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Pakistan

PARTLY FREE

37
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	15 / ₄₀
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	22 / ₆₀

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

37 /100 **Partly Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



Note

The numerical scores and status listed above do not reflect conditions in Pakistani Kashmir, which is examined in a separate report. *Freedom in the World* reports assess the level of political rights and civil liberties in a given geographical area, regardless of whether they are affected by the state, nonstate actors, or foreign powers. Disputed territories are sometimes assessed separately if they meet certain criteria, including boundaries that are sufficiently stable to allow year-on-year comparisons. For more information, see the report **methodology** and **FAQ**.

Overview

Pakistan holds regular elections under a competitive multiparty political system. However, the military exerts enormous influence over security and other policy issues, intimidates the media, and enjoys impunity for indiscriminate or extralegal use of force. The authorities impose selective restrictions on civil liberties, and Islamist militants carry out attacks on religious minorities and other perceived opponents.

Key Developments in 2022

- Pakistan was severely affected by flooding between June and September, displacing residents and damaging infrastructure nationwide. In an October document, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that over 1,600 people were killed, two million homes were damaged or destroyed, and 7.9 million people were displaced.
- In April, Prime Minister Imran Khan lost a no-confidence vote after unsuccessfully dissolving the parliament to avoid it. The Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaf (PML-N) of Shehbaz Sharif then formed a government with the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F).
- In October, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) banned Khan from holding office for five years over accusations that he made false statements about his assets and liabilities.
- The PTI held regular rallies nationwide after Khan was removed from office. In November, Khan was shot and slightly wounded during a rally in Wazirabad. One person was killed during the attack, which supporters called an assassination attempt. Khan blamed Prime Minister Sharif and the army for the incident.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

1/4

A prime minister holds most executive power under the constitution. Imran Khan of the PTI took that post in August 2018, a month after parliamentary elections. In March 2022, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-led government lost its majority when the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) withheld its support. In April, Khan dissolved the parliament to avoid a no-confidence vote, but the Supreme Court ruled his effort unconstitutional and ordered the parliament to return. Khan was ousted later that month, becoming the first premier in the country's history to lose their post in such a fashion. Shehbaz Sharif of the PML-N succeeded him, backed by a new coalition.

The president, who plays a more symbolic role, is elected for up to two five-year terms by an electoral college comprising the two chambers of the parliament and the provincial assemblies. PTI nominee Arif Alvi was elected in September 2018.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

2/4

The parliament currently consists of a 342-member National Assembly and a 100-member Senate. National Assembly members are elected for five years; 272 seats are filled through direct elections in single-member districts, 60 are reserved for women and 10 are reserved for non-Muslim minorities. Reserved seats are filled via a party-list proportional-representation system.

In the July 2018 elections, the PTI received 32 percent of the vote and 149 seats. The PML-N received 24 percent and 82 seats. The PPP received 13 percent and 54 seats. Parties and candidates linked to active Islamist militant groups, including Tehreek-e-

Labaik Pakistan (TLP) and Allah-o-akbar Tehreek, also participated in the polls. Voter turnout was 52 percent. Polling was orderly, but the elections were affected by reporting delays. Media restrictions and judicial rulings affected the PML-N. In April 2022, after the PTI-led government fell, a coalition comprising the PML-N, the PPP, and the JUI-F took office.

By-elections for eight National Assembly seats were held in October 2022, a consequence of the power struggle that forced Imran Khan out of power. A large number of PTI lawmakers offered their resignations after Khan lost the premiership, of which 11 were accepted by the speaker. The PTI won six of the eight seats, while the PPP won the other two.

For the Senate, each of the four provincial assemblies chooses 23 members. Senators serve six-year terms, with half of the seats being renewed every three years. The National Assembly chooses four senators to represent the Islamabad capital territory, while another four represent the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATAs). As the FATAs have been integrated into the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, seats still reserved for those areas will be removed in 2024. In the March 2021 Senate elections, the PTI won 18 of 48 seats contested, leaving it with 26 seats in total and without a majority. The PPP, with 20 seats, became the Senate's largest opposition party.

Local elections were held in Baluchistan in May 2022, ending a years-long hiatus. While the polls were technically nonpartisan, many candidates were affiliated with a party in practice. Independents and the JUI-F performed well. Turnout stood at 60 percent.

In June 2022, elections were held in 14 of Sindh Province's districts; voting in another 16 was delayed to 2023 due to flooding and security concerns. The PPP, which rules in Sindh, topped those polls amid widespread complaints by opposition parties of official interference.

In July 2022, elections were held to fill 20 seats in the Punjab assembly; the seats were made open when PTI members who backed Hamza Shahbaz of the PML-N for the provincial premiership were disqualified. The PTI won at least 15 of the contested seats.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented

2/4

impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	
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Elections are administered by the ECP, whose members are current or retired senior judges nominated through a consultative process that includes the government and the parliamentary opposition. The ECP has asserted its independence in the past, electoral laws are considered largely fair, and candidates can address electoral disputes via the judiciary. However, the ECP was unable to counteract judicial and military actors' efforts to manipulate the electoral environment in 2018.

Voter-registration rates for women are low, Ahmadis must register as non-Muslims even though they identify as Muslim, and candidates must abide by vague moral requirements for their nomination. Some citizens, especially people living in poor river communities and ethnic Bengalis, have been stopped from registering.

The ECP was involved in the struggle over Imran Khan's premiership in 2022. In April, Khan called on Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja to resign, accusing him of anti-PTI bias. In August, the ECP determined that the PTI had received donations from prohibited international sources. In October, it banned Khan from holding office for five years over accusations that he made false statements on assets and liabilities.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?	2/4
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Several major parties and numerous smaller parties and independents compete in elections and are represented in the parliament and provincial legislatures. However, established parties maintain patronage networks and other advantages of incumbency that hamper competition in their respective provincial strongholds. In recent years, major parties' freedom to operate has been related to the strength of their

relationships with unelected arms of the state, which have used legal and extralegal means to sideline figures they object to.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

2 / 4

Opposition parties campaign and contest elections, which regularly end with transfers of power at the national level. National opposition parties also hold power or significant provincial representation. However, the military, despite its claims to refrain from political interference, has long been considered more powerful than elected politicians and able to influence electoral outcomes.

Other official bodies have been used to impede political parties. In recent years, the PPP and PML-N faced a succession of charges from the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), the government's anticorruption body, leading to multiple court appearances and periodic detentions. Nawaz Sharif of the PML-N, the current premier's brother, was banned from office in 2018 over corruption accusations; he remains in self-imposed exile in London but is politically active. After being ousted in April 2022, Imran Khan and other PTI leaders faced judicial and administrative scrutiny; in August, Khan received terrorism charges over a speech delivered at a PTI rally.

In October 2022, Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) founder Manzoor Pashteen was arrested on terror-related charges over a speech he delivered on enforced disappearances. PTM lawmaker Ali Wazir remained imprisoned at year's end despite being cleared of terrorism charges in October; he continues to face sedition charges. In November, PTM cofounder Mohsin Dawar was prevented from traveling abroad.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

1 / 4

The manipulation of politics by religious extremists has long hampered voters' ability to freely express their political preferences. The TLP, a militant party adhering to the Sufi Bareilvi tradition, was banned for part of 2021 but refrained from agitation in 2022.

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) reemerged in the Swat Valley and other Pashtun-majority areas along the frontier with Afghanistan in 2022, engaging in extortion and intimidation.

In recent years, the military has reasserted its role as a political arbiter—more powerful than either the judiciary or the elected government—setting the constraints within which civilian politics play out.

The heavy presence of security agents at many polling stations in 2018 was interpreted by observers as tantamount to voter intimidation. Several candidates had links with extremist groups that advocated or engaged in violence, further contributing to a sense of unease among many voters.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

1/4

A joint electorate system allows members of non-Muslim minorities to participate in the general vote. They are also represented by reserved seats in the national and provincial assemblies through the party-list system. However, non-Muslims' political participation remains marginal. Political parties nominate members to reserved legislative seats, leaving non-Muslim voters with little say in the selection process. Ahmadis, members of a heterodox Muslim sect, face political discrimination and are registered on a separate voter roll.

Political parties maintain women's wings that are active during elections, but women face practical restrictions on voting, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan, where militant groups and societal constraints are stronger. Women rarely hold political-party or government leadership positions. The interests of LGBT+ people are generally not represented by elected officials.

The national-level single-member constituency system ensures that the major ethno-linguistic groups from each province receive parliamentary representation. Although Sindhi, Pashtun, and Baloch figures all play visible roles in national political life—alongside the largest ethno-linguistic group, Punjabis—the military works to

marginalize figures from minority groups it suspects of harboring antistate sentiments, as exemplified by its treatment of the PTM.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

1 / 4

Formally, the prime minister and cabinet make policy in consultation with the parliament. However, there has been a long-running struggle between these civilian structures and the military establishment for control of national security policy. The military has asserted primacy on relations with Afghanistan, China, India, and the United States, as well as on domestic counterterrorism policy.

After becoming prime minister in 2018, Imran Khan generally deferred to the army on key national security and foreign policy issues. But during the final months of his tenure and subsequently as opposition leader, Khan was publicly critical. Both Khan and his political opponents accused each other of collaborating with the military to either achieve or take power in 2022, as the opposition agitated to displace the PTI government.

The current government has sought to avoid confrontation with the army. In November 2022, Prime Minister Sharif named Lieutenant General Syed Asim Munir, whom Khan had dismissed from the Inter-Services Intelligence, as the new army chief in consultation with outgoing chief Qamar Javed Bajwa.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

1 / 4

Despite numerous formal safeguards, official corruption is endemic in practice. The use of accountability mechanisms is often selective and politically driven. The NAB focuses on cases against politicians and senior officials, which tend to be protracted. The military and judiciary have their own disciplinary systems for corruption.

The government has relatively progressive laws around public finances, procurement processes, and general government operations. However, the military is deeply opaque in its affairs. Military intelligence agencies act without oversight and often without public knowledge, including when they abduct, detain, interrogate, and torture individuals. The military censors media and information published about its activity by means of vaguely worded regulations that empower officials to monitor and manage content deemed harmful to national security.

Access-to-information laws have long been applied in Pakistan, with a 2002 law being updated in 2017. Information commissions in the provinces exist to enable implementation, which is inconsistent. Determined citizens can demand information from departments, which often ignore requests, and can complain to the information commissions over noncompliance.

The parliament regularly debates and scrutinizes the budget, accompanied by commentary from the media. Members of both provincial and national assemblies are expected to make themselves accessible to constituents. Parliamentarians and select public officials are compelled to submit asset declaration forms that civil society organizations often share online. Vocal civil society groups and journalists often weigh in on policy debates, though debates about policies with national security implications are quickly stopped.

While a procurement regulatory agency uses many standard tools to fulfill its mission, international bodies have scrutinized the country's public procurements.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

1/4

Pakistan has boasted a relatively vibrant media sector, with many television news channels and print publications presenting a range of news and opinions. However, both the civilian authorities and military have curtailed media freedom in recent years, and the PTI government that took power in 2018 accelerated this trend. Media outlets have faced interference with distribution and broadcast, withdrawal of government advertising, a ban on specific television presenters, physical attack, and the temporary disappearance of journalists.

The media sector faces similar dangers under the current Sharif government. In August 2022, media regulators took the ARY News television channel off the air after a PTI official made comments critical of the military on a broadcast. The official was arrested and charged with sedition and abetting mutiny. In October, gunmen shot and killed ARY News anchor Arshad Sharif in Kenya in an apparently targeted attack. Sharif fled to Kenya after receiving death threats.

The military prohibits access to militancy- and insurgency-affected areas, impeding coverage of issues there. In Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, authorities have ordered local journalists to refrain from reporting on separatist activity, while rebel or militant groups threaten them when allegedly siding with the government.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

1/4

Constitutional religious-freedom guarantees have not provided effective safeguards against discriminatory legislation, social prejudice, and sectarian violence. Members of the Shia sect, Christians, and other religious minorities can face blasphemy accusations that arise from trivial disputes and escalate to criminal prosecution and mob violence. Blasphemy laws and their exploitation by religious vigilantes have also curtailed freedom of expression by Muslims.

Hindus have complained of vulnerability to kidnapping and forced conversions, and some continue to migrate to India.

Ahmadis are legally prohibited from calling themselves Muslims and face discrimination. Under a Punjab government directive issued in July 2022, Muslim couples wanting to register their marriage must declare their belief in the finality of Mohammad's prophethood. In August 2022, an Ahmadi man in the town of Rabwah was stabbed to death in a hate crime.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

2 / 4

Pakistani authorities have long used the education system to portray Hindus and other non-Muslims negatively and to rationalize enmity between Pakistan and India, among other ideological aims. Past attempts to modernize education and introduce religious tolerance into school textbooks have made little progress, and minority groups consider negative portrayals of non-Muslims in textbooks as a continuing source of hostility towards them. In July 2022, the education minister announced the renaming of the national curriculum launched by the PTI government and pledged to use it as a vehicle to set educational standards and counter violent extremism.

In recent years, scholars have been somewhat more able to discuss sensitive issues involving the military. However, there is no academic freedom on matters pertaining to religion, where academics remain vulnerable to blasphemy accusations.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

2 / 4

Pakistanis are free in practice to discuss many topics, but the 2016 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act gives the executive-controlled Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) unchecked powers to censor material online. The PTA encourages reporting of websites complainants consider offensive. The PTA's broad and poorly defined censorship mandate includes preventing both morally objectionable content

and the maligning of the “state, judiciary, or armed forces.” In practice, it censors content arbitrarily.

Direct or implied criticism of the army remains taboo and individuals could be punished for airing such views.

The threat of being accused of blasphemy and facing draconian legal action, murder, or mob attacks also deters unfettered speech. In January 2022, a Rawalpindi court sentenced a woman to death over messages she allegedly sent via WhatsApp and Facebook, after a complainant called the messages blasphemous.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

3/4

The constitution guarantees the right to assemble peacefully, though the government can harness legal provisions to arbitrarily ban gatherings, or any activity designated a threat to public order. A Human Rights Commission of Pakistan analysis of 503 assemblies held between January 2021 to March 2022 found that 12 percent of them were met by state violence, often combined with the use of criminal-code provisions.

The PTI held regular rallies nationwide after Khan was removed from office in April 2022. In November, Khan was shot and wounded in the shin during a rally in Wazirabad. One person was killed in the attack, which supporters called an assassination attempt. Khan blamed Prime Minister Sharif and an army officer for the incident.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?

1/4

Foreign and domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) face government-imposed restrictions. Organizations are subject to intrusive registration requirements and vetting by military intelligence. Officials can demand that NGOs obtain a “no-objection certificate” before undertaking even the most innocuous activity. In September, the Edhi Foundation called on the government to lift a ban on some foreign NGOs after major flooding impacted the country.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

2/4

The rights of workers to organize and form trade unions are recognized in law, and the constitution grants unions the rights to collective bargaining and to strike. However, these protections are not strongly enforced. Roughly 70 percent of the workforce is employed in the informal sector, where unionization and legal protections are minimal. The procedures that need to be followed for a strike to be legal are onerous. Strikes and labor protests are organized regularly, though they often lead to clashes with police and dismissals by employers.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

1/4

The country’s politicized judiciary has often been involved in power struggles between the military, the civilian government, and opposition politicians. In effect, it acts as a center of political power in its own right, though it is often aligned with the military and cooperates with it in curtailing the powers of civilian politicians.

The judiciary was involved in the struggle over Imran Khan’s premiership in 2022. In April, it ruled against Khan’s efforts to dissolve the parliament to avoid a no-confidence vote. The judiciary addressed corruption allegations against PML-N and PPP leaders while the PTI was in power, but it pivoted to address accusations made

against Khan and the PTI after Khan's ouster. Proceedings against Khan's political opponents were not dropped, however.

The broader court system is marred by endemic problems including corruption, intimidation, insecurity, a large backlog of cases, and low conviction rates for serious crimes.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

1 / 4

Police have long been accused of biased or arbitrary handling of initial criminal complaints. Police and prosecutors have been criticized for a chronic failure to prosecute terrorism cases and for their reliance on torture. The National Assembly in 2022 failed to ban torture via legislation, despite the Senate passing draft legislation in 2021. No standardized definition consequently exists, nor is there a comprehensive mechanism to monitor security agencies.

Under the Army Act, the military operates its own courts, primarily for its own personnel. However, the army has asserted the right to selectively try civilians in national security cases.

There has been progress in women's access to justice and generalized protection of rights for litigants in the former FATAs, which now lie within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Informal jirgas remain a form of local dispute resolution alongside the formal justice system.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

1 / 4

Most terrorist violence has historically been connected to three distinct conflicts. A low-intensity insurgency in Baluchistan pits the Baloch Liberation Army and other Baloch separatist outfits against the state. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the TTP conducts attacks against security forces, often launching them from within Afghanistan. The TTP escalated its activities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan after ending a

cease-fire in November 2022. The local branch of the Islamic State militant group, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), also attacks targets in Pakistan, though it has prioritized its campaign in Afghanistan.

In 2022, 971 people—a figure that includes civilians, security forces, and terrorists—were killed in terrorist incidents, an increase of almost 50 percent over 2021. These figures remain far lower than the 2009 figure of 11,317. In March 2022, 63 worshippers died in a suicide attack on a Shia mosque in Peshawar. The ISKP claimed responsibility. In December, TTP militants held in a police facility in Bannu overcame their captors, precipitating a siege. The army stormed the facility to end the siege; 33 militants and 2 commandos were killed in the fighting according to Defense Minister Khawaja Asif.

State actors engage in extralegal violence against civilians, including enforced disappearances. Most victims are from Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, or former FATAs. Victims typically are held incommunicado by security and intelligence agencies on suspicion of antistate agitation, terrorism, rebellion, or espionage. The Voice for Baloch Missing Persons, an advocacy NGO, accused the state of operating “death squads” to abduct and kill suspected separatist sympathizers. In September 2022, Islamabad High Court chief justice Athar Minallah admonished the government over its inability to address enforced disappearances. The official Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances logged 9,203 cases of missing persons as of December 30 and said that it resolved 7,001.

In October 2022, the National Assembly passed an amended bill to criminalize enforced disappearances. However, the bill failed to establish an oversight mechanism for state agencies responsible for enforced disappearances, nor did it curtail the army’s power to hold civilians under the Army Act.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

1/4

Women face discrimination in employment despite legal protections and are placed at a disadvantage under personal status laws. Perpetrators of gender-based violence and sexual harassment or discrimination often enjoy impunity. Individuals must register a “first information report” of a crime, and police are often reluctant to pursue complaints of crimes against women, including so-called crimes of honor.

Ethnic and religious minorities, Afghan refugees, and LGBT+ people suffer legal or de facto discrimination and violence. The penal code prescribes prison terms for consensual sex “against the order of nature,” deterring LGBT+ people from acknowledging their identity or reporting abuses. Transgender and intersex people are authorized to register for official documents under a “third gender” classification recognized by the Supreme Court since 2009, and some transgender people were recognized in the 2017 census. However, they face targeted violence and discrimination in housing and employment. Access to identity papers has become increasingly important to avail of rights and services.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

2 / 4

There are some legal limitations on the freedom of movement. Authorities routinely hinder internal movement in some parts of the country for security reasons. The main tool for restricting foreign travel is the Exit Control List, which blocks named individuals from using official exit points. Though intended to prevent those posing a security threat and those facing court proceedings from fleeing, authorities have used it to control dissent.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

2 / 4

The constitution, legal system, and social and religious values ostensibly guarantee private property and free enterprise. In reality, organized crime, corruption, a weak regulatory environment, and the subversion of the legal system often render property rights precarious. Powerful and organized groups continue to engage in land grabbing, particularly in Karachi and Punjab.

Inheritance laws discriminate against women, and women are often denied their legal share of inherited property through social or familial pressure.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

1/4

In some parts of urban Pakistan, men and women enjoy personal social freedoms and have recourse to the law in case of infringements. However, historically prominent social practices in much of the country restrict personal behavior, and especially choice of marriage partner. Despite attempts to abolish the practice, “honor killings” of those accused of breaking social and sexual taboos remains common, and most incidents go unreported.

Though the legal age of marriage is 18 in most of Pakistan, nearly 20 percent of girls are married before that age; 35 percent of child marriages take place in the former FATAs. Nearly one-third of Pakistani women have experienced gender-based physical violence, according to the UN Population Fund. Abortion is illegal, except to save the pregnant person’s life.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

1/4

Bonded labor was formally abolished in 1992, and efforts to enforce the ban and related laws against child labor continue. Gradual social change has also eroded the power of wealthy landowning families involved in such exploitation. Nevertheless, other traditional forms of extreme labor exploitation remain common. Employers continue to use chronic indebtedness to restrict laborers’ rights and hold actual earnings well below prescribed levels, particularly among sharecroppers and in the brick-kiln industry. Marginalized groups, such as itinerant workers, face difficulties in obtaining a National Identity Card. Women from marginalized communities are vulnerable to sex trafficking within Pakistan or to other destination countries.





On Pakistan

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

37/100 **Partly Free**

Internet Freedom Score

26/100 **Not Free**

Other Years

2022

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