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Pakistan 2020

The crackdown on the media, civil society and the political opposition intensified. Frequent enforced disappearances continued; nobody was held accountable. COVID-19 created new challenges for economic, social and cultural rights. Health workers were detained for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression, and also came under attack at their place of work. The Supreme Court blocked efforts to relieve prison overcrowding, despite the spread of COVID-19 in prisons. Religious minorities continued to be prosecuted under blasphemy laws and attacked by non-state actors. Violence against women remained prevalent. Prime Minister Khan made encouraging announcements to release women prisoners and criminalize torture but there was little progress in implementing these measures. The Ministry of Human Rights presided over critical reforms around the death penalty and child abuse. The National Commission on Human Rights remained defunct.

Background

For most of the year, the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed the country's health infrastructure, paralysed educational institutions and laid bare existing economic inequalities. The outbreak dominated events in Pakistan for most of 2020, as cases surged after authorities lifted lockdowns prematurely in a bid to stabilize the economy. Difficulties in socially isolating meant that daily wage earners and essential workers, as well as prisoners, refugees, students and others, were exposed to greater risks of infection. The country returned to a policy of “smart lockdowns” in June, isolating certain districts and areas with a high number of reported cases. Cases started dropping significantly in August, baffling medical experts, after which the government relaxed restrictions.

Right to health

Frontline health workers

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, health care facilities faced a severe shortage of PPE. Doctors were photographed attending to suspected COVID-19 patients wearing plastic bags instead of face masks, protective suits and gloves. Between March and July, almost 5,400 health workers were infected with COVID-19. At least 58 died. Balochistan police used unnecessary and excessive force against health workers protesting the lack of PPE, resources and government support in Quetta, Balochistan province. Some of the protesters were arrested and detained for almost 24 hours.

There were instances of violence against health workers by police and members of the public when they were forced to turn patients away because hospitals were overwhelmed, or when they did not immediately return the bodies of COVID-19 victims to their families as part of the protocol to control the spread of the disease. They included a doctor who was shot in the legs by a police officer on 17 June, another whose nose was broken by the family member of a COVID-19 patient on 2 June, and an instance on 29 May where women health workers were forced to lock themselves in a room for their own protection when their hospital quarters were vandalized by angry people. No investigation into the attacks was known to have been carried out by the end of the year, and it remained unclear whether the government provided additional security to health workers following repeated requests from hospitals. On 6 April, security forces used excessive force against peacefully protesting doctors in Quetta, beating them with batons and detaining 53 health workers for at least 24 hours. In July, doctors peacefully protesting the lack of security were arrested in the region of Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

Prisoners

Prison populations were well over the maximum capacity and prisoners were particularly vulnerable to contracting COVID-19. The lack of adequate hygiene and sanitation facilities, scarce medical resources, inconsistent testing and the inability of prisoners to socially distance all contributed to easy transmission of the virus.

Prison authorities took steps to relieve overcrowding. Directives from provincial courts also allowed for the release of prisoners considered especially vulnerable to the virus. However, shortly after the releases were ordered the Supreme Court intervened, citing a technicality, and the prisoners were re-arrested. By September, at least 1,800 prisoners had tested positive for COVID-19 in prisons around the country. The true number was probably higher, since insufficient numbers of tests were conducted.

On 2 September, the Prime Minister ordered officials to implement a Supreme Court decision to release women prisoners who were under trial, convicted of minor offences or had served most of their term. However, by the end of the year no list of women prisoners had been prepared for release and the government had not issued any special notification to facilitate the process.

Discrimination

Amid the economic impact of the pandemic, there was a surge in charity drives to help support those who had lost their livelihoods. Despite this, members of the persecuted Ahmadiyya community were reportedly denied alms and donations on account of their faith. Calls were circulated on social media by religious organizations asking charities to ensure that Ahmadis did not receive food supplies or other essentials.

Workers' rights

The closure of factories producing non-essential items, disruptions in supply chains and travel restrictions resulted in tens of thousands of workers being laid off. The government announced in April it would create 60,000 jobs to hire these workers to support its reforestation drive. This was implemented partially. Pakistan's social security systems remained crippled by a lack of resources; most re-employment programmes were ad hoc.

Right to education

The government closed schools and universities for almost six months to prevent the spread of COVID-19, forcing classes to move online. Internet coverage remained inadequate, with some 68% of the population having limited or no access, especially in remote areas. This negatively affected the right to education of many students who were unable to join classes because of a lack of equipment or limited internet access. Students in the city of Quetta protested, calling for equal internet access to be able to continue their education. At least 24 students were beaten and detained by police officers. Video footage showed that those conducting the arrests were not wearing PPE or maintaining physical distance, increasing the risk of spreading COVID-19.

Enforced disappearances

The use of enforced disappearances to punish dissent became more public and widespread, with people being abducted by intelligence agencies in broad daylight from urban centres. In previous years the victims of enforced disappearances included human rights defenders, political activists, students and journalists who were rarely well-known outside their communities. However, in July a vocal critic of the government, Matiullah Jan, was apprehended by armed men in the federal capital, Islamabad. Security cameras captured the abduction and the footage was published online. It provoked a strong backlash against the perpetrators and Matiullah Jan was released 24 hours later.

In June, the Ministry of Defence admitted to having held human rights defender and former Amnesty International consultant Idris Khattak in their custody since he was subjected to enforced disappearance by armed men on 13 November 2019. Despite the public admission that he was in military custody there was no accountability for the perpetrators, underscoring the culture of impunity around enforced disappearances. Multiple directives from the provincial high court to produce him were ignored. The Joint Investigation Team assembled to investigate the case was dissolved as Idris Khattak was no longer considered a missing person, even though his whereabouts were not disclosed.

In September, Sajid Gondal, a former journalist and member of the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan, was reported missing after his car was discovered in a suburb of Islamabad. He had recently been linked with an investigation by another journalist into corruption allegations against a top aide to the Prime Minister. He was returned five days later.

There was no progress towards criminalizing enforced disappearances, an election promise of the ruling government. The Minister for Human Rights, Shireen Mazari, tweeted in September that in her conversations with the Prime Minister, he had found the practice “unacceptable”.

Freedom of expression

The authorities tightened their control on the media, and media workers reported increased coercion and censorship. In an interview in September, the Prime Minister denied there was a press crackdown and said that he did not mind criticism. However, journalists who published critical pieces were subjected to harassment, intimidation, censorship and even arrest.

In a joint statement published on 12 August, at least 16 women journalists reported being systematically harassed and threatened with violence by the social media team of the ruling party, particularly when their journalism was not favourable towards the government. They noted that this had affected their ability to work and to express themselves without fear. The number of signatories to the women's statement grew to 161 in one month. The ruling party failed to renounce such attacks or online abuse; instead, the same pattern of intimidation and harassment was perpetuated in statements from its parliamentarians.

Ahmed Noorani, a journalist who had previously been violently attacked in 2017, allegedly by intelligence agents, was targeted in a vicious online campaign after he published a story in August investigating the businesses of a top aide to the Prime Minister and former army official.

In September, journalist Bilal Farooqi was arrested and detained for social media posts about an anti-Shi'a demonstration in the city of Karachi. He was arrested under the draconian Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act.

Mir Shakil ur Rahman, editor and founder of the Jang Media Group – Pakistan's largest media conglomerate – was placed in pre-trial detention in March on charges related to a property transaction that had taken place more than three decades previously. The trumped-up allegations were seen as reprisals for his media group's critical coverage of the government's “anti-corruption” drive.

Violence against women and girls

The slogan “my body, my choice” became the rallying cry for the growing women's movement in Pakistan. In February, as preparations were underway to hold the third annual Aurat (Women's) March, a provincial court was petitioned by a lawyer to ban the event. The court ruled such a ban to be unconstitutional. Following the ruling, a religious political party accused the Aurat March of “vulgarity” and called on its workers to block it and be prepared for “any sacrifice” should the government provide security to the marchers. Peaceful protesters in Islamabad were pelted with stones. Despite the threat level to the Aurat March, the authorities failed to put in place adequate security measures.

In September, the gang rape of a woman on a motorway in front of her sons caused a national outcry, with protests taking place across the country demanding the resignation of a high-ranking police official who stated the attack was the victim's fault. The incident triggered public calls for harsh punishments for perpetrators, including chemical castration and public hangings. Civil society groups responded with pushbacks and the media underscored the inefficacy of such steps to curb violence against women and girls.

The passage of the Zainab Alert Bill was a rare success. The law aimed at expediting procedures and allowing for better co-ordination between various government institutions to recover missing and abducted children.

Hundreds of cases of violence against women and girls were reported throughout the year. Few, if any, perpetrators were held to account.

Freedom of religion and belief

In July, authorities in Islamabad bowed to pressure from a discriminatory campaign mounted by politicians, media outlets and clerics to halt the construction of the first Hindu temple and community centre in the capital. The boundary wall of the construction site was torn down by a mob.

While vague and broad blasphemy laws had been used in previous years to target the most marginalized people in society, in 2020 their application widened to include artists, human rights defenders and journalists.

In July, Tahir Ahmed, a 54-year-old man with mental disabilities, was fatally shot in court by a young man who had come to observe his hearing on blasphemy charges.

In August, police filed a case against female actor Saba Qamar and male singer Bilal Saeed for recording a music video in a mosque. The clip was released online and led to large protests in the city of Lahore during which the leaders of religious party Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan threatened “vengeance” against the artists.

In August police filed a case against journalist and human rights defender Marvi Sirmed under the blasphemy laws for a tweet she posted.

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