while the country had narrowed the voter gender gap after adding 11.7 million women since 2018, there were still 10 million eligible women missing from the total 127 million registered voters in the country.

The voters' lists also showed that almost half of eligible voters fell in the 18-35 age bracket (45 percent), with Islamabad being home to over a million voters in total.⁸⁸

Revisions to constituencies. Despite the new census showing an increase in population, the total number of National Assembly seats could not be modified accordingly as it would require a constitutional amendment by both houses of parliament. This led the ECP to redraw boundaries of constituencies to adjust the new population count, leading to criticism and objection of favouring one party over the other.⁸⁹

In December, it was revealed that a total of 358 candidates had submitted nomination papers for the three National Assembly seats of the capital.⁹⁰

Local government

The legal quagmire surrounding the capital's local government elections continued in 2023, with the IHC adjudicating the government's tactful increases in the number of union councils which had delayed the elections in 2022.⁹¹

In February, after the president returned the Islamabad Capital Territory Local Government Amendment Bill 2022 for review, in which the government had increased the number of union councils and provided for direct elections for mayor and deputy mayor, a joint sitting of parliament reverted to indirect elections for the two top posts by further amending the law.⁹²

In March, the ECP assured the IHC that local government elections would be held within four months.⁹³ However, the matter took a backseat amid general political uncertainty in the country, and the constitutional requirement of having a local government was ignored for the third year.⁹⁴

Shrinking spaces and the role of assemblies

Legislature call for military trials of civilians. In June, the National Assembly passed a resolution calling for swift military trials of the 9 May rioting suspects. HRCP took strong exception to the incident, warning lawmakers of ceding civilian supremacy by such actions.

Laws passed without president's assent. In August, the president, in a stunning revelation, claimed the recently amended Official Secrets Act and Pakistan Army Act bills, which were reported to have received his assent, were in fact not signed by him.

Alvi said he had instructed his staff to return the two bills passed by parliament without his signatures in a timely manner so that they would become ineffective, leading to questions about the president's authority and the laws' status.

The caretaker government responded that the president was misleading the public as the bills had returned with his signatures and the laws were in effect.⁹⁵ Soon after, the Supreme Court was moved for suspending the bills not signed by the president and their status is in limbo.

Army officials appointed to civilian posts. The practise of appointing serving and retired military officials on civilian posts showed no sign of abating, from the appointment of a retired lieutenant general as the new National Accountability Bureau chief in March⁹⁶ to October's appointment of a serving lieutenant general as head of the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA).⁹⁷ Similarly, the caretaker government also intimated the appointment of senior army medical

officers as heads of the capital's two biggest public hospitals—a move condemned by doctors and since seemingly abandoned.⁹⁸ Relatedly, the PDM-led government's much-hailed Special Investment Facilitation Council, created to boost foreign investment, included the army chief as well as several officers at various key posts,⁹⁹ making official the military's foray into the a top civilian body.

Caretaker government overstepping mandate. The caretaker government, whose powers had already been expanded by parliament in July,¹⁰⁰ at various instances still seemed to be exceeding its purview. In August, former Senate chair Raza Rabbani criticized the reconstitution of the Cabinet Committee for Disposal of Legislative Cases, which scrutinizes laws to check their conformity with the constitution and the government's policies.¹⁰¹

Similarly, the caretaker information minister twice attempted to introduce the Motion Pictures (Amendment) Bill in the Senate, only to be reminded by lawmakers that caretaker governments cannot enact legislation.¹⁰²



RIGHTS OF THE DISADVANTAGED

Women

Gender-based violence. According to HRCP's media monitoring for 2023, there was at least one case of 'honour' killing reported in the federal capital. The Digital Rights Foundation reported that their helpline received 118 complaints related to cyber harassment and gender-based violence from Islamabad. Sexual violence incidents in the capital were also registered by law enforcement personnel. [See *Law and order*].

Women's rights legislation. Two important and progressive pieces of legislation came in the form of Maternity and Paternity Leave Act 2023 and the Day Care Centres Act 2023.¹⁰³

Women performing Hajj. In November, the Council of Islamic Ideology conditionally allowed women to perform Hajj without a *mehram* [male guardian/unmarriageable kin] after the Saudi government's go-ahead a year earlier. Responding to a query from the religious affairs ministry, the council said several Islamic schools of thought (Fiqh-e-Jafria, Maliki and Shafi'i) allow a woman, whose parents or husband permit her, to perform Hajj without a *mehram* after 'proper scrutiny'.¹⁰⁴



In November, the Council of Islamic Ideology conditionally allowed women to perform Hajj without a mehram.

Registration of sex offenders. In May, NADRA launched a national sex offenders' registry to help identify and track individuals convicted of sex crimes against children and women. The database was said to be linked with law enforcement departments and can be availed via SMS.¹⁰⁵

Gender-sensitive policing. In September, the National Police Bureau announced the establishment of a National Gender Responsive Unit—previously the Gender Crime Cell—as part of the police’s initiative to reform and reshape the force to make it more inclusive, responsive and accountable to the public.¹⁰⁶

Female chair for Pakistan Academy of Letters. In August, Dr Najiba Arif was appointed chairperson of the Pakistan Academy of Letters, becoming the first woman to head the organization which works for the promotion of Urdu literature.¹⁰⁷

Transgender persons

In May, the Federal Shariat Court declared the Transgender (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 in violation of Islamic law. Announcing its verdict on petitions challenging the landmark rights’ legislation, the court ruled that a person’s gender must conform to their biological sex. HRCP opposed the decision, saying that by denying the right to self-perceived gender identity, ‘this move seeks the erasure of an entire demographic and its fundamental rights’, while also undermining the will of parliament.¹⁰⁸ The decision was later challenged in the Supreme Court by rights activists.¹⁰⁹

Children

Violence against children. HRCP’s media monitoring for the year reported 66 incidents of corporal punishment for children took place, of which 46 of the victims were boys and 29 were girls. In February, the education ministry notified rules for the Islamabad Capital Territory Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Act 2021, whereby educational institutes would be required to decide complaints of corporal punishment and abuse within 15 days.¹¹⁰

According to Sahil’s *Cruel Numbers* report, there were 4,213 cases of child sexual abuse reported during the year. At least 593 boys and 457 girls aged 6-15 years were sexually abused in the first half of the year across Pakistan, whereas a total of 2,227 cases of child abuse, including kidnapping, were reported in the period. Of the total cases, 7 percent were reported from Islamabad.¹¹¹ Sahil also reported 232 cases of child abduction in Islamabad took place in 2023.

Rizwana Bibi and child labour. In July, one incident that shook the whole country and sparked outrage was when a minor teenage girl Rizwana Bibi employed as a domestic helper at a civil judge’s residence in Islamabad was reported to have suffered sustained physical abuse at the hands of the judge’s wife. The victim was transferred to a hospital in Lahore from her hometown of Sargodha due to the severity of her injuries.

HRCP demanded that the employment of minor domestic workers be criminalized in line with a Supreme Court judgment.¹¹² While the case continued with the suspect on bail, the IHC in November began hearing a petition seeking the judge's removal as well as the implementation of child labour laws in the capital.¹¹³

Labour

Migrant workers' passports. In November, the International Labour Organization (ILO) introduced a national skills passport initiative that would provide a comprehensive catalogue of an individual's skills, obtained through formal and informal channels. The skills passport would also record a migrant worker's qualifications, competencies and work experience for ease of foreign employment.¹¹⁴

Effects of spiralling inflation. In the 2023/24 budget presented in June, the government set the minimum wage at PKR 32,000¹¹⁵ in light of the massive rise in inflation within the past year.

In September, an ILO report estimated that the number of unemployed persons in Pakistan is expected to reach 5.6 million after repeated economic shocks to the country starting from the Covid-19 pandemic to the ongoing record inflation.¹¹⁶

The elderly

In January, the new Capital Development Authority chief directed the public transport wing to introduce a mechanism to give 50 percent fare concession to students and senior citizens—those above the age of 60 years—using the Metro Bus Service.¹¹⁷

People living with disabilities

Accessibility for deaf persons. In January, the president approved the Access to the Media (Deaf) Persons Act which requires all private and state news and entertainment channels to include sign language interpreters in their broadcasts.¹¹⁸ However, the law's implementation remained thin if not nil throughout the year as TV broadcasts continued as before, leading a petitioner to approach the IHC in August seeking its enforcement.¹¹⁹

Job quotas. In January, the Supreme Court observed that employment for people living with disabilities takes greater importance as they are already socially marginalized and lack access to basic rights.¹²⁰ In a separate case, the court ruled that if the job quota for persons with disabilities and minorities remains unfilled in a particular year, the reserved seats cannot be made available to general candidates.¹²¹

Refugees

On 3 October, the caretaker government issued an executive order stating that all irregular migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, in the country must leave voluntarily by 1 November or face deportation.

The appalling decision, which affected Afghan refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in particular, led to scores of Afghans with legitimate registration papers rounded up in police raids and sent to deportation centres with little to no legal recourse.¹²²

Moreover, authorities also deported many Afghans awaiting resettlement in Western countries.¹²³ The state's *carte blanche* to the authorities also resulted in the razing of several informal refugee settlements, some which had been inhabited for decades.¹²⁴ Reports also surfaced of police seeking bribes in order to release those with registration papers.¹²⁵ The sudden order and the tight deadline had an adverse impact on vulnerable sub-groups, including women, elderly, the disabled and children.

Despite this maltreatment and the extreme hardship awaiting them in Afghanistan, as well as desperate pleas of governments and rights organizations, including HRCP, the state did not halt its deportation drive, which by the end of year had seen over half a million Afghan refugees leave.

While the decision was criticized for emanating from a government devoid of public support, the state has long blamed Afghan refugees conveniently for several of the country's ills.¹²⁶ This is perhaps why a Gallup poll in November showed an overwhelming support for the deportation exercise.¹²⁷



Education

Literacy rate. In September, it was reported that the country's actual literacy rate stood at 59.3 percent compared to the 62.8 percent reflected in the Economic Survey 2022-23.¹²⁸

HEC administration. In November, the HEC got a full-time executive director after a gap of about five years with the appointment of former vice-chancellor of Allama Iqbal Open University Dr Zia-ul-Qayyum. The HEC executive director is a significant post which deals with regulatory issues of higher education institutes as well as billions of rupees worth of educational programmes oversees.¹²⁹

Addressing fee hikes in medical and dental colleges. In December, the caretaker health minister and head of the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council vowed to establish a committee that would propose a way to reverse the recent exorbitant rise in fees of private medical and dental colleges across the country.¹³⁰

Out-of-school children. In a conference in December, education ministers from across provinces and the federal government agreed on formulating a joint policy on tackling the issue of out-of-school children, and also decided to establish a 'challenge fund' worth Rs25 billion for the purpose.

The federal education ministry said a unified national strategy was required to bring the 22.8 million out-of-school children back into the fold.¹³¹ In June, the education ministry claimed it had enrolled more than 55,000 out-of-school students of the capital thanks to efforts by several educational institutes and NGOs.¹³²

Health

Budget allocation. The federal budget was passed on 9 June, in which the health sector was allocated PKR 24.25 billion. This constituted 2.8 percent of the total development budget, and a paltry 0.05 percent of GDP.¹³³

Sehat Sahulat Programme. Quashing rumours about a possible rollback of the state's public health insurance service, the caretaker health minister in December assured that the Sehat Sahulat Programme was fully functional and would be improved further. Under the programme, which has seen its name change under successive governments since its launch in 2015, residents of Islamabad are entitled to free treatment worth PKR 1 million per family annually from a pool of public and private hospitals.¹³⁴

Unsafe drinking water. The Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources in a report in November declared 25 bottled and mineral water brands unsafe for human consumption due to various types of contamination. It found 19 brands unsafe due to the presence of high levels of sodium; three due to higher than permissible limit of total dissolved solids; one due to excessive levels of potassium; and eight brands were found to be contaminated with bacteria.¹³⁵



A report in November declared 25 bottled and mineral water brands unsafe for human consumption due to various types of contamination.

Increased duties. In July, it was reported that the federal excise duty on sugary drinks had been increased to 20 percent in the June 2023 budget, according to the Pakistan National Heart Association, which hailed the move.¹³⁶

Transparency in health services and drugs. In August, the Islamabad Health Regulatory Authority directed healthcare facilities across the capital to prominently display price lists of tests and procedures. The authority said it had found discrepancies in the initial and final rates communicated to patients after inspecting facilities and had also received complaints about the issue.¹³⁷

Mental health crisis. HRCP's media monitoring recorded 1,380 cases of suicide and 271 suicide attempts reported during the year. Of these cases, 1,012 men, 396 women and two transgender persons lost their lives. The compounded effects of political instability and economic strain notwithstanding, these figures indicate a crisis of mental health that continues to go unaddressed.

Housing and public amenities

Forced evictions. In July, residents of various *katchi abadis* [unregularized urban settlements] across the capital protested outside the National Press Club against the Capital Development Authority (CDA) and district administration after a spate of demolitions of informal settlements left many people homeless. The protesters demanded affordable housing for low-income earners, and an end to evictions preceding development projects.¹³⁸

In September, an anti-encroachment drive by the CDA and police resulted in clashes which left at least nine policemen and three villagers injured.

Residents of Chauntra village in the Margalla Hills were told to vacate their land which the CDA claimed belonged to the armed forces, however, the locals—said to number several thousand who have been residing there for decades—demanded fair compensation and alternative land.¹³⁹

Allotted land to civil servants. In January, the IHC observed that allotment of plots to CDA employees on subsidized rates was contradictory to the constitution, and directed the federal government to ensure that state land is sold off at competitive rates.¹⁴⁰ In November, the Estate Office, a department of the housing ministry which oversees housing for federal government employees, cancelled almost 3,000 allotments of government houses to civil servants in light of a recent IHC order, after which fresh allotments would be made in terms of seniority.¹⁴¹

Environment

Demarcation of Margalla Hills land. In August, it was reported that about 60 percent work on demarcating the boundary of Margalla Hills National Park had been completed, while the remaining area would require more time as it borders un-acquired private land, making the exercise difficult. The CDA started the demarcation work in July, with the assistance of various official and semi-official agencies, in light of the IHC's directions in January 2022 in a case involving the park's encroachment by the armed forces.¹⁴²

Wildlife and ecosystems protection. In August, parliament passed the Islamabad Nature Conservation and Wildlife Management Act for the protection, preservation, and management of nature in the capital. The law expanded the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board's authority to undertake its duties, including the protection of the Margalla Hills National Park.¹⁴³ The law also provides a comprehensive framework for the protection of nature and biodiversity in Islamabad, as well as prohibits the captivity of wild animals with the exception of rescue and rehabilitation centres, and approved breeding facilities.¹⁴⁴

Combating climate change. In July, the federal cabinet approved the country's first National Adaptation Plan to build the country's resilience against adverse impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. The plan, developed by the climate change ministry, focuses on several key areas, including the agriculture-water nexus, urban resilience, natural capital, and human capital. Its focus is to enhance climate resilience and mitigate risks, while promoting sustainable growth through gender, youth, and social inclusion.

Culture

In August, the National Assembly approved a bill establishing a Gandhara Culture Authority to preserve and promote Buddhist sites and tourism across the country. The authority would be in-charge of managing Gandhara artefacts and archaeological sites, along with organizing tourism around the sites. The National Heritage and Culture Division would work in support of the authority, which would be self-sustainable.¹⁴⁵

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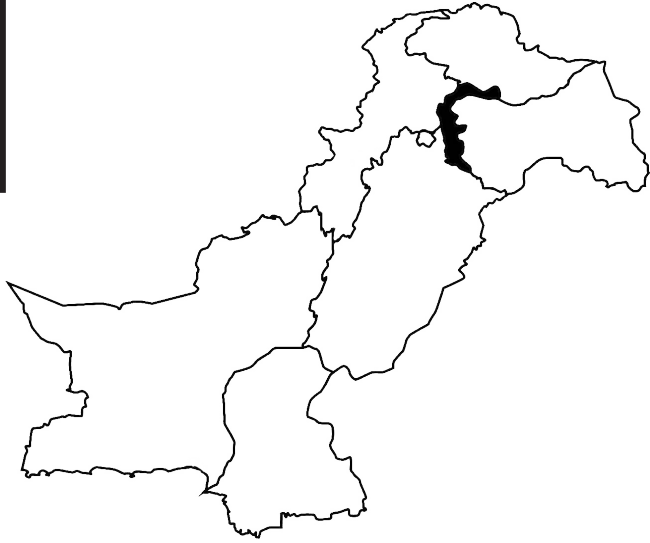
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AZAD JAMMU AND KASHMIR



HIGHLIGHTS

- In a tragic incident off the coast of Greece, hundreds of irregular migrants from AJK lost their lives when their boat capsized. The migrants included 30 young men from just one village, Bandli in Kotli district, of whom 28 drowned and only two survived.
- There were widespread public protests against government subsidy withdrawal on wheat flour and electricity price hikes.
- Following a government crackdown on demonstrators, 48 police reports were filed on sedition and treason charges, and 53 arrests were made.
- In an unprecedented move, AJK premier Sardar Ilyas was disqualified by the AJK High Court for derogatory remarks against the judiciary.
- The second phase of local body elections was completed but the newly elected local bodies remained dysfunctional due to lack of financial and administrative powers.
- Contentious legislation on defamation was introduced in the AJK assembly, aiming to tighten restrictions on free speech. In response, media bodies and civil society organizations launched widespread protests across the territory.
- An overall increase in crime was reported, particularly gang-rape, rape, harassment, and crimes against women and children, with many cases going unreported.
- Owing to ongoing massive deforestation in Neelum Valley, the AJK cabinet approved a proposed ordinance aimed at implementing a complete ban on deforestation.



OVERVIEW

Kashmir remains disputed territory and has been administered both by Pakistan and India since the partition of the Subcontinent in 1947. Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) is regarded as an autonomous region and not a formal province of Pakistan. While AJK has a degree of self-governance, its autonomy is constrained in several key areas as it remains closely tied to Pakistan in matters such as defence, foreign policy and economic dependence. The Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan Affairs serves as a link between the Government of Pakistan and that of AJK.

The human rights situation in AJK has not received much attention. There are no dedicated human rights organizations or individuals to monitor human rights abuses in AJK. Due to the limited national media presence in AJK, there is less coverage, resulting in no significant documentation available to formally assess the state of human rights in the territory.

In 2023, AJK experienced severe human rights violations amid widespread protests against the government's decision to withdraw subsidies on wheat flour and increase electricity prices. The crackdown on activists and demonstrators led to arrests, with accusations of torture in custody.¹

The AJK premier was disqualified for derogatory remarks against the judiciary. A new coalition government was formed that faced challenges in cabinet appointments and functioning of local governments.

In June, a boat carrying hundreds of irregular migrants, many of them from AJK, capsized, with scores drowned. Killings near the Line of Control (LOC) further complicated the situation. Despite efforts to combat human trafficking and other crimes, the crime rate reportedly increased, particularly crimes against women and children, with many cases going unreported. Environmental problems such as wildfires and deforestation persisted, highlighting ongoing challenges in governance and accountability in AJK.



RULE OF LAW

Laws and law-making

In 2023, the AJK Legislative Assembly held several key sessions and made significant legislative and procedural decisions. Throughout the year, the assembly remained active, holding ten sessions over 120 days in total.

It passed one amendment to the interim constitution, allowing for an expansion of the cabinet, as well as 14 new laws and amendments to two existing laws, apart from budget and monetary bills. The year saw political manoeuvring, budgetary discussions, and legislative changes aimed at governance and development in AJK.

In June, the Assembly removed a constitutional provision limiting the state cabinet to 16 ministers, allowing for an expansion of the cabinet. Chaudhry Latif Akbar was elected the fourteenth speaker of the Assembly, despite some opposition boycotts. After this amendment, the premier of AJK inducted 31 members into his cabinet, making it the largest cabinet in the history of AJK.

Administration of justice

AJK's judicial system comprises various tiers, with an apex court, the Supreme Court of AJK, functioning as the highest judicial authority. This court includes an appellate bench with three judges, including a chief justice, and operates with circuit benches in Rawalakot and Mirpur, in addition to its headquarters in Muzaffarabad. The high court also plays a significant role, with the camp presence at divisional levels and a Shariah Appellate Bench. Further down the hierarchy, district and session courts, as well as sub-judges' courts, operate at the district and tehsil levels, respectively.

Judicial positions and cases pending. As of the latest available information, the Supreme Court of AJK is operating at full strength, while the high court has six judges instead of nine, with one vacant position in the Shariah Appellate Bench.

While no record of cases in the Supreme Court is publicly available, this year the AJK High Court and its circuit benches disposed of 10,439 cases while receiving 10,110 new cases, leaving a backlog of 16,139 cases, all less than five years old. The subordinate courts disposed of 63,221 cases, while 58,964 new cases were filed; currently, 44,432 cases are pending.

Notice to prime minister. A full-court bench of the AJK High Court served notices to Prime Minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas, asking him to explain his derogatory remarks about the judiciary, leading to his

disqualification on 11 April on grounds of contempt, rendering him ineligible for public office. The AJK Election Commission promptly issued a notification.²

Earlier, the ousted prime minister, during a public meeting, had accused the judiciary of hindering the functioning of his government and interfering in the executive's domain through the grant of stay orders. He said that although the stay orders were only temporary and needed to be decided quickly, they continued for years. He was summoned by both top courts simultaneously after his remarks and disqualified from holding office in an unprecedented manner. On 12 April, the legal team of the former prime minister filed an appeal in the Supreme Court against his disqualification verdict by the AJK High Court, but the appeal was later rejected.

Online hearings. In May, the AJK High Court introduced a video link system connecting its principal seat with all circuit benches to facilitate online hearings, enhancing access to justice and efficiency.³

Relief to PTI lawmaker. In October, the AJK Supreme Court's division bench granted interim relief to an opposition PTI legislator, staying the verdict of an election tribunal until appeal disposal.⁴ The PML-N's Chaudhry Ismail Gujjar had filed a petition against PTI legislator Chaudhry Maqbool for alleged rigging during the 2021 elections for the AJK Legislative Assembly. It took the Election Commission two and a half years to recount the vote and nullify the previous result.



ENFORCEMENT OF LAW

Law and order

Crime statistics. According to records from the AJK police, the total number of cases registered in 2023 rose to 9,962 compared to 8,578 in the previous year. However, this figure likely underrepresents the actual number of incidents due to citizens' reluctance to report crimes, especially in cases of crimes against women such as rape, attempted rape and harassment.

There has been a notable increase in cases involving murder, violence against women, rape, burglary, and narcotics offenses, with 78 cases of murder, two cases of gang-rape, 27 rape cases, and 348 cases of abduction/*zina* [unlawful sexual relations] reported during the period.⁵

Positive developments. In January, the AJK Police Department established a 'school of investigation' in the state capital Muzaffarabad to enhance the investigative capabilities of police personnel.⁶

In April, AJK Prime Minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas launched a special complaint and tracking portal to improve governance, providing easy access to the government, an online complaint lodging facility, and timely grievance resolution.⁷ However, there is no record available as to how many complaints were registered or resolved through the portal.



The AJK Police Department established a 'school of investigation' in Muzaffarabad.

Trafficking. In June, the police launched a massive crackdown on human trafficking rings in Kotli, Mirpur and Bhimber districts after 30 people

from the area drowned after a boat carrying irregular migrants capsized off the coast of Greece.⁸ The police arrested dozens of people suspected of working for international human trafficking rings.

Custodial torture. In July, a faith healer was found dead at the Rawalakot police station. His relatives alleged that the police had arrested him in a fake first information report (FIR) and that he was killed as a result of custodial torture. Protests erupted after the news emerged on social media and medical reports showed marks of torture on the body of the deceased. Eleven policemen were arrested in this case.

Tragedy at sea

On 14 June, an overloaded fishing trawler *Adriana*, carrying an estimated 400 to 750 migrants, mostly from Pakistan, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Afghanistan, sank off the coast of Pylos, Greece. Among them were 30 young men from one village, Bandli in the Kotli district of AJK. Of these, 28 lost their lives, while only two survived. The victims, aged 20 to 30, paid approximately PKR 2.2 million each to human traffickers to escape poor employment prospects and visa difficulties, seeking better opportunities in Europe.

Migration from Kotli, Mirpur and Bhimber districts to Europe has increased, with obstacles to obtaining visas leading many to resort to illegal means, facilitated by local agents. These agents operate through ground and air routes to reach Libya, from where migrants illegally enter European countries such as Greece, Spain or Italy by sea. The operations involve agents affiliated with Gujranwala and Gujrat; some locals are also implicated.

Following the tragedy, the Pakistani government initiated an inquiry and detained 14 suspected smugglers. However, there is a notable absence of legislative initiatives to address the issue. The Federal Investigation Agency has jurisdictional limitations in AJK, leaving a gap in enforcement efforts. Smugglers operate with impunity in Kashmir, shielded from legal repercussions. Despite some arrests, challenges persist due to the lack of capacity in law enforcement agencies and intimidation tactics employed by smugglers. This situation underscores the urgent need for coordinated efforts between local and international agencies to combat human trafficking effectively.

In June, the police launched a massive crackdown on human trafficking rings in Kotli, Mirpur and Bhimber districts after the Greek boat capsized. The police arrested dozens of people suspected of working for international human trafficking rings.

LOC killings. Despite a period of relative peace along the LOC since India and Pakistan agreed to restore the 2003 Ceasefire Agreement in February 2021, challenges persisted due to the presence of landmines and cluster bombs, resulting in tragic accidents and casualties among residents. Additionally, civilians being killed by the Indian Army when mistakenly crossing or approaching the LOC remains cause for concern.

In June, four villagers were reportedly killed by the Indian army in Dhaki Chaknarr village in Neelum Valley.⁹ According to their families, they were collecting herbs near the LOC when the Indian army resorted to firing, killed them on the spot and removed their bodies. In August, a five-year-old girl was killed in a toy bomb blast near Athmuqam.¹⁰

In September, a former Lashkar-e-Taiba commander from the Surankote area of Poonch in Indian-occupied Kashmir was reportedly shot dead by unknown gunman in a mosque in Rawalakot.¹¹ Pakistan's Foreign Office claimed India's involvement in the killing.

In October, the Indian army reportedly shot and killed four residents of Sonar village in Neelum Valley while they were searching for herbs near the LOC.

Jails and prisoners

Prison infrastructure. The infrastructure of prisons in AJK remains inadequate, with the reconstruction of central jails in Muzaffarabad and district jails in Bagh, Rawalakot and Plandri pending since their destruction in the 2005 earthquake. Additionally, jails in other regions are housed in old buildings with insufficient space for prisoners, and three districts—Neelum, Jhelum Valley and Haveli—lack district jails, resulting in prisoners being kept in judicial lockups or transferred to nearby jails. Notably, juvenile offenders are housed alongside adult prisoners, contravening legal standards.

In November, AJK High Court Chief Justice Sadaqat Hussain Raja visited the Central Jail in Muzaffarabad and expressed concern over the delay in executing the second phase of the jail's construction. He directed authorities to prioritize this issue.

Jail population and death penalty. According to data from the AJK Prisons Department in 2023, a total of 932 individuals were incarcerated in AJK's prisons, including 23 juveniles and 27 women, with three infants accompanying their mothers. Furthermore, 69 prisoners, including three women, were sentenced to death. However, no executions have taken place in the past four years.

Prisoners' privacy. In January, AJK Prime Minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas paid a surprise visit to the Central Jail of Muzaffarabad, issuing directives to improve facilities for prisoners in line with the jail manual

and humanitarian considerations. However, the implementation of these directives remains a question. The sharing of photos of prisoners, including women and children, by the Prime Minister's office on social media sparked widespread criticism due to the inadequate facilities provided to prisoners as well as their right to privacy (especially women) having been violated.¹²

Enforced disappearances

According to its website, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances acknowledged that 15 cases of enforced disappearance from AJK were pending with the commission in 2023.

Reports suggest that several residents of AJK went missing from districts close to the LOC and were later found killed or arrested by the Indian army at the LOC. The Indian army claimed they were involved in militancy or drug trafficking.

In December, the police apprehended a gang in Neelum Valley that claimed to be involved in several failed attempts to carry drugs across the LOC in Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir. According to a police report, the gang also acknowledged the death of some of the missing persons who were previously involved in the same activities.



FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

AJK has a predominantly Muslim population, with Sunnis forming the majority, but also hosts religious minorities such as Christian, Bahai and Ahmadiyya communities.

In recent years, mob lynching incidents following accusations of blasphemy have occurred in southern districts such as Mirpur and Bhimber.

Blasphemy charges are occasionally registered during Islamic months such as Muharram and Rabi-ul-Awal. Incidents of persecution against the Ahmadiyya community in Kotli, both in the district and city, are underreported, as they are not registered by the police and receive minimal media attention.¹³ However, no case was reported this year.

Freedom of expression

Censorship. There exists in AJK a pervasive yet invisible form of censorship that suppresses dissenting views, particularly regarding the region's status within Pakistan. This suppression impedes individuals from freely expressing themselves.

While nationalist groups advocating for complete autonomy struggle to gain visibility in traditional media outlets, they find a platform on social media. Mainstream political parties dominate the narrative in local media coverage.

The AJK government occasionally bans books that it considers prejudicial to the 'ideology of the state's accession to Pakistan'. This includes all books that propagate or discuss the Kashmiri nationalist discourse with its emphasis on independence for a united Kashmir. The government notifications issued during different times show that more than 48 books are banned by the AJK government.

In March, magistrates in Mirpur and Bhimber districts sealed two bookstores for displaying banned books on their bookshelves.¹⁴ Meanwhile, directives were issued to bookstores across AJK not to sell banned books.

Defamation bill. In December, the AJK government introduced a contentious defamation bill in the Legislative Assembly, aiming to tighten restrictions on free speech and criticism of the government and its officials. In response, media bodies and civil society organizations launched widespread protests across AJK, prompting the government to postpone the bill's debate in the assembly.¹⁵

Suspension of press club membership. In December again, the AJK Press Foundation, a controversial welfare-cum regulatory body headed by a high court judge, issued a notification suspending the membership of journalist Usman Tariq. This suspension was not only from the foundation but also from the Neelum Press Club. The suspension was imposed after Tariq allegedly posted 'derogatory remarks' about the foundation in a social media group. Some have raised concerns as to how a government body could suspend a journalist's membership of a press club.¹⁶

Freedom of assembly

Throughout the year, AJK witnessed multiple instances of conflict and police crackdowns on civil society protests, underscoring the ongoing challenges faced by political parties and civic groups in exercising their rights.

Protests against high utility bills. In August, the people of AJK organized rallies and protests to voice their grievances over unfair electricity taxes, scarcity of subsidized wheat flour and the apparent affluence of the ruling class, among other public concerns.¹⁷ Several clashes between police and protesters were reported and police registered an FIR against the leaders of the Joint Action Committee. In Rawalakot, a 105-day sit-in against electricity taxes and other public grievances concluded on 22 August with a gathering at which thousands of utility bills were ceremonially burned.¹⁸



Protesters calling for the 'boycott' of inflated power costs burnt their electricity bills.

Student leaders in Muzaffarabad and Rawalakot blamed the government for lodging FIRs against them on charges of treason for torching electricity bills during protests or throwing them into the river.¹⁹

In September, residents of the Poonch and Mirpur divisions staged a peaceful strike in response to inflated power bills.²⁰ September also saw civil society activists in Muzaffarabad and Rawalakot discard hundreds of electricity bills into a river and burn others during public sit-ins to protest issues such as exorbitant power tariffs. November witnessed civil society in AJK protesting high power tariffs, leading to the closure of businesses, except pharmacies, and a halt in travel over the Mangla Dam. The District Bar Association also declared a strike.²¹

Excessive force. Clashes erupted between police and protestors in Muzaffarabad in September as thousands demanded an end to the steep hike in power tariffs and protested the arbitrary arrests of shopkeepers and civic leaders. According to police records, 48 FIRs were filed on sedition and treason charges, and 53 people were arrested, following a government crackdown on demonstrators, with the Joint Action Committee accusing the government of torturing those in custody.

In October, thousands took to the streets in AJK, advocating for tax-free energy, subsidized wheat flour and an end to the privileges enjoyed by the political and bureaucratic elite, marking their discontent with a wheel-jam strike.²² Police baton-charged protesters in different cities, especially in the capital Muzaffarabad.

The police also removed a sit-in camp held by the Awami Action Committee and arrested activist Faisal Jameel Kashmiri at the protest site. A police officer was injured when he was pelted with stones by a mob. Earlier, the police had managed to disperse sit-ins in cities such as Rawalakot, Bagh and Kotli.



DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Political participation

Disqualification of prime minister. In 2023, the political landscape of AJK saw significant developments. At the start of the year, Prime Minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas was disqualified by the AJK High Court in a contempt case. This led to the formation of a coalition government led by former speaker of the AJK Assembly, Chaudhry Anwarul Haq, with the support of President Sultan Mehmood Chaudhry and major opposition parties PPP and PML-N.

Haq, a PTI dissident, assumed the role of the new prime minister in April after forming a coalition with other PTI dissidents and members of the PPP and PML-N.²³ Initially, the cabinet size was restricted, but it was later expanded to accommodate members from allied parties.

Other developments. The PPP also won a by-election in Bagh, defeating its coalition partner, the PML-N on 8 June.²⁴

In February, Raja Mansoor Khan was removed from the Prime Minister Inspection and Implementation Commission Chairmanship, sparking criticism from some sections of the ruling party.²⁵ Mansoor, also serving as PTI general secretary in AJK, had developed differences with Prime Minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas.

In August, the AJK government restructured the bureaucracy, focusing on the police department.²⁶ In September, the PTI expelled several members, including Anwarul Haq, who defected to the coalition government.²⁷ In November, Haq allotted portfolios to cabinet members after a five-month delay.²⁸

Local government

The completion of the second phase of local bodies polls earlier in 2023 saw the ruling PTI secure most of the top positions.²⁹ There was hope for increased participation of younger and female candidates, leading to the emergence of a new generation of political leaders.

However, towards the end of the year, the government showed reluctance to devolve administrative and financial powers to the newly elected members, resulting in dysfunctional institutions, particularly union councils. Nationalist parties and dissenting ideologies were excluded from the elections, with candidates required to affirm their belief in the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to Pakistan.

On 2 March, the PTI won in seven out of ten district councils in AJK.³⁰ On 9 March, the mayor-elect of the AJK capital, along with the city's councillors, launched a protest against the perceived power limitations

of local government institutions.³¹ In July, former Prime Minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas expressed disappointment over the withholding of development funds and lack of devolution of authority to local government institutions.



RIGHTS OF THE DISADVANTAGED

Women and children

Violence against women and children. In 2023, crime against women and children continued to rise. According to the police's annual crime statement, there were two gang-rapes and 27 rape cases in the region. Police also reported 348 cases of *zina*/abduction during this year.

In 2022, no case of gang-rape was reported while the number of reported rape cases was 14; 321 cases of *zina*/abduction were reported. The police are often blamed for registering rape cases under *zina* laws. In general, victims avoid reporting their experiences due to cultural barriers such as victim-blaming and lack of faith in redressal mechanisms.

Certain incidents of violence against women and children created unrest in AJK. In January, a court in Rawalakot awarded death sentences to two people accused of raping a woman in 2020.³²

In March, a 14-year-old girl gave birth to a child in a Muzaffarabad public hospital; she had allegedly been raped by her father and brother repeatedly. Police found that the DNA of the new-born matched that of the victim's brother.³³ In July, police reported that a woman, a resident of AJK, was gang-raped for several days in Gojar Khan, Rawalpindi.³⁴

Mandatory hijab. A government directive was issued in March that required female students and teachers in co-educational institutions to wear a hijab without exception. The circular was signed by a deputy director and sparked mixed reactions.³⁵

Women in sports. In a positive development, the AJK Winter Sports Association and Sports Department organized the first-ever National Women's Winter Sports Championship (Saadia Khan Cup) in Ganga Choti in Bagh district. The event had 80 female athletes from eight teams representing different regions and organizations.³⁶

Transgender persons. There is no official data available on the transgender community in AJK. Some cases were reported in 2023 in which the police arrested and misbehaved with transgender persons for begging in the street and being allegedly involved in sexual activities and crime. Police in Muzaffarabad claimed that all transgender persons were 'non-local'.

Labour

Labour participation rate. The labour force participation rate in AJK, as per the 2023 Labour Survey, is alarmingly low at 22.9 percent, almost half that of Pakistan's national average.

Notably, the female labour force participation rate in AJK is even lower, standing at a mere 7.9 percent compared to Pakistan's average of 23 percent.³⁷

Underinvestment in key sectors such as agriculture, rural development and tourism has led to a crisis of unemployment, particularly affecting women and young people.

Many unemployed youths migrate to Pakistan and abroad, with a growing trend of attempting illegal routes to reach Europe.

Labour accidents. Tragically, on 14 June, a fishing trawler carrying migrants, including 30 residents of AJK, sank off the coast of Greece, prompting a crackdown on human trafficking rings in AJK by law enforcement authorities (see also Box 1).

In May, three workers died in a steel slab installation near Dhani village due to the contractor's negligence.³⁸

Demands for salary increases. In July, the AJK government announced a 35 percent salary increase for government employees.³⁹ The announcement was later implemented through a government notification.

Earlier, in February, employees at PTV Muzaffarabad Centre had protested against the removal of allowances by their management in Islamabad.⁴⁰

In December, the administrative staff at Poonch University in Rawalakot went on strike over not receiving the announced salary increase.⁴¹ They demanded a 35 percent addition to their salaries as announced by the government and implemented by other departments.



Education

Despite high literacy rates in certain districts, AJK's primary education system faces challenges such as neglect, insufficient financing and political interference leading to corruption and nepotism. The system lacks teacher training and accountability; many schools destroyed in the 2005 earthquake were never rebuilt. Solutions include implementing a robust accountability system, eradicating corruption and improving curriculum quality and teacher motivation.

Crackdown on protesting schoolteachers. In July, the government cracked down on schoolteachers for protesting and organizing a long march toward the capital city of Muzaffarabad to raise their basic pay scales. Police baton-charged the protestors in several districts and arrested several teachers, including women. The registration of the representative body of schoolteachers was also revoked in a violation of their right to freedom of association. A similar police crackdown occurred on protesting schoolteachers in Mirpur that month for organizing a long march for higher pay scales, resulting in arrests and baton charges.⁴²

Policies and dress codes. In February, the AJK cabinet approved a mandatory education policy. The same month, the Directorate General of Elementary and Secondary Education in AJK issued a circular making it mandatory for female teachers and students at co-educational institutions to wear a hijab. This received a mixed response on social and traditional media channels.⁴³

New university campus. In August, the King Abdullah Campus was inaugurated at the University of AJK, marking a significant diplomatic milestone between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.⁴⁴ The campus is considered to be the largest university campus in the region and equipped with modern and state-of-the-art educational facilities. The campus was built under an earthquake reconstruction assistance programme funded by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Health

Healthcare in AJK faces a number of key challenges such as shortage of human resources and infrastructure, particularly in remote areas. However, its health indicators are better than in the federating units of Pakistan, with an infant mortality rate of 47/1,000 infants and a maternal mortality rate of 104/100,000 mothers. Efforts are underway to improve healthcare services, including the planning of new projects such as a cardiac centre and two new tehsil headquarter hospitals, as well as the implementation of vertical programmes such as the Expanded Programme on Immunization.

The termination of around 1,000 employees of the Maternal Newborn and Child Health (MNCH) Programme by the AJK government caused concern. In September, MNCH employees protested at the AJK district headquarters, demanding government regularization of services and inclusion in the normal budget.⁴⁵ Citing the unavailability of financial resources, the government has not yet extended the contracts of 1,200 employees, mostly lady health visitors, under the MNCH Programme.

Environment

Wildfires. During the autumn, multiple wildfires broke out across various parts of AJK, engulfing hundreds of acres of jungle. While the exact cause of these wildfires and the extent of losses remain under investigation, according to a Forests Department report, a total of 145 wildfire incidents occurred, affecting approximately 1,864 acres of forested land.



During the autumn, multiple wildfires broke out across various parts of AJK.

Deforestation. In the Neelum Valley, deforestation under government supervision emerged as a significant challenge. Local communities and media outlets consistently raised concerns about widespread deforestation. Illegal logging and timber transportation persisted not only in Neelum Valley but also in other parts of AJK.⁴⁶

The consequences of deforestation are dire, leading to annual natural disasters such as avalanches and cloudbursts in the valley. Additionally, the smuggling of raw timber out of the valley results in significant losses and demands immediate attention. Addressing the issue of smuggling is imperative to mitigate further damage to the environment.

In April, the AJK High Court intervened by suspending the operation of two tender notices issued by the Forests Department, effectively halting the transportation of raw wood from outside Neelum Valley due to concerns related to deforestation and smuggling.⁴⁷ Earlier, in March, the AJK government pledged to take concrete steps to conserve the territory's wildlife and natural habitats, emphasizing the importance of international wildlife conservation organizations collaborating with the AJK administration. Subsequently, in June, the AJK cabinet approved a proposed ordinance aimed at implementing a complete ban on deforestation. The ordinance stipulates a five-year imprisonment for those engaged in illegal tree-cutting, along with a significant increase in fines for such activities, underscoring the government's commitment to environmental conservation.⁴⁸

Climate change and natural disasters. The region of AJK is highly susceptible to a range of natural disasters, including landslides, floods and incidents related to glaciers. The year began with significant snowfall, followed by some of the most severe torrential rainfall and floods witnessed in recent decades during the summer months.

Comparing the official 2023 data with that for 2022 reveals a slight decrease in losses caused by natural disasters. In 2023, 12 houses were damaged and 10 individuals lost their lives in fires, while one person perished in a flash flood.

According to the State Disaster Management Authority, a total of 29 fatalities and numerous injuries were reported due to various natural calamities such as floods, rain and fires. Regrettably, the majority of flood victims, especially those who experienced significant property and financial losses, did not receive any form of compensation from the government.

Road accidents. During 2023, AJK witnessed several major road accidents, resulting in numerous fatalities and injuries. The primary causes of these accidents included poor road infrastructure, inadequate signage, lack of safety barriers, and insufficient lighting. However, due to the unavailability of official data, the full extent of the issue remains unclear. These accidents underscore the dire consequences of negligence and recklessness on the roads.

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GILGIT-BALTISTAN



HIGHLIGHTS

- The political status of Gilgit-Baltistan remained unresolved; the territory has not been accorded the status of a province despite this being a longstanding demand among most residents of the area.
- The Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly passed nine laws in 2023.
- Law and order remained problematic: in one incident, unidentified gunmen attacked a passenger bus on the Karakoram Highway, resulting in 10 deaths and 25 injuries.
- Following charges of possessing a false degree, the chief minister Khalid Khurshid was disqualified from office. Haji Gulber of the PTI forward bloc became the leader of the house, with the support of the Pakistan Democratic Movement alliance. The assembly was sealed for three days after the chief minister's disqualification.
- In a welcome development, Sadia Danish became Gilgit-Baltistan's first woman deputy speaker.
- Local government elections remained overdue even after 18 years.
- At least nine journalists reported having experienced physical attacks and threats across the region.
- Various groups and communities, including members of civil society, university students, women and local residents, staged protests on a range of issues, from the exploitation of *khalsa sarkar* or communally owned land and illegal land acquisition to wheat subsidy cuts, poor internet service provision, water and electricity shortages, and lack of teachers. In many cases, protestors were arrested and charged under maintenance of public order laws.
- Several political activists, including Shabir Mayar and Hasnain Ramal, were arrested in connection with their nationalist stance.
- Although the number of persons on the list maintained under Schedule Four of the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 decreased, some political workers and nationalists remained on the list.
- Hurdles to preventing gender-based violence remained: shelter homes remained incomplete, the Child Marriage Restraint Act has yet to be implemented, and a bill against domestic violence was pending.
- Positive steps were taken by the government to promote girls' education in Diamer, with over 100 home-based schools established.

- Land-related conflicts between the government and local communities, as well as within communities, continued, with illegal land acquisition by the government and land mafia increasing in the absence of land reforms and policies for barren land.
- Gilgit-Baltistan remained especially vulnerable to climate change-induced natural disasters such as glacial lake outburst floods and landslides, adversely affecting people's right to shelter, food and health.



OVERVIEW

The human rights situation in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) was defined by a complex interplay of legislative developments, security challenges and social issues in 2023. Its unsettled political status remained unresolved. Additionally, it remained vulnerable to climate-induced natural disasters, with thousands of people displaced by floods over the past decade still awaiting both physical and psychosocial rehabilitation. Security challenges were exemplified by the attack on a passenger bus in December on the Karakoram Highway in Chilas, resulting in casualties.

The disqualification of Chief Minister Khalid Khurshid on charges of using a false degree led to political instability, cancellation of by-elections and changes in leadership. Arrests of political activists, temporary closure of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly (GBLA), and lack of approval for crucial legislation on child marriage, land reforms, prevention of domestic violence, and rules of business for laws on the rights of persons with disabilities, indicate the level of restrictions on political freedoms and legal rights.

Broader socioeconomic challenges included incomplete shelter homes, delayed local body elections, gender disparities, child abuse, suicides, 'honour' killings, and lack of access to mental healthcare. However, strides in advancing girls' education in Diamer reflect positive efforts by the government to address gender imbalances.

Civil society, student groups and various communities actively protested on issues ranging from land disputes and illegal land acquisition to education, showcasing a resilient civic response. Despite the complexities, the human rights situation in GB emphasized the urgent need for comprehensive and lasting solutions addressing security concerns and socioeconomic inequalities in the region.



RULE OF LAW

Laws and law-making

Some important laws passed by the GBLA in 2023 include: the GB Civil Servant (Amendment) Act 2023, the GB Services Tribunal (Amendment) Act 2023, the GB Commission of Inquiry Act 2023, the GB Forest (Second Amendment) Act 2023, the GB Finance (Second Amendment) Act 2023, the GB Judicial Academy Act 2023, the GB Food Act 2023, the GB Board of Investment and Trade (Amendment) Act 2023 and the GB Establishment of Technology Board Act 2023.

In a positive development, Chief Minister Haji Gulber Khan approved the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women in October under the GB Commission on the Status of Women Act 2022.¹ The Cabinet, headed by the chief minister, approved the draft of the National Hazardous Waste Management Policy 2022 and the GB Rangeland Policy 2023. It also approved the establishment of special protection units for the GB police, as mandated by the Supreme Appellate Court's ruling related to timber transportation.²

Administration of justice

Disqualification of chief minister. Khalid Khurshid, who served as the chief minister from November 2020 to July 2023, was disqualified by a three-member bench of the GB chief court for obtaining a license with a false degree on 4 July.³

Following his disqualification, the chief justice of the Supreme Appellate Court, Sardar Muhammad Shamim Khan, postponed the scheduled election for the new chief minister, citing procedural violations.⁴ The disqualified chief minister alleged that the delay was an attempt to 'bully' the PTI.

Meanwhile, in response to a petition filed by a PTI worker, Rehman Darelo, the election commission imposed a lifetime ban on Khalid Khurshid, preventing him from contesting elections and heading the PTI's regional chapter.⁵

Judicial developments. In August, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif approved the permanent appointment of three judges to the chief court on the governor's advice. Earlier in March, the Supreme Court of Pakistan had restrained the prime minister, as chairman of the GB Council, from making further appointments.⁶

According to the website of the chief court, in May the GB High Court digitalized the whole judicial system, including a digital notice and summons system.



ENFORCEMENT OF LAW

Law and order

In December, a passenger bus was attacked by unidentified gunmen on the Karakoram Highway in Chilas, resulting in at least 10 deaths and 25 injuries. The victims were from various regions, including GB, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh.⁷



In December, a passenger bus was attacked by unidentified gunmen on the Karakoram Highway in Chilas.

In a tragic incident in July, a 28-year-old schoolteacher, Niat Ameen, was killed in Ghizer in what was reportedly a targeted killing. Subsequently, a police officer lost his life when the police raided a residence in search of the culprits.⁸

In October, Raja Shakeel, a senior judge of the chief court, was attacked while out for a walk.

In August, Haji Rashid, a resident of Punjab, was shot and killed by armed men during a robbery on Babusar Road. Rashid was an assistant professor at Baltistan University in Skardu.⁹

Although security was tightened in Babusar after this, insecurity still prevailed among travellers on the Karakoram Highway.¹⁰

Table 1 provides a comparative breakdown of crimes in GB in 2022 and 2023.

Table 1: Police crime data for 2022 and 2023

<i>Offence</i>	2022	2023
Murder	63	67
Attempted murder	120	125
'Honour' killings	15	16
Hurt	151	143
Rioting	90	95
Assault on public servants	66	83
Rape	2	3
Gang rape	nil	nil
Kidnapping/abduction	45	38
Kidnapping for ransom	nil	nil
Suicide	45	47
Attempted suicide	11	6
Dacoity	7	1
Robbery	15	20
Burglary	140	173
Other motor vehicle theft	18	15
Motorcycle theft	121	181
Cattle theft	34	71
Other theft	175	207
Arms Act	272	254
Prohibition Ordinance	62	170
Smuggling	nil	nil
Other local and special laws	1	6

Source: GB police, on HRCP's request for information.



FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

Blasphemy allegations. In early September, residents of Skardu protested against the GB government for registering a first information report (FIR) against prominent Shia cleric Agha Baqir Al-Hussaini on charges of blasphemy during a clerics' conference in the city. This sparked a sectarian rift, exacerbated by proposed amendments to the blasphemy laws in the Parliament.

Earlier, in August, protestors in the Sunni-majority Diamer district had demanded the registration of an FIR against Al-Hussaini and his arrest, as a result of which the Karakoram Highway was blocked for two days. Simultaneously, Skardu saw counter-protests, seeking the withdrawal of the FIR against Al-Hussaini.

The situation became tense on 1 September, when demonstrations were held in Gilgit and surrounding areas after prominent cleric Maulana Qazi Nisar Ahmed allegedly made derogatory remarks during a protest in Gilgit. The protesters demanded action against the cleric.¹¹

The situation prompted the closure of educational institutions, stranding tourists, and a 13-day mobile network suspension from 5 to 18 September. The issue settled after the arrest of several religious leaders from both sects and an apology tendered by Al-Hussaini.

Freedom of conscience

Following the 9 May riots, in which PTI-led mobs damaged and destroyed public property in several cities, the Islamabad police attempted to arrest Chief Minister Khalid Khurshid under the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance on charges of attempting to provide shelter to PTI leaders. The chief minister's security and ministers residing in the house opposed the arrest, emphasizing the jurisdiction of the provincial government. He was subsequently placed under house arrest in Islamabad.¹²

Freedom of expression

Attacks on journalists. Fida Shah Ghizri, founder of a digital media forum, was attacked by a religious group in Ghizer in December. A resolution was passed by the Tanzeem e Ahl e Sunat Wal Jamat Ghizer and an application submitted demanding that an FIR be filed against him for allegedly disrespecting the sanctity of a worship place.¹³ The issue was settled after the intervention of the local administration.

In September, three local journalists were attacked by unknown persons in Gilgit on their way back from work. In August, a local journalist, Munir Akhtar, was attacked by unknown persons, following which he submitted a complaint at a police station in Rawalpindi.

Shams ur Rehman, a local journalist, was booked on charges of electricity theft in Astore. He claimed this was done because he had highlighted corruption in the power department. In April, the president of the Gilgit Press Club was allegedly threatened by a Special Branch official during a press conference, following which an FIR was lodged against the latter.

Detention of civil society members. In March, Asif Sakhi, a member of the Awami Workers Party was arrested in Hunza on charges of harassing Frontier Works Organization (FWO) officials who were reportedly trying to fix a billboard in Gojal. Seven others were also booked in the same case.¹⁴

Five members of the Awami Action Committee in Ghizer were charged in May after they announced a public meeting over a loudspeaker to protest against the lifting of the wheat subsidy and lack of civic facilities in GB.

Several activists, including Tajamul Marhoom, were arrested in July and detained for two weeks after being accused of provoking Karakoram International University (KIU) students to protest.

He was released in August. Nazeer Baba, a social activist from Skardu, was booked on charges of sedition in May for allegedly making anti-state remarks on social media.

Political activist Hasnain Ramal told HRCP that he had been arrested several times since 2017 on charges of terrorism for questioning the legal status of GB but had received no response to a questionnaire he had submitted to the anti-terrorism court in Gilgit in his defence on this matter.

Freedom of assembly

Civil society and students. In October, Shabir Mayar, a political activist and chief organizer of the GB United Movement, was arrested while leading a protest against the prior arrest of Awami Action Committee¹⁵ workers in Baltistan. Mayar was charged under anti-terrorism laws.¹⁶

In the same month, ten KIU students were expelled after protesting against a hike in university fees.¹⁷

In November, following increased protests by students against the hike in fees, the KIU administration issued a notification closing the university's main campus in Gilgit till further orders.

Ban on protests. Protests on the Karakoram Highway and Ghizer and Skardu roads were banned by the Home Department in March.¹⁸ In August, the apex committee of GB, chaired by the chief minister, declared that blocking any road for purposes of protest would invite immediate legal action to maintain law and order.¹⁹

Food and power outage protests. Earlier in January, thousands of protestors took to the streets amid a shutter-down and transport strike across GB against land reforms, imposition of taxes, wheat shortages and prolonged blackouts in the region. In March, residents of Gilgit and Ghanche expressed their discontent with persistent shortages of electricity and wheat. In Gilgit, protestors, including women, gathered at a key intersection to protest against daily power outages lasting up to 22 hours.²⁰



Residents of Gilgit and Ghanche expressed their discontent with persistent wheat shortage.

Protests against land acquisition. In January, 11 people were booked for blocking the Karakoram Highway during a protest demanding compensation for the land they had lost on the Bhasha-Diamer dam site.

In May, the Tanzeem e Pushtani Bashandagan of Gilgit organized a protest condemning the unlawful allotment and acquisition of land in the region. Their demands included the cancellation of all illegitimate allotments and the return of land to its rightful owners in Gilgit.

Other protests. In May, seven workers of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) were arrested while staging a protest in front of the Gilgit Press Club to commemorate the death anniversary of late JKLF leader Aman Ullah Khan. In August, an FIR was registered against eight

protestors in Nagar for protesting against the Special Communication Organization, the region's sole internet service provider, which is managed by the Pakistan military.

Freedom of association

In November, KIU students demanded the restoration of student unions while protesting against fee hikes in Gilgit. Meanwhile a resolution was also tabled by a PPP member of the GBLA, Ghulam Shahzad Aga, demanding that student unions in GB be restored.

Freedom of movement

Schedule Four. Although the number of persons on the list maintained under Schedule Four of the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 has decreased, some political workers and nationalists remained on the list, including political activists Manzoor Parvana, Shabir Mayar and Hasnain Ramal.

Road closures. In August, amid other security measures, the government decided that the Karakoram Highway and Babusar Road would remain closed for traffic from 12 AM to 6 AM daily, while a convoy system for vehicles travelling between GB and other areas would be in place from 7 PM till midnight. These measures were taken after a university lecturer was killed on Babusar Road. [See *Law and order*].²¹



DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Political participation

The political status of GB remained uncertain, as in previous years. In August, the GBLA unanimously requested the federal government to delegate authority for amending the GB Order 2018, emphasizing constitutional empowerment, judicial commission appointments, and resolution of financial allocations in the National Finance Commission.²²

A protest was held outside the GBLA building in March, demanding that the assembly be convened; no session had been held for the last six months.²³

Disqualifications and aftermath. In July, the chief minister was sent packing after the chief court determined that he had used a false degree to apply for a license from the GB Bar Council. The case did, however, raise several questions about the quality of vetting done by the election commission and the local bar council, since Khalid Khurshid had been serving as chief minister for well over two years before anyone investigated his credentials.²⁴

Former Senate chairman Raza Rabbani strongly condemned police intervention in the GBLA, denouncing it as a violation of the assembly's sanctity and degradation of its status to below that of local bodies. Although the police had entered the assembly citing security concerns, the tactic was reportedly aimed at preventing members from voting for the nominated PTI candidate for chief minister after the disqualification of Khalid Khurshid.²⁵

In June, the assembly speaker, Amjad Ali Zaidi, faced a no-confidence motion, leading to his ouster. Deputy Speaker Nazir Ahmed succeeded him as speaker unopposed.²⁶ In a positive development, Sadia Danish became GB's first woman deputy speaker. She was elected unopposed in July.²⁷

In July, the Supreme Appellate Court delayed the chief minister's election, following a petition claiming a breach of assembly rules. The court's intervention came after police evacuation of assembly personnel and journalists, citing security concerns linked to 'explosive material'.²⁸

Qamar Zaman Kaira, the Prime Minister's Advisor on Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan, spearheaded efforts in July to form a coalition government, engaging with political and religious leaders, including the governor Syed Mehdi Shah, opposition leader Amjad Hussain, and PML-N and JUI-F representatives.²⁹

In July, estranged PTI member Haji Gulbar Khan became the chief minister, securing 19 out of 32 votes, following PTI candidate Khalid

Khurshid's disqualification. Raja Azam Khan, endorsed by Khurshid as his successor, boycotted the election as did Javed Ali Manwa, who led the PTI forward bloc. The PTI denounced the election as a 'robbery' of the public mandate'.³⁰

In September, a by-election was held in Astore after the disqualification of Khalid Khurshid. His father Khurshid Khan, a PTI candidate, reportedly received the largest number of votes according to unofficial results.³¹ However, the results were withheld, alleging rigging by the winning candidate.

Earlier in August, Planning Minister Fateh Khan of the PTI was disqualified from the GBLA when the election tribunal ruled in favour of the PPP's Jameel Ahmed for the remaining term. Jameel Ahmed, the former deputy speaker, contested Fateh Khan's victory in a Gilgit constituency in the 2020 elections, alleging rigging.³²

Budgets and funds. The GBLA approved a tax-free budget of over PKR116 billion for the fiscal year 2023/24 in June. Opposition members criticized the government for not prioritizing local issues in the budget.³³ Members of the GBLA demanded an investigation into alleged corruption and misuse of funds provided for the rehabilitation of flood-affected people in the region in August.³⁴

Local government

The Cabinet, at its first meeting in July, decided to hold local bodies elections in the region, bringing an end to the legal battle over this issue.³⁵ Earlier in January, GB's chief election commissioner Raja Shehbaz Khan had said that the election commission was ready to hold local bodies elections, which had not been held for the last 18 years.³⁶ In July, he announced that local government elections were set for the first week of November.³⁷

In August, the government formed committees for the delimitation of constituencies for city metropolitan corporations, municipal corporations, tehsil councils, municipal committees, town committees and union councils.³⁸ However, as a result of inadequate arrangements, these elections were not held till the end of 2023.



RIGHTS OF THE DISADVANTAGED

Women

Local women were under-represented in every sphere of life, including the GB council, civil services, election commission, administration, works department and other important sectors.

In March, the First Annual Women's Summit was held in Gilgit by the Dadi Jawari Public Policy Centre in collaboration with the GB government and UN Women in connection with International Women's Day.

The summit highlighted challenges to women's labour rights, ensuring equal opportunities in government, establishing support centres for victims of violence, addressing legal loopholes with respect to harassment, and securing land and inheritance rights for women.



In March, the First Annual Women's Summit was held in Gilgit.

Violence against women. Reports of violence against women, 'honour' killings, suicide, domestic violence, and harassment at the workplace continued to emerge. A 35-year-old mother of five was killed in Ghizer, allegedly in the name of 'honour', in April.³⁹

Legislation against domestic violence remained pending as of 2022. A shelter home for victims of violence (women) has been under construction for the last five years. GB still lacks psychiatric hospitals, forensic labs and medico-legal experts to deal with cases of suicide, 'honour' killings and violence against women.

According to police data, 16 ‘honour’ killings were registered in 2023 as well as 47 suicides and six attempted suicides. In Skardu, a girl was killed by her brother in June after a video of her went viral on social media.⁴⁰

HRCP’s Complaints Cell received 50 cases of gender-based violence of a total of 80 cases during the year. Cases of cyber-harassment against women were reported during the year. In January, social media reported that a man was arrested by the Federal Investigation Agency in Gilgit for engaging in alleged cyber-harassment against women in GB.

Transgender persons

According to local activists, the local transgender community tends to hide their identity due to social pressure. According to the Benazir Income Support Programme socioeconomic survey, at least 45 transgender children are out of school in the region. HRCP received three complaints of domestic violence from transgender persons in Gilgit, Ghizer and Hunza.

Children

According to the District Child Protection Unit, 27 cases of child abuse – encompassing sexual abuse, physical violence, neglect, bullying, corporal punishment, child marriage, and begging – were registered in 2023. The majority of children were aged 11–15 and the bulk of cases reported pertained to male victims.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act remained pending despite advocacy attempts by the National Commission on the Status of Women. The most recent estimates from the Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey conducted by UNICEF show that the child marriage prevalence rate in GB is as high as 26 percent.

According to the survey, about 50,000 children in GB are engaged in child labour, representing about 14 percent of the total population of children in the region. Violence against children continued to be reported. The Ghizer police arrested a 70-year-old man for allegedly raping a nine-year-old girl repeatedly in the Punial Valley.⁴¹

Labour

The labour department was hampered severely by lack of resources and capacity, while awareness of labour rights remained low.

Labour accidents. Three labourers lost their lives while ten others were injured in an explosion during rock blasting at the Diamer-Bhasha dam construction site in April. The incident occurred as the labourers were

preparing explosives; a short circuit led to an accidental explosion, according to the police.⁴²

Government posts. In May, GB's line department officers requested a 30 percent quota in secretariat posts, highlighting the absence of any allocation for them, unlike in AJK and other provinces.

The GB Professional and Unified Officers Association, in a letter to the chief minister and chief secretary, emphasized the officers' long-standing demand for equal rights and service benefits.⁴³

Newly appointed lady health workers protested against the suspension of their appointment outside the chief minister's residence in January. The government had advertised over 600 positions and appointed candidates.

However, the chief minister Khalid Khurshid had suspended these appointments a day before issuing letters of appointment. Protesters alleged that the chief minister had sought to appoint his favoured candidates.⁴⁴ The issue was subsequently resolved after negotiations with the protestors.

The elderly

The implementation of the Senior Citizens' Welfare Act 2022 is still pending, while its rules of business have not yet been finalized. The region also lacks shelter homes for homeless elderly people and elderly victims of domestic violence.

People living with disabilities

Despite consistent demands from associations of persons living with disabilities (PLWDs), the Rights of Persons Living with Disabilities Act 2019 had not been effectively implemented as of year-end, with its rules of business still pending approval.⁴⁵

PLWDs demanded the creation of reserved seats in GB. According to the president of the Association of Persons with Disabilities, PLWDs comprise an estimated 10 percent of the population, despite which they continue to be neglected.

A person with mental disabilities, Qasim Khan, was sentenced on charges of blasphemy by a local court in June. He had been arrested in January 2022 on allegations of desecrating a local mosque in Ghizer.

The sole hostel designated for PLWDs, housed in an educational complex in Gilgit, remained occupied by the National Accountability Bureau, despite receiving a notice from the chief court to vacate the premises.

Refugees and internally displaced persons

People displaced by the earthquake in Rondu in 2021, glacial lake outburst floods in Hasanabad and the Attabad landslide in 2010 continued to face problems regarding rehabilitation, schooling for their children, access to healthcare and other issues.

The government's response remained lukewarm. KIU students, internally displaced by the Rondu earthquake, were banned from sitting their examination, although the chief minister announced a fee remission package for them.⁴⁶

Residents of Jaglot blocked the Karakoram Highway in June, protesting against the alleged misappropriation of flood-aid funds meant for rehabilitation after glacial lake outburst flooding.⁴⁷ In February, flood victims in Sher Qilla in Ghizer expressed frustration over the government's lack of attention to their rehabilitation, according to a report by a local digital news platform.

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL RIGHTS



Poor road conditions led to dozens of road accidents in 2023, resulting in at least 34 deaths and 50 injuries according to figures shared by Rescue 1122. The government failed to make significant improvements to transport infrastructure in GB.

Land grabbing

Land-related conflicts between the government and local communities, as well as within communities, have surged in the past five years. Illegal land acquisition by the government and land mafia increased in the absence of land reforms and policies for barren land in GB.

In Aliabad, a resident accused the local administration of seizing his land for a government building.⁴⁸ In response to widespread protests against land grabbing, the government initiated consultations on land reforms, but nationalist and progressive parties in GB rejected the process, advocating for the reinstatement of state-subject rule, similar to that in AJK. In a case of land grabbing, residents of Guro Jiglote sent an application to the chief minister and other authorities in January, alleging that the FWO had seized a piece of community land that had been rented to it earlier.

However, the FWO had neither paid rent nor vacated the land. In March, an FIR was registered in Aliabad against over 100 persons from Nagar for allegedly attacking residents of Ganish over disputed barren land in Hunza.

Education

Positive steps. The GB government has taken positive steps towards girls' education in the conservative district of Diamer and established more than 100 home-based schools. The district was known to have traditionally opposed girls' education, with a female literacy rate of only 5 percent. Other remote areas such as Shigar and Kharmang are also deprived of schools and suffer constant teacher shortages. Students staged protests through the year against the shortage of teachers in Kharmang and other parts of GB.

In January, the administration had announced that it would recruit 4,000 teachers over six months to resolve the problem.⁴⁹ The government also started an initiative to hire 1,000 education fellows to improve the education system and overcome teacher shortages in government schools across the region over the next three years at a cost of PKR 2.19 billion.⁵⁰ A total of 26,266 students were enrolled in public sector schools across GB at the start of the academic year, representing a 13 percent increase in enrolment compared to 2022.

The chief secretary disclosed official data indicating that Ghizer and Kharmang had experienced the highest student enrolment, with a remarkable increase of over 22 percent compared to the previous year.⁵¹

A Chilas sub-jail was transformed into a girls' school in May, accommodating 200 students. The commissioner's house in Diamer, currently under construction, will be repurposed as a women's hostel.⁵²

Other developments. The National Curriculum Council approved the Burushaski script in both Perso-Arabic and Roman in February. Burushaski, spoken by some 300,000 people, now has a dual script, giving it wider outreach.⁵³

In 2023, KIU officials reported that a total of PKR 910 million in fees remained unpaid, citing unknown reasons for students' ability to make payments. Faculty members of KIU staged a protest in June against the financial crisis and non-payment of salaries.

Health

Mental health remained a neglected sector in GB, as evident from increasing cases of suicide (47 suicides according to police records) and domestic violence. Despite this, GB lacks basic mental healthcare facilities, including psychiatric hospitals and rehabilitation for persons with mental ailments.

The chief minister Gulbar Khan halted the passage of a bill in August that aimed to increase the retirement age of doctors to 65 years, responding to protests by the GB Young Doctors' Association and Pakistan Medical Association.⁵⁴

Environment

GB is especially vulnerable to climate change-induced natural disasters such as glacial lake outburst floods and landslides, adversely affecting people's right to shelter, food and health.

In January, the European Union approved a grant of PKR 7.86 billion for sustainable and climate-resilient projects in GB and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The funds will be utilized for energy projects.⁵⁵

Floods

In Diamer's Tangir Valley, two lake outbursts triggered by an avalanche destroyed four homes and damaged another 40 in January.⁵⁶ The chief secretary announced the installation of early flood warning systems across 200 valleys in GB under the Glacial Lake Outburst Flood Project in February.⁵⁷

The Pakistan Meteorological Department issued an alert for GB and some parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in June, warning of the possibility of flash floods and glacial lake outburst floods amid rising temperatures.⁵⁸

Landslides triggered by flash floods blocked sections of the Karakoram Highway in Diamer, Jaglote and Skardu, leaving thousands of passengers stranded.⁵⁹



Landslides triggered by flash floods blocked sections of the Karakoram Highway in Diamer, Jaglote and Skardu.

Pollution and water shortages. The GB government announced a comprehensive ban in August on single-use plastic, including bags and bottles, to curb adverse impacts on human health and the environment.⁶⁰ Residents of Skardu are expected to face severe water shortage as the water level in Sadpara Dam has fallen to a dead level.⁶¹

Culture

A department of culture is not functional in GB, with little focus on the promotion of cultural activities, including the celebration of local festivals, sports and other recreational activities.

The government announced it would establish a regional languages, arts and cultural academy for the promotion of local languages and culture in 2015, but as of 2023, this has not materialized due to lack of resources. The region lacks even a public auditorium for cultural activities nor is it included in cultural exchange visits to foreign countries.

Endnotes

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APPENDIX 1

Human rights legislation in 2023

This appendix outlines selected laws passed in 2023 that pertain to human rights.

Federal legislation

- The Islamabad Capital Territory Local Government (Amendment) Act 2023 amends the Islamabad Capital Territory Local Government Act 2015. The amendment permits the recounting of ballot papers from one or more polling stations upon request by the contesting candidate or their election agent. Additionally, the act introduces provisions for issuing a show-cause notice to a political party in the event of failure to conduct intra-party elections within the stipulated timeframe outlined in its constitution. Moreover, the Act specifies that holding a nomination on an honorary basis, or being a member of any board of a statutory body or entity owned or controlled by the government, or in which the government has a controlling share, interest, or authority – by any designation – will not lead to disqualification for candidacy in parliament, a provincial assembly, or a local government (February 2023).
- The Lawyers Welfare and Protection Act 2023 legislates on matters pertaining to the welfare and protection of advocates (March 2023).
- The Maternity and Paternity Leave Act 2023 provides for maternity and paternity leaves to employees of public and private establishments under the administrative control of the federal government (June 2023).
- The Day Care Centres Act 2023 provides for the facility of day care centres in public and private establishments (June 2023).
- The Elections (Amendment) Act 2023 amends the Elections Act 2017. According to the amendment, the Elections Commission of Pakistan is empowered, through an official Gazette notification, to declare the date or dates for general elections. Furthermore, the commission is granted the authority to modify the election program initially announced in the notification for various stages of the election or to issue a completely new election program with revised poll dates. In addition, the act specifies that in cases where no specific procedure, manner, or duration has been outlined in Section

62 and Section 63 of the constitution for the qualifications and disqualifications of members of parliament, the criteria for qualification and disqualification shall be governed by the Elections (Amendment) Act 2023 (June 2023).

- The Criminal Laws (Amendment) Act 2023 amends the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016, the Pakistan Penal Code and the Qanun-e-Shahadat 1984. The act defines child sexual abuse and introduces new sections such as online child grooming, solicitation and cyber enticement, commercial sexual exploitation of children and use of information systems for kidnapping, abducting or trafficking minors (July 2023).
- The Official Secrets Act of 1923 grants sweeping powers to security intelligence agencies, compromising the right to privacy (August 2023).
- The Pakistan Army (Amendment) Act 2023 criminalizes defamation of the armed forces, including online expressions, violating freedom of expression (August 2023).
- The Contempt of Majlis-e-Shoora (Parliament) Bill 2023 criminalizes criticism of the parliament, infringing upon people's rights to freedom of expression. While the bill was passed by both houses, it is not clear whether it received presidential assent.

Provincial legislation

Punjab

- The Punjab Home-Based Workers Act 2023 governs the rights, entitlement, and registration of home-based workers (February 2023).

Sindh

- The Sindh Local Government (Third Amendment) Act 2023 amends the Sindh Local Government Act 2013. The act sets the limit for the penalty to be imposed and the offences punishable under this act will be tried by the magistrate (May 2023).
- The Sindh Local Government (Amendment) Act 2023 amends the Sindh Local Government Act 2013 (May 2023).
- The Sindh Workers Welfare Fund (Amendment) Act 2023 amends the Sindh Workers Welfare Fund Act 2014 (July 2023).

- The Sindh Senior Citizen Welfare (Amendment) Act 2023 amends the Sindh Senior Citizen Welfare Act 2014. The act provides for a council for senior citizens to prescribe a scheme for the management of old age homes, including the standards and various types of services necessary for medical care (August 2023).
- The Sindh Immunization and Epidemics Control Act 2023 provides for and consolidates the laws relating to immunization, vaccination and control of epidemics in Sindh (October 2023).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

- The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government (Amendment) Ordinance introduces provisions for the re-issuance of local government funds.

Balochistan

- The Balochistan Use of Plastic Shopping and Flat Bags Act 2023 regulates and prohibits the manufacture, sale, purchase, storage, display, use and import of plastic shopping and flat bags (July 2023).
- The Balochistan Local Government (Amendment) Act 2023 amends the Balochistan Local Government Act 2010 and provides for disqualification on grounds of defection (July 2023).

Legislation by administrative regions

Gilgit-Baltistan

- The Gilgit-Baltistan Commission of Inquiry Act 2023 provides for the constitution of a Commission of Inquiry for matters of public importance.

Azad Jammu and Kashmir

- The Azad Jammu and Kashmir Employees Service Association (Registration and Regulation) Amendment Act 2023 amends the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Employees Service Association (Registration and Regulation) Act 2016 (December 2023).



APPENDIX 2

Key HRCP activities

HRCP's work is organized around seven strategic areas (see below), some of which is cross-cutting work. This work takes the form of (a) human rights monitoring and fact-finding (b) research, documentation and learning, (c) convening and alliance building for solidarity, (d) awareness raising, (e) advocacy and lobbying, (f) public interest litigation, and (g) support to survivors of human rights violations.

In addition, members hold regular monthly meetings on human rights-based themes of local or national interest. Much of this work is informed by the Knowledge Management System that HRCP maintains, comprising human rights-related news reports dating back to 1990, digitized and categorized according to 19 broad themes.

Combating discrimination against vulnerable and excluded groups

- 3 January, Multan: Meeting on the state of public and private school education system
- 13 January, Hyderabad: Meeting on the state of women's rights and gender-based violence
- 18 January, Islamabad: Consultation on the challenges associated with securing transgender rights in Pakistan regarding the implementation of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018
- 31 January, Lahore: Fact-finding mission to investigate attacks on religious minorities' sites of worship in Gujranwala and Wazirabad
- 3 February, Peshawar: Fact-finding mission to investigate children's deaths in a boating accident in Kohat
- 13 February, Dera Ismail Khan: Mobilization meeting on the state of women's rights
- 15 February, Nawabshah: Meeting on human rights mechanisms for reporting violence against women
- 5 May, Bahawalpur: Mobilization meeting on access to citizenship for religious minorities in Cholistan
- 11 May, Bahawalpur: Meeting on access to citizenship for religious minorities

- 17 May, Mardan: Advocacy workshop on women’s right to inheritance
- 17 May, Islamabad: Awareness-raising session on trans rights legislation and redressal mechanisms
- 18 May, Peshawar: Consultation on addressing violence against women in the Newly Merged Districts
- 26 May, Gilgit: Consultation on prevention mechanisms and protection for domestic violence survivors in Gilgit-Baltistan
- 26 May, Larkana: Consultation on the state of women’s rights
- 28 May, Peshawar: Roundtable on the implementation of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Protection Act 2010
- 6 June, Lodhran: Meeting on trans-sensitive policing services
- 9 June, Lahore: Workshop on rights-based policing for Tahaffuz Reporting and Khidmat Markaz officers
- 19 June, Jamshoro: Outreach meeting on the right to housing and livelihood for residents of *kachi abadis*
- 20 June, Quetta: Outreach meeting on constitutional rights and gender-based violence
- 20 July, Gilgit: Mobilization meeting on strengthening women’s rights in Gilgit-Baltistan
- 16 August, Muzaffargarh: Outreach meeting on support systems for survivors of gender- based violence
- 17 August, Lahore: Fact-finding mission to investigate mob-led destruction of churches in Jaranwala, Punjab
- 21 August, Badin: Outreach meeting on overcoming constraints to girls’ right to education
- 23 August, Bahawalpur: Advocacy meeting on the citizenship rights of religious minorities in South Punjab
- 14 September, Islamabad: Discussion on upholding children’s fundamental right to education
- 15 September, Hyderabad: Policy dialogue on the socioeconomic rights of trans persons
- 16 September, Gilgit: Roundtable on the implementation of the Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Act 2015

- 21 September, Hunza: Meeting on women's right to inheritance
- 23 September, Gilgit: Discussion on addressing gender-based violence in Gilgit-Baltistan
- 23 September, Lahore: Fact-finding mission to investigate mob violence and the social ostracization of the Christian community in Sargodha
- 26 September, Quetta: Roundtable on rights violations of religious minorities in Balochistan
- 10 October, Turbat: Consultation to commemorate World Day Against the Death Penalty
- 13 October, Islamabad: Fact-finding mission on the bulldozing of settlements of Afghan refugees
- 14 October, Gilgit: Roundtable on the challenges faced by persons living with disabilities in Gilgit-Baltistan
- 17 October, Jamshoro: Mobilization meeting on the situation of religious minorities' rights in Thana Bula Khan
- 18 October, Islamabad: Consultation on the rights of Afghan refugees
- 19 October, Karachi: Awareness-raising session on gender-based violence in the Bengali community
- 20 November, Quetta: Mobilization meeting on protecting the rights of Afghan refugees
- 28 November, Karachi: Dialogue on protecting the rights of Afghan women refugees
- 28 November, Peshawar: Workshop to assess the implementation of the Domestic Violence against Women (Prevention and Protection) Act 2021
- 18 December, Quetta: Roundtable on the implementation of women's rights legislation
- 28 December, Mardan: Dialogue on domestic violence against women

Defending the rights of workers and peasants

- 16 February, Bahawalpur: Advocacy meeting on land rights in Cholistan

- 14 February, Islamabad: Third Asma Jahangir Memorial Lecture on economic justice, delivered by Dr Pervez Tahir
- 27–28 February, Multan: Human rights camp and press conference on the land rights of Cholistan’s indigenous residents
- 13 April, Quetta: Roundtable on the state of labour rights for coal mine workers in Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan
- 18 April, Peshawar: Roundtable on the state of labour rights for agricultural workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
- 5 May, Faisalabad: Roundtable on the socioeconomic rights of textile workers in Punjab
- 6 May, Karachi: Roundtable on the state of labour rights for fisherfolk in Sindh and Balochistan
- 9 May, Islamabad: Roundtable on the reconceptualization of labour rights
- 11 May, Hyderabad: Mobilization meeting on promoting the economic empowerment of women who work from home and other vulnerable groups in Sindh
- 18 May, Gilgit: Roundtable on proposed land reforms in Gilgit-Baltistan
- 22 May, Lahore: Advocacy meeting on the rights of lady health workers
- 25 May, Turbat: Roundtable on the implementation of an official notification to categorize fisherfolk in Makran and Balochistan as formal labour
- 31 May, Karachi: Mobilization meeting on the labour rights of health workers in Sindh
- 5 June, Multan: Advocacy meeting on citizenship rights for brick kiln workers
- 25 June, Karachi: National conference on the dignity of labour and decent work for all
- 31 July, Karachi: Roundtable on the working conditions of media persons and gaps in media laws
- 21 August, Multan: Outreach meeting on the impact of the Punjab Domestic Workers Act 2019

- 28 September, Islamabad: Consultation on the labour rights of media workers
- 24 November, Tando Muhammad Khan: Mobilization meeting on the implementation of labour laws and benefits for workers in agro-based industries and other informal sectors
- 13 December, Quetta: Fact-finding mission to document sit-in against border restrictions at Chaman, Balochistan
- 15 December, Lahore: Consultation on sanitation workers and the right to decent work
- 19 December, Peshawar: Fact-finding mission to investigate coal miners' deaths in Darra Adam Khel, Kohat

Reclaiming space for civil society

- 16 January, Gilgit: Dialogue on protocols for reporting human rights violations
- 16 February, Gilgit: Roundtable on the right to information in Gilgit-Baltistan
- 1 March, Islamabad: Training workshop on human rights and advocacy for human rights defenders
- 17 March, Gilgit: Dialogue on protocols for reporting human rights violations
- 20 March, Turbat: Seminar on freedom of expression in Makran
- 20-21 March: Training workshop on human rights and advocacy for civil society groups
- 23 May, Islamabad: Training workshop on Pakistan's obligations under international human rights law
- 25-26 May, Karachi: Training workshop on human rights and advocacy for civil society groups
- 28-29 May, Hyderabad: Workshop on capacity-building for human rights organizations
- 17-18 June, Karachi: Workshop on advocacy, fact-finding methods and security for human rights defenders
- 12 June, Gilgit: Training workshop on human rights frameworks and advocacy for human rights defenders

- 18 July, Peshawar: Workshop on human rights advocacy for lawyers of the Peshawar Bar Association
- 24 August, Peshawar: Dialogue on shrinking civic spaces for political workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
- 27 September, Karachi: Workshop on digital rights and relevant laws
- 17–18 October, Karachi: Awareness-raising sessions with university students on HRCP's mission and vision
- 28–29 November, Lahore: Workshop on countering online misinformation and disinformation
- 29 November, Hyderabad: Roundtable on the protection of human rights defenders
- 1 December, Peshawar: Workshop on human rights and advocacy for human rights defenders
- 4 December, Karachi: Film screening on freedom of expression
- 7–8 December, Karachi: Workshop on human rights and advocacy for civil society groups.

Advancing the rule of law and justice system reforms

- 15 March, Hyderabad: Awareness-raising session on alternative dispute resolution
- 30 March, Turbat: Press conference on the arbitrary detention of activist Mahil Baloch
- 16 May, Quetta: Advocacy meeting on constitutional rights and the rule of law
- 26 June, Lahore: Meeting to mark International Day in Support of Victims of Torture
- 26 June, Turbat: Consultation and demonstration to mark International Day in Support of Victims of Torture
- 26 June, Islamabad: Meeting and discussion on the implementation status of the UN Convention Against Torture
- 26 June, Multan: Dialogue on International Day in Support of Victims of Torture

- 26 June, Hyderabad: Demonstration to mark International Day in Support of Victims of Torture
- 26 June, Karachi: Discussion to mark International Day in Support of Victims of Torture
- 26 June, Quetta: Meeting to mark International Day in Support of Victims of Torture
- 7 August, Turbat: Press conference to condemn the killing of Rauf Barkat (teacher accused of blasphemy)
- 30 August, Lahore: Meeting to mark International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances
- 30 August, Peshawar: Meeting to mark International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances
- 30 August, Islamabad: Meeting on enforced disappearances in Pakistan
- 30 August, Gilgit: Consultation with civil society to mark International Day of Victims of Enforced Disappearances
- 30 August, Hyderabad: Meeting and demonstration to mark International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances
- 30 August, Karachi: Rally and sit-in to mark International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances
- 30 August, Quetta: Meeting to commemorate International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances
- 30 August, Turbat: Meeting to commemorate International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances
- 2 October, Hyderabad: Fact-finding mission to investigate extrajudicial killings in Mari Jalbani village near Sakrand, Sindh
- 10 October, Islamabad: Meeting to mark World Day against the Death Penalty
- 10 October, Karachi: Discussion to mark World Day against the Death Penalty
- 14 December, Islamabad: Advocacy meeting on implementation status of UN Convention Against Torture

Strengthening constitutional democracy and federalism

- 5 May, Hyderabad: Consultation on the challenges faced by vulnerable groups in local government participation
- 31 May, Islamabad: Press conference on the political crisis in Pakistan
- 28 August, Islamabad: Conference on the Constitution, democracy and human rights to mark 50 years of the 1973 Constitution
- 12 October, Peshawar: Advocacy meeting on challenges to the devolution of power and resources for local governments
- 14 December, Lahore: Seminar on democracy and people's rights in collaboration with the Joint Action Committee

Contributing to climate action

- 9 March, Quetta: Roundtable on consequences faced by vulnerable groups in flood-affected areas
- 13 June, Karachi: Outreach meeting on climate change-induced floods in Sindh
- 25 September, Karachi: Outreach meeting on the rights of people internally displaced by the climate crisis
- 12 November, Lahore: Seminar on the right to clean air

Promoting electoral reforms

- 4 May, Karachi: Conference on improving electoral participation and the political empowerment of marginalized groups
- 6 June, Quetta: Consultation on improving electoral participation and the political empowerment of marginalized groups
- 19 June, Peshawar: Provincial dialogue on electoral participation and the political empowerment of marginalized groups
- 20 June, Multan: Awareness-raising session on electoral participation and caucus formation of women from religious minorities
- 19 September, Islamabad: National conference on improving electoral participation and the political empowerment of marginalized groups

Cross-cutting work

- 10 February, Karachi: Outreach meeting on the state of human rights in Thatta
- 14–18 February, Karachi: Fact-finding mission to Ghotki, Mirpur Mathelo, Kandhkot, Jacobabad, Larkana and Karachi to assess the overall human rights situation in Sindh
- 18 February, Karachi: Press conference on fact-finding mission to northern Sindh
- 1 March, Turbat: Consultation on the state of human rights in Turbat
- 13–18 March, Peshawar: Fact-finding mission to Bannu, Peshawar, Khyber and Swat to assess the human rights situation in the Newly Merged Districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
- 13 April, Multan: Fact-finding mission to assess mismanaged flour distribution mechanisms and stampede-related deaths
- 19 April, Quetta: Press conference to launch HRCP fact-finding report titled *Balochistan's Struggle for Hope*
- 26 April, Islamabad: Press conference to launch HRCP's report *State of Human Rights in 2022*
- 18–20 May, Lahore: Workshop on HRCP Complaints Cell redressal mechanisms and protocols
- 16 June, Islamabad: National roundtable on enshrining the right to health in the Constitution
- 19 July, Quetta: Outreach meeting on the impact of the current economic crisis on human rights
- 22 July, Gilgit: Meeting on the right to mental healthcare in Gilgit-Baltistan
- 2 September, Lahore: Seminar and workshop on the fundamental rights enshrined in Pakistan's Constitution and its international commitments
- 19 September, Karachi: Conference on the role of youth in effective policymaking
- 12 November, Lahore: 37th Annual General Meeting
- 10 December, Karachi: Conference on freedom, equality and justice for all to mark International Human Rights Day

- 27 December, Peshawar: Press conference to launch HRCP fact-finding report on the state of human rights in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Publications

Thematic reports

- *State of Human Rights in 2022* (English)
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-State-of-human-rights-in-2022.pdf>
- *State of Human Rights in 2022* (Urdu)
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-State-of-Human-Rights-in-2022-UR.pdf>
- *Protecting the Right to Dignity of Labour and Decent Work for All*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-National-labour-conference-charter-of-demands.pdf>
- *Fighting to Breathe: Occupational Safety and Health in Punjab's Stone-Crushing Industry* (I A Rehman Research Grant Series)
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Fighting-to-breathe.pdf>
- *Economic Justice* (Asma Jahangir Memorial Lecture)
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-On-Economic-Justice-Asma-Jahangir-Memorial-Lecture.pdf>
- *The Right to Democratic Participation: Improving the Electoral Participation and Political Empowerment of Marginalized Groups*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-The-Right-to-Democratic-Participation.pdf>
- *A Breach of Faith: Freedom of Religion or Belief in 2021/22* (English)
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-A-breach-of-faith-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-in-2021-22.pdf>
- *A Breach of Faith: Freedom of Religion or Belief in 2021/22* (Urdu)
<http://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-A-breach-of-faith-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-in-2021-22-UR.pdf>
- *A Clarion Call for Climate Justice: The Human Rights Cost of the 2022 Floods*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-A-clarion-call-for-climate-justice.pdf>

- *A Year of Protests: The Right to Peaceful Assembly from 2021 to 2022*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-A-year-of-protests-The-right-to-freedom-of-peaceful-assembly-from-2021-to-2022.pdf>
- *A Bid for Change: Documenting the Right to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly in Pakistan*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-A-bid-for-change-documenting-the-right-to-freedom-of-peaceful-assembly-in-Pakistan.pdf>
- *The Ailing Prisoner: Access to Healthcare in Pakistan's Prisons* (English)
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-The-Ailing-Prisoner-Access-to-Healthcare-in-Pakistans-Prisons.pdf>
- *The Ailing Prisoner: Access to Healthcare in Pakistan's Prisons* (Urdu)
<http://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-The-Ailing-Prisoner-Access-to-Healthcare-in-Pakistans-Prisons-UR.pdf>
- *Making Elections Credible: A Discussion Paper on Electoral Reforms in Pakistan*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Making-Elections-Credible.pdf>
- *Securing Health as a Fundamental Right* (policy paper)
<http://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Securing-health-as-a-fundamental-right.pdf>
- *Constitutional Cover for Local Governments: Proposed Amendment to Strengthen Article 140-A* (policy paper)
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Constitutional-cover-for-local-governments.pdf>

Fact-finding reports

- *Children's Deaths in Boating Accident in Kohat*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Childrens-deaths-in-boating-accident-in-Kohat.pdf>
- *Attacks on Religious Minorities' Sites of Worship in Gujranwala and Wazirabad*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Attacks-on-religious-minorities-sites-of-worship.pdf>
- *Balochistan's Struggle for Hope*
<http://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Balochistans-Struggle-for-Hope.pdf>

- *Mismanaged Flour Distribution Mechanisms and Stampede-Related Deaths*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Mismanaged-flour-distribution-mechanisms-and-stampede-related-deaths.pdf>
- *Mob-Led Destruction of Churches in Jaranwala, Punjab*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Mob-led-destruction-of-churches-in-Jaranwala.pdf>
- *Northern Sindh: In Search of Solutions (English)*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Northern-Sindh-In-Search-of-Solutions-EN.pdf>
- *Northern Sindh: In Search of Solutions (Urdu)*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Northern-Sindh-In-Search-of-Solutions-UR.pdf>
- *Mob Violence and the Social Ostracization of the Christian Community in Sargodha*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Mob-violence-and-the-social-ostracisation-of-the-Christian-community-in-Sargodha.pdf>
- *Investigation into Extrajudicial Killings in Mari Jalbani Village near Sakrand, Sindh*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Investigation-into-extra-judicial-killings-in-Mari-Jalbani-village-near-Sakrand-Sindh.pdf>
- *The Merger and its Discontents: Human Rights in the Newly Merged Districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-The-merger-and-its-discontents.pdf>

Legislation Watch Cell Series

- *Punjab Protection of Rights of Transgender Act 2022*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2022-LWC02-Punjab-Protection-of-Rights-of-Transgender-Act-2022.pdf>
- *Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention and Punishment) Act 2022*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-LWC03-Torture-and-Custodial-Death-Prevention-and-Punishment-Act-2022.pdf>

- *Criminal Laws (Amendment) Act 2023*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-LWC04-Criminal-Laws-Amendment-Act-2023.pdf>
- *Punjab Home-Based Workers Act 2023*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-LWC05-Punjab-Home-Based-Workers-Act-2023.pdf>

ElectionsWatch Series

- *ElectionsWatch January-September 2023*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Elections-Watch-Jan-Sep-2023.pdf>
- *ElectionsWatch October 2023*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Elections-Watch-Oct-2023.pdf>
- *ElectionsWatch November 2023*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Elections-Watch-Nov-2023.pdf>
- *ElectionsWatch December 2023*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2024-Elections-Watch-Dec-2023.pdf>

Shakeel Pathan Labour Studies Series

- *Reconceptualizing Labour and Labour Rights*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Reconceptualising-labour-and-labour-rights.pdf>
- *Invisible Lives: Stories from Pakistan's Sanitation Workers*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Invisible-lives-Stories-from-Pakistans-sanitation-workers.pdf>
- *The Human Cost of the Textiles Industry: Textile Workers in Punjab and Sindh*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-The-human-cost-of-the-textiles-industry.pdf>
- *Fishing for Nothing: The Situation of Fisherfolk in Sindh and Balochistan*
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Fishing-for-nothing.pdf>

- *Deadly Labour: Mine Workers in Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan*
<http://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Deadly-labour.pdf>
- *Agricultural Workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: The Rights to Land and Livelihood*
<http://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Agricultural-workers-in-Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.pdf>

In addition to the publications listed above, HRCP produced and disseminated 12 issues of its monthly newsletter, *Jehd-e-Haq*, which provides coverage of local human rights concerns. These can be accessed here: <https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/jehd-e-haq/>



APPENDIX 3

HRCP stands

Combating discrimination against vulnerable and excluded groups

11 January: The recent stampedes that have left one labourer dead in Mirpurkhas and several women injured in Nawabshah, both caught in crowds desperate to buy flour, should serve as a grim wake-up call to the federal and provincial **governments**. HRCP believes that spiralling inflation, food shortages and poor distribution mechanisms, and mass layoffs are leading steadily to a human rights crisis. An inquiry into labourer Harsingh Kohli's death is little more than a sop. Mr Kohli, a father of six, was not the first casualty of the food security crisis and, unless the state prioritizes the equitable distribution of food at affordable prices across the country, he will not be the last.

14 January: HRCP strongly condemns the desecration of a historical Ahmadiyya site of worship in Wazirabad, allegedly by the district administration on 10 January. The vague nature of the complaint filed by a local TLP leader should drive home the urgent need for a special task force to protect all religious minorities' sites of worship, as envisaged by the 2014 Supreme Court judgement. The Wazirabad administration must compensate the local Ahmadiyya community for its action and ensure such an incident does not recur.

27 January: The deaths of at least 18 people, 16 of them children, after inhaling toxic industrial gases in Karachi's Keamari area, were an avoidable tragedy. We demand that the authorities institute regular environmental and health checks in all residential areas located near factories. Those responsible for this negligence must be brought to book.

1 February: HRCP is appalled to learn that a seminar held yesterday by the ministry for religious affairs, ostensibly to promote inter-faith harmony, featured not only Mian Mitthu, a cleric long associated with forced conversions in Sindh, but also made a point of asking recent converts to publicly denounce their original faith, including in one case, a low-income domestic worker. Such blatant bigotry flies in the face of the government's recent claims at Pakistan's fourth UPR that it is committed to freedom of religion or belief.

31 March: HRCP is deeply concerned by the mismanagement causing stampedes at wheat flour distribution centres set up by the government. We have lost many people across Pakistan over the past few weeks—the incident in Karachi where 11 people lost their lives is particularly

alarming. This situation is adding insult to injury for the marginalised people of Pakistan who are braving the economic injustice perpetrated by the elites who dominate the state. HRCP demands that the government improve this distribution system immediately and to the satisfaction of its citizens.

30 April: HRCP strongly condemns the CDA's attempts to demolish people's homes for forcible land acquisition in Islamabad, during which AWP political worker Ismat Shahjahan, who was resisting police action, was manhandled. The FIR lodged against Ms Shahjahan, her son and others must be withdrawn. Any further attempts by the CDA to acquire such land must deal with vulnerable inhabitants fairly and without resorting to violence.

1 May: HRCP takes exception to politicians' use of derogatory terms such as 'blind', 'deaf' and 'dumb', a recent example being a former opposition MNA who has used these terms against the incumbent government. This is highly disparaging towards persons living with disabilities.

4 May: HRCP strongly condemns the attack on human rights defender Mukhtaran Mai near her village in Alipur in South Punjab. We are concerned by her allegation that the perpetrators may be connected to the jirga responsible for ordering her gang-rape in 2002. The Punjab government should provide Mukhtaran Mai protection and ensure that her assailants are held accountable.

19 May: HRCP is greatly dismayed by the Federal Shariat Court's regressive ruling on the Transgender Persons Act 2018. In denying trans persons the right to self-perceived gender identity, this move seeks the erasure of an entire demographic and its fundamental rights. Moreover, the ruling undermines the will of the Parliament. HRCP hopes that the Supreme Court will overturn this decision. Parliament must not amend this act at any cost.

9 June: HRCP is alarmed by reports that Dow University of Health Sciences in Karachi has doubled tuition fees overnight, causing students to mobilize in protest. This is a nationwide trend, where public sector universities are increasing their fees and expenses to the point where students are finding higher education impossible to afford. This is unacceptable and must be reversed.

Press release: HRCP calls for investigation and accountability in boat capsized tragedy

Lahore, 19 June: The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is shocked by the tragic deaths of at least 300 Pakistani nationals—including women and children—who drowned when their boat capsized off the coast of Greece last week.

The fact that these were possibly avoidable deaths and involved victims of human trafficking should serve as a stark reminder to the state that it has failed to stem a longstanding and grievous human rights violation.

Pakistan is a well-known source, transit and destination country for trafficking in persons. However, it is clear that a serious lack of coordination among law enforcement agencies continues to allow traffickers to operate with impunity. Not only must the state take responsibility for its part in this disaster, but it must also acknowledge that the dearth of economic opportunities available in the country compels more and more people to take their chances on such routes without being aware of the risk.

HRCP feels it necessary to question the efficiency of the Federal Investigation Agency in tracking, monitoring and reporting instances of trafficking. The state must also implement comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation and train the public officials concerned to identify and report such crimes and hold the perpetrators to account.

26 June: HRCP strongly condemns the killing of two Sikh men in Peshawar in the space of 48 hours. Targeted attacks against this community are frequently reported which is cause for great concern. We demand a swift investigation into the incident. The state must also immediately take action to protect all vulnerable groups from such wanton violence.

3 July: HRCP strongly condemns the judicial harassment of the Ahmadiyya community, most recently in the shape of cases filed against them by individuals with far-right political links for engaging in ritual sacrifice during Eid-ul-Azha. No progressive society can afford to be held hostage to the whims of religious extremists in this manner. Moreover, such harassment flouts the 2022 Supreme Court judgement which upholds all religious minorities' fundamental rights as citizens of Pakistan, including their right to dignity and to practice their faith within their places of worship. All such cases must be quashed immediately.

17 July: The incessant persecution of the Ahmadiyya community has, to HRCP's alarm, become a recurring feature of right-wing politics in Punjab, where members of the community are harassed and intimidated as a matter of course and their sites of worship remain easy targets. On 14 July, the minarets of an Ahmadi site of worship in Jhelum were razed by law enforcement personnel after a cleric associated with the TLP reportedly threatened to take matters into his own hands.

The state cannot afford to wilt in front of far-right groups when it is responsible for ensuring that the most vulnerable are protected. Those who threatened the Ahmadiyya community must be held to account and special police forces instituted to protect all religious minorities' sites of worship as envisaged under the 2014 Supreme Court judgement.

19 July: HRCP is deeply concerned by the grave challenges to interfaith harmony and recent threats to the Christian community in Sargodha. The local and provincial administrations must take immediate steps to diffuse the tension and ensure peace and security for minority communities.

Press release: All political parties must commit to protecting religious minorities

Islamabad, 25 July. Human rights defenders at a consultation organised by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) earlier today urged all political parties to commit to protecting and promoting the rights of religious minorities and sects in their manifestos and policies. HRCP Council member Nasreen Azhar called attention to the escalating and concerted marginalisation of religious minorities and sects, particularly the Ahmadiyya community, while academic and HRCP member Dr A. H. Nayyar pointed out that education remained ‘a battleground for ideologies’, with most students never made aware of the need for and nature of religious diversity.

Dr Shoaib Suddle, chair of the One-Man Commission for Minorities constituted by the Supreme Court of Pakistan, explained that a proposal separating minorities’ affairs from religious affairs had been forwarded to the Cabinet. Although steps had been taken to recruit more police officers from religious minorities, he said, the special police forces envisaged under the 2014 Supreme Court judgment to protect religious minorities’ sites of worship did not exist across all provinces. Police officer Abdullah said that the only way of protecting sites of worship effectively was to sensitise police officers at the constable level to the rights of all religious communities.

Human rights defender Amir Mahmood criticised the police for their alleged complicity in desecrating Ahmadiyya sites of worship under pressure from local right-wing clerics. Lawyer Sarwan Kumar Bheel, a representative of the Scheduled Caste Hindu community, expressed his concern over the lack of implementation of a child marriage act in Sindh. Other representatives of religious minorities, including the Christian community, underscored the situation of Christian citizens languishing on death row on charges of blasphemy.

HRCP Council member Farhatullah Babar concluded the consultation by pointing out that the Constitution was self-contradictory in that it guaranteed equal rights to religious minorities but prevented them from holding certain public offices. While commending the FIA for making online blasphemy offences noncognisable, Mr Babar said that more efforts must be made to prevent misuse of the blasphemy laws. He also pointed out that the state remained ‘in denial’ over the problem of forced conversions of young Hindu and Christian women. ‘Religious affairs and minorities’ affairs are separate matters’, he added.

Press release: Criminalise employment of minor domestic workers

Lahore, 30 July. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) demands that the employment of minor domestic workers be criminalised, following the case of 13-year-old Rizwana Bibi, who was brutally tortured over a sustained period, allegedly at the hands of her employers. That such cases occur with alarming regularity in the country should prompt a call to action by civil society.

It is not only the extent of violence that Rizwana Bibi has borne that is reprehensible. She was employed as a minor in contravention of a Supreme Court judgment prohibiting the employment of domestic workers under 16. The irony that her employers were a civil judge and his wife should be lost on no one. The fact that a more robust FIR was not lodged in the first instance and that the accused was granted protective bail in all likelihood on account of her influence, reflect a system that is rigged invariably against the most vulnerable.

Regrettably, society has normalised not only the employment of minors, but also their ill treatment, whether in homes, schools or workplaces. If the statistics are anything to go by, children are seen as easy targets, as punching bags and as prey.

At the core of the Convention on the Rights of the Child—to which Pakistan is a signatory—is a commitment to protect children against all forms of violence in the public and private spheres. The state must prevent and respond to all forms of neglect, abuse, exploitation and violence against children. If it is not to fail children such as Rizwana—as it has failed numerous other children like her before—the state must also adopt and implement a national strategy to prevent and protect children from violence and apply judicial systems that pursue the best interests of the child.

11 August: On National Minorities Day, HRCP reminds the state of its constitutional responsibility to respect and protect freedom of religion or belief. Half-hearted attempts to do so, alongside the weak implementation of the 2014 Supreme Court judgment, have imperilled the lives of religious minorities and left them fearing mob reprisal merely for practicing their faith. Such fears are not unfounded. This year alone has witnessed at least 17 attacks on religious minorities' sites of worship. Women and girls remain especially vulnerable, with at least 20 alleged forced conversions reported in 2022. HRCP demands that the state protect the rights of all religious minorities and sects and promote a strong narrative that takes pride in diversity of belief.

16 August: The mob-led assault on Christian families and their homes and sites of worship in Jaranwala, Faisalabad, following allegations of blasphemy, must be condemned in no uncertain terms. The frequency and scale of such attacks—which are systematic, violent and often

uncontainable—appear to have increased in recent years. Not only has the state failed to protect its religious minorities, but it has also allowed the far right to permeate and fester within society and politics. Both the perpetrators and instigators of this violence must be identified and punished to the full extent of the law. The government must waste no time in raising and equipping special police forces to protect religious minorities' sites of worship as directed by the 2014 Supreme Court judgment.

Press release: HRCP fact-finding mission to Jaranwala finds local Muslim religious leaders complicit in attacks

Lahore, 25 August. According to a fact-finding mission initiated by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), at least 24 churches and several dozen smaller chapels as well as scores of houses in Jaranwala were torched and looted in a series of brutal mob-led attacks against the local Christian community on 16 August 2023. Following rumours and allegations of blasphemy against a Christian man and subsequent calls for action by Muslims from mosque loudspeakers, thousands of men gathered in the town and proceeded to attack Christian churches and homes.

Comprising HRCP chairperson Hina Jilani, Centre for Social Justice executive director Peter Jacob, senior Women's Action Forum member Neelam Hussain, and historian and rights activist Dr Yaqoob Bangash, the mission has also said that it 'cannot rule out the suspicion that this was not a spontaneous or random crowd [that led the attacks], but part of a larger campaign of hatred against the local Christians.'

The mission has said that, while it fully recognises the operational difficulties that the police may have confronted in a small town with meagre administrative and law enforcement resources to deal with a situation of widespread violence, there are concerns with respect to the timeliness of the response as well as weaknesses in the strategy employed to restrain the crowd.

The mission recommends reviewing the blasphemy laws so that they are not misused against individuals or any religious minority. Additionally, policies and strategies to deal with organised extremist groups should be devised, especially with regard to enforcement of law and order, so that such groups are neither able nor allowed to undermine the writ of the state.

The mission urges the Punjab government to take measures to implement the recommendations of the judicial inquiry held after the communal riots in Gojra in 2009 so that there is no impunity for organised Muslim religious groups that openly declare their intentions of violent action against religious minorities. The government must also take stern action against any instances of hate speech against any community.

The government needs to take urgent measures to compensate the victim community and rebuild the Christian neighbourhoods damaged in Jaranwala. The compensation money must be commensurate with the damage and disbursed swiftly. The administration must publicly clarify that the transfer of the assistant commissioner, a Christian, was not due to any fault on his part but was done to protect him and his family.

The directive of the 2014 Supreme Court judgment calling for a separate police force to be created to protect religious minorities' places of worship must be implemented urgently, and the financial and human resources needed to do this made available without any further delay.

30 August: HRCP is gravely concerned by reports of threats to the Christian community in Sargodha, where religious-political parties continue to campaign for stricter and more frequent use of the blasphemy laws. This has led to dozens of arrests targeting both Christian men and women, as a result of which the community is now living in constant fear for their lives and the security of their homes and sites of worship. Although many of those arrested have been released, at least four men are still in custody. With the mob-led attacks in Jaranwala still fresh in people's minds, the local authorities must take concrete steps to protect Sargodha's Christian community and release those still under arrest, while ensuring their security.

1 September: HRCP welcomes the decision of the Lahore High Court, ruling that caretakers of Ahmadiyya sites of worship cannot be held liable for the construction of minarets at sites that pre-date Sections 298-B and 298-C of the PPC. Given the alarming frequency with which individuals – often at the behest of far-right religious groups – file cases against members of the Ahmadiyya community on charges of outraging 'the religious feelings of Muslims', this judgment goes some way in protecting the community's right to practice their faith safely. The judgment should also serve to prevent the police from razing minarets at Ahmadiyya sites of worship – a constant pattern in the last eight months.

7 September: HRCP is alarmed by reports that staff and students at a private school in Karachi were subjected to sexual abuse, which was filmed and used to blackmail the victims. HRCP notes that this incident is one of many that have reportedly taken place in educational institutions across Pakistan, most recently at Bahawalpur's Islamia University. The police must carry out a robust investigation and bring the perpetrators to book. Investigations of this nature must also protect the safety and privacy of survivors by ensuring that evidence in the form of any videos made by the perpetrators is kept strictly sealed.

8 September: The destruction of part of an Ahmadiyya site of worship in Shahdara by the Lahore police earlier today was a brazen violation of the recent Lahore High Court judgment protecting Ahmadiyya sites of worship. It demonstrates yet again that the community is being hemmed

in systematically and deliberately by law enforcement and the religious far right alike. According to the 2014 Supreme Court judgement, the police are supposed to protect the community's right to practice its faith. The provincial government must hold the perpetrators accountable, repair the damage and ensure that this does not recur.

15 September: The recent crackdown on Afghan refugees in Karachi is cause for alarm, with at least 350 such individuals—reportedly including women and children—having been arrested for allegedly lacking the correct documentation. Most of these refugees are likely poor, vulnerable individuals who should be provided access to legal counsel immediately. Their status as unauthorized refugees does not mean they are not entitled to protection, nor should they bear the brunt of Pakistan's security concerns. The next government must seriously consider signing the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees.

25 September: Reports from the Ahmadiyya community of at least 34 incidents since January, in which their sites of worship have been desecrated - including with the complicity of the police - should sound alarm bells for the government and for all progressive-minded people. No other community has had to face this level of intolerance and bigotry. Yet, no other community has been accorded as little attention by the government, which is obligated to protect every citizen's right to freedom of religion or belief. The government must take a stand and refuse to allow any individual or group to instigate or carry out such acts or desecration. It must immediately assign special police units to protect these sites in accordance with the 2014 Jilani judgement.

4 October: The government's decision to evict over one million 'illegal' foreign residents within 30 days—allegedly because they have links to terrorist and criminal groups—reflects not only an absence of compassion but also a myopic and narrow view of national security. The large majority of such people are vulnerable Afghan refugees and stateless persons for whom Pakistan has been home for several generations. It is unacceptable to hold them to account for the wrongs of a select few. They have a moral right to seek refuge in this country and to be treated with dignity and empathy. This decision also contravenes international human rights law and must be reversed immediately. HRCP intends to lobby strongly with the government for this decision to be reversed and for Pakistan to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention.

4 October: HRCP notes with concern the failure of Bahauddin Zakaria University (BZU) to address the grievances of its LLB students, whose 2019 examination results have been withheld and whose Part II annual examination for 2020 has been delayed. Despite recommendations from various bodies, including the Punjab governor and a Senate standing committee, to act in the students' best interests, the university as well as the Higher Education Commission have allowed this grave oversight

and mismanagement to continue. We urge BZU to hold the delayed examination immediately and declare the withheld results. In not doing so, the university has compromised students' right to education and prevented them from moving forward in their academic and professional lives.

7 October: HRCP is appalled by reports from Islamabad that residents of Afghan origin are being evicted summarily from their homes and that settlements of Afghan refugees are being razed by the state. This is blatantly xenophobic and must cease. The government must understand that the forcible deportation of vulnerable Afghans is neither sound nor practical: it will put many of them at risk in their home country and is likely to separate families, including women and children. Repatriation must only ever be voluntary and ensure that the rights of the most vulnerable are protected, including their right to shelter, healthcare and legal counsel. Pakistan would be better served if it were to expedite the registration of refugees and legislate to protect their rights as residents.

10 October: Today on World Mental Health Day, HRCP upholds the importance of mental health care not just as a crucial component of wellbeing and overall health, but also as a fundamental human right. The state must acknowledge this and devise a comprehensive national policy that upholds citizens' right to good-quality and accessible mental health services at par with international regulations. This policy must also recognise and provide for other fundamental rights that are intrinsically tied to mental health, such as the right to dignified work, the right to education, the right to a clean environment, and the right to live free from discrimination and harassment. Misconceptions about mental health conditions that engender shame and silence must also be addressed as these only exacerbate mental illness further. Mental health must be treated with the same consideration as physical health, and with equal humaneness and compassion.

Press release: Government must withdraw decision to deport refugees by 1 November

Islamabad, 18 October. At a high-profile consultation held earlier today, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) called on the government to immediately withdraw its decision to expel undocumented foreigners by 1 November. The decision does not fall within the mandate of a caretaker government to begin with, apart from which it amounts to forced repatriation, which is not recognised under international law, and will invariably affect poor and vulnerable Afghan refugees and asylum seekers, including women, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and Afghans at risk because of their professions.

Participants included civil society activists, lawyers, political leaders including former senator Afrasiab Khattak, representatives of the Afghan refugee community, and representatives of UNHCR and IOM.

Former senator and HRCPC Council member Farhatullah Babar said that the absence of domestic laws on refugees was no excuse for failing to protect their rights, given Pakistan's obligations under its tripartite agreement with Afghanistan and UNHCR. He recommended the institution of a national refugee council as a bridge between the government and refugees to enable the latter to articulate their concerns.

HRCPC Council member Sadia Bokhari presented the observations of a recent fact-finding mission, which has found that several Afghan settlements in Islamabad have been demolished by the CDA, ostensibly as part of an anti-encroachment drive. However, the majority of residents hold POR cards and say they have been subjected to harassment, intimidation and extortion by the police following the government's notification on foreigners.

Refugee rights researcher Dr Saba Gul Khattak underscored the need for accurate and publicly available data on the number of refugees and asylum seekers in order to make fair needs assessments. Participants agreed, pointing out that the absence of documentation meant there was greater scope for rights violations and that expelling an entire community for solely security-driven considerations amounted to collective punishment.

They also called for timeline-based citizenship that would allow long-term residents to become naturalized as citizens. Former MNA Mohsin Dawar said that the foreign relations committee he had chaired had unanimously recommended that Pakistan sign the 1951 Refugees Convention.

Representatives of the Afghan refugee community also said that it was not humanly possible for several hundred thousand refugees to return to Afghanistan in under a month when, for so many, Pakistan was the only home they had ever known. Representatives of UNHCR said that any repatriation of refugees must be voluntary, comply with international standards of dignity and safety, and be based on informed consent for return and reintegration. An IOM representative said that the agency was willing to mobilize resources to assist the Pakistani government in complying with these criteria.

Concluding the consultation, HRCPC chairperson Hina Jilani said that 'a one-size-fits-all solution cannot be applied to all refugees and asylum seekers without considering their specific needs.' Even in the deliberate absence of a policy on refugees, Pakistan was still bound by international customary law, she said, adding that any such policy must put humanitarian concerns ahead of security concerns."

27 October: HRCPC is deeply concerned by reports of Pashtun and Baloch students having been harassed and intimidated by law enforcement personnel at universities in Lahore in the last several days, with at least

two students having been forcibly disappeared. Students from Balochistan and KP remain especially vulnerable in Punjab. This practice of subjecting students to ethnic profiling must end. All students must be equally allowed to pursue their education without the fear of harassment and enforced disappearance.

Open letter calling for the protection of Afghan refugees in Pakistan

31 October. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is greatly concerned by the Pakistan government's decision to expel all undocumented foreigners by 1 November 2023, the bulk of whom comprise Afghan nationals. HRCP strongly believes that this decision – which will apply to an estimated 1.7 million Afghans – could trigger a humanitarian crisis. The decision amounts to forced repatriation, which is not recognised under international customary law, and will invariably affect vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers, which include women, children, the elderly, persons living with disabilities, persons from low-income groups, and Afghans at risk because of their professions – many of whom fled Afghanistan after the Afghan Taliban took over the government in August 2021.

Despite drawing criticism from human rights organisations and networks, the government has shown no signs of reconsidering this decision, having gone so far as to prevent prominent members of civil society from expressing their views on this matter at public events. The interior minister Sarfraz Bugti has also made it clear that this phase will be followed by the deportation of foreigners with legitimate documents, including Afghans with proof-of-residence cards. Press reports indicate that 77 Afghan refugees with legitimate documents have already been deported from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa ahead of the 1 November deadline. Additionally, HRCP has received worrying reports of Afghan refugees having been harassed, intimidated, extorted and arrested by law enforcement personnel, following the government's original announcement.

While HRCP recognises that the government may have legitimate security concerns tied to a small number of foreign nationals resident in the country illegally, we believe that humanitarian concerns must override security interests. Moreover, such decisions do not fall within the mandate of an unelected caretaker government. We also believe that refugees and asylum seekers should be allowed to thrive along with their hosts and that the rights of both are not mutually exclusive.

Regrettably, Pakistan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugees Convention, lacks a national asylum system and addresses issues related to Afghan refugees through ad hoc and discretionary policies. However, the country is bound by the universally binding customary law of non-refoulement, which prohibits deporting anyone to a place where they would face a real risk of persecution, torture, ill treatment, or a threat to

their life. This includes an obligation not to pressure individuals, including registered refugees, into returning to places where they face serious risk of such harm. HRCP believes that the Pakistan government's actions in this context amount to violations of international customary law, given that the prevailing circumstances in Afghanistan are not at all conducive to the safe return and reintegration of vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers.

We strongly urge the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to call on the Pakistan government to:

- Immediately extend the 1 November deadline, giving all undocumented refugees and asylum seekers the chance to obtain legal documentation of their status.
- Ensure that no migrants, refugees or asylum seekers with legitimate documentation are expelled without just cause.
- Ensure that all refugees and asylum seekers, whether undocumented or otherwise, are treated with dignity and not subjected to harassment or intimidation under any circumstances.
- Categorise refugees and asylum seekers based on their vulnerability and facilitate their access to documentation of their status in collaboration with the United Nations Refugee Agency and International Organization for Migration.
- Devise and implement a rights-based domestic policy on refugees enabling repatriation that is voluntary, complies with international standards of dignity and safety, and is based on informed consent for return and reintegration.
- Revisit the Foreigners Act 1946, which is a colonial remnant and flawed piece of legislation and replace it with a more progressive law that protects the rights of noncitizen residents.
- Sign the 1951 Refugees Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

7 November: HRCP is appalled by reports of the ill treatment being meted out to Afghan nationals in Sindh Islamabad, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as part of the government's deportation drive, with even minors being deported and separated from their families in Pakistan as a result. Despite strong criticism from civil society and international refugee agencies, the government has contravened international customary law by persisting with this move. The provincial and federal governments must ensure that all Afghan nationals are treated with dignity and that children are, under no circumstances, separated from their parents. We would still urge the government to reconsider this ill-thought move.

Press release: HRCP strongly condemns Kohistan honour killing

Lahore, 29 November. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is appalled by the recent ‘honour’ killing of a young girl in Mansehra, who was murdered allegedly by members of her family after a video featuring her went viral on social media. The fact that the murder was sanctioned by a local jirga in Kohistan is a harrowing reminder that violence against women remains deeply accepted in Pakistan and that the state has failed to rein in antiquated means of so-called justice despite the Supreme Court’s 2019 ruling that jirga decisions are illegal and unconstitutional.

While the arrests of the perpetrator, suspected accomplices and three members of the jirga are welcome, the state must also ensure that concrete evidence is collected against the accused and that there is no provision for blood money in this case. Law enforcement personnel must also ensure the security of others featured in the video—a second girl who has returned to her family and several boys who have since gone into hiding.

The chilling similarity of this incident to that of the jirga-sanctioned murder of eight young people who were filmed while singing and dancing at a wedding in Kohistan in 2011, is a reminder that Pakistan remains entrenched in a culture that ties notions of honour to women’s bodies. There too, the perpetrators’ convictions were eventually overturned and the whistle-blower Afzal Kohistani himself gunned down in 2019. This must not be allowed to recur. With at least 103 people killed for honour in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa alone in 2022, the state must also take long-term, structural measures to address violence against women.

4 December: HRCP is concerned by the delay in appointing a chairperson to the Sindh Commission on the Status of Women. The previous chairperson, whose tenure ended at the beginning of September, has alleged that she was asked to continue working in this position without clear instructions as to whether she should hand over charge to a successor or if her tenure would be extended. Given the important work the commission does, this is not acceptable. The Sindh government must resolve the situation and ensure that the commission’s work and outreach does not suffer as a result.

Defending the rights of workers and peasants

12 January: HRCP welcomes the Balochistan government’s decision to give the province’s fisherfolk community the status of labour, a key demand of the Gwadar-based Haq Do Tehreek. This decision will help secure the economic rights of fisherfolk in Balochistan by bringing them within the ambit of the province’s labour laws and ILO conventions. It

would bode well for other provinces to follow suit and grant their fisherfolk the status of labour to support the work and rights of this underserved community.

25 January: HRCP welcomes the Sindh High Court's order instructing the provincial government to comply with the legal minimum wage of Rs25,000 for sanitation workers deployed in all departments across the province. We extend our congratulations to the petitioners led by activist Naeem Sadiq. This is the first step towards ensuring that this vulnerable labour group is accorded the dignity it deserves, especially given the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. We urge the other provincial governments to follow suit and ultimately institute not just a minimum wage, but a living wage for all workers.

20 April: On the occasion of Eid, HRCP calls upon the Indian and Pakistani governments to release fisherfolk belonging to both countries who are languishing in each other's prisons.

Press release: Democratic movement not possible without vibrant labour movement

Karachi, 25 June. At its national conference on the right to dignity of labour and decent work for all, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has observed that the backbone of any true democratic movement is a strong labour movement that advocates for social protection, fair wages without discrimination, the right to collective bargaining and humane working conditions.

A panel of academics and researchers—including Umair Rasheed, Dr Fahd Ali, Taha Kehar, Zeeshan Noel, Noor-e-Muzamil, and Muhammad Rafique—presented their findings based on fieldwork examining the labour rights situation of fisherfolk, textile workers, sanitation workers, miners and agricultural workers. These studies, which also seek to reconceptualise labour and labour rights in Pakistan, were being released as part of HRCP's Shakeel Pathan Labour Studies Series, named for a former staff member and veteran labour rights activist, announced director Farah Zia.

Speaking on the right to decent work, Karamat Ali, executive director of the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research, said that a mechanism to enforce fair wages was necessary. Sabhagi Bheel, vice-president of the Agricultural General Workers Union (Sindh), noted that women agricultural workers continued to be paid significantly less than their male counterparts. Referring to fisherfolk as among the most marginalised labour groups, Saeed Baloch, general secretary of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, strongly advocated that they be granted pensions in their old age. Asif Khattak, general secretary of the Balochistan Coal Mining Company, drew attention to the frequency of mining accidents and inadequate grants in case of injury or death.

Joint secretary of the All Pakistan Workers Federation, Akram Bonda, said it was important to address the anomalies created after the devolution of labour with respect to trans-provincial labour issues. Hanif Ramay, general secretary of the Muttahida Labour Federation, recommended that the Workers' Welfare Fund, social security institutions and EOBI be made independent of the government. Zehra Khan, secretary-general of the Home-Based Women Workers' Federation and Bushra Arrain of the Lady Health Workers Union traced the history of their respective unions and explained how this had accorded greater dignity of labour to their communities. Mir Zulfiqar Ali, executive director of the Workers Education and Research Organisation, added that measures to report and address sexual harassment at the workplace were necessary to make work sites safer for women.

HRCP co-chair Asad Iqbal Butt said that the system of contracting labour had hampered the workers' movement in Pakistan. Veteran journalist and HRCP treasurer Husain Naqi underscored the need for workers to organise effectively themselves to secure their rights. Finally, Qazi Khizer Habib, vice-chair HRCP Sindh, gave a vote of thanks to all the speakers and participants.

HRCP secretary-general Harris Khalique concluded the conference by presenting a charter of demands that was approved by all participants. The resolution stated that all forms of labour must be honoured as dignified work and that labour relations and the right to collective bargaining should be free of barriers around religion, caste, gender and ethnicity. Additionally, the resolution called for social welfare and protection to be seen as a universal citizenship-based entitlement, while all workers should be entitled to a living wage, based on a decent and dignified life.

Press release: Former PTCL employees must be accorded right to fair pensions

Lahore, 22 July. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) supports the demands of former employees of Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL) to receive the increase in pensions that they are entitled to since 2010, with payment of arrears.

Around 40,000 retired employees have not been paid their fair share of pensions by the Pakistan Telecommunications Employees Trust (PTET) since 2010, following a federal government notification announcing an increase in pensions payable. These pensioners have also been deprived of medical allowances, which were added to federal employees' pensions in 2010.

While this case has been presented at numerous forums, there is still a clear need for decisive action. The Supreme Court ruled in favour of the pensioners in 2015; a Senate Standing Committee took notice of this

violation in 2019; and the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunications also issued directives to PTET in subsequent years to comply. It is deeply concerning that, despite promises made directly to the pensioners as well, the PTET has withheld the increase in pensions to date.

The failure to implement such directives not only flouts the authority of the government and judiciary, but also disregards the pensioners' right to dignity of labour, particularly for vulnerable groups such as widows and the elderly. HRCP demands that the state take notice of the PTCL pensioners' longstanding demands and hold their employer accountable for failure to comply.

15 October: HRCP strongly condemns the killing of at least six labourers in Turbat by armed assailants. This was an indiscriminate assault on vulnerable workers who had no means to defend themselves. The perpetrators must be identified and held to account.

9 December: HRCP welcomes the Punjab government's decision to award 12.5 acres of land each to about 27,000 landless peasants in Cholistan on a five-year lease, thereby reviving a land allotment process that had been stalled for decades. This step will help protect their livelihoods and right to grazing land and water. Having led several missions to this area headed by former HRCP chairperson Hina Jilani, followed by a grassroots-led campaign, HRCP has heard numerous testimonies calling for the state to uphold the social, economic and environmental rights of the indigenous population. Their legitimate concerns must be addressed by the state, including that land in this area be allotted only to native Cholistanis in accordance with the law.

10 December: As human rights defenders across the world mark Human Rights Day, HRCP urges the state to protect the rights of vulnerable pensioners and the elderly. An estimated 500,000 EOBI pensioners reportedly receive a meagre PKR 10,000 a month—barely a third of the minimum wage. Amid constant inflation, this is nowhere near enough to subsist on. The government must not only increase pension levels in line with the cost of living, but also expand the coverage of pension schemes and ensure that these are gender-responsive and extended to informal workers.

Press release: HRCP calls for protection of labour rights, civil rights on Human Rights Day

Karachi, 11 December. Several hundred members of civil society gathered at a conference organized by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) yesterday to mark International Human Rights Day and call on the state to protect and uphold the right to 'freedom, justice and equality for all'.

HRCP Council member Sadia Baloch opened the conference by pointing out that every day should be thought of as 'Human Rights Day'. Lawyer Akhtar Hussain underscored the importance of the right to health, education and shelter, while poet Waheed Noor recited verses on the theme of political resistance and human rights. Women's rights activist Anis Haroon condemned enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, which she said had weakened the civil rights movement.

HRCP Council member and journalist Sohail Sangi emphasized the need to protect fundamental freedoms and restore student unions. Climate justice activist Yasir Hussain pointed to record-high levels of pollution, adding that environmental rights were integral to human rights. Labour rights activist Nasir Mansoor said that labour rights had been neglected and called on the state to protect the right to a living wage and food security. Senior journalist Tauseef Ahmed Khan pointed out that threats to freedom of expression in the present climate had resulted in self-censorship. HRCP Council member Mahnaz Rahman said that the situation of vulnerable women labourers must be improved.

Rights activist Surath Lohar from Sindh's Voice for Missing Persons underscored the impunity with which enforced disappearances continued to take place. Lala Wahab from the Baloch Yakjehti Committee added that the planned long march to Islamabad from Balochistan was precisely against such heinous crimes.

Defence of Human Rights activist Aishah Masood pointed out that Articles 9 and 10 of the Constitution upheld the rights of missing persons. Activist Sarang Joyo emphasized that civil society must be united against enforced disappearances to effect change. Finally, psychologist Dr Syed Ali Wasif cited numerous examples where the state's use of such tactics against its own citizens had led to the collapse of social structures.

Concluding the conference, HRCP chair Asad Iqbal Butt advocated democratic reforms to allow effective representation in legislatures, not just those of elite interests. HRCP's vice-chair for Sindh, Qazi Khizar Habib, agreed, adding that the state must prioritize economic and social justice.

Reclaiming space for civil society

18 January: HRCP strongly condemns the arrest of journalist Shahid Aslam by the FIA. This violates not only his right to freedom of expression, but also the Islamabad High Court's order instructing the FIA to inform the PFUJ should a journalist need to be questioned. Such tactics set the dangerous precedent of obstructing the work of investigative journalists in Pakistan.

20 January: HRCP notes with concern that the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative

Assembly (GBLA) has yet to pass a right-to-information (RTI) act even though it began work on the matter in July 2021. Without adequate RTI legislation, information on important public affairs in GB cannot be accessed, leading to a critical lack of transparency and effectively hampering other fundamental freedoms such as the right to freedom of expression. HRCP demands that the GBLA legislate on this issue without further delay and uphold GB citizens' right to information.

26 January: HRCP deplores the continuous use of archaic, colonial laws against sedition by successive governments against their political opponents. Fawad Chaudhry is the latest in the series. The charges must be dropped immediately and the government of the day must act more responsibly.

5 February: The PTA's decision to ban Wikipedia betrays a wilful lack of understanding of the role that social media play in allowing people across classes, genders and geographies to obtain, fact-check, share and respond to news and information. The state already has a poor record of upholding its citizens' right to information and expression on the grounds of 'morality'. HRCP strongly opposes this absurd ban and demands that the PTA reverse its decision immediately, given that there is nothing to stop it from editing the offending content on Wikipedia. The state already has a poor record of upholding its citizens' right to information and expression on the grounds of 'morality'.

14 February: HRCP welcomes Ali Wazir's release from prison after two years, but we insist and reiterate that such inhuman political victimisation must end once and for all.

15 February: HRCP welcomes the acquittal of human rights defender Prof Muhammad Ismail and his spouse in cases of sedition and terror financing by a Peshawar anti-terrorism court. We demand the immediate withdrawal of the case registered against him under S10 and 11 of PECA 2016.

16 February: HRCP expresses deep concern over recent government efforts to amend the PPC and CrPC, expanding the scope of the current defamation laws and stipulating five years' imprisonment 'for scandalising or ridiculing' the judiciary or army. With defamation laws already in existence, enforcing such measures would be antithetical to the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression, a fact the IHC noted in its 2022 ruling when it struck down the PECA Ordinance on similar grounds. Certain archaic clauses in the Constitution that limit the scope of freedom of expression must also be examined, but criminalising criticism would be a needless hindrance to vigorous public debate and discourse and must be stopped immediately.

17 February: HRCP takes strong exception to a notification issued by Gomal University, banning male and female students from mingling

and restricting female students from public spaces. Segregation will reinforce a culture of ignorance and inequality. The notification must be withdrawn immediately.

24 February: HRCP strongly condemns the frivolous FIR filed in Kashmore, Sindh, against dozens of protestors calling for the recovery of Nazia Khoso and her infant daughter. HRCP Council member Imdadullah Khoso is also among those named in this FIR. We note with concern that charges of terrorism are being used increasingly to violate citizens' right to freedom of peaceful assembly. Ms Khoso must be recovered immediately and the FIR against the protestors withdrawn.

27 February: HRCP strongly condemns the arrest of Lt Gen (R) Amjad Shoaib on charges of inciting the public against state institutions under S. 153-A and 505 of the PPC. Like any citizen, Lt Gen (R) Shoaib has the right to criticize the government and opposition as well as government officials. We note with growing concern that state institutions have become increasingly unable to swallow opinions they do not agree with, citing such vague grounds as 'public mischief'. Lt Gen (R) Shoaib must be released immediately and unconditionally.

3 March: HRCP strongly condemns the Lahore district administration's decision to deny the Aurat March organisers permission to hold a public rally marking International Women's Day on 8 March. It is regrettable that their right to peaceful assembly is routinely challenged by the district administration on the grounds that 'controversial' placards and 'strong reservations' from the public and religious organisations ostensibly create law-and-order risks. This is a poor defence. The caretaker Punjab government must uphold the Aurat March's right to freedom of peaceful assembly and provide the marchers with full security.

4 March: HRCP is appalled by the response of the local administrations in at least three cities (including now Islamabad and Multan) towards various Aurat March collectives that have been told they cannot exercise their right to assemble peacefully in public spaces of their choosing to mark 8 March. It is the local administration's duty to provide security to such events, not to circumvent them in this manner. We stand in solidarity with every woman, every trans person and every ally that plans to march on International Women's Day this year.

5 March: HRCP deplores PEMRA's decision to ban PTI chief Imran Khan's live and recorded speeches on electronic media. We have always opposed measures to curb voices in the past - whether under the previous government or earlier - and we continue to stand by our commitment to freedom of speech, irrespective of the person's political opinion. The ban must be lifted immediately.

8 March: The government's crackdown on PTI workers and imposition of S. 144 in Lahore was short-sighted and appears to have little to do with law and order as claimed. There is now an acute need for both the government and opposition to hold a political dialogue, make a concerted effort to lower the political temperature and find a solution to this perpetual impasse. It is unacceptable for political leaders on either side to remain this obdurate even as ordinary citizens struggle to survive.

8 March: HRCP deplores the use of force by the Islamabad police against citizens at Aurat Azadi March. We are also concerned by reports that religious organizations have tried to hinder women from taking part in the march. Women have as much right to peaceful assembly as any citizen. The police are supposed to provide security to the marchers, not to resort to violence against peaceful demonstrators.

24 March: HRCP condemns the arrest of PTI activist Azhar Mashwani reportedly for having criticised the Punjab police and provincial government for employing questionable tactics against party workers in the recent political fray. Mr Mashwani must be produced before the court promptly. These are not lawful grounds for detaining any citizen.

25 March: HRCP strongly condemns the arbitrary arrest of Haqooq-e-Khalq worker Ahsan Bhatti who was exercising his constitutional right to protest against spiralling inflation. The Punjab government must immediately cease these repressive tactics against all political workers.

30 March: HRCP welcomes the Lahore High Court's decision to invalidate Section 124-A of the PPC, which criminalizes criticism of the federal and provincial governments as 'inciting disaffection' or sedition. We have long held that such laws are remnants of an abusive colonial system that have regrettably continued to be used to criminalize political dissent and selectively suppress members of civil society, in particular rights activists, political workers, journalists and students.

30 March: HRCP deplores the unjust treatment meted out to Hasan Askree, a civilian accused of criticising the chief of army staff. His family's allegation that he was summarily court-martialled and sentenced in 2020 without being informed of the charges against him, and his subsequent incarceration in a maximum-security prison, reflect a system bereft of justice. HRCP maintains that criticism of the military is, in the first instance, not a crime. This notwithstanding, Mr Askree should have been tried in a civilian, not military court, especially given that such trials do not meet the standards of fair trial enshrined in the Constitution.

6 April: HRCP believes that PTI leader Ali Amin Gandapur's arrest under PPC Section 124-A, the sedition law, is deplorable—particularly when the Lahore High Court has recently struck down this colonial law.

HRCP demands that Mr Amin Gandapur be released, and that the government and law enforcement authorities desist using such deplorable tactics to stifle political dissent.

25 April: HRCP condemns the illegal detention of Bannu-based journalist Gohar Wazir who was kidnapped and tortured by unknown armed persons before being released. Journalists throughout the country have become increasingly vulnerable to such threats. Amid the rapidly deteriorating security situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, this incident calls for immediate action. The state must also take stringent measures to protect journalists and their work without further delay.

25 April: The continued state surveillance of private citizens and public officials violates their constitutional right to privacy and dignity and must be condemned in no uncertain terms. Increasingly, the use of intrusive technologies to monitor private spaces and control particular narratives – depending on the political stakeholders in office – is cause for alarm. The government must strictly regulate the use of all surveillance tools, including those used ostensibly for legitimate purposes.

3 May: HRCP reiterates its commitment to defending freedom of expression for all journalists and other media persons in Pakistan. Without press freedom, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion cannot flourish. Without press freedom, the right to freedom from torture and slavery would diminish. And without press freedom, ordinary people cannot hold their elected representatives and other organs of the state accountable for their actions. The state must promote an environment in which all media persons can live and work in dignity and without fear, which includes protecting their right to job security, fair wages and timely compensation.

14 May: HRCP is deeply concerned by reports of random arrests and cases filed arbitrarily against PTI workers across Pakistan. A distinction must always be made between those resorting to violence and nonviolent political workers. No one must ever be penalised for their party affiliations. This goes against all democratic norms.

18 May: HRCP condemns the rearrest of PTI leaders who had been released earlier by the courts. This tactic has been used by previous governments, including the PTI, to bully opposition leaders into submission. In either case, it reflects political vindictiveness weakly justified as allowing the law to take its course.

6 June: HRCP demands the immediate and safe recovery of Geo journalist Zubair Anjum who was picked up in Karachi. Such unlawful incidents must come to a halt.

10 June: HRCP is deeply concerned to learn that senior journalist Ahmad Noorani has been declared a 'proclaimed offender' following an earlier FIR lodged against him for discharging his professional duties. This action was disproportionate and compromises Mr Noorani's right to freedom of expression. We urge the honorable Islamabad High Court to take notice and grant relief to Mr Noorani.

18 June: The arrest of PTM activist Alamzaib Mahsud on seemingly fabricated charges, the abduction of lawyer Uzair Bhandari following his opposition to military courts, and the attack on former governor Sardar Latif Khosa's house all indicate there has been no let-up in the state's wilful determination to punish dissent. Mr Mahsud must be released and those responsible for abducting Mr Bhandari and firing on Mr Khosa's house held accountable if the state is to restore any semblance of its commitment to democratic norms.

9 July: The abduction of senior Jang reporter Syed Mohammed Askari in Karachi, allegedly by police and men in plainclothes, must be condemned by all democratic voices. That journalists continue to be abducted in this manner, without charge, calls into question not only the state's commitment to democracy but also its capacity to brook criticism and opposition. Mr Askari must be released immediately.

13 July: HRCP condemns the use of force against primary school teachers protesting at the Karachi Press Club. Scores of teachers, including women, were baton-charged while attempting to move towards the Chief Minister House. Those arrested must be released and the Sindh Chief Minister must agree to meet the protestors and give their demands a fair hearing.

21 July: HRCP is concerned that the proposed PEMRA Amendment Act 2022 has assigned the regulator the role of disseminating what it terms 'authentic' news in a bid to curb disinformation. While any responsible journalist is honour-bound to eschew false information intended to deliberately create harm, we are concerned that the given definition of 'disinformation' in this bill strays into censorship territory and may allow powerful groups or individuals to stonewall journalists seeking both sides of a story. This violates Article 19 of the constitution protecting freedom of expression. While the bill takes an important step in protecting electronic media workers' salaries — a longstanding demand of media trade unions and rights activists — it should be reviewed to ensure that media practitioners' salaries are paid within 30 rather than 60 days, in keeping with labour laws.

26 July: The Punjab film censor board's ban on the film 'Barbie' is difficult to fathom. As with the film Joyland, it appears to be an arbitrary attempt to police people's ability to think for themselves. The censor board should allow this and other films, both local and international, to be screened without projecting its regressive stance onto such films.

Press release: Government must cease attempts to control civil liberties

Lahore, 2 August. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) strongly opposes the recent slew of hastily passed legislation, none of which has undergone critical deliberation even at the parliamentary level, much less public debate.

Most recently, the amended Official Secrets Act 1923, which HRCP deems draconian in scope, gives intelligence agencies sweeping powers to enter and search any person or place without a warrant if they suspect an offence has been committed under the act—at the very least, this violates people’s right to privacy under Article 14 of the Constitution. Moreover, by broadening certain definitions, the act may be used to indiscriminately charge people who have no intent of committing an offence under the act. In making it a crime to ‘incite, conspire, attempt, aid or abet the commission of an offence under the act’, the amendments also broaden the scope for targeting dissidents and political rivals in the future.

Previously, the Pakistan Army (Amendment) Act 2023—passed by the Senate and National Assembly at breakneck speed in July—has criminalised defamation of the armed forces, including online. In so doing, it violates the right to freedom of expression of retired military personnel under Article 19 as well as their right to participate in public life under Article 17. Additionally, the bill sanctions the armed forces’ engagement in ‘national development and advancement of national or strategic interest’. HRCP deplores this attempt to seek legislative approval for military involvement in areas to which it has no moral or political claim.

In criminalising criticism of Parliament, the Contempt of Majlis-e-Shoora (Parliament) Bill 2023, passed earlier in July, not only violates people’s constitutional right to freedom of expression under Article 19, but also makes it harder to hold elected representatives accountable, while contravening people’s right to participatory governance. Moreover, allowing the envisaged contempt committee to award punishment violates the trichotomy of powers because judicial power cannot be exercised by the legislature, nor should legislators be judges in their own cause. While HRCP upholds the concept of parliamentary supremacy, the content of the law—which is ambiguous and over-broad—and the manner in which it was passed, are both cause for concern.

Finally, the Personal Data Protection Bill and E-Safety Bill, which were approved by the federal cabinet in July without any sign of deliberation or debate, are cause for great concern. We support the reservations of digital rights activists who have pointed out that these bills do not meet international standards of data privacy and will curtail rather than protect digital rights.

The government would do well to remember that its legitimacy and authority spring from the quality of its governance and its ability to respect, protect and fulfil citizens' fundamental rights.

12 August: HRCP is concerned by allegations of harassment from VBMP rights activist Hooran Baloch, who claims that security agency personnel raided her family's house in Quetta earlier this week and threatened her father in connection with her work as an activist. As a legitimate human rights defender, Ms Baloch has every right to carry out her work free from fear of reprisal. The provincial government must investigate these allegations and hold the perpetrators accountable.

15 August: HRCP strongly condemns the recent murder of Sukkur-based journalist Jan Mohammed Mahar. We demand an immediate and transparent inquiry into the incident and the perpetrators brought to book. HRCP stands in solidarity with the journalist community and expresses its deepest sympathy with Mr Mahar's family and friends.

20 August: HRCP strongly condemns the arrest of lawyer Imaan Mazari-Hazir. The manner in which the ICT Police broke into her home, allegedly without a warrant, is unacceptable and points to a larger, more worrying pattern of state-sanctioned violence against people exercising their right to freedom of expression and assembly. Ms Mazari-Hazir must be released immediately and unconditionally.

30 August: The number and nature of cases registered against lawyer Imaan Mazari-Hazir—including farcical charges of financing 'terrorist organisations'—as well as her rearrest and continuing physical remand, indicate that the state is bent on silencing all voices of dissent. Former lawmaker Ali Wazir has been similarly charged on highly dubious grounds and is awaiting bail. The swiftly growing use of such tactics to stifle freedom of expression and assembly has created fresh fears among human rights defenders and must be condemned collectively by all political parties. Ms Mazari-Hazir, Mr Wazir and all those arrested for exercising their constitutionally guaranteed civil rights must be released unconditionally.

3 September: HRCP strongly condemns the repeated use of the MPO to rearrest political workers and leaders freed by the courts. Such acts not only betray a desire to suppress dissenting voices, but also lend unnecessary credence to a draconian piece of legislation that grants widespread powers of arrest and detention in the name of 'public safety' or 'public order', phrases that have not been clearly defined or interpreted. HRCP urges the caretaker government to uphold its non-partisan status and desist from creating further polarisation. All those who have been rearrested under sections of the MPO must be released immediately.

Press release: HRCP denied permission to hold demonstration for Cholistanis' land rights

Lahore, 11 September. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has been denied permission by the local civil administration in Bahawalpur to hold a peaceful demonstration and press conference to express its concerns over the allotment of land to nonresidents in Cholistan—one of the principal grievances conveyed to HRCP during a fact-finding mission to the area in 2022 and a subsequent human rights camp held there in February 2023. Not only does this decision violate local Cholistanis' right to freedom of peaceful assembly, but it also seeks to undermine people's demand that land in this area be allotted only to native Cholistanis in accordance with the law.

HRCP has continued to receive reports from residents of Cholistan that their applications for allotment of the land they have been settled on for centuries remain pending since 2018. Despite the fact that its planned demonstration and press conference have now been postponed, HRCP wishes to make it clear that it will not be deterred and will continue to stand with the residents of Cholistan and make every effort to ensure that their legitimate grievances are heard and resolved.

19 September: HRCP demands an immediate withdrawal of the FIR filed against political workers of the Left Democratic Front and Awami Workers Party after a rally in Rawalpindi to condemn the economic hardships faced by people because of state policies. Those raising their voice against backbreaking inflation and anti-poor economic choices made by the state provide the only ray of hope.

11 October: HRCP deplores the co-option of the media, allegedly by the establishment, compelling media houses to broadcast interviews of PTI politicians who went missing and, on being recovered, disassociated publicly from their party. Such authoritarian tactics are an affront to democracy and people's right to freedom of expression, opinion and association and, unless the state is not careful, will set new and dangerous precedents for who is allowed to say what and when. HRCP is also dismayed by reports that, despite the attorney general's assurances to the Supreme Court in June that military courts would not hold summary trials, civilians are now being tried in these very courts, thereby violating their right to a fair and transparent trial under Article 10-A of the Constitution. The state should be aware that, in the long term, the cost of deliberately decimating one political party (because it has fallen out of favour) is democracy itself and all its attendant fundamental rights.

17 October: HRCP is deeply concerned to learn that ten students have been expelled from Karakoram International University in Gilgit for having allegedly 'disrupted' the academic environment after they took part in protests against tuition fee hikes. In doing so, they were exercising their right to peaceful assembly. The university's response was

disproportionate and unjust and all these students should be reinstated. Moreover, the university administration must give their legitimate demands a fair hearing.

23 October: HRCP strongly condemns the arrest of at least 80 PTI workers and raid on a local PTI leader's home and offices in Lahore, allegedly in an attempt to prevent a party convention from taking place as planned. Not only were these actions in flagrant violation of political workers' right to assembly and privacy of the home under Articles 14 and 16 of the Constitution, but they also reflect the caretaker government's failure to provide a level playing field to all political parties ahead of the national elections. All political parties, including the PTI, have every right to assemble freely and peacefully as part of their election campaigns. To curtail this right smacks of electoral manipulation, which the Electoral Commission of Pakistan must not tolerate.

24 October: HRCP is appalled to learn that the police prevented a panel discussion on the forced deportation of Afghan refugees from taking place at The Black Hole in Islamabad. The police reportedly disrupted the event and threatened to arrest the speakers, briefly detaining the venue manager. This was in clear violation of the panellists' right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Such tactics are also an alarming indicator of the government's unwillingness to acknowledge that it is bound by customary international law to protect vulnerable refugees.

25 November: HRCP is greatly alarmed to learn that two Karachi-based journalists, Anees Mansoori and Ali Sarwar of HNow TV, have been targeted allegedly by government agencies for their reportage. Mr Sarwar was reportedly forcibly disappeared on 24 November while unidentified persons broke into Mr Mansoori's home in his absence and threatened his elderly mother. The Sindh government must take immediate notice of these incidents, initiate an investigation and hold the perpetrators accountable. HRCP reminds the state that the credibility of the upcoming elections is at stake so long as the media continues to face such intimidation.

5 December: HRCP is alarmed to learn about PTM chief Manzoor Pashteen's arrest yesterday in Chaman. Amid conflicting reports about the circumstances of the arrest, in which Mr Pashteen's convoy allegedly clashed with law enforcement officials, it is clear that the PTM's leaders and supporters have been harassed continuously for what the state erroneously deems 'anti-state' activities. Indeed, the PTM has never resorted to violence and has merely exercised its right to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression. HRCP demands an impartial inquiry into Mr Pashteen's arrest. The state must also cease its unwarranted antagonism against the movement's leaders. Their legitimate grievances must be heard fairly.

18 December: HRCP strongly condemns the state's use of excessive force against peaceful protestors in Dera Ghazi Khan, where members of the long march from Turbat to Islamabad were baton-charged by the police, many of their leaders as well as local activists arrested and their camp demolished. The long march has been organized in protest against extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances in Balochistan, with protestors demanding that the state protect Baloch citizens' right to life, liberty and due process as much as that of any other citizen. In responding with force, the state has once again violated the protestors' constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of peaceful assembly. Those arrested must be released unconditionally and the long march allowed to proceed to Islamabad, peacefully and unhindered.

21 December: HRCP strongly condemns the violent police crackdown on Baloch protestors in Islamabad, with women, children and the elderly subjected to unwarranted force in the form of water cannons and use of batons. Numerous women protestors have reportedly been arrested and separated from their male relatives and allies. This treatment of Baloch citizens exercising their constitutional right to peaceful assembly is inexcusable. It also reflects how little the state thinks of the protesters' demand that their right to life and liberty be upheld. All those detained must be released unconditionally. Once again, we urgently call on the government to organize a delegation to meet the protesters and give their legitimate demands a fair hearing.

Press release: Government must hear out Baloch protestors, release jailed women

Islamabad, 21 December. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) strongly condemns the violent state crackdown on Baloch citizens who have led a long march from Turbat to Islamabad in protest against the alleged extrajudicial killing of Balach Baloch and others in Turbat.

HRCP is appalled by the state's response to peaceful protestors, with women, children and the elderly subjected to unwarranted force in the form of water cannons and use of batons. Numerous women protestors have reportedly been arrested and separated from their male relatives and allies. At least one Baloch woman journalist covering the long march has also been arrested. This treatment of Baloch citizens exercising their constitutional right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression is inexcusable. An obdurate state that responds to calls for the right to life, liberty and due process to be upheld, by resorting to force at every stage, is a state that has shed its constitutional and moral responsibility for protecting and fulfilling the rights of all citizens.

All those detained must be released immediately and unconditionally. We strongly urge the government to organize a delegation immediately to meet the protesters, give their legitimate demands a fair hearing and

commit to upholding the rights of the Baloch people. The state's widespread use of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings also warrants a prompt and transparent investigation as well as a commitment to hold the perpetrators accountable.

25 December: HRCP condemns the registration of an FIR against various human rights defenders, including a member of HRCP's council Saeed Baloch, who peacefully assembled on 23 December to denounce the arrests of Baloch protesters. It is unjustifiable to target peaceful protestors exercising their fundamental rights with criminal allegations that have no merit. HRCP demands that this FIR be revoked and that the state desist from such repressive tactics against its own people.

Advancing the rule of law and justice system reforms

23 January: HRCP is deeply concerned by the situation in Central Jail, Gujrat, where prisoners are protesting for their rights. While we do not condone reported arson or violence perpetrated by the prisoners, we stand by the complete realisation of their rights. This is also a stark reminder of the subhuman prison conditions prevalent across Pakistan. We demand that the Punjab government resolve the issue swiftly and peacefully and safeguard the constitutional rights of the prisoners in its care.

16 January: HRCP is shocked to learn of the assassination of senior lawyer Abdul Latif Afridi on the premises of the Peshawar High Court earlier today. A former president of the Supreme Court Bar Association and founding member of the National Democratic Movement, Mr Afridi was a stalwart of the 2007 lawyers' movement and remained committed to the ideals of justice and the rule of law. His death is an immense loss to human rights defenders everywhere. HRCP expresses its deepest condolences to Mr Afridi's family, colleagues and friends, and demands an immediate investigation into this brazen attack.

30 January: HRCP strongly condemns today's bomb blast in Peshawar. Had the state heeded earlier warnings from civil society about the resurgence of extremist outfits in the province, it may have been possible to avoid this escalation. Instead, ill-equipped law enforcement personnel continue to be targeted in incidents that dearly cost civilian and police lives. HRCP demands the state take action now by implementing the National Action Plan and clamping down on all such extremist groups.

4 February: Abdul Hafeez Zehri, who was forcibly disappeared and subsequently arrested in Dubai in 2022, was deported to Pakistan and cleared of all charges. HRCP is deeply concerned to learn that he was subjected to a second attempted abduction by unidentified armed men, on leaving Karachi Central Jail yesterday. His family members were injured in this assault. Those responsible must be held to account.

9 February: HRCP strongly condemns the alleged enforced disappearance of Mohammad Rahim and his wife Rashida from Quetta on 3 February by several unidentified men in plainclothes. Mr Rahim's elderly mother and his two young daughters were also taken away but released soon after. However, they depend on their father, a vegetable vendor, to support them. Mr Rahim and his wife must be released immediately and unconditionally and the perpetrators identified and held to account.

11 February: HRCP is deeply shocked by the brutal lynching of a man by a charged mob in Nankana Sahib, following allegations of blasphemy. This is yet another failure of the state to prevent mob 'justice'. Lip service and weak measures against law enforcers gives the state the appearance of a helpless observer, not a protector of citizens' lives and property.

20 February: HRCP is alarmed by the recent abduction of Nazia Khoso — an expectant mother — and her infant daughter from Kandhkot in Sindh. The state's failure to prevent an armed kidnapping and to bring the culprits to book even 12 days after the incident reflects a deeper failure of the public safety apparatus. Both Ms Khoso and her daughter must be recovered immediately.

21 February: HRCP is horrified by the discovery of three bullet-ridden bodies in a well in Barkhan, Balochistan. The deceased are reportedly the wife and two sons of Khan Muhammad Mari who, along with these family members, has allegedly been held hostage in a private jail owned by a provincial minister. These are very serious allegations and must be investigated promptly. Mr Marri must be released immediately and those responsible for the murder of his family brought to book.

9 March: HRCP is concerned to learn that Baloch writer Abid Mir has been missing since yesterday, after leaving his home in Islamabad on an errand. His family say they are unable to reach him. We urge the ICT Police to investigate immediately and ensure that Mr Mir is recovered safely.

21 March: HRCP condemns the targeted attack on Havelian tehsil chairman Atif Munsif Khan in Abbottabad, in which the PTI leader and eight other people were killed. The brazen use of rocket-propelled grenades in this case is cause for alarm in particular and signals the rapidly deteriorating security situation in KP. HRCP demands that the state investigate this incident promptly and bring the perpetrators to justice.

30 March: HRCP is alarmed by the assassination of Dr Beerbal Ginani in Karachi. It is the second incident where a doctor from the Hindu community in Sindh has been murdered; just a few weeks back, Dr Dharam Dev Rathi was assassinated in Hyderabad as well. We demand a thorough investigation and that the perpetrators be brought to book.

31 March: HRCP is saddened to learn that four police officers, including a deputy superintendent of police, were killed and six others wounded during a terrorist attack at Lakki Marwat's Saddar police station. With such incidents becoming alarmingly frequent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as well as in other parts of Pakistan, the state cannot afford to delay action. As first-responders, law enforcement must be far better trained and equipped to maintain security. At the same time, the state must revise its own policies to address this spike in militancy.

16 April: HRCP is deeply concerned about land mines causing accidents and taking innocent lives in the former FATA region, with a young boy losing his life in Waziristan recently. HRCP demands that these land mines must be cleared immediately by the authorities.

4 May: HRCP is shocked at the deaths of eight people, seven of them high school teachers in Parachinar, in two separate firing incidents in Kurram. The state cannot afford to ignore rising militancy in KP when even schools are once again falling prey to wanton violence. We stand in solidarity with the families and students of those killed and demand that the perpetrators be brought to book.

Press release: State must take stand against mob attacks

Lahore, 8 May. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) observes with great alarm that the prevalence of—and seeming public tolerance for—mob lynching has risen in recent months. This uptick in vigilantism not only indicates an increasing desensitisation to violence, but also breeds further brutality.

Most recently, the murder of a cleric at a public meeting in Mardan, who was beaten to death by a mob following allegations of blasphemy, is at least the second such incident this year alone. In February, a 45-year-old man was killed by a mob in Nankana Sahib on similar grounds.

Unfortunately, the impunity that has accompanied such incidents betrays a breakdown of the rule of law. Law enforcement authorities are not adequately equipped or trained to contain such flareups or to trace and charge hundreds of perpetrators. This is compounded by the weak response of the political leadership, which appears to lack the political will to take a stand against such atrocities.

The state must devise a strategy to restore public trust in the criminal justice system and uphold the right to due process and fair trial. At the same time, unless the state makes it unequivocally clear that religious extremism will not be tolerated, such incidents will invariably recur.

16 May: The horrific death of a young schoolgirl after a police constable opened fire in a school in Swat, injuring seven others, is a grim reminder

of how vulnerable the young remain to wanton violence, especially in KP where the state has failed to protect law and order. The special investigation team formed must bring the perpetrator to book swiftly.

16 May: HRCP strongly opposes the use of the Pakistan Army Act 1952 and Official Secrets Act 1923 to try civilians. While those responsible for arson and damaging public and private property during the recent protests should be held to account, they remain entitled to due process. All those civilians tried under these acts in the past should also have their cases transferred to civil courts.

22 May: HRCP condemns the wanton destruction of two girls' schools by 'unidentified persons' in Mir Ali tehsil, North Waziristan, in the last several days. In recent years, both schools have reportedly received threats from militants opposed to girls' education. The state must heed citizens' warnings of the resurgence of militancy in these areas. Regrettably, its failure to protect such schools – knowing full well that they have long been targets for militants – reflects its lack of commitment to the right to education.

Press release: HRCP demands thorough investigation into Karachi doctor's murder

Lahore, 25 May. A fact-finding mission led by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has ascertained that the murder of a doctor, Birbal Ginani, on 31 March in Karachi does not seem to be linked to his association with the Hindu community.

Conducted on 15 April 2023, the mission met the law enforcement officials involved in the investigation as well as the victim's friends and family members. While the perpetrators are still at large and the investigation ongoing, the evidence suggests that this crime may be a result of personal enmity. Respondents also agreed that it seemed unlikely that Dr Ginani's religious or political affiliations had led to his murder.

Of concern, however, is the fact that the victim's former colleague, who was working as a nurse at his clinic and was traveling with him when he was murdered, has not been found or taken into custody yet, nor was any woman police officer involved in the investigation regarding this aspect. Additionally, the nature of the crime suggests that it was an organised crime as the perpetrators managed to avoid being recorded on CCTV camera.

The mission recommends that the police expedite the investigation, preferably through the formation of a joint investigation team. More CCTV cameras must also be installed to provide key evidence when such crimes take place. Furthermore, security in the metropolis must be enhanced, considering that the crime took place a few hundred meters

away from Lyari Expressway. This incident is one of many in the recent uptick in crimes in Sindh, which must be addressed without further delay.

2 June: HRCP is deeply concerned by reports that lawyer and activist Jibran Nasir has been abducted by unknown armed persons in Karachi. We demand that he be safely recovered immediately and his abductors held accountable under the law.

28 June: In the 14 years since Dr Deen Mohammad Baloch was forcibly disappeared, his family have fought for answers. And received none. This Eid, HRCP stands in solidarity with Sammi Baluch, his daughter, and with all other victims of enforced disappearances. We remind the state that this is a crime against humanity and cannot be allowed to continue with such impunity.

6 July: HRCP strongly condemns the enforced disappearance of Salim Baloch, a Punjab University history graduate, and his friend, Ikram Naeem, both of whom were abducted from their homes in Turbat on 4 July, allegedly by security agency personnel. We are greatly alarmed by the recent uptick in such reports, especially from Turbat, which seem to indicate ever-greater impunity for those who perpetrate such rights violations. Both young men must be released immediately and their abductors held accountable.

11 July: HRCP is deeply concerned by reports of civil unrest in Kurram, incl. violence perpetrated by rival sects, which have not only led to at least 9 deaths, but also interrupted access to schools and curtailed freedom of movement, especially that of the local Shia community. There are also alarming reports of rising militancy feeding into local conflicts. The government must immediately undertake to resolve all sectarian differences peacefully and restore law and order to this region. We also remind the state that it pledged to mainstream the Newly Merged Districts in 2018 and secure all citizens' right to life and security while providing them access to healthcare, education and livelihoods. This pledge remains unmet despite the allocation of AIP funds.

16 July: HRCP is alarmed by reports of deteriorating law and order in the districts of Kashmore and Ghotki in Sindh, where some 30 members of the Hindu community – including women and children – have allegedly been held hostage by organised criminal gangs. Moreover, we have received disturbing reports that these gangs have threatened to attack the community's sites of worship, using high-grade weapons. The Sindh Home Department must investigate this matter immediately and take steps to protect all vulnerable citizens in these areas.

20 July: HRCP is deeply concerned by reports of heavy firing in the city of Wadh in Khuzdar as a result of ongoing hostilities between two factions of the Mengal tribe. Reports emerging from the area suggest

that, while no casualties have been reported so far, residents fear for their safety and their freedom of movement has been curtailed. The provincial government, which is responsible for maintaining peace, must take prompt action. We also strongly urge Shafiq ur Rahman Mengal and Sardar Akhtar Mengal to broker an immediate ceasefire and ensure that people's right to life and security of person is protected.

21 July: HRCP remains deeply concerned by the deteriorating law and order in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with five police officers having been killed in terrorist ambushes in the last three days alone. The human cost of terrorism must not be ignored: the police officers who died in the line of duty have left behind grieving families with questionable means of support. If the state is to quell the rising tide of militancy in the province, it must not only provide law enforcement personnel with better intelligence, training and equipment, but also ensure that those who take on this immense risk are at least assured that their families will be looked after should the worst happen.

30 July: Enforced disappearances violate the most fundamental human rights. On the 18th anniversary of Masood Janjua and Faisal Faraz's disappearance, let us renew our commitment to ending this horrific practice and standing up for justice.

30 July: HRCP strongly condemns the blast targeting a JUI-F convention in Bajaur, KP, in which at least 40 people have been killed. The continued onslaught of terrorism in KP is cause for great concern. The government must launch an immediate inquiry and hold the perpetrators accountable.

4 August: HRCP is shocked to learn of the murder of human rights defender Imdad Joyo, who protested against cases of alleged torture in a Balochistan minister's private jail. We demand a swift investigation into this incident. Mr Joyo's family must also be provided security at once.

15 August: HRCP is greatly alarmed by reports that Shams Baloch, a student at Sargodha University, was forcibly disappeared in Khuzdar on 13 August. Two days later, his uncle Fazal Yaqoob Baloch was reportedly disappeared after unidentified persons broke into his home and threatened his family. We are seriously concerned for their safety and demand that both men be released immediately. Their families must also be protected against intimidation from any quarter.

Press release: HRCP concerned by lack of transparency in detaining PTI women, Imran Khan's prison conditions

Lahore, 22 August. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is deeply concerned by the lack of transparency surrounding the continued detention of women associated with the PTI, who were arrested following the 9 May riots.

It has now been over three months since they were arrested and it is not clear how many women are currently in jail, what they have been charged with, where they have been detained, which courts they are to be presented in and whether challans have been issued for their remand. This situation is unacceptable. HRCP also reminds the state that, under Section 167 of the Criminal Procedure Code, women cannot be remanded into state custody except in cases of serious crimes.

The state is duty-bound to ensure that the detention of any citizen follows not only legal procedure, but that details of their detention are publicly available so that their right to due process can be protected. HRCP observes with alarm that such treatment has, historically, been meted out to political workers of parties that fell out of favour with state institutions. This cycle must end now.

HRCP is also concerned by allegations that former prime minister Imran Khan is being detained in Attock Jail in conditions that violate the Pakistan Prison Rules 1978. The Punjab Prisons Department must investigate these allegations and ensure that Mr Khan receives the facilities to which he is entitled according to his prison class.

Press release: Next elected government must not procrastinate on enforced disappearances

Lahore, 30 August. Marking International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) expresses grave concern over the lack of progress not only in tracing victims but also holding perpetrators accountable. Despite repeated calls for action from civil society, including victims' families, the state has failed to legislate against enforced disappearances. The next elected government—if it is serious about upholding principles of justice and accountability—cannot afford to drag its feet on this matter.

Speaking at a meeting in Islamabad, Council member and former senator Farhatullah Babar said that, despite the creation of a special cell at General Headquarters in July 2019, there had been no progress towards eliminating enforced disappearances. Mr Babar emphasised that repeated demands for victims' release and recovery had fallen on deaf ears, emanating from high-powered cabinet and parliamentary committees as well as the Peshawar High Court.

He reiterated the need for transparency and accountability, strongly urging the authorities concerned to shut down extra-legal internment centres where many victims of enforced disappearance were allegedly held. Mr Babar also said that political bickering over the enforced disappearances bill and its constant removal from the parliamentary agenda underscored the fecklessness of state stakeholders in making any progress on the issue.

At a meeting in Lahore, HRCP chairperson Hina Jilani stressed the importance of defining and punishing the offence in line with international standards. She condemned the use of torture, extrajudicial killings and secret detentions, emphasising the need for a robust legal framework that protects civil liberties. Ms Jilani also raised strong concerns over the dismal performance of the Commission for Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, emphasising that accountability must extend to those ordering or allowing such violations to occur. 'Claims of "neutrality" from those responsible', she added, 'stand exposed.'

29 September: HRCP strongly condemns the suicide blast at a religious procession in Mastung that has left at least 50 dead and scores injured. It is unacceptable that the residents of Balochistan are compelled to live in constant fear amid deteriorating law and order. Those responsible for this heinous attack must be brought to justice. HRCP believes, however, that hyper-securitisation will not resolve the security problem in the province.

29 September: The deaths of at least four people, killed allegedly by law enforcement agencies during a security operation in a village near Sarkand in Sindh, must be investigated independently. While the government should take all possible steps to improve law and order in the province, this in no way excuses extrajudicial killings, which HRCP has always opposed. We urge the caretaker chief minister to take notice of this incident. Those families currently protesting in Sarkand deserve justice. Additionally, the whereabouts of Liaquat Jalbani, a student initially in the custody of law enforcement personnel, who was brought to the village when this incident took place, must be established.

10 October: On World Day Against the Death Penalty, HRCP joins the universal call for no death penalty and demands that the state immediately establish an official moratorium on executions. As a first step, the number of offences that carry the death penalty must be drastically reduced to include only the most serious crimes in line with international standards. Moreover, there is enough evidence to establish that retaining the death penalty is incompatible with the prohibition against torture under UNCAT, to which Pakistan is a signatory. The state must heed its international obligations to uphold human rights and ultimately abolish the use of the death penalty.

15 October: HRCP demands the immediate release of Irfan Zohrani, who was abducted a second time by the authorities after being released from a court in Rahim Yar Khan. Earlier, Zohrani went missing from Sindh in January 2023 and was traced to a Rahim Yar Khan jail in May 2023. The trumped-up charges against him were declared unfounded by the court. On his release on 13 October 2023, Mr Zohrani and his lawyer Mohib Azad were both picked up once again. Mr Azad was later released but Mr Zohrani's whereabouts remain unknown. This practice of illegally detaining and disappearing citizens must stop once and for all.

23 October: HRCP welcomes today's Supreme Court verdict declaring that the military trials of over 100 civilians—arrested in the wake of violent protests on 9 May—are unconstitutional. Military courts do not meet the standards of fair trial, nor are such trials likely to be impartial or independent, as the administration of justice warrants. Moreover, there is ample scope to try those accused in this case in civilian courts.

It is hoped that civilians like Idris Khattak, who have already been tried and convicted, will be allowed to benefit from today's verdict. Further, at this juncture, it is imperative that civilian institutions are upheld and strengthened, not undermined, by the use of military courts.

1 November: HRCP is alarmed by the escalation in violence in Parachinar, where at least 23 people have reportedly been killed in recent clashes as a result of sectarian conflict compounded by land disputes. There are also worrying reports of the violence having been stoked by militants in the region. The state must take immediate steps to restore law and order and ensure that residents' right to life and security is protected, including by de-weaponizing the region and integrating the Newly Merged Districts more effectively with the rest of the province.

24 November: HRCP strongly condemns the practice of extrajudicial killings by law enforcement and security agencies, which continue to be reported from Balochistan, particularly in Kech and its surrounding areas. Extrajudicial executions are not justified in any circumstances whatsoever, given that the state has a legal obligation to protect the right to life and the right to due process. The impunity accorded to perpetrators must cease and those responsible held to account.

12 December: HRCP takes strong exception to a Lahore antiterrorism court's decision to grant the Quetta police two-day transitory remand of PTI supporter Khadija Shah. All the cases heard against Ms Shah, a resident of Lahore, have so far been heard in the city where she was originally charged. To implicate her in a new case to which she has no connection, just as she was likely to be released, appears to be a means of continued harassment, given that she has been separated from her children for months. To move her to Quetta by road in the cold weather is tantamount to ill treatment under the law and Pakistan's international obligations under the CAT. Ms Shah should be allowed to remain in Lahore and her right to due process upheld.

13 December: The alleged extrajudicial killing of Balach Baloch and others in Turbat must be investigated swiftly and transparently, and immediate measures taken to ensure that such incidents do not recur. HRCP notes with immense concern that both enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings have continued with impunity particularly in Balochistan, with little realization on the state's part that these may constitute crimes against humanity.

HRCP stands in solidarity with the families of victims of enforced disappearance and extrajudicial killings in Balochistan, who have marched from Turbat to Quetta and are now en route to Islamabad. We also condemn the treatment meted out to the protestors in Quetta, who were prevented by baton-wielding police from entering the city's Red Zone. The federal government must give the protestors a fair hearing in Islamabad and take their concerns seriously.

Press release: HRCP disappointed by Supreme Court order on military courts

Lahore, 15 December. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) fears that the Supreme Court's decision to suspend the operation of its earlier short order, which had declared the military trial of civilians 'unconstitutional', will result in delayed justice to those who deserve to be exonerated from the charges levelled against them. Moreover, suspending the earlier decision means, from a practical perspective, the denial of bail to all the affected individuals, thereby violating their right to liberty.

This order of the honourable court is deeply worrying from a human rights perspective because it paves the way for continued military trials of civilians which, as HRCP has consistently pointed out, violates their right to due process and fair trial. The secrecy surrounding military court proceedings, the extremely high conviction rate of these courts and the possible means used to achieve such rates, and the absence of the right of appeal to civilian courts—whose role is restricted to exercising narrow powers of judicial review in such cases—are all reasons for which military jurisdiction over civilians has been globally disapproved.

Continuation of any trial in the light of the Supreme Court's verdict through a subsequent interim order has allowed an unconstitutional process to proceed in military courts. It is especially of concern that such an order was passed without there being any element of irreparable harm apprehended from the non-suspension of the apex court's earlier short order.

HRCP is compelled to question the prudence of not only the order in question, but also hearing of the appeals against the Supreme Court's verdict before the detailed judgment was announced. HRCP fervently hopes that the concerns arising from the interim order will be addressed through an expeditious and final adjudication by the Supreme Court.

30 December: HRCP is alarmed by the law-and-order situation in Bannu and other parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province where the activities of proscribed militant organisations have seen a major upsurge. Besides the acts of arson and violence committed by them, they are openly instructing residents to follow their diktats.

Women and vulnerable populations are now living under grave threat. HRCP demands that authorities take necessary steps immediately to protect the local population and their right to free mobility, assembly and girls' education.

Strengthening constitutional democracy and federalism

Press release: Political problems must be resolved solely by political means

Lahore, 28 March. On concluding an extraordinary meeting to deliberate on the current political crisis and constitutional impasse, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP)'s governing council has resolved that it is of utmost importance to uphold and strengthen the democratic process.

HRCP is deeply concerned that this crisis has resulted in polarization across the political spectrum. This state of affairs was, regretfully, triggered by events that were designed to stall the democratic process and undermine the efficacy and legitimacy of Parliament. One political party first abandoned the National Assembly and then dissolved two provincial assemblies. Others in government blocked the subsequent reversal of this move by thwarting the opposition's attempt to return to the National Assembly.

Despite its considered view that the dissolution of the Punjab and KP assemblies was politically expedient, HRCP is concerned that these assembly elections have been postponed till October by the Election Commission of Pakistan. We are also aware of legitimate apprehensions that such decisions could become a precedent to be used to derail the democratic process in the future.

Accordingly, there must be consensus among all political parties and stakeholders on the rationale for such a delay. They should also recognise that this is an unwelcome precedent and must not recur. The election process must also remain free, fair, credible and transparent, and the results acceptable to all political stakeholders.

HRCP notes with dismay the judicial overreach in conflict with the constitutional principle of the trichotomy of powers. There is a need to dispel the impression that, in interpreting the Constitution, the Supreme Court enhances its own powers at the expense of other democratic institutions. The judiciary must safeguard its independence, integrity and credibility. It must resist any urge to interfere in the domain of other constitutional bodies and instead help strengthen all such institutions by giving them the room to resolve issues that fall within their constitutional remit. We also firmly believe that there is no room for threats of any undemocratic interventions.

HRCP strongly condemns violent and unlawful behaviour by political elements aimed at creating disorder to further their political agendas. At the same time, HRCP denounces the strong-arm tactics and disproportionate use of force by the state as a means of political repression. We are deeply concerned to observe that this has involved resorting to the use of colonial laws of sedition, unwarranted charges of terrorism against political opponents, enforced disappearances, and attempts to gag freedom of expression through ill-conceived proposals and actions through PEMRA.

Ultimately, the crux of the ongoing crisis is political and not legal. There is no other option for the political opposition and the government but to hold serious and meaningful dialogue in Parliament to resolve this in the larger interests of Pakistan's people.

Press release: HRCP marks 50 years of 1973 Constitution

Lahore, 10 April. Marking 50 years to the day since the Constitution of 1973 was passed by the National Assembly, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) notes that, in a history interspersed with periods of autocratic military rule and attempts to grossly undermine representative governments, this was the first time that a constitution was drafted and passed unanimously by a democratically elected assembly. While it is not a perfect document, the 1973 Constitution has played a pivotal role in shaping the country's democratic system and federal character, and in upholding the fundamental rights of its citizens.

The moral worth of a country's constitution lies in its ability to put in place a structure of government that defines limits to the exercise of authority by institutions of the state, and to lay down the rights, obligations and attendant principles that must be drawn upon when interpreting the law. In this sense, the 1973 Constitution was significant in recognising and guaranteeing certain basic rights to all citizens, regardless of their religion, race or gender.

It enshrined fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, religion, assembly and association, freedom from slavery, as well as the right to a fair trial, due process and equality before the law. It also established an independent judiciary to protect these rights and ensure they were enforced. It sought to protect the rights of women, religious minorities and marginalised communities, and provided for affirmative action to address historical injustices.

Perhaps most significantly, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, passed in 2010, is a testament to the resilience and evolution of Pakistan's democratic system. It devolved greater powers to the provinces, transferred key powers from the president to the prime minister and the Parliament, and ensured greater financial autonomy for the provinces.

In a time fraught with political discord, HRCP calls on all political stakeholders and citizens to rally behind the shared values of the 1973 Constitution. At the same time, HRCP believes that the spirit of the Constitution provides the necessary room to review and improve the state's ability to secure all people's rights without any grounds for discrimination.

Press release: Immediate need for restraint and dialogue in political crisis

Lahore, 10 May. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is greatly troubled by the unfolding political crisis in the country, following the arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan yesterday, and its implications for the rights of ordinary citizens.

We deplore the use of disproportionate force in arresting Mr Khan from the premises of the Islamabad High Court. It was clearly unwarranted and has only aggravated the political climate. HRCP strongly condemns the violence perpetrated both by security and law enforcement personnel—in which at least one person was reportedly killed—as well as by enraged protestors.

At this time, the need for restraint and political dialogue has never been greater. Respect for the rule of law must apply equally to all citizens and in all situations—it cannot be applied selectively. HRCP was also alarmed to see that the state's knee-jerk reaction to the crisis was to restrict Internet connectivity.

As before, such steps achieve little apart from allowing dangerous rumours to circulate and compromising people's access to information and their safety in public spaces. Once again, HRCP urges all political stakeholders to use peaceful, democratic means such as the forum of the Parliament to settle their differences rather than resorting to violence, intimidation and thuggery.

24 May: HRCP opposes any move by the state to proscribe legitimate political parties. While we deplore any violence perpetrated by the state or any other group, and the destruction of public or private property, we believe in the fundamental right of citizens to participate peacefully in the political process and choose their own political representatives belonging to the party of their choice.

Moreover, we are deeply concerned that nonpolitical powers may take advantage of the unfolding situation—including the sudden resignations of PTI leaders—to further their own agendas. We strongly urge all political parties to come together and determine their priorities in the democratic interests of ordinary people.

Press release: HRCP conference takes stock of the 1973 Constitution at 50

Islamabad, 28 August. At a conference organised to mark 50 years of the 1973 Constitution, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP)'s secretary-general Harris Khaliq said that this was an opportunity to take stock of the Constitution as a social contract between citizens and the state. In this context, HRCP chairperson Hina Jilani said that the Constitution could function as a living document only if Parliament had the wisdom and foresight to ensure that it evolved along with society and the state.

Looking critically at the evolution of constitutional history in Pakistan in the first session, HRCP Council member Nasreen Azhar pointed out that the Objectives Resolution – as part of the Constitution – had marginalized religious minorities. Researcher and constitutional expert Zafarullah Khan said that the Constitution should be considered a 'user manual of statecraft'. 'It should be reviewed and reconciled with its original spirit and evolving polity, which includes incorporating international human rights law into the chapter on fundamental rights,' he said. Moderating the session, academic Dr Naazir Mahmood said that the Constitution needed to reflect the rights of children, youth and persons living with disabilities.

Journalist Asma Shirazi, while moderating the second session on the relationship between the Constitution and federalism, said that a 'hybrid-plus state' had weakened political parties. Former senator Afrasiab Khattak explained that the contradiction between the *de jure* and *de facto* state and 'majoritarian tyranny' had marginalized 'peripheries' such as Balochistan and former FATA. Public policy expert Abdullah Dayo said that a second charter of democracy was required that involved both mainstream and smaller nationalist political parties to build trust in and commitment to federalism.

The third panel assessed how far the Constitution protected the rights of the vulnerable and marginalized. Moderating the session, HRCP member Fatima Atif said that it was important to separate religion from the state. Transgender rights activist Nayyab Ali said that, although the Constitution protected the right to dignity and equality, it did not expressly specify that these rights applied to gender minorities. Rehman Bajwa, chief coordinator of the All Government Employees Grand Alliance (Pakistan), added that the Constitution did not expressly protect the rights of informal labour.

Rights activist Ali Ahmad Jan pointed out that an important element missing from the Constitution was its recognition of Gilgit-Baltistan and of 'cultural minorities', thereby compounding their vulnerability. Researcher and gender rights activist Dr Saba Gul Khattak said that the Constitution did not protect refugees' right to livelihood, while Pritham

Das Rathi, president of the Islamabad Hindu Panchayat, criticized its failure to protect religious minorities from violence. As Tariq Ghori, an activist with the National Commission for Justice and Peace, pointed out, Jinnah's 11 August speech on the rights of religious minorities should be made part of the Constitution.

In the fourth session moderated by local government specialist Fauzia Yazdani, journalist Munizae Jahangir questioned the restrictions on freedom of expression under Article 19 of the Constitution. Former National Assembly member Daniyal Aziz criticized the role of the judiciary in supporting constitutional transgressions and recommended that the Council of Common Interests be strengthened through parties' consensus. Asif Khan, chief executive of the Shaheed Bhutto Foundation, suggested that left-of-centre parties should take the lead in strengthening constitutional protection of labour rights. Former senator Farhatullah Babar concluded the session by pointing out that, while the 9 May riots should be condemned by all political parties, they should not be used as an excuse to cede space to undemocratic forces.

Press release: Uncertainty around elections must end immediately

Lahore, 3 September. The governing Council of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), on concluding a meeting earlier today, has expressed immense concern over the uncertainty surrounding the general elections.

HRCP insists that the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) announce an election schedule promptly such that polls are held as close as possible to the stipulated 90-day period. The delimitation of constituencies must also be completed quickly and efficiently and under no circumstances used as an excuse to delay the elections any further. Moreover, HRCP is concerned by the scope for manipulating the electoral process by institutions such as NADRA and urges the ECP to guard against this possibility.

HRCP is greatly alarmed by the increasingly polarised environment, in which religious and sectarian divisions are being exacerbated reportedly to carve out artificial political space for far-right parties such as the TLP. The divisive and violent tactics used by such parties to build their political identities—particularly at the expense of religious minorities and sects—is eating into organic political and civic spaces. The continuing terrorist violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has also made political parties more apprehensive about campaigning in the province—a pattern we have witnessed before and must not go through again.

Apart from ensuring that free, fair and credible elections take place, the test of the current caretaker government is to see not only whether it will protect and respect people's right to protest peacefully, but also whether it will respond to the issues that ordinary citizens are mobilising around.

Press release: Caretaker government must end pre-poll political victimization

Lahore, 25 September. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) takes strong exception to Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar's claim that fair elections are possible without senior PTI leaders, including the chairperson Imran Khan, who is currently incarcerated in a graft case, and other leaders who were jailed following the 9 May riots. Given that the courts have yet to establish guilt in all such cases, Mr Kakar's claims are anti-democratic and ill judged.

The prime minister should be aware that it is not for him or his government to decide unilaterally what constitutes a 'fair' election. The systematic way in which the PTI leadership has been dismantled – in the shape of mass arrests and rearrests, forced disassociation from the party, the disproportionate number of cases filed against political leaders and workers (including in military courts), and curbs on their freedom of expression and assembly – has not produced a level playing field.

This is cause for concern because it perpetuates a pattern of pre-election manipulation that was also visible in 2018. HRCP also condemns the treatment meted out to former chief minister and PTI president Parvez Elahi, who was rearrested against the directive of the Lahore High Court.

HRCP reminds the government that responsibility for ensuring free and fair elections falls to the Election Commission of Pakistan. The caretaker government must desist from making irresponsible, partisan statements on matters not within its mandate. Instead, it must ensure that an environment conducive to free, fair, credible and inclusive elections is created and maintained.

23 December. HRCP is deeply concerned to learn that various PTI candidates are allegedly being prevented by authorities from filing their nomination papers for the upcoming elections, and that the party was denied their choice of electoral symbol. We also condemn the registration of FIRs in recent days against PTI workers and leaders in different cities on vague allegations of threatening public order. These actions, coupled with the continued imprisonment since 9 May of women associated with the party, flout democratic norms, the rule of law, and the fundamental right to political representation and association. HRCP again reminds the caretaker government and Election Commission of Pakistan to not overstep their mandate to ensure fair and credible elections.

31 December. The rejection of a large number of nomination papers filed by PTI candidates and candidates from other parties, such as the HKP and AML, gives credence to apprehensions that the electoral process is being engineered. Allegations that nomination papers are being snatched before submission are also cause for concern.

HRCP demands that the caretaker government and the ECP adhere strictly to their mandates by providing a fair chance to every candidate – belonging to any political party – who wishes to contest the upcoming general elections. This is as much the right of the voters as of the candidates.

Promoting electoral reforms

17 May: HRCP hopes that the recent census has accurately counted under-represented groups such as transgender persons, persons with disabilities and religious minorities. Given civil society's prevailing concerns about the credibility of census data and its collection process, the PBS must make every effort to ensure the political and economic inclusion of vulnerable groups and restore citizens' trust in this democratic process.

Press release: HRCP calls for inclusiveness and electoral empowerment of marginalised groups

Islamabad, 17 July. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) held a national consultation today on the political participation and electoral empowerment of marginalised groups in Pakistan. The participants discussed barriers in the electoral system leading to disenfranchisement and proposed measures to increase inclusiveness and transparency.

President of the Potohar Mental Health Association Zulqarnain Asghar underscored inaccessibility at polling stations for persons with disabilities, stressing that a variety of disabilities must be catered to instead of simply providing wheelchairs or other token efforts. Special wings for persons with disabilities in political parties was also proposed.

HRCP's Council member Farhatullah Babar urged for an increase in women's seats in the legislature, noting that women legislators' actual participation exceeded the arbitrary 5 percent quota allocated. He also emphasised easing cumbersome CNIC registration requirements for women, persons with disabilities and non-Muslim minorities, a matter seconded by the Director General for Inclusive Registration at the National Database and Registration Authority Reema Aftab.

According to minority rights activist Jennifer Jaggiwan, the electoral process must be re-evaluated from a lens of representation and recognition, and political parties must make an effort to raise religious minorities' issues in their internal forums. Member of the National Democratic Movement and former senator Afrasiab Khattak agreed, stating that all political parties must take collective responsibility and work towards representing marginalised groups adequately.

Gaps in population data were also discussed. Trans activist Nayyab Ali highlighted how transgender people were undercounted in the 2017 census; among those counted only 18 percent were documented. Joint census commissioner for the Federal Bureau of Statistics Qazi Ismatullah agreed that census data must include minorities, persons with disabilities and transgender people.

Awami Workers Party's Dr Aasim Sajjad Akhtar added that the current electoral system is skewed towards higher income groups and that there should be a system of proportional representation for marginalised groups. The Election Commission of Pakistan's Director General for Gender Nyghat Siddique said that the commission has implemented ceiling budgets for election campaigns, and other checks and balances are steadily being devised.

Finally, the federal ombudsperson for protection against harassment at the workplace Fauzia Viqar and HRCP secretary-general Harris Khalique emphasised that political institutions must empower statutory institutions instead of forwarding their own interests. Such measures would go a long way towards ensuring fair and inclusive elections in Pakistan, free of the influence of non-political forces.

8 August: Regardless of the implications of the 2023 digital census for fresh constituency delimitations, HRCP insists that there should be no delay in the general elections beyond the stipulated 90-day period. Moreover, the detailed census results must be made public immediately.

Press release: HRCP calls for extensive electoral reforms

Lahore, 2 September. At a seminar held earlier today, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) presented the findings of a discussion paper calling for extensive electoral reforms. Titled *Making Elections Credible: The Need for Electoral Reforms*, the paper argues that such reforms are critical if the state is to restore citizens' rapidly receding trust in the electoral process. While Pakistan's elections have historically been mired in controversy, exacerbated by the role of undemocratic forces, the need for consensus and action on electoral reforms is now critical.

Elections expert and the author of this discussion paper, Tahir Mehdi, presented his findings in seven key areas: credibility, constituencies, the electorate, candidates, polling, reserved seats and finance. Drawing on the experiences of other democracies, the paper recommends reviewing the legal framework that underpins the elections, including the Elections Act 2017.

It criticizes the role of caretaker governments as being counter-productive and suggests dispensing with these altogether. The paper also points to the judicialisation of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the adverse impact this has had on the ECP's independence.

Asking if voters should be allowed to choose which constituency to register or cast their vote in, the paper points out that internal migrants are effectively disenfranchised, given the impracticality of having the address on their national identity cards (NICs) changed to appear on the rolls of the constituency in which they live and have a stake. The paper argues strongly that linking the right to vote with possession of an NIC has effectively converted a basic civic right into the citizen's responsibility, thereby leaving a significant population – including 10 million women – disenfranchised.

The paper finds the 5 percent allocation of seats to women candidates to be cosmetic and farcical, and recommends that political parties must nominate at least 23 percent female candidates as a starting point, increasing this over time to reach parity.

A key issue raised in the paper is the anomalous situation of the Ahmadiyya community, who continue to be listed separately on the electoral rolls, forced to disclose their identity at polling stations (at significant risk to their lives) and effectively barred from exercising their right to vote. The paper recommends abolishing the separate supplementary list for Ahmadi voters. More generally, it criticizes the concept of reserved seats for religious minorities on the grounds that these do not accord effective representation to such groups.

The paper proposes further reforms to address practices that undermine the electorate's mandate, such as multiple-seat candidacy and independent candidates joining political parties after securing seats. The authentication of data collection, from the census and electoral rolls, to polling documentation and asset declarations of elected representatives, also need to be reviewed.

Preventing the manipulation of information in social media use and technological solutions, such as electronic voting machines and the results transmission system, must also be examined. The report will be released early next week.

Press release: HRCP conference calls for the empowerment of marginalised groups in political and electoral arenas

19 September. A national conference held by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), in partnership with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF), has called for extensive reforms to improve the political and electoral participation of marginalised groups, including women, transgender persons, persons with disabilities and religious minorities.

In his welcome address, HRCP secretary-general Harris Khalique emphasised that all marginalised groups must be brought into the political mainstream to move towards empowerment. He also

underscored the necessity of a level playing field for voters as well as candidates. Birgit Lamm, head of FNF's Pakistan office, introduced the conference by highlighting the importance of free and fair elections to underpin the legitimacy of governments.

In the first session, Ahmadiyya community representative Amir Mahmood highlighted the faith-based discrimination embedded in separate voters' lists for Ahmadis, undermining their right to vote on the basis of citizenship. Transgender rights activist Dr Mehrub Moiz Awan said that electoral participation for marginalised groups must be grounded in genuine solidarity rather than in the politics of sympathy. Former speaker of the Balochistan Assembly Rahila Durrani recommended special political academies to empower women to contest general elections and encourage political engagement.

In the second session, former HRCP chairperson Afrasiab Khattak shed light on the duality in Pakistan's constitutional and legal frameworks regarding marginalised groups, whereby the principle of equality is contradicted by laws that undermine it. Researcher Dr Naazir Mahmood expanded on the role of educational curriculums in peddling skewed perspectives of Pakistan's political history, thus steadily depoliticising the electorate. Discriminatory laws must also be revoked, and constitutional guarantees instituted for marginalised groups to be adequately represented in parliament.

The panellists agreed that linking the right to vote with the possession of national identification cards effectively disenfranchises marginalised groups by shifting the burden of responsibility from the state to citizens. Peshawar High Court lawyer Sangeen Khan recommended progressively increasing the minimum 10 percent stipulation of women's votes in a constituency's total polled votes, compelling political parties to increase women's representation in their own ranks to secure more votes. Checks and balances must also be imposed to ensure the 5 percent quota for women legislators is not misused.

In the final session, the panellists discussed the impact of elite capture on marginalised citizens. Academic Dr Asim Bashir Khan pointed to the indirect gerrymandering of constituencies through overinflated population figures, effectively discounting constituents' interests. Ewajee Alliance chair Sana Durrani and former finance minister Aisha Ghous Pasha also recommended extensive political reforms and a new social contract that safeguards citizens' rights.

In his concluding address, HRCP Council member Farhatullah Babar criticised the depoliticization of the electorate, stating that the demonisation of politics had effectively diminished the political will to engender change. Reforms must be brought about by politically engaged young activists, he said.

Loss of fellow human rights defenders and allies

12 April: HRCP solemnly marks the second death anniversary of I. A. Rehman who remained a guiding light for the human rights movement in Pakistan, South Asia and beyond. He led HRCP in the capacities of director (1990-2008), secretary-general (2008-2016) and honorary spokesperson (2017-2021). As an outstanding journalist and formidable public intellectual, he touched many lives and mentored two generations of human rights defenders. His loss remains irreparable.

14 July: HRCP is grieved to learn that senior journalist Qazi Siraj has passed away in Karachi. Mr Siraj was a committed labour rights activist and ran the 'workers' page' in the daily Jasarat for many years. We extend our condolences to his family, friends and colleagues.

4 August: We are grieved at the loss of Iftikhar Butt, an active member of HRCP since 1992. He headed HRCP's general election observation teams and served as its election commissioner for the organization's governing body elections. Our deepest condolences to his family and friends.

4 September: HRCP is deeply saddened to learn that retired Justice Ali Nawaz Chowhan, the first chairperson of the NCHR, passed away yesterday in Rawalpindi.

A renowned jurist and intellectual, Justice Chowhan will be remembered for his commitment to upholding human rights and the rule of law, a journey which started when he served as a district judge in 1977, before being elevated to the Lahore High Court Rawalpindi Bench where he served for six years.

He then held the distinct honour of being elected as a judge of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia by the United Nations in 2006, as well as the Chief Justice of Gambia from 2014 to 2015. He was further appointed as an honorary consul of Gambia in 2022. HRCP offers its deepest condolences to Justice Chowhan's family.

15 September: HRCP is deeply saddened by the passing of veteran journalist Shahid Hussain in Karachi. He remained upright and honest throughout his career. We offer condolences to his family, friends and the journalist community.

16 September: HRCP is deeply saddened by the death of leading poet Mubarak Qazi in Turbat. Qazi gave a new meaning to romance with political resistance in Balochi poetry. We offer condolences to his family, friends and readers.

29 September: HRCP is grieved to learn that eminent political economist and columnist Dr Pervez Tahir has passed away. A life member of HRCP, Dr Tahir delivered this year's Asma Jahangir Memorial Lecture, in which he urged the state to focus on delivering economic justice rather

than high growth. As former chief economist of the Planning Commission, he invariably took a compassionate, pro-people approach to policy development. Our deepest condolences to his family, friends and colleagues.

31 October: HRCP is grieved to learn that labour rights activist Veeru Kohli has passed away. As a former bonded labourer herself, she spent almost 25 years working tirelessly to free bonded labourers in Sindh and, most recently, was helping flood-affected *haris* rebuild their homes in Mirpurkhas. Ms Kohli's struggle inspired scores of labour rights activists not only in Pakistan, but also abroad. We express our deepest condolences to her family, friends and fellow activists.

11 December: HRCP mourns the passing of Ahmed Salim, author, poet, translator, archivist, researcher and progressive historian. He campaigned for the rights of the working class all his life and served prison terms during martial law regimes.

A true public intellectual, Salim wrote and edited some 175 books and, as a labour of love, maintained a unique repository of over 40,000 political and historical documents. Our deepest condolences to his family and friends.

Cross-cutting stands

Press release: State must heed Gwadar's legitimate grievances

Lahore, 2 January. Having closely followed the recent mass demonstrations in Gwadar, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) believes it is now imperative for the state to shed its tacit policy of relegating Balochistan to second-class status.

While HRCP deplores the violence that left one policeman dead during the recent protests, we also urge the provincial government to protect people's right to freedom of peaceful assembly by refraining from mass arrests and use of force and focusing instead on more effective methods of crowd control.

In the medium term, however, the onus is on the provincial government to negotiate with the protestors and give their demands a fair hearing. Their legitimate grievances—which are not new—centre on demands that any citizen of Pakistan has a right to make: the right to security of person, freedom of movement and peaceful assembly, access to clean water, education and healthcare, an end to enforced disappearances, and greater economic opportunities and livelihoods.

Moreover, the unofficial media blackout of Balochistan and its problems must end and the region's problems given the attention they have long merited.

Press release: Long-standing human rights concerns endure in Balochistan: HRCP releases fact-finding report

Lahore, 7 April. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) notes with considerable alarm that Balochistan faces mounting public frustration pertaining to enforced disappearances, economic exclusion, curbs on press freedom, misgovernance and allegations of political manipulation by the establishment. A fact-finding mission led by HRCP in October 2022 has observed a palpable sense of anger among ordinary citizens, many of whom went so far as to refer to Balochistan as a ‘colony’ of the state during meetings with the organisation.

The mission comprised senior journalist and HRCP treasurer Husain Naqi, vice-chair HRCP Balochistan Habib Tahir, staff members Maheen Pracha, Fareed Shahwani and Ghani Parwaz, and journalist Akbar Notezai. The team spoke to a wide range of civil society members, including human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, and members of the fisherfolk community, as well as political leaders and members of the administration in Gwadar, Turbat, Panjgur, and Quetta.

The mission is concerned at the state’s widespread use of enforced disappearances to muzzle dissent, a grievance echoed in numerous conversations. This discontent has been compounded by the extensive presence of paramilitary check-posts, which citizens say has cultivated a climate of fear, particularly in Makran. Additionally, in the midst of a serious economic downturn, the resource-rich province continues to be deprived of its fair share of revenues from large development projects. The mission also observed that the absence of a healthy legal trading ecosystem between Balochistan and neighbouring countries has exacerbated poverty levels in the province.

Among other recommendations, the mission calls for an immediate halt to unwarranted interference in Balochistan’s political affairs by the establishment, accountability for perpetrators of enforced disappearances and legislation by the Balochistan Assembly to protect the security and independence of the province’s media professionals. The mission strongly feels that the Haq Do Tehreek’s long-standing demands for basic amenities must be met, while any ongoing or planned projects under CPEC should not impinge on the Gwadar fisherfolk community’s source of livelihood.

The mission also believes that the legitimate grievances of the Pashtun population, particularly those around unequal representation in the provincial legislature, must be given a fair hearing by all political stakeholders. Given the devastating impact of the floods in parts of Balochistan, the mission has also underscored the need for a consistent and empowered local government able to develop early warning systems, evacuation plans and community sanctuaries with stockpiles of emergency supplies in conjunction with the PDMA.

Press release: HRCP launches fact-finding report on rights violations in Balochistan

Quetta, 19 April. In its fact-finding report titled *Balochistan's Struggle for Hope* launched in Quetta today, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has expressed deep concern about the mounting public frustration in Balochistan over enforced disappearances, economic exclusion, curbs on press freedom, misgovernance, and allegations of political manipulation by the establishment. Based on an HRCP fact-finding mission conducted in October 2022, the report documents a palpable sense of anger among ordinary citizens, many of whom referred to Balochistan as a 'colony' of the state.

The report consists of interviews with a wide range of civil society members, including human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, and members of the fisherfolk community, as well as political leaders and members of the administration in Gwadar, Turbat, Panjgur, and Quetta. It also notes with concern the state's widespread use of enforced disappearances to muzzle dissent, and the extensive presence of paramilitary check-posts, which citizens say has cultivated a climate of fear, particularly in Makran. Additionally, the resource-rich province continues to be deprived of its fair share of revenues from large development projects with the absence of a healthy legal trading ecosystem between Balochistan and neighbouring countries has exacerbated poverty levels in the province.

The report recommends an immediate halt to unwarranted interference in Balochistan's political affairs by the establishment, accountability for perpetrators of enforced disappearances, and legislation by the Balochistan Assembly to protect the security and independence of the province's media professionals. It also calls for the long-standing demands of the Haq Do Tehreek for basic amenities to be met, while any ongoing or planned projects under CPEC should not impinge on the Gwadar fisherfolk community's source of livelihood.

The legitimate grievances of the Pashtun population, particularly those around unequal representation in the provincial legislature, must be given a fair hearing by all political stakeholders. Given the devastating impact of the floods in parts of Balochistan, a consistent and empowered local government is also needed that can develop early warning systems, evacuation plans, and community sanctuaries with stockpiles of emergency supplies.

Press release: Political and economic turmoil has had serious impact on human rights: HRCP releases annual report for 2022

Islamabad, 26 April. In its flagship annual report *State of Human Rights in 2022*, released earlier today, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has expressed concern over the political and economic turmoil

of last year, both of which have had a serious impact on the human rights situation. Both the incumbent and previous governments failed to respect the supremacy of Parliament, while tussles among the legislature, executive and judiciary undermined institutional credibility.

The report notes that political victimisation continued throughout the year, with colonial-era sedition laws being weaponised to stifle dissent. Dozens of journalists and opposition politicians were arrested, with ensuing claims of custodial torture – ironically in the same year that the Parliament passed a bill criminalising the use of torture.

The agitation that followed the successful vote of no-confidence against former prime minister Imran Khan saw law enforcement personnel clash with protesters in various parts of the country, with the right to freedom of assembly being violated but also abused.

The year saw an alarming resurgence in terror attacks – the highest in five years, with 533 lives lost. Despite citizens' warnings that such developments were imminent, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the state continued to fumble in addressing militancy.

HRCP also notes an uptick in enforced disappearances, particularly in Balochistan, with 2,210 reported cases remaining unresolved even as a bill criminalising the act was passed by the National Assembly. The report also notes that, as climate change-induced floods ravaged much of the country, relief and rehabilitation for over 33 million affected persons fell woefully short. This lacklustre response has underscored the need for empowered, well-resourced local governments in every province and territory.

Escalating threats to freedom of religion or belief remained a grave concern. While the number of police reports on blasphemy charges fell, the incidence of mob lynching appears to have risen. The Ahmadiyya community came under particular threat, with several places of worship and over 90 graves desecrated, primarily in Punjab.

Violence against women continued unabated, with at least 4,226 instances of rape and gang-rape compounded by an abysmally low conviction rate for perpetrators. Additionally, the scale of violence and discrimination against trans persons – the theme of this edition of the report – was compounded by the conservative backlash against the hard-won Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018.

In a year that began to see the country's economic situation unravel, the report notes that the rights of workers and peasants were sorely neglected. Although the minimum wage was increased, the state has yet to acknowledge that this falls below the threshold of a living wage.

Additionally, while around 1,200 bonded labourers were freed in Sindh, the district vigilance committees constituted in 2022 remained largely

dysfunctional. The death toll in the country's mines also remained very high, at 90 workers. HRCP demands immediate action by the state on these issues if it is to move towards a pro-people approach to politics, law and governance.

Press release: HRCP Council alarmed by economic crisis, calls for parliamentary supremacy

Lahore, 30 April 2023. On concluding its biannual meeting, the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP)'s governing Council has expressed serious concern over the country's dire economic situation, purported increase in child labour and exploitative practices, and reports of suicides allegedly triggered by poverty. HRCP reiterates the need for urgent land reforms to reduce economic inequality and views the growth of high-income housing societies with alarm, given the consequent depletion of agricultural land and associated risk of rising food insecurity.

HRCP strongly feels that the growing political polarisation has undermined parliamentary supremacy. Concerns over the census and allegations of undercounting must also be addressed, given the implications for delimitation of electoral constituencies. Local governments need to be made much more effective in all the provinces to protect people's rights. HRCP also demands greater judicial accountability and transparency in the appointment of judges.

Unseasonal rains and the growing prospect of floods in Sindh and Balochistan are cause for alarm. Those displaced by the earlier floods must be rehabilitated in areas that are not vulnerable to further natural disasters.

HRCP is also alarmed by the deteriorating law and order in northern Sindh and southern Punjab, including the increase in dacoities and kidnappings, as well as reports of the growing presence of militants in Gilgit-Baltistan and Kohistan.

The state must make a concerted effort to protect the rights of vulnerable groups, including Afghan refugees settled in makeshift camps in Islamabad. It must meet the long-standing demand for compensation for people displaced by the 2010 Attabad disaster and Kargil war in Gilgit-Baltistan and make every effort to repatriate Pakistani fisherfolk incarcerated in Indian jails. HRCP is also concerned over the continuing legal challenges being mounted against the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018.

HRCP is especially concerned over the situation of religious minorities, who continue to face discrimination and violence. A bill criminalising forced conversions, currently with the Sindh government, should be passed without further delay. The Sindh Students Union Act must also be implemented promptly.

The continued use of Schedule IV of the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 to harass human rights defenders, political dissidents and journalists in Gilgit-Baltistan must cease. Additionally, the journalists' safety commission instituted under the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act 2021 must be made operational.

HRCP reiterates its utter dissatisfaction with the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, given that perpetrators of enforced disappearances are still not held accountable. We also call for transparency into the resources that were supposed to have been allocated to the newly merged districts in KP and reportedly have not. Additionally, there needs to be a concerted effort to remove landmines in KP.

Press release: Dire need for better governance and accountability: HRCP launches fact-finding report on rights violations in northern Sindh

Karachi, 8 September. In its fact-finding report titled Northern Sindh: In Search of Solutions launched in Karachi today, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has expressed deep concern over the human rights situation in northern Sindh, including rights violations against vulnerable groups, precarious law and order, poor access to education and healthcare, and other curbs on fundamental freedoms.

Based on an HRCP fact-finding mission conducted in February 2023, the report draws on interviews and consultations in Ghotki, Mirpur Mathelo, Kandhkot, Jacobabad, Larkana and Karachi, where the mission met human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, students, workers, political leaders, government representatives and law enforcement authorities.

The mission found that poor conviction rates in gender-based violence cases were exacerbated by a dearth of shelters for survivors. Religious minorities were also deemed vulnerable to deep-seated discrimination, arbitrary blasphemy accusations and faith-based conversions.

Alarming rates of organised crime, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and exploitative feudal power systems prevailed amid a stark lack of good governance and accountability, particularly in the katcha areas. Tribal feuds especially played a significant role in the region's conflict dynamics, paralysing socio-economic development there as well.

The mission further noted that an imbalance in resource allocation has led to limited access to good education and health facilities. Moreover, while censorship of coverage on human rights issues continued unabated, journalists alleged facing attacks by law enforcement personnel and fabricated FIRs to suppress press freedom. Concerns related to the rehabilitation of flood victims, as well as long-term climate sustainability measures, also remain.

The report broadly recommends establishing an overarching women's protection system with shelters in every district, and monitoring issues related to religious minorities for immediate redressal. The state must also set up accessible and affordable health and education facilities for the people of northern Sindh and take measures to curb extrajudicial killings with special capacity-building workshops for the police.

A dedicated police unit to tackle organised crime and abductions, particularly in the katcha areas, must be set up. Furthermore, the Sindh Commission for Human Rights must keep track of enforced disappearances in the region and become party to all inquiries put before any forum. Given the devastating impact of the 2022 floods in northern Sindh, the state must also work towards completely rehabilitating flood-affected persons who await help and devise long-term sustainable climate solutions.

HRCP deplores damage to democracy, calls for economic justice

Lahore, 12 November. On concluding its 37th annual general meeting, the general body of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has expressed its apprehension over the growing sense of powerlessness among ordinary people amid economic deprivation and unemployment.

HRCP believes that the most serious victims of political engineering in the run-up to the general elections have been democracy, electoral politics and the rule of law. Additionally, the establishment's incursions into civic and political spaces have damaged the prospect of free, fair and credible elections. Concerns over contentious delimitations must also be taken into account by the ECP.

HRCP condemns the continuing curbs on freedom of expression: not only have journalists been summarily removed for expressing dissenting opinions, but many have also been prevented from reporting on recent events in areas such as Parachinar and Chaman. HRCP is well-aware of the pressures on the media and is determined to hold the state accountable for such restrictions as the elections approach.

HRCP demands that the discredited chair of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances be removed, and the commission be held to account for its poor track record. In cases where victims' families have filed petitions, HRCP urges the courts to identify the perpetrators and hold them accountable, and to ensure that victims and their families are given reparations. The continued use of internment centres is also cause for alarm and HRCP urges the Supreme Court to hear the petition filed on this matter urgently.

The state of law and order, especially in the *kachha* areas of Sindh and Punjab, needs immediate attention, amid reports that vulnerable Hindu families are being compelled to migrate as a result. The provincial

governments must heed residents' credible suspicion that influential persons are involved in drawing financial or political benefits from the deteriorating security situation.

HRCP is also extremely concerned by the rise in number of police encounters and reminds the state that extrajudicial killings, torture and enforced disappearances are crimes against humanity and cannot be justified under any circumstances.

HRCP demands that the Newly Merged Districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa be mainstreamed without further delay and local bodies empowered. It also expresses concern over the revival of the FATA Tribunal. The government must also monitor the situation in Parachinar and protect people's right to security by preventing further sectarian violence.

The rising number of suicides, especially in Sindh, South Punjab and Gilgit, are cause for concern, given that many cases are connected to rising poverty. Economic deprivations have also had social consequences, reportedly driving many people to send their children to seminaries rather than schools, where radicalisation can be expected, to the detriment of society.

This situation has been compounded by shrinking civic spaces, including curbs on academic freedom, including the persecution of a professor in Bannu, and curbs on freedom of peaceful assembly in Cholistan.

HRCP is especially alarmed by rights violations against vulnerable groups, including the relentless persecution of the Ahmadiyya, Christian and Hindu communities; and violence against children and women, including honour killings. Child domestic workers, who remain highly vulnerable to abuse and sexual violence, need special protection. The recent ban in Kohistan on women from working at NGOs must also be strongly condemned.

HRCP opposes the ongoing drive to deport Afghan nationals, including those with legitimate documents. The government must also protect people's right to fair wages and safe working conditions, particularly for fisherfolk, miners and sanitation workers.

HRCP is alarmed by the continued allotment of collectively owned land in Gilgit-Baltistan to private individuals and the impact of environmental degradation on people's right to health and livelihood in this area.

Press release: HRCP launches fact-finding report on rights violations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Peshawar, 27 December. In its fact-finding report titled *The Merger and its Discontents* launched today, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has expressed concern about the alleged mismanagement of development resources for the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs), the

resurgence of militancy in the region, the delayed repatriation of internally displaced persons (IDPs), curbs on fundamental freedoms, incidence of enforced disappearances and the continued use of internment centres.

Led by former HRCP chairperson Hina Jilani, the fact-finding mission team comprised regional vice-chair Akbar Khan, HRCP members Ijaz Khan and Jamila Gilani, and staff members Shahid Mehmood and Marrium Rauf. The report documents the mission's visit to Swat, Bannu, Khyber, Peshawar and an IDP camp in Baka Khel, and underscores the discontentment of NMDs' residents over the slow implementation of the merger plan; residents also allege that the merger's promise of equality, equal protection under the law and equitable development remains unfulfilled.

The continued presence of armed forces that hinders the establishment of law and order under police jurisdiction and a return to normalcy, as well as evidence of continued enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions in internment centres, were also noted. Such practices, along with threats to the work of journalists and activists, undermine civil liberties, perpetuating fear and distrust among communities. Military forces must cede space to the police where possible, empowering them with enough resources to tackle increase in militancy. The Supreme Court must also urgently fix for hearing the appeal against the Peshawar High Court order that declared the Actions in Aid of Civil Power Ordinance 2019 case null and void, in order to remove the ambiguity surrounding the legality of internment centres and cases of enforced disappearances.

While certain positive steps for NMDs—including the establishment of district courts, local government elections, representation in the provincial assembly, and police capacity-building—are noted and welcomed, the report draws attention to limited access to courts and essential social services for residents that must be addressed. The report also recommends increased access to utilities and social services for residents of IDP camps, and the release of all funds dedicated to development work in NMDs and the empowerment of local governments, with a thorough investigation of allegations of corruption and misuse in that regard.

Peace and international human rights

Resolution of HRCP Council on the situation in Gaza

Lahore, 12 November: On concluding its biannual meeting, the governing council of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has passed a resolution expressing its deepest apprehension over the ceaseless violence in Gaza. Israel's determination to annihilate the civilian population in Gaza—without remorse and without

accountability – is simply unacceptable. The fact that Israel has killed over 4,000 children, deliberately targeted hospitals and refugee camps, and imposed a siege that makes access to food, clean water, fuel and medical supplies virtually impossible, signals genocidal intent.

While Hamas's taking of hostages contravenes international law, the international community must not be lulled into accepting false balances. The moral bankruptcy of the West, the lethargy of Muslim countries that claim to uphold the Palestinian cause, and the inability of the United Nations to assert itself are cause for immense concern for the way that this will shape the world in months to come.

HRCP's Council calls for an immediate ceasefire and urges the international community to use this tragedy to devise and implement a sustained peace process that puts civilians and their rights ahead of military paradigms. HRCP also stands in solidarity with the hundreds of human rights defenders in the region who continue to monitor and document the situation at enormous risk to themselves.

Other statements

Press release: HRCP announces Fakhruddin G. Ebrahim Human Rights Fellowship

Lahore, 7 January. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is pleased to announce the inaugural Fakhruddin G. Ebrahim Human Rights Fellowship, sponsored by his family.

A founding member of HRCP, Justice Fakhruddin G. Ebrahim (1928-2020) remained deeply committed to democratic ideals all his life and worked tirelessly to secure and advance the constitutional rights of minorities and the under-privileged.

The Human Rights Fellowship Award in his name will honour Justice Ebrahim's legacy and will continue as an annual competitive grant awarded to support research and scholarship in this field. The HRCP secretariat will shortly announce the application deadline and eligibility criteria.

30 March: HRCP warmly congratulates Justice Musarrat Hilali on becoming the first woman chief justice of the Peshawar High Court. Justice Hilali has served as an HRCP vice-chair and was on its governing council for many years. HRCP strongly believes that a more gender-diverse judiciary would augur well for not only women's access to justice, but also that of all vulnerable groups.

3 April: We wish to issue the following clarification: HRCP notes that it has been listed among a group of civil society organisations attempting to bring feuding political parties to the negotiating table. While, as an

institution, we wish these efforts well, HRCP is in no way part of any such group of mediators. However, some voluntary members of HRCP may be supporting this effort in their individual capacity. We believe that all political matters must be resolved through political means and on the floor of the Parliament.

15 June: The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is an independent, nongovernment organisation, registered in 1987, and is in no way associated with the Human Rights Council of Pakistan or any other organisations using the abbreviation 'HRCP'. As a membership-based organisation, we do not charge participants any form of fees for the workshops or events we hold.

6 July: HRCP welcomes the elevation of Justice Musarrat Hilali to the Supreme Court of Pakistan. As the second female judge appointed to the apex court, this is an important step towards improving gender diversity in the judiciary, although there is still a long way to go. Justice Hilali is not only an eminent jurist, but also a former vice-chair of HRCP's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chapter. We wish her every success.

16 September: Our warmest congratulations to lawyer and human rights defender Jalila Haider for having been awarded this year's Justitia Award in Vienna. It is a matter of great pride to the human rights community in Pakistan that she and lawyer Nida Usman Chaudhary, founder of Women In Law, have both been selected for this honour in turn in 2021 and 2023.

10 October: HRCP is pleased to announce that Azwar Shakeel has been awarded the first Fakhruddin G Ebrahim Fellowship. Mr Shakeel will be carrying out research on human smuggling from Pakistan from a rights-based perspective. His findings will be published and disseminated by HRCP. Instituted in memory of the late Justice Fakhruddin G Ebrahim, an eminent jurist and founding member of HRCP, this prestigious fellowship is awarded annually to human rights defenders and practitioners to support the development of an independent project aligned with HRCP's vision and mission. This year's recipient was selected by an independent committee of human rights defenders. We are very grateful to the Ebrahim family for supporting this initiative.

16 November: HRCP warmly congratulates educator Sister Zeph on winning the distinguished Global Teacher Award at UNESCO's General Conference. A tireless advocate for schooling for underprivileged children, Sister Zeph must be commended for her commitment to children's fundamental right to education. The state would do well to recognize her work by implementing the solutions she has long called for.



APPENDIX 4

Human rights frameworks

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11

1. Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.
2. No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Article 12

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14

1. Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
2. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15

1. Everyone has the right to a nationality.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16

1. Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
2. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
3. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17

1. Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
2. No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21

1. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
2. Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
3. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 22

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23

1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
4. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
5. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
6. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 24

Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25

1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

7. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
8. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
9. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27

1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
10. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

Article 28

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29

1. Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.
11. In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.
12. These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 30

Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

Fundamental rights in the Constitution of Pakistan

8. Laws inconsistent with or in derogation of fundamental rights to be void.

(1) Any law, or any custom or usage having the force of law, in so far as it is inconsistent with the rights conferred by this Chapter, shall, to the extent of such inconsistency, be void.

(2) The State shall not make any law which takes away or abridges the rights so conferred and any law made in contravention of this clause shall, to the extent of such contravention, be void.

(3) The provisions of this Article shall not apply to:

(a) any law relating to members of the Armed Forces, or of the police or of such other forces as are charged with the maintenance of public order, for the purpose of ensuring the proper discharge of their duties or the maintenance of discipline among them; or

(b) any of the:

(i) laws specified in the First Schedule as in force immediately before the commencing day or as amended by any of the laws specified in that Schedule;

(ii) other laws specified in Part I of the First Schedule;

and no such law nor any provision thereof shall be void on the ground that such law or provision is inconsistent with, or repugnant to, any provision of this Chapter.

(4) Notwithstanding anything contained in paragraph (b) of clause (3), within a period of two years from the commencing day, the appropriate Legislature shall bring the laws specified in [Part II of the First Schedule] into conformity with the rights conferred by this Chapter:

Provided that the appropriate Legislature may by resolution extend the said period of two years by a period not exceeding six months.

Explanation: If in respect of any law [Majlis-e-Shoora (Parliament)] is the appropriate Legislature, such resolution shall be a resolution of the National Assembly.

(5) The rights conferred by this Chapter shall not be suspended except as expressly provided by the Constitution.

9. Security of person.

No person shall be deprived of life or liberty save in accordance with law.

10. Safeguards as to arrest and detention

(1) No person who is arrested shall be detained in custody without being informed, as soon as may be, of the grounds for such arrest, nor shall he be denied the right to consult and be defended by a legal practitioner of his choice.

(2) Every person who is arrested and detained in custody shall be produced before a magistrate within a period of twenty-four hours of such arrest, excluding the time necessary for the journey from the place of arrest to the court of the nearest magistrate, and no such person shall be detained in custody beyond the said period without the authority of a magistrate.

(3) Nothing in clauses (1) and (2) shall apply to any person who is arrested or detained under any law providing for preventive detention.

(4) No law providing for preventive detention shall be made except to deal with persons acting in a manner prejudicial to the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, or external affairs of Pakistan, or public order, or the maintenance of supplies or services, and no such law shall authorise the detention of a person for a period exceeding [three months] unless the appropriate Review Board has, after affording him an opportunity of being heard in person, reviewed his case and reported, before the expiration of the said period, that there is, in its opinion, sufficient cause for such detention, and, if the detention is continued after the said period of [three months], unless the appropriate Review Board has reviewed his case and reported, before the expiration of each period of three months, that there is, in its opinion, sufficient cause for such detention.

Explanation I: In this Article, ‘the appropriate Review Board’ means:

(i) in the case of a person detained under a Federal law, a Board appointed by the Chief Justice of Pakistan and consisting of a Chairman and two other persons, each of whom is or has been a Judge of the Supreme Court or a High Court; and

(ii) in the case of a Person detained under a Provincial law, a Board appointed by the Chief Justice of the High Court concerned and consisting of a Chairman and two other persons, each of whom is or has been a Judge of a High Court.

Explanation II: The opinion of a Review Board shall be expressed in terms of the views of the majority of its members.

(5) When any person is detained in pursuance of an order made under any law providing for preventive detention, the authority making the order shall, [within fifteen days] from such detention, communicate to such person the grounds on which the order has been made, and shall afford him the earliest opportunity of making a representation against the order:

Provided that the authority making any such order may refuse to disclose facts which such authority considers it to be against the public interest to disclose.

(6) The authority making the order shall furnish to the appropriate Review Board all documents relevant to the case unless a certificate, signed by a Secretary to the Government concerned, to the effect that it is not in the public interest to furnish any documents, is produced.

(7) Within a period of twenty-four months commencing on the day of his first detention in pursuance of an order made under a law providing for preventive detention, no person shall be detained in pursuance of any such order for more than a total period of eight months in the case of a person detained for acting in a manner prejudicial to public order and twelve months in any other case: Provided that this clause shall not apply to any person who is employed by, or works for, or acts on instructions received from, the enemy [or who is acting or attempting to act in a manner prejudicial to the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof or who commits or attempts to commit any act which amounts to an anti-national activity as defined in a Federal law or is a member of any association which has for its objects, or which indulges in, any such anti-national activity].

(8) The appropriate Review Board shall determine the place of detention of the person detained and fix a reasonable subsistence allowance for his family.

(9) Nothing in this Article shall apply to any person who for the time being is an enemy alien.

10A. Right to fair trial

For the determination of his civil rights and obligations or in any criminal charge against him a person shall be entitled to a fair trial and due process.

11. Slavery, forced labour, etc. prohibited

(1) Slavery is non-existent and forbidden and no law shall permit or facilitate its introduction into Pakistan in any form.

(2) All forms of forced labour and traffic in human beings are prohibited.

(3) No child below the age of fourteen years shall be engaged in any factory or mine or any other hazardous employment.

(4) Nothing in this Article shall be deemed to affect compulsory service:

(a) by any person undergoing punishment for an offence against any law; or (b) required by any law for public purpose provided that no compulsory service shall be of a cruel nature or incompatible with human dignity.

12. Protection against retrospective punishment

(1) No law shall authorize the punishment of a person:

(a) for an act or omission that was not punishable by law at the time of the act or omission; or

(b) for an offence by a penalty greater than, or of a kind different from, the penalty prescribed by law for that offence at the time the offence was committed.

(2) Nothing in clause (1) or in Article 270 shall apply to any law making acts of abrogation or subversion of a Constitution in force in Pakistan at any time since the twenty-third day of March, one thousand nine hundred and fifty-six, an offence.

13. Protection against double punishment and self incrimination.

No person:

(a) shall be prosecuted or punished for the same offence more than once; or (b) shall, when accused of an offence, be compelled to be a witness against himself.

14. Inviolability of dignity of man, etc.

(1) The dignity of man and, subject to law, the privacy of home, shall be inviolable.

(2) No person shall be subjected to torture for the purpose of extracting evidence.

15. Freedom of movement, etc.

Every citizen shall have the right to remain in, and, subject to any reasonable restriction imposed by law in the public interest, enter and move freely throughout Pakistan and to reside and settle in any part thereof.

16. Freedom of assembly

Every citizen shall have the right to assemble peacefully and without arms, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of public order.

17. Freedom of association

(1) Every citizen shall have the right to form associations or unions, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of sovereignty or integrity of Pakistan, public order or morality.

(2) Every citizen, not being in the service of Pakistan, shall have the right to form or be a member of a political party, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the sovereignty or integrity of Pakistan and such law shall provide that where the Federal Government declares that any political party has been formed or is operating in a manner prejudicial to the sovereignty or integrity of Pakistan, the Federal Government shall, within fifteen days of such declaration, refer the matter to the Supreme Court whose decision on such reference shall be final.

(3) Every political party shall account for the source of its funds in accordance with law.

18. Freedom of trade, business or profession

Subject to such qualifications, if any, as may be prescribed by law, every citizen shall have the right to enter upon any lawful profession or occupation, and to conduct any lawful trade or business:

Provided that nothing in this Article shall prevent:

- (a) the regulation of any trade or profession by a licensing system; or
- (b) the regulation of trade, commerce or industry in the interest of free competition therein; or (c) the carrying on, by the Federal Government or a Provincial Government, or by a corporation controlled by any such Government, of any trade, business, industry or service, to the exclusion, complete or partial, of other persons.

19. Freedom of speech, etc.

Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, and there shall be freedom of the press, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, [commission of] or incitement to an offence.

19A. Right to information

Every citizen shall have the right to have access to information in all matters of public importance subject to regulation and reasonable restrictions imposed by law.

20. Freedom to profess religion and to manage religious institutions

Subject to law, public order and morality:

(a) every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion; and

(b) every religious denomination and every sect thereof shall have the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions.

21. Safeguard against taxation for purposes of any particular religion

No person shall be compelled to pay any special tax the proceeds of which are to be spent on the propagation or maintenance of any religion other than his own.

22. Safeguards as to educational institutions in respect of religion, etc.

(1) No person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction, or take part in any religious ceremony, or attend religious worship, if such instruction, ceremony or worship relates to a religion other than his own.

(2) In respect of any religious institution, there shall be no discrimination against any community in the granting of exemption or concession in relation to taxation.

(3) Subject to law:

(a) no religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any educational institution maintained wholly by that community or denomination; and

(b) no citizen shall be denied admission to any educational institution receiving aid from public revenues on the ground only of race, religion, caste or place of birth.

(4) Nothing in this Article shall prevent any public authority from making provision for the advancement of any socially or educationally backward class of citizens.

23. Provision as to property

Every citizen shall have the right to acquire, hold and dispose of property in any part of Pakistan, subject to the Constitution and any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the public interest.

24. Protection of property rights

(1) No person shall be compulsorily deprived of his property save in accordance with law.

(2) No property shall be compulsorily acquired or taken possession of save for a public purpose, and save by the authority of law which provides for compensation therefore and either fixes the amount of compensation or specifies the principles on and the manner in which compensation is to be determined and given.

(3) Nothing in this Article shall affect the validity of:

(a) any law permitting the compulsory acquisition or taking possession of any property for preventing danger to life, property or public health; or

(b) any law permitting the taking over of any property which has been acquired by, or come into the possession of, any person by any unfair means, or in any manner, contrary to law; or

(c) any law relating to the acquisition, administration or disposal of any property which is or is deemed to be enemy property or evacuee property under any law (not being property which has ceased to be evacuee property under any law); or

(d) any law providing for the taking over of the management of any property by the State for a limited period, either in the public interest or in order to secure the proper management of the property, or for the benefit of its owner; or

(e) any law providing for the acquisition of any class of property for the purpose of

(i) providing education and medical aid to all or any specified class of citizens or

(ii) providing housing and public facilities and services such as roads, water supply, sewerage, gas and electric power to all or any specified class of citizens; or

(iii) providing maintenance to those who, on account of unemployment, sickness, infirmity or old age, are unable to maintain themselves; or

(f) any existing law or any law made in pursuance of Article 253.

(4) The adequacy or otherwise of any compensation provided for by any such law as is referred to in this Article, or determined in pursuance thereof, shall not be called in question in any court.

25. Equality of citizens

(1) All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law.

(2) There shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex.

(3) Nothing in this Article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the protection of women and children.

25A. Right to education

The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law.

26. Non-discrimination in respect of access to public places

(1) In respect of access to places of public entertainment or resort not intended for religious purposes only, there shall be no discrimination against any citizen on the ground only of race, religion, caste, sex, residence or place of birth.

(2) Nothing in clause (1) shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children.

27. Safeguard against discrimination in services

(1) No citizen otherwise qualified for appointment in the service of Pakistan shall be discriminated against in respect of any such appointment on the ground only of race, religion, caste, sex, residence or place of birth:

Provided that, for a period not exceeding [forty] years from the commencing day, posts may be reserved for persons belonging to any class or area to secure their adequate representation in the service of Pakistan:

Provided further that, in the interest of the said service, specified posts or services may be reserved for members of either sex if such posts or services entail the performance of duties and functions which cannot be adequately performed by members of the other sex.



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Index

A

Access to the Media (Deaf)
Persons Act 182

activist 67, 68, 88, 139, 167, 176,
207, 226, 238

Afghan nationals 9, 49

Afghan refugees 19, 95, 97, 115,
116, 121, 147, 148, 156, 176,
183, 190, 192, 193

Afghans 9, 20, 57, 61, 73, 81, 82,
97, 124, 125, 148, 183, 192

agricultural workers 1, 48

Ahmadi 35, 36, 54, 63, 69, 173

Ahmadiyya 9, 11, 16, 25, 28, 30,
35, 54, 63, 69, 88, 173, 205

air quality 10, 26, 28, 38, 51, 52,
58, 62, 83, 84, 87, 91

anti-terrorism court 31, 32, 100,
113, 168, 226

armed forces 7, 43, 73, 164, 186

Aurat March 39, 55, 74, 78, 89, 90,
175, 190

Awami National Party 106

B

Balochistan High Court 133, 134,
137

Balochistan Liberation Army 136

Balochistan Prisons Department
137

Balochistan Union of Journalists
140

Benazir Income Support
Programme 15, 18, 79, 110,
232

blasphemy 9, 17, 30, 33, 34, 36,
54, 55, 69, 103, 174, 190, 205,
225, 233

BNP-M 131, 138, 139, 154

bombings 135

C

Capital Development Authority
21, 182, 186

caretaker government 7, 9, 14, 25,
28, 30, 39, 47, 48, 49, 50, 52,
61, 81, 82, 85, 129, 161, 175,
178, 179, 183

chief minister 19, 27, 29, 44, 49,
67, 86, 98, 115, 133, 142, 219,
222, 225, 227, 229, 233, 234,
235, 236, 239

child labour 19, 25, 46, 56, 57, 130,
145, 147, 156, 162, 181, 182,
192, 232

child marriage 145, 156, 221, 232

Child Protection and Welfare
bureau 46

Christian 2, 9, 17, 25, 28, 30, 34,
35, 36, 54, 102, 106, 110, 114,
205

climate change 5, 10, 21, 125, 151,
152, 187, 220, 236

Commission of Inquiry on
Enforced Disappearances
13, 33, 67, 104, 137, 170, 171,
204

compensation 86, 112, 138, 186,
214, 227

Congo virus 20, 83, 91, 150, 151,
157

conjunctivitis 84
corporal punishment 18, 145, 181,
192, 232
Covid-19 20, 84, 91, 119, 182
crackdown 6, 12, 16, 31, 32, 49, 51,
67, 72, 75, 82, 97, 125, 148,
155, 156, 161, 162, 171, 174,
197, 198, 201, 202, 207, 211,
212

D

daily-wage 47, 145
death penalty 30, 98
death sentence 12, 30, 98, 169, 189
defamation 7, 164, 197, 205, 215
dengue 25, 50, 57, 84, 119, 125,
151, 157
Digital Rights Foundation 18, 44,
110, 180
disabilities W, 5, 9, 19, 49, 79, 81,
95, 115, 182, 192, 221, 233
domestic help 46, 74
domestic violence 18, 44, 96, 101,
110, 129, 135, 144, 219, 221,
231, 232, 233, 236
domestic workers 28, 46, 182, 192
drug abuse 46, 95, 120

E

earthquake 20, 152, 157, 203, 212,
234
Election Commission of Pakistan
(ECP) 14, 16, 27, 29, 41, 42,
43, 50, 55, 56, 96, 97, 98, 100,
106, 108, 109, 111, 112, 122,
123, 134, 142, 153, 162, 163,
174, 177, 178, 191

Edhi Foundation 84
educational institutes 50, 181, 184
electricity bills 15, 139, 206, 207
Employees' Old-Age Benefits
Institution 74
encroachment 21, 72, 120, 186,
193
enforced disappearances 1, 5, 6,
7, 8, 13, 14, 16, 33, 61, 67,
104, 105, 129, 131, 137, 139,
140, 154, 161, 168, 170, 171,
175, 189, 204

Environmental Protection Agency
51, 83

Exit Control List 100, 176

extrajudicial killings 1, 5, 7, 8, 14,
16, 129, 131, 137, 139, 167

F

federal government 18, 19, 61, 79,
81, 85, 100, 115, 116, 133,
138, 148, 173, 184, 186, 229

Federal Shariat Court 8, 11, 18,
45, 79, 145, 161, 166, 181

FIR (first information report) 69,
73, 100, 103, 122, 202, 206,
225, 226, 227, 235

fisherfolk 1, 9, 13, 147, 151

flood 10, 20, 21, 52, 57, 58, 84, 85,
86, 91, 95, 121, 133, 144, 149,
150, 151, 156, 157, 214, 220,
221, 230, 234, 236, 237, 239,
240

Food and Agriculture
Organization 48, 57

forced conversions 70

forced marriage 145

G

Gender-based violence 44, 101,
110, 135, 144, 180

general elections 6, 41, 42, 43, 56,
98, 133, 142, 191

H

health card 125, 151, 157

healthcare 1, 5, 20, 25, 50, 81, 84,
131, 185, 212, 221, 234, 236

Higher Education Commission
35, 83, 174

Hindu 9, 17, 35, 37, 55, 63, 69, 70,
71, 88, 89, 141, 173, 190

‘honour’ killings 101, 110, 135,
168, 180, 221, 231, 232

I

infection 84, 91

inflation 1, 5, 15, 19, 25, 28, 39, 47,
73, 80, 83, 106, 182

International Labour
Organization 182

Islamabad High Court 6, 161, 162

Islamabad Wildlife Management
Board 161, 186

J

jailbreak 129, 137, 154

Jamaat-e-Islami 76, 106, 129, 136,
176

Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-F 102

jirga 15, 110, 112, 118, 123, 124,
144

journalist 16, 22, 37, 55, 61, 63, 67,
72, 87, 89, 103, 105, 122, 123,
140, 155, 171, 189, 206, 215,
219, 225, 226, 229

juvenile 33, 36, 44, 56, 67, 100,
103, 104, 113, 122, 124, 137,
203

K

Karachi Press Club 71, 73, 74

kidnapped 16, 70, 102, 105, 135,
138, 153, 154

kidnapping 61, 63, 70, 89, 181

L

Lahore High Court (LHC) 7, 9,
11, 19, 25, 29, 30, 32, 35, 37,
39, 41, 42, 43, 44, 46, 48, 52,
53, 54, 55, 56, 58, 191

landmine 136

local government 15, 41, 42, 63,
76, 81, 85, 108, 109, 110, 129,
143, 162, 178, 209, 216, 230

M

malaria 84, 91, 150, 157

maltreatment 183

Mayo Hospital 46

mental health 96, 100, 120, 150,
157, 185

migrants 1, 2, 20, 61, 81, 125, 183,
197, 198, 202, 211

militants 14, 66, 95, 101, 102, 103,
129, 135, 136, 137, 153, 154

military courts 1, 6, 7, 11, 14, 28,
31, 97, 104, 122, 162, 166,
189

miners 1, 19, 81, 90, 145, 146, 147, 156
mine workers 9, 113, 145
minimum wage 9, 19, 47, 61, 74, 80, 81, 90, 182
minority 25, 28, 35, 37, 69, 140, 155, 173
MQM 68, 76, 78, 88, 89
murder 12, 30, 31, 33, 44, 67, 89, 103, 112, 134, 137, 139, 153, 169, 189, 201, 224, 238

N

Naegleria fowleri 84
National Accountability Bureau 7, 178, 233
National Assembly 6, 7, 11, 14, 17, 43, 56, 98, 105, 108, 123, 134, 142, 161, 163, 173, 174, 177, 178, 187, 188
National Commission for Human Rights 2, 46, 156, 169
National Database and Registration Authority NADRA 7, 135, 178, 180
National Heritage and Culture Division 187

O

Occupational safety 49
out of school 20, 95, 97, 111, 149, 156, 184, 193, 232

P

Pakistan Central Cotton Committee 47

Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority PEMRA 8, 16, 73, 161, 163, 174
Pakistan Meteorological Department 237
Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz 102
Pakistan National Heart Association 185
Pakistan Penal Code 11, 30, 35, 73
Pakistan Railways 47, 80
Pakistan Steel Mills 74
Pakistan Telecommunication Authority 174
Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement 73, 105, 140, 167
Peshawar High Court 95, 96, 97, 123, 165
police encounters 7, 12, 25, 31, 32, 66, 167, 168
polio 20, 63, 84, 91, 119, 125
PPP 29, 64, 69, 76, 78, 108, 109, 142, 155, 192, 208, 215, 228, 230, 239
privatization 39, 48, 57, 80, 90
protestors 16, 72, 73, 139, 140, 155, 190, 207, 212, 219, 225, 227, 228, 233
protests 5, 6, 8, 15, 29, 50, 67, 72, 73, 76, 79, 80, 83, 89, 91, 95, 105, 106, 107, 108, 118, 121, 123, 131, 139, 142, 149, 154, 155, 176, 197, 198, 205, 206, 207, 219, 225, 226, 227, 235, 236, 238, 239
provincial assembly 25, 41, 42, 65, 109, 133, 136, 144, 145

provincial government 37, 38, 39,
66, 77, 78, 85, 86, 96, 100,
133, 134, 137, 139, 140, 145,
148, 225

PTI 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14,
15, 16, 17, 25, 27, 31, 32, 37,
38, 39, 40, 42, 43, 50, 51, 54,
55, 61, 64, 67, 72, 73, 88, 89,
95, 97, 98, 100, 105, 106, 107,
108, 109, 122, 132, 134, 136,
139, 142, 153, 154, 155, 161,
162, 163, 166, 171, 172, 174,
175, 176, 177, 190, 191, 200,
208, 215, 216, 219, 222, 225,
229, 230, 238, 239

Punjab Child Protection and
Welfare Bureau 46

Punjab Domestic Workers Act 46

Punjab Empowerment of Persons
with Disabilities Act 49

Punjab School Education
Department 45, 50

R

Railways workers 47

rainfall 84, 152, 214

rape 30, 31, 44, 66, 101, 112, 164,
167, 168, 197, 201, 210, 216,
224

reconstruction 86, 121, 203, 212

refugee 115, 118, 147, 176, 183

rehabilitation 19, 20, 49, 96, 113,
120, 149, 186, 221, 230, 234,
236

riots 1, 6, 7, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 32,
54, 61, 64, 72, 73, 83, 142,
162, 166, 171, 174, 175, 176,
225

S

sanitation workers 1, 9, 19, 47, 56,
80, 81, 90, 95, 102, 106, 123,
124

schoolteachers 74, 118, 212

Search for Justice and Care
Foundation 46

Section 144 8, 15, 25, 38, 51, 55,
58, 106, 107, 139, 151, 176

sedition 11, 37, 100, 134, 153, 168,
197, 207, 215, 226

sexual abuse 9, 46, 47, 112, 145,
181, 232

sexual violence 18, 46, 101, 110,
135

Shia 174, 176, 225

Sindh Mines and Minerals
Department 87

slums 85

Social Welfare Department 46, 49

stone-crushing 47, 49, 57

suicide bomber 136

suo motu 122, 145, 163, 164, 165

Supreme Court 7, 11, 18, 27, 41,
42, 43, 56, 73, 95, 99, 100,
104, 133, 134, 161, 162, 163,
164, 165, 166, 169, 173, 177,
178, 181, 182, 189, 199, 200,
222, 238

T

terrorist attack 136

Torkham 95, 106, 116, 123

torture 7, 9, 12, 18, 21, 44, 46, 56,
68, 78, 100, 103, 122, 162,
192, 198, 202

tourism 187, 211

transgender 5, 8, 15, 18, 20, 28, 45,
56, 61, 63, 74, 79, 90, 112, 124,
135, 144, 161, 185, 210, 232

trans rights 45

U

United Nations Office on Drugs
and Crime 44

V

vaccination 64, 84

W

WAPDA W, 47, 48, 80

Women and Juvenile Facilitation
Centre 44

World Bank 80, 85, 119

Y

Young Doctors Association 138

Established in 1986 and registered in 1987, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is the country's apex independent human rights body. A membership-based organization, HRCP is committed to realizing the entire ambit of human rights—civil, political, economic, social, environmental and cultural—for all citizens and persons present in the country. HRCP uses the framework provided by the fundamental freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution of Pakistan as well as international human rights instruments, to some of which Pakistan is a state party.

HRCP works in seven key strategic areas: combating discrimination against vulnerable and excluded groups, defending the rights of workers and peasants, reclaiming space for civil society, advancing the rule of law and justice system reforms, including an end to torture and enforced disappearances, strengthening constitutional democracy and federalism, contributing to climate action, and promoting electoral reforms. The organization also maintains a vast data archive comprising human rights-related news reports dating back to 1990.

HRCP's office bearers for 2023–26 are: Asad Iqbal Butt (chairperson), Munizae Jahangir (co-chair), Husain Naqi (treasurer), Kashif Panezai (vice-chair, Balochistan), Nasreen Azhar (vice-chair, Islamabad), Akbar Khan (vice-chair, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), Raja Ashraf (vice-chair, Punjab), and Qazi Khizar Habib (vice-chair, Sindh). The HRCP Secretariat is represented by its secretary-general Harris Khalique. The organization's day-to-day operations are overseen by the director, Farah Zia. HRCP's work is supported by a network of human rights defenders across the country.

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