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Freedom in the World 2009 - Pakistan

Capital: Islamabad

Population: 172,800,000

Political Rights Score: 4

Civil Liberties Score: 5

Status: Partly Free

Explanatory Note

The numerical ratings and status listed above do not reflect conditions in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir, which is examined in a separate report.

Status Change Explanation

Pakistan's political rights rating improved from 6 to 4, and its status improved from Not Free to Partly Free, due to the end of military rule, parliamentary elections that propelled an opposition coalition to power, and the election of a civilian president.

Overview

An opposition coalition comprised of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) soundly defeated the party associated with military ruler Pervez Musharraf in February 2008 parliamentary elections. The coalition formed a government in March, though it soon faced internal disagreements over the issue of reinstating judges dismissed by Musharraf in late 2007. Under threat of impeachment, Musharraf stepped down as president in August, paving the way for the election of PPP leader Asif Ali Zardari to replace him in September. Despite substantial openings in the political environment during the year, a range of human rights abuses – including arbitrary arrests, harassment of journalists, and violations of women's and minority rights – continued to be a concern. In addition, as Islamist militants extended their influence in the country, terrorist violence escalated dramatically.

Pakistan was created as a Muslim homeland during the partition of British India in 1947. Following a nine-month civil war, East Pakistan achieved independence in 1971 as the new state of Bangladesh. The army has directly or indirectly ruled Pakistan for much of its independent history. As part of his efforts to consolidate power, military dictator Mohammad Zia ul-Haq amended the constitution in 1985 to allow the president to dismiss elected governments. After Zia's death in 1988, successive presidents cited

corruption and abuse of power in sacking elected governments headed by Benazir Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in 1990 and 1996, and Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) in 1993.

After the PML decisively won the 1997 elections, Sharif, as prime minister, largely ignored Pakistan's pressing economic and social problems while attempting to undermine every institution capable of challenging him, including the judiciary and the press. When he attempted to fire the army chief, General Pervez Musharraf, in 1999, he was deposed in a bloodless coup. Musharraf appointed himself "chief executive," declared a state of emergency, and suspended Parliament, the provincial assemblies, and the constitution. He then neutralized Sharif and Bhutto through a combination of court convictions and exile. The 2002 Legal Framework Order (LFO) gave Musharraf effective control over Parliament and changed the electoral rules to the detriment of opposition parties. The regime also openly promoted progovernment parties, such as the newly formed Pakistan Muslim League Quaid-i-Azam (PML-Q), which captured the largest share of National Assembly seats in the 2002 parliamentary elections and formed the government. The 2004 establishment of a powerful National Security Council (NSC), headed by the president, solidified the military's role in government.

While he managed to contain the secular opposition, Musharraf was less willing to rein in radical Islamist groups with which the military traditionally had a close relationship. Although several groups were banned in September 2001, as Musharraf pledged to support the United States in its antiterrorism efforts, more than 40 groups continued to function under new names, and their leaders were generally not prosecuted. Analysts noted with concern that the influence of Islamist militant groups, some affiliated with the Taliban, was spreading, particularly in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), and Baluchistan. Extremists gradually extended their reach to the capital, Islamabad, which led to a full-fledged military siege of the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) compound in July 2007. Following the assault, Islamist militants throughout Pakistan stepped up their bombing campaigns. In November, the entire Swat valley in NWFP was taken over by fighters loyal to Mullah Fazlullah, a radical Muslim cleric.

The primary political tussle during 2007 was between the president and the judiciary, which had become increasingly independent after years of subservience to the executive. Worried that an activist judiciary could threaten his reelection bid, Musharraf provoked a crisis in March by suspending Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry on the grounds of misconduct and abuse of office. The maneuver backfired when Chaudhry refused to resign and lawyers mounted large protests to support his cause, prompting harassment of media outlets that covered the demonstrations and politically charged clashes that killed at least 40 people in Karachi in May.

The political crisis deepened in July, when the Supreme Court ruled against Musharraf's suspension of Chaudhry, who was reinstated. A PML-Q majority in Parliament ensured Musharraf's victory in the October presidential election, which proceeded despite the resignation of many opposition lawmakers prior to the vote. However, when the Supreme Court announced that it would issue a ruling on the validity of the presidential election, Musharraf again took preemptive action and imposed martial law on November 3, suspending the constitution and replacing much of the higher judiciary. Under a state of emergency declaration that lasted for 42 days, a range of basic civil liberties were suspended. More than 6,000 civil society activists, political leaders, and lawyers and judges were arrested soon after the declaration, although the vast majority were released after short periods of detention.

Musharraf was sworn in for a new five-year term as president on November 29, just after resigning as army chief and appointing General Ashfaq Kayani in his stead. The state of emergency was lifted in mid-December and an amended version of the constitution was restored, but some restrictions on the press and the right to assembly remained in place, as did the emasculated judiciary. Following the December 27 assassination of former prime minister Bhutto, who had returned from exile in October, parliamentary elections planned for early January 2008 were postponed until February 18. Shortly after her death, Bhutto's widower Asif Ali Zardari assumed de facto leadership of the PPP.

Both the PPP and the PML-N – the faction led by Nawaz Sharif, who had returned from exile in November – alleged that the government and bureaucracy engaged in preelection rigging and harassment. However, the ruling PML-Q was ultimately routed due to Musharraf's personal unpopularity and voter dissatisfaction with the government's handling of radical Islamist violence and major economic problems, including soaring food prices. The PPP led the voting with 97 out of 272 directly elected seats in the National Assembly, followed by the PML-N with 71. The PML-Q won only 42 seats, and a number of ministers lost their races. The Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), an alliance of Islamic parties, was also severely weakened at both the national and provincial levels. The PML-N triumphed in its traditional stronghold of Punjab, while the PPP dominated in Sindh and the Awami National Party, a secular and ethnic Pashtun group, won the most seats in NWFP.

In March, the PPP and PML-N concluded a power-sharing deal at the national level and in Punjab province. The two parties agreed on the key priorities of reinstating the judges suspended by Musharraf in November 2007 and stripping the president of his power to dissolve Parliament and dismiss the prime minister. A PPP-backed candidate, Yousaf Raza Gilani, was elected prime minister on March 24. He immediately ordered the release of Chaudhry and nine remaining suspended Supreme Court justices from house arrest. Gilani also announced plans to pursue negotiations with Islamist militants instead of relying solely on military action.

The PPP and PML-N remained divided over the timing and method (executive order or constitutional amendment) of reinstating the dismissed judges, and the PML-N withdrew from the cabinet in May, arguing that the PPP had stalled on the issue. The two parties worked together on initial moves to impeach Musharraf on the grounds of subversion of the constitution and misconduct while in office, prompting Musharraf to resign on August 18. Less than a week later, the PML-N formally ended its coalition with the PPP, accusing it of breaking a promise to immediately reinstate the judges after Musharraf's exit. Although the government did reappoint eight of the judges on August 27, they did not include Chaudhry, leading to speculation that Zardari was concerned about the possible reopening of old corruption cases against him. Zardari won the September 6 presidential election, with 481 of the 702 votes cast; 368 national and provincial lawmakers abstained or boycotted the vote. The PML-N candidate received 153 votes, and the PML-Q took 44.

The security situation in the FATA and in Swat continued to deteriorate in 2008. In May, the government signed a ceasefire deal with a Taliban-allied group in the Mohmand tribal agency, in which militants agreed not to attack the army or government officials and the army withdrew from some positions. Some analysts noted that such deals were allowing Islamist militant groups to consolidate their authority over a growing swath of territory.

At the end of June, Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud announced that he would withdraw from any agreements already signed and pull out of peace talks with the central government (an agreement with provincial authorities in NWFP remained in place after they made several concessions, including releasing prisoners). Mehsud also promised to unleash attacks throughout Pakistan, and the growing reach of the extremist threat was made apparent by a massive suicide bomb attack on the Marriot hotel in Islamabad on September 20. More than 50 people were killed and at least 250 were injured in the blast, which destroyed large parts of the heavily guarded building. In response to the wave of terrorist attacks, the central government once again stepped up its military operations. However, civilian casualties stemming from Pakistani military action and U.S. airstrikes had contributed to growing local hostility against both the U.S. and Pakistani governments, while tens of thousands of residents had been forced to flee the tribal areas. The Parliament held an unusual closed-door hearing in October to call for a review of national security policy, stressing the need for consensus among all concerned groups. Late in the year, the military claimed increased success in some of the tribal areas and touted a new strategy of arming local tribes against Islamist extremists.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Pakistan is not an electoral democracy, though it took significant steps toward that status in 2008. Parliamentary elections in February allowed an opposition coalition to take power, and a looming impeachment process forced military ruler Pervez Musharraf, who had stepped down as army chief in November 2007, to resign his post as civilian president in August. PPP leader Asif Ali Zardari was elected to replace him as president in September.

The bicameral Parliament consists of a 342-seat National Assembly, which has 272 directly elected members and additional seats reserved for women (60 seats) and non-Muslim minorities (10 seats), all with five-year terms; and a 100-seat Senate, most of whose members are elected by the four provincial assemblies for six-year terms, with half up for election every three years. The president is elected for a five-year term by an electoral college consisting of the national and provincial legislatures. The 2002 LFO gave the president the right to unilaterally dismiss the prime minister and the national and provincial legislatures.

The Musharraf government continued to constrain opposition party activity through mass arrests and preventative detention in 2007 and early 2008, and although the 2008 elections marked a distinct improvement over those held in 2002, they were not completely free and fair. State resources and media were used to support progovernment parties and candidates, and inaccuracies in the voter rolls that were noted in 2002 were not corrected. The voting results were generally not displayed at each polling station, allowing for rigging in some areas as the overall constituency results were tallied; the European Union observer mission noted suspicious results in a number of constituencies. Opposition party workers, particularly from the PPP, faced criminal charges and other forms of preelection harassment in addition to police intimidation on election day itself. More than 100 people were killed in attacks on political gatherings or in clashes between party activists during the campaign period. On the positive side, private media and civil society groups such as the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) played a significant watchdog role, publicizing incidents of violence and otherwise monitoring the conduct of the balloting alongside foreign observers. Moreover, despite the restrictions and irregularities, an opposition coalition managed to take power after a competitive contest, and the overall result reflected the will of the people.

Women's political participation is generally ensured by the provision of reserved seats in the national and provincial legislatures and in local councils, and women won an additional 16 National Assembly seats in the February elections. In some parts of the country, women have difficulty voting and running for office due to objections from social and religious conservatives. Religious minorities also have reserved seats in both the national and provincial legislatures (allotted proportionally to different parties based on their share of the vote). However, members of the Ahmadiyya sect, who are required to register on a separate electoral list, largely boycotted the 2008 elections. Separately, a requirement that all candidates hold either a bachelor's degree or madrasa qualification prevents roughly 95 percent of the population from running for office.

The FATA are subject to special rules under which the president and unelected civil servants are responsible for local governance. Elected councils, set up in 2007 with the intention of increasing local representation, have not altered established decision-making structures. Political parties are not legally allowed to operate in the FATA, although this was disregarded by some religious parties, who openly campaigned there ahead of the 2008 elections.

Pakistan's government operates with limited transparency and accountability, although this has improved somewhat with the resumption of civilian rule. Following the 1999 coup, "army monitoring teams" were established to oversee the functioning of many civilian administrative departments. The army has a stake in continuing to influence both commercial and political decision-making processes, in addition to its traditional dominance of foreign policy and security issues. Serving and retired officers have received top public-sector jobs in ministries, state-run corporations, and universities, and they are given a range of other privileges. Nevertheless, the army withdrew several

thousand active-duty officers from civilian jobs in 2008. The newly elected Parliament also began functioning more effectively than its predecessor, holding important policy debates on terrorism and overturning key Musharraf decisions.

Corruption is pervasive at almost all levels of politics and government. Under Musharraf, corruption charges were frequently used to punish opposition politicians or induce them to join the progovernment PML-Q party. However, a National Reconciliation Ordinance, passed just ahead of the October 2007 presidential election, provided for an automatic withdrawal of all corruption cases filed against public officials prior to 1999. Zardari, who has been known popularly as "Mr. Ten Percent" due to his reputed skimming of public contracts while his wife was in power, spent eight years in prison on corruption charges, although none have ever held up in court. In March 2008, the last outstanding charge against him in Pakistan was dropped, enabling his more active participation in politics; Swiss charges against him were dropped in August. Pakistan was ranked 134 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.

While the additional press restrictions imposed as part of the November 2007 state of emergency were eased during 2008, media freedom remained constrained by official attempts to restrict critical reporting and by the high level of violence against journalists. Pakistan has some of the most outspoken newspapers in South Asia, and the opening of a number of new private television stations has diversified the broadcast sector. Some of the new outlets focus on live news, commentary, and call-in talk shows, which serve to inform viewers and shape public opinion regarding current events. In general, the constitution and other laws authorize the government to curb freedom of speech on subjects including the armed forces, the judiciary, and religion; blasphemy laws are occasionally used against the media. Ordinances passed in late 2007 barred the media from publishing or broadcasting "anything which defames or brings into ridicule the head of state, or members of the armed forces, or executive, legislative or judicial organs of the state," as well as any broadcasts deemed to be "false or baseless." Media outlets found to have breached the ordinances faced jail terms of up to three years, fines of up to 10 million rupees (\$165,000), and cancellation of their licenses. Although the guidelines were routinely flouted in 2008, reform of the legal environment stalled, and the new government continued to engage in sporadic efforts to suspend certain broadcasts or programs. Access to some websites is periodically blocked, particularly those involving Baluchi nationalist issues or other sensitive subjects, and authorities imposed a temporary ban on the video-sharing site YouTube in February.

The physical safety of journalists continues to be a matter of concern, and at least six journalists were murdered in 2008. On a number of occasions, security forces subjected journalists to physical attacks, intimidation, or arbitrary arrest and incommunicado detention. In addition, Islamic fundamentalists and thugs hired by feudal landlords or local politicians harass journalists and attack newspaper offices. Conditions for reporters covering the ongoing unrest in the FATA were particularly difficult during the year, with a number of local and foreign correspondents detained, threatened, expelled, or otherwise prevented from covering events there, either by the Taliban and local tribal groups or by the army and intelligence services.

Pakistan is an Islamic republic, and there are numerous legal restrictions on religious freedom. Blasphemy laws provide steep sentences, including the death penalty, and injuring the "religious feelings" of individual citizens is prohibited. Incidents in which low-ranking police officials take bribes to file false blasphemy charges against Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, and occasionally other Muslims continue to occur. Ahmadis consider themselves Muslims, but the constitution classifies them as a non-Muslim minority, the penal code severely restricts their religious practice, and other regulations require them to renounce their beliefs in order to vote or gain admission to educational institutions. Authorities occasionally confiscate or close Ahmadiyya publications and harass journalists or printers involved in their production. To date, appeals courts have overturned all blasphemy convictions, but suspects are generally forced to spend lengthy periods in prison, where they are subject to ill-treatment, and they continue to be targeted by religious extremists after they are released. A 2005 amendment requiring that a senior police officer investigate such charges has led to a significant reduction in

new blasphemy cases, according to the U.S. State Department's Report on International Religious Freedom, with several dozen cases reported each year.

Religious minorities also face unofficial economic, social, and cultural discrimination, and they are occasionally subjected to violence and harassment. In a growing trend, particularly in Sindh province, Hindu girls are kidnapped, forcibly converted, and then compelled to marry their kidnappers. Terrorist and other attacks on places of worship and religious gatherings occur frequently, leading to the deaths of dozens of people every year. The government often fails to protect religious minorities from sectarian violence, and discriminatory legislation contributes to a climate of intolerance.

The government generally does not restrict academic freedom. However, student groups at a number of universities, typically those with ties to political parties or radical Islamist organizations, attack or otherwise intimidate students, teachers, and administrators and try to influence university policies. Girls' schools, particularly in NWFP, face threats and attacks from religious extremists. Following the November 2007 state of emergency declaration, several university teachers were arrested for engaging in political activities, while many students were harassed, intimidated, beaten, or treated roughly during demonstrations.

Broad legal provisions for freedoms of assembly and association are selectively upheld. Authorities routinely restrict public gatherings, disperse protests using excessive force, and use preventative arrest to forestall planned demonstrations. These practices became particularly stringent during the spring 2007 protests by lawyers and the November 2007 emergency but dropped off somewhat in 2008. Some Islamist leaders have been held under house arrest or in preventive detention under the Maintenance of Public Order ordinance, which allows three months' detention without trial. While the new government has adopted a relatively open stance on these issues, the NWFP government cancelled permission to hold political rallies or religious gatherings in August in response to terrorist and other violence.

Authorities generally tolerate the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and allow them to publish critical material. However, NGOs that work on issues of female education and empowerment, and female NGO staff in general, have faced threats, attacks, and a number of murders by Islamic extremists, particularly in the north. Citing security concerns, the government has at times prevented aid groups from operating in Baluchistan, exacerbating the humanitarian situation there. Conditions for the NGO community worsened temporarily in November 2007, when a number of leading activists were jailed or placed under house arrest, but improved following the political changes in early 2008. Apart from secular NGOs, Pakistan contains a large number of charitable or cultural organizations, such as the Jamat ud Dawa, that have links to Islamist extremist groups.

The Industrial Relations Act, passed in 2008, allows workers to form and join trade unions of their choice, but it also places some restrictions on union membership, the right to strike, and collective bargaining, particularly for workers in industries deemed essential. Despite legislation outlawing bonded labor and canceling enslaving debts, illegal bonded labor is widespread, particularly in Sindh province. According to news reports, there is a growing trend in which bonded laborers sell organs, particularly kidneys, to repay debts or escape their servitude. The enforcement of child labor laws remains inadequate; recent surveys have indicated that there are at least 10 million child workers in Pakistan, and those found to be employing children often avoid punishment.

The judiciary consists of civil and criminal courts and a special Sharia (Islamic law) court for certain offenses. Lower courts remain plagued by corruption; intimidation by local officials, powerful individuals, and Islamic extremists; and heavy backlogs that lead to lengthy pretrial detentions. Under the military government, the Supreme Court was brought under the control of the executive. Increasing activism by the court, particularly by Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, led Musharraf to remove Chaudhry in March 2007, but he was reinstated a few months later after lawyers mounted large-scale

protests. When the Supreme Court attempted to strike down Musharraf's November 2007 emergency declaration and suspension of the constitution, he dismissed a majority of superior court justices (13 Supreme Court and 30 provincial court justices) and ordered the arrest and detention of Chaudhry. Other judges, lawyers, and legal activists who opposed the executive's actions were also arrested. While most were released in early 2008, Chaudhry was held under house arrest until late March. In June, under the new government, the Supreme Court was expanded from 16 to 29 judges; by year's end, 5 of the 13 dismissed Supreme Court judges were reinstated, 3 retired, and 5 remained off the bench, including Chaudhry.

Other parts of the judicial system, such as the antiterrorism courts, operate with limited due process rights. A 1999 ordinance vested broad powers of arrest, investigation, and prosecution in a National Accountability Bureau and established special courts to try corruption cases. The Sharia court enforces the 1979 Hudood Ordinances, which criminalize nonmarital rape, extramarital sex, and several alcohol, gambling, and property offenses. They also provide for Koranic punishments, including death by stoning for adultery, as well as jail terms and fines. In part because of strict evidentiary standards, authorities have never carried out the Koranic punishments. Pressure to amend or do away with the ordinances, which are highly discriminatory toward women, has grown in recent years, and the Musharraf government made limited progress toward reversing some of the worst provisions.

The FATA are governed under a separate legal system, the Frontier Crimes Regulation, which allows collective punishment for individual crimes and preventative detention of up to three years and authorizes tribal leaders to administer justice according to Sharia and tribal custom. Feudal landlords and tribal elders throughout Pakistan adjudicate some disputes and impose punishments – including the death penalty or the forced exchange of brides between tribes – in unsanctioned parallel courts called jirgas. In 2004, responding to growing concern over the potential for abuse in this practice, the Sindh High Court banned all trials conducted under the jirga system in the province. However, such proceedings continue to take place. Tensions between national laws and the efforts of provincial assemblies to pass restrictive Islamist legislation remain a problem. Militants in several tribal areas and NWFP's Swat district have reportedly set up their own parallel courts, dispensing harsh penalties with little regard for due process.

Police routinely engage in crime, excessive force, torture, and arbitrary detention; extort money from prisoners and their families; accept bribes to file or withdraw charges; rape female detainees; and commit extrajudicial killings. Prison conditions are extremely poor, with overcrowding a particular problem. Case backlogs mean that the majority of prisoners are awaiting trial. Government critics are particularly at risk of arbitrary arrest, torture, "disappearance," or denial of basic due process rights. Progress on creating an official human rights commission empowered to investigate cases and redress grievances has been slow, and although a number of cases are investigated and some prosecutions do occur, impunity remains the norm. Feudal landlords, tribal groups, and some militant groups operate private jails where detainees are routinely maltreated.

Although cases of politically motivated detention and disappearance declined in 2008, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) – an NGO – estimated that by November at least 1,100 people continued to be illegally detained by state agencies. While some are suspected of links to radical Islamist groups, the detainees have also included Baluchi and Sindhi nationalists, government critics, and some journalists, researchers, and social workers. Intelligence services operate largely outside the purview of the judicial system, and while the Supreme Court took a more active interest in the issue beginning in 2006, ordering the government to either release or lawfully detain prisoners who were being held incommunicado, the ongoing judicial crisis has stalled progress in this area. Government efforts to place the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate under the control of the Interior Ministry in July 2008 were swiftly quashed by the military.

Press reports estimate that there are tens of thousands of active armed militants in Pakistan. These extremists – members of the Taliban and a number of other Islamist groups – carry out terrorist attacks within Pakistan and in neighboring countries against

foreign, Shiite Muslim, and Christian targets, killing at least several hundred civilians each year. Sunni and Shiite fundamentalist groups continue to engage in tit-for-tat sectarian violence, mostly bomb attacks against places of worship and religious gatherings. The New Delhi-based South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) reported that 306 people were killed and 505 were injured in sectarian violence in 2008, a modest decline from the previous year.

The army and security forces (with support from the United States) have conducted intermittent campaigns against militants in the tribal areas since 2002, and human rights abuses associated with these operations – including arbitrary detention, property destruction, killing or displacement of civilians, and extrajudicial executions – have grown dramatically in the past several years. Occasional peace deals with militant groups or tribal leaders have allowed militants to create a number of territorial strongholds and increase infiltration into Afghanistan. The security situation continued to deteriorate in 2008, with the Taliban holding more than 100 soldiers and civil servants hostage, killings (including beheadings) proliferating, and several hundred thousand civilians being displaced in parts of the NWFP and FATA. The SATP reported that 6,715 people were killed nationwide in terrorist- or insurgent-related violence in 2008, including 2,155 civilians, 654 security force personnel, and 3,906 militants, more than double the figures from 2007. Major incidents included a suicide bomb attack outside the Lahore High Court in January, several attacks at election rallies in February, and the bombing of Islamabad's Marriott hotel in September.

In addition to violence stemming from the Islamist movement, the separatist Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) has routinely attacked infrastructure and development projects since early 2005, while local tribal leaders demand greater political autonomy and control over the province's natural resources. The army in turn has stepped up counterinsurgency operations, leading to human rights violations and the displacement of thousands of civilians. In 2006, the government declared the BLA a terrorist group, and the army killed the 79-year-old Baluchi separatist leader Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, prompting increased political instability and rioting. The chief of the BLA was killed by government forces in November 2007; it and other Baluchi separatist groups appear to have grown weaker and more factionalized since Bugti's death. Thousands of activists and other locals perceived to be sympathetic to the separatist cause have been detained since 2004, according to an October 2007 report by the International Crisis Group, although several nationalist leaders were released in early 2008. Separately, violence between the country's various political factions, particularly in Karachi, is an ongoing concern, with dozens of politically motivated killings occurring during the year.

A combination of traditional norms, discriminatory laws, and weak enforcement contributes to a high incidence of rape, domestic abuse, acid attacks, and other forms of violence against women; according to the HRCP, up to 80 percent of women are victims of such abuse during their lifetimes. Female victims of rape and other sexual crimes are often pressured by police not to file charges, and they are sometimes urged by their families to commit suicide. Gang rapes sanctioned by village councils as a form of punishment for crimes committed by the targeted woman's relatives continue to be reported, despite the fact that harsh sentences have been handed down against the perpetrators in some cases. The discriminatory Hudood Ordinances, under which women could be charged with adultery arising from rape cases, were reformed with the passage of the Women's Protection Act in December 2006. Under the new law, a woman is no longer required to produce four Muslim male witnesses to prove rape, and judges are required to try rape cases under criminal law rather than Sharia. However, extramarital sex is still criminalized, and marital rape is not recognized as a crime.

According to the HRCP, at least 612 women were killed by family members in so-called honor killings in 2007, although other local rights groups suspect that the actual number may be much higher, and many more women are otherwise humiliated or maimed. Government-backed legislation enacted in 2005 introduced stiffer sentences and the possibility of the death penalty for honor killings, but activists have questioned the authorities' willingness to aggressively enforce it. The tribal practice of *vani*, in which women are offered in marriage to settle blood feuds between rival families, continues to take place in certain parts of rural Pakistan, although there is growing opposition

from the women themselves as well as social activists and religious scholars. It was declared illegal by the Supreme Court in 2004, and in a landmark 2005 judgment, the court ordered local police to offer women protection. Despite legal bans, other forms of child and forced marriage continue to be a problem. Most marriages between people of different faiths are considered illegal, and the children of such unions would be legally illegitimate.

Pakistani inheritance law discriminates against women, who also face unofficial discrimination in educational and employment opportunities. Children's access to education and health care is inadequate, and school attendance and literacy rates are low, despite the presence of a number of local and international NGOs that work to address such problems. The trafficking of women and children remains a serious concern, with females facing forced labor, sexual exploitation, or marriage to significantly older men.

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