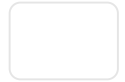


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2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Pakistan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pakistan is a federal parliamentary republic. On April 11, parliament elected Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz's Shehbaz Sharif as prime minister and head of government. This parliamentary election, conducted in accordance with procedures in the constitution, followed a successful no-confidence vote in the National Assembly called by opposition parties, which replaced the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf administration by bringing to power a coalition government led by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz. In 2018, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party won the most National Assembly seats in the general elections, and the party's leader, Imran Khan, became prime minister. While independent observers noted technical improvements in the Election Commission of Pakistan's management of the polling process itself, observers, civil society organizations, and political parties raised concerns regarding pre-election interference by military and intelligence agencies that created an uneven electoral playing field. Some political parties also alleged significant polling day irregularities.

Police have primary domestic security responsibility for most of the country. Local police are under the jurisdiction of provincial governments. Paramilitary organizations, including the Frontier Corps that operates in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas, as well as the Rangers that operate in Sindh and Punjab, provide security services under the authority of the Ministry of Interior. The Frontier Corps' primary mission is security of the border with Afghanistan, and the corps reports to the Ministry of Interior in peacetime and the army in times of conflict. The military plays a role in domestic security, including as the lead security agency in many areas of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas. While military and intelligence services officially report to civilian authorities, they operate independently and without effective civilian oversight or control. There were reports that members of the security forces committed numerous abuses.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings by the government or its agents; forced disappearance by the government or its agents; torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government or its agents; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary detention; political prisoners; transnational repression against individuals in another country; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including violence against

journalists, unjustified arrests and disappearances of journalists, censorship, and criminal defamation laws, and laws against blasphemy; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws for the operation of nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations; severe restrictions of religious freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement; serious government corruption; lack of investigation of and accountability for gender-based violence; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting members of racial and ethnic minorities; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; the existence or use of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; restrictions on workers' freedom of association; and existence of the worst forms of child labor.

There was a lack of government accountability, and abuses, including corruption and misconduct by security services, often went unpunished, fostering a culture of impunity among perpetrators. Authorities seldom investigated or punished government officials for reported human rights abuses or acts of corruption.

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

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

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

There were numerous reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. There were reports members of marginalized racial and ethnic communities were overrepresented among the victims of some abuses. Security forces reportedly committed extrajudicial killings in connection with conflicts throughout the country (see section 1.g.). Government entities generally investigate whether security force killings were justifiable and whether to pursue prosecutions via an order either from the inspector general of police or through the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP).

On August 14, security forces allegedly opened fire on a peaceful protest outside a military base in Harnai, Balochistan, killing a political worker affiliated with the Awami National Party and injuring seven others. The Awami National Party staged protests and demanded the formation of a judicial commission to investigate the incident. The party alleged police and local officials refused to file complaints against those who fired on the protesters.

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

There were numerous reports of attacks against police and security forces. Terrorist groups and cross-border militants killed more than 100 soldiers or Frontier Corps members and injured hundreds more. Militants and terrorist groups killed and injured hundreds more with bombs, suicide attacks, and other violence. The number of casualties was higher than the previous two years (see section 1.g.).

b. Disappearance

Kidnappings and enforced disappearances of persons took place across the country. Some officials from the intelligence agencies, police, and security forces reportedly held prisoners incommunicado and refused to disclose their location. On May 29, the Islamabad High Court directed the federal government to serve notices to former Army Chief and President General Pervez Musharraf and all successive “chief executives,” including Imran Khan and incumbent Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, for following an “undeclared tacit approval of enforced disappearances.” Following the court verdict, the federal government constituted a seven-member committee headed by the minister of law and justice to “deliberate a policy” related to enforced disappearances. In August, a similar committee was formed to investigate missing persons cases by the Balochistan provincial government.

According to figures released in May by the government’s Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, of the 8,463 missing person cases reported to the commission since 2011, 3,284 were solved, while 2,219 remained pending. The commission came under criticism by the judiciary and civil society activists for failing to initiate proper and regular proceedings on missing-person cases and support the relatives of missing persons.

Human rights defender Idris Khattak in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was reportedly held incommunicado by law enforcement officers from November 2019 to June 2020. Authorities charged him under the 1923 Official Secrets Act, a British-era law, which could result in a lengthy prison term or death sentence. Khattak, who monitored human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), was detained after his car was stopped by security agents in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In December 2021 he was tried by a military court under the Pakistan Army Act and sentenced to 14 years in prison.

Human rights organizations reported authorities arrested and caused the disappearance of Pashtun, Sindhi, and Baloch human rights activists, as well as Sindhi and Baloch nationalists, without cause or warrant. They also alleged children were detained to pressure their parents. Activists claimed 500 Sindhis were missing, with more than 50 disappearing in 2021 alone. The Voice for Sindhi Missing Persons said 89 Sindhi persons disappeared in Sindh Province alone between January and August. The group also said bullet-riddled bodies of at least three missing persons were discovered in Sindh. Activists said most of the victims were affiliated with Sindhi nationalist parties.

On April 28, security personnel raided a house at midnight and abducted two students, including 11-year-old Irfan Nohani, in Sehwan, Sindh. Family members of the students, who were reportedly members of a Sindh nationalist party, protested several times, demanding security agencies arrest those responsible and present them in court.

Human rights groups reported an increase in enforced disappearances of Baloch students from educational institutions across the country. The HRCP reported a fresh wave of enforced disappearances in Balochistan and the rest of the country. The trend increased after an April 26 suicide bombing at Karachi University that killed three Chinese nationals. On June 14, two students at Karachi University who had been missing since June 7 were released by security forces following civil society protests.

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

Although the constitution prohibits torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, the penal code has no specific provision against torture. The penal code prohibits criminal use of force and assault against those who are detained; however, there were reports security forces, including the intelligence services, tortured and abused individuals in custody.

Human rights organizations claimed that torture was perpetrated by police, military, and intelligence agency members, that they frequently operated with impunity, and that the government did not make serious efforts to curb the abuse.

On November 30, the HRCP said that 31 persons died in police custody due to torture from January 1 to October 31. The HRCP expressed concern regarding the use of torture by civilian and military agencies and the absence of a legal framework to effectively prosecute police brutality. The HRCP reported frequent allegations of custodial killings and torture in detention centers, police lockups, and prisons and noted most instances of torture remained invisible. The HRCP stated that torture was not only underreported but also difficult to prove in medical reports.

Media and civil society organizations reported cases of individuals dying in police custody allegedly due to torture. On September 11, protesters gathered at the Mithi police station in Sindh, alleging that during interrogations concerning a theft case, police tortured and killed a local youth named Manzoor Korai.

On November 2, the president signed into law the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention and Punishment) Bill, 2022, to criminalize and prevent torture, custodial death, and rape against persons in the custody of public officials. The bill also authorizes the HCRP along with the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to refer cases for possible prosecution based on complaints.

There were reports police personnel employed cruel and degrading treatment and punishment. An HRCP study released in March reported that authorities used unwarranted and disproportionate curbs on the freedom of peaceful assembly in at least 392 of the 858 assemblies held between 2010 and 2020. These curbs included the excessive use of force, at times with lethal consequences. The HRCP also reported police used excessive force on citizens during at least 20 protests from January to August, resulting in the death of at least four protesters and injury of many others.

Police abuse was often underreported. Impunity was a significant problem in the security forces due to politicization, corruption, and a lack of effective mechanisms to report and investigate abuses. The government provided some human rights training for police to increase respect for human rights by security forces.

Shahbaz Gill, chief of staff to former Prime Minister Imran Khan, stated police assaulted and “tortured” him after he was arrested on August 9 for allegedly making “false, hateful, and seditious” comments regarding the military on a television talk show. Gill was transferred to a medical facility for examination and subsequently released on bail. A case was pending with the courts. In October, political party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Senator Azam Swati alleged he was stripped and beaten by authorities after his arrest for antimilitary comments he made on Twitter. On November 27, he was rearrested and remained in police custody at year’s end facing several charges for his public and online comments.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

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

Abusive Physical Conditions: Prison conditions often were extremely poor due to gross overcrowding and inadequate food, water, sanitation, heating, ventilation, lighting, and medical care. Overcrowding remained a serious problem, largely due to inadequate and ageing facilities and structural problems in the criminal justice system that led to a significant rate of pretrial detention. According to prison authorities, as of August the total nationwide prison population stood at 87,712 persons in 116 prisons across the country. The designed capacity of these prisons was 64,099, putting the occupancy at 36 percent above capacity.

Inadequate food and medical care in prisons continued to contribute to chronic health problems. Malnutrition remained a problem, especially for inmates unable to supplement their diets with help from family or friends. In many facilities the sanitation, ventilation, lighting, and access to potable water were inadequate. Most prison facilities were antiquated and lacked means to control indoor temperatures. A system existed for basic and emergency medical care, but access was sometimes slowed by bureaucratic procedures. Prisoners with disabilities usually lacked adequate care. Representatives of Christian and Ahmadi Muslim communities claimed other prison inmates often subjected their members to abuse and violence. Civil society organizations reported prison officials frequently subjected prisoners accused of blasphemy to poor prison conditions. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported many individuals accused of blasphemy remained in solitary confinement for extended periods, sometimes for more than a year. The government asserted this treatment was for the individual's safety, in view of the likelihood that prisoners accused of blasphemy would face threats from the general prison population.

Authorities held women prisoners separately from men. The passage of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 provides for separate places of confinement, but NGOs reported prison officials held transgender women with men, which led to harassment. Balochistan had no women's prison, but authorities confined women in separate barracks from male convicts.

Due to a lack of infrastructure, prison departments often did not segregate detainees from convicted criminals.

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

Administration: An ombudsman for detainees maintained a central office in Islamabad and offices in each province. Inspectors general of prisons irregularly visited prisons and detention facilities to monitor conditions and handle complaints.

By law prison authorities must permit prisoners and detainees to submit complaints to judicial authorities without censorship and to request investigation of credible allegations of inhuman treatment and conditions. There were reports, however, that prisoners refrained from submitting complaints to avoid retaliation from prison authorities. The law also provides for visitation privileges, but overcrowding and lack of adequate visitor facilities in some prisons restricted detainees' ability to receive visits. In most cases authorities allowed prisoners to observe their religious traditions. In June,

Punjab police launched a digital mobile application pilot program for prisoners and visitors at 43 jails in Lahore District to file complaints regarding difficulties related to visitation, bribery, misbehavior of jail staff, and missing facilities for prisoners.

Independent Monitoring: International organizations responsible for monitoring prisons reported difficulty accessing some detention sites, particularly those holding security-related detainees. Authorities did not allow international organizations access to detention centers in areas most affected by violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the former FATA, and Balochistan. Authorities at the local, provincial, and national levels permitted some human rights groups and journalists to monitor prison conditions of juveniles and female inmates.

Improvements: On August 18, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Inspector General of Prisons stated construction of prisons and extensions in existing prisons across the province created additional capacity for 4,672 inmates.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court, but authorities did not always observe these requirements. Corruption and impunity compounded this problem.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Actions (In Aid of Civil Power) Ordinance of 2019 gives the military authority to detain civilians indefinitely without charge in internment camps, occupy property, conduct operations, and convict detainees in the province solely using the testimony of a single soldier. Both before and after the ordinance's passage, the military was immune from prosecution in civilian courts for its actions in the province. The ordinance also states the military is not required to release the names of detainees to their families. The families are therefore unable to challenge detainees' detentions in a civilian court. The provincial high court ruled the ordinance unconstitutional in 2018, but the Supreme Court suspended this ruling in 2019. As of September, the appeal was pending at the Supreme Court. Pending the outcome of this appeal, the military retains control of its detention centers, although transition to civilian law enforcement in the former FATA continued.

Ali Wazir, a National Assembly member representing South Waziristan and a prominent activist of the human rights organization Pashtun Protection Movement (PTM), remained in police custody in Karachi. He was arrested in Peshawar in 2020 and extradited by Sindh police on charges of criminal conspiracy and defamation of state institutions and the army. As of October, he had not been released on bail.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

A first information report (FIR) is the legal basis for any arrest, initiated when police receive information concerning the commission of a "cognizable" offense. A third party usually initiates a FIR, but police may file FIRs on their own initiative. A FIR allows police to detain a suspect for 24 hours, after which a magistrate may order detention for an additional 14 days if police show detention is necessary to obtain evidence material to the investigation. Some authorities did not observe these limits on detention. Many police agencies did not have the investigative or forensic resources to carry out the investigations required after a FIR filing. Local police sometimes attempted to discourage FIRs for lower-level offenses, instead encouraging individuals to find other avenues for justice, such as mediation. There were reports of police asking for money from complainants to fund investigations.

Some authorities reportedly filed FIRs to harass or intimidate detainees or failed to file them when provided with adequate evidence unless the complainant paid a bribe.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not routinely provide notification of the arrest of foreigners to embassies or consulates. The government requires that diplomatic missions request access to their arrested citizens 20 days in advance. Many missions reported that requests for access to arrested citizens were unanswered for weeks or months, and, when answered, notification of access was often not sent until the day before or the day of the proposed visit, making logistical arrangements for the visit difficult. Foreign prisoners often remained in prison long after completion of their sentences because they were unable to pay travel costs for deportation to their home countries.

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

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

The government provided state-funded legal counsel to detainees accused of crimes for which conviction included the death penalty, but it did not regularly provide legal representation in other cases. The constitution recognizes the right of habeas corpus and allows the high courts to demand that a person accused of a crime be present in court. In many cases involving forced disappearances, authorities failed to present detainees according to judges’ orders.

In some instances, police held detainees incommunicado.

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

On April 24, protesters outside the Larkana Press Club accused police of raiding Baidi Lashari, a village in Sindh. The protesters alleged police raided the village to make an arrest, but when they failed to find their suspect, they set fire to houses and arbitrarily arrested seven women and 11 children.

In 2021 the Supreme Court criticized the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) for “randomly” arresting individuals and waiting more than one year to file charges against them.

Pretrial Detention: According to provincial prison departments, as of September, an estimated 70 percent of prison detainees were either awaiting or on trial. Reports indicated some prison authorities

did not differentiate between pretrial detainees and prisoners being tried when collecting prison data. Police sometimes held persons in investigative detention without seeking a magistrate's approval and often held detainees without charge until a court challenged the detention. Magistrates generally approved investigative detention at the request of police without requiring justification. When police did not produce sufficient evidence to try a suspect within the 14-day period, they generally requested that magistrates issue another judicial remand, thereby further extending the suspect's detention.

Some individuals remained in pretrial detention for periods longer than the maximum sentence for the crime of which they were charged. Authorities seldom informed detainees promptly of charges against them.

Special rules apply to cases brought to court by the NAB, which investigates and prosecutes corruption cases. The NAB may detain suspects for 15 days without charge (renewable with judicial concurrence) and deny access to counsel prior to charging. Offenses under the NAB are not bailable, and only the NAB chairperson has the power to decide whether to release detainees.

Security forces may restrict the activities of terrorism suspects, seize their assets for up to 48 hours, and detain them for as long as one year without charges. Human rights and international organizations reported security forces held an unknown number of individuals allegedly affiliated with terrorist organizations indefinitely in preventive detention, where they were often allegedly tortured and abused. In many cases authorities held prisoners incommunicado, denying them prompt access to a lawyer of their choice. Family members often did not have prompt access to detainees.

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

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provides for an independent judiciary, but according to NGOs and legal experts, the judiciary often was subject to external influences, such as fear of reprisal from extremist elements in terrorism or blasphemy cases and public politicization of high-profile cases. Civil society organizations reported judges were reluctant to exonerate individuals accused of blasphemy, fearing vigilante violence. Media and the public generally considered the high courts and the Supreme Court more credible, but media discussed allegations of pressure from security agencies on judges of these courts.

Extensive case backlogs in the lower and superior courts undermined the right to effective remedy and to a fair and public hearing. Due to the prevalence of pretrial detention, these delays often led defendants in criminal cases to be incarcerated for long periods as they awaited trial. Antiquated procedural rules, unfilled judgeships, poor case management, and weak legal education caused delays in civil and criminal cases. According to the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan, as of July 13, the country's superior and lower judiciaries were dealing with a backlog of 2.1 million cases, with a reported 4.1 million additional cases filed in 2021.

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

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

The use of informal justice systems that lacked institutionalized legal protections continued, especially in rural areas, and often resulted in human rights abuses. Large landholders and other community leaders in Sindh and Punjab and tribal leaders in Pashtun and Baloch areas sometimes held local council meetings (*panchayats* or *jirgas*) outside the established legal system, at times with the support of local police officials. Such councils settled feuds and imposed tribal penalties, including fines, imprisonment, and sometimes the death penalty. These councils often sentenced women to violent punishment or death for so-called honor-related crimes. These councils, meant to provide “speedier justice” than traditional courts, in some instances also issued decisions that significantly harmed women and girls. For example, women, especially young girls, were affected by the practice of *swara*, in which girls are forced into marriage to compensate for a crime committed by their male relatives. The Federal Shariat Court declared *swara* to be against the teachings of Islam in 2021. Jirga and panchayat decisions were often discriminatory towards women and girls, frequently issuing harsher sentences than for men.

On March 20, a Muslim man named Wahid Lashari shot and killed an 18-year-old Hindu girl, Pooja Kumari, after she resisted his attempt to kidnap her from her home. On July 24, a jirga held in Rohri, Sindh, pardoned the killer in exchange for \$12,000 in compensation and determined her family should withdraw and cease pursuing a murder case. Pooja belonged to the marginalized Orh caste, and her family was reportedly pressured to accept the jirga decision.

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

Trial Procedures

The civil, criminal, and family court systems are supposed to operate with the presumption of innocence, cross-examination, and appeal; however, the judiciary did not always enforce these rights. The constitution protects defendants from self-incrimination. There are no trials by jury. Although defendants have the right to be present and consult with an attorney, courts are required to appoint attorneys for indigents only in capital cases. Defendants generally bear the cost of legal representation in lower courts, but a lawyer may be provided at public expense in appellate courts. Due to the limited number of judges, a heavy backlog of cases, lengthy court procedures, frequent adjournment, and political pressure, cases routinely lasted for years, and defendants made frequent court appearances.

Police lacked training to properly handle child delinquency, and there were reports of police brutality against juveniles. Many juveniles spent long periods in detention because they could not afford bail. According to an NGO, juveniles were at risk of sexual and physical assault by police, adults, and other juveniles as soon as they enter the judicial system, including transportation to detention. Juveniles did not have facilities separate from adult detainees.

The law mandates the creation of juvenile courts and “juvenile justice committees,” intended to expedite the administration of justice for children by resolving cases that involve minor offenses without resorting to formal judicial proceedings. Despite a 2019 directive that the government create these courts and committees within three months of the law’s passage, implementation remained

slow. As of 2021, the government had established three child courts in Lahore and eight in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including one in the former FATA.

The law bans the application of the death penalty for children, yet courts sentenced convicted children to death under antiterrorism laws. Unreliable documentation made determining the ages of possible children difficult.

Some court cases, particularly those involving high-profile or sensitive matters such as blasphemy, lacked transparency. NGOs reported the government often held such trials in jails due to concerns for the safety of defendants, lawyers, judges, prosecutors, and witnesses. Although NGOs acknowledged these safety concerns were well founded, they expressed concerns regarding transparency.

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

On August 22, police charged former Prime Minister Imran Khan under antiterror laws for comments he made regarding law enforcement and court officials during a rally. On September 11, the Islamabad High Court ordered the antiterrorism charges dropped.

The frequent use of ATCs for cases not involving terrorism, including for blasphemy or other acts deemed to foment religious hatred, led to significant backlogs, and despite being comparatively faster than the regular court system, ATCs often failed to meet speedy trial standards.

The Federal Shariat Court has exclusive appellate jurisdiction over all cases involving the application and interpretation of the Hudood Ordinances, enacted in 1979 by military leader Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq to implement a strict interpretation of Islamic law by punishing extramarital sex, false accusations of extramarital sex, theft, and alcohol consumption. The court also has power to revise legislation it deems inconsistent with sharia. Individuals may appeal Federal Shariat Court decisions to the Shariat Appellate Bench of the Supreme Court. A full bench of the Supreme Court may grant a further appeal.

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

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were reports of political prisoners and detainees. The NAB continued to press corruption charges against opposition figures, but corruption charges were rarely pursued against coalition figures, and the NAB sometimes dropped investigations or prosecutions after a change in administration. Although multiple cases remained pending with the NAB, on June 10, the government amended the NAB law's anticorruption provisions, greatly curtailing the watchdog's powers.

Many ethnic and religious groups claimed authorities detained their members based on political affiliation or beliefs. The federal government announced a general amnesty in 2015 for Baloch insurgents who gave up arms. On March 28, Shahzain Bugti resigned as special assistant to the prime

minister on reconciliation in Balochistan. He said he took the step after the Imran Khan-led government reneged on its promises concerning Balochistan. Despite the amnesty offers, illegal detention of Baloch leaders and the disappearance of private Baloch citizens continued. Nonetheless, human rights activists said the numbers from the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances were unreliable and more cases remained than were reported. Baloch activists complained the commission served no purpose other than to help security agencies identify victims' families for harassment. On November 30, the NGO Voice for Baloch Missing Persons stated 309 Baloch persons disappeared in the province between January and July, with an alleged 6,734 persons forcibly disappeared since 2000. On November 14, the Human Rights Council of Balochistan claimed 492 individuals were forcibly disappeared and 366 alleged extrajudicial killings were reported in the province from January to October.

Transnational Repression

Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, Forced Returns, or Other Violence or Threats of Violence: Journalists and civil society members in exile in Europe reported targeted harassment and physical violence they believed was linked to their investigative work into the military's actions and human rights abuses. In August, media reported law enforcement agencies in the United Kingdom warned Pakistani dissidents living in London of credible information of threats against them. Those threatened included individuals who criticized Pakistan's military in their writings. In January, a court in London convicted a British man, Mohammad Gohir Khan, of conspiring to kill a Pakistani dissident in the Netherlands for a reported \$134,000.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Individuals may petition the courts to seek redress for various human rights abuses, and courts often took such actions. Individuals may seek redress in civil courts against government officials, including on grounds of denial of human rights. Observers reported that civil courts seldom issued judgments in such cases, and most cases were settled out of court. Although there were no procedures for administrative redress, informal reparations were common. Individuals and organizations could not appeal adverse decisions to international human rights bodies, although some NGOs submitted human rights "shadow reports" to the United Nations and other international actors.

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

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

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

controls, blocking or filtering of websites and social media platforms, censorship, and tracking methods.

g. Conflict-related Abuses

As of December 31, terrorism fatalities stood at 971, compared with 663 fatalities in 2021, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, a database compiled by the public interest advocacy organization Institute for Conflict Management, which collects data on terrorism and low intensity warfare in South Asia.

The military and paramilitary organizations conducted multiple counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations to eradicate militant safe havens. The military's Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad, launched in 2017, continued throughout the year. Radd-ul-Fasaad is a nationwide counterterrorism campaign aimed at consolidating the gains of Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014-17), which countered foreign and domestic terrorists in the former FATA. Law enforcement agencies also acted to weaken terrorist groups, arresting suspected terrorists and gang members who allegedly provided logistical support to militants. In raids throughout the country, police confiscated caches of weapons, suicide vests, and planning materials. Police expanded their presence into formerly ungoverned areas, particularly in Balochistan, where military operations became normal, although such operations often were not reported in the press.

Poor security, intimidation by both security forces and militants, and limited access to Balochistan and the former FATA impeded the efforts of human rights organizations to provide relief to victims of military abuses and of journalists to report on any such abuses. For example, the Jani Khel tribal conflict in Bannu, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, continued following the government's failure to negotiate or satisfy a settlement agreement to investigate the killings, remove militants from the area, and compensate the families.

Militants carried out numerous attacks on political party offices and candidates. On July 15, unknown attackers shot and killed Qari Samiuddin, a local politician affiliated with Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl, and his colleague near Mirali, North Waziristan.

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

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

There were numerous media reports of police and security forces killing terrorist suspects in "police encounters." On May 18, police shot and killed two suspected militants in an encounter in Karachi, saying they were associated with the proscribed Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army and were involved in a blast. Nevertheless, a nationalist party spokesperson stated one of the deceased, Allah Dino Rahimoon, was not a terrorist but a political worker who had taken part in demonstrations against enforced disappearances. The spokesperson claimed Rahimoon was "picked up a few days ago and killed in a fake encounter."

Security forces in Balochistan continued to cause the disappearance of pretrial terror suspects, along with human rights activists, politicians, and teachers, according to the Baloch Human Rights Council.

There were numerous reports of criminal suspects killed in exchanges with police and the military. Militants and terrorist groups, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and Islamic State Khorasan Province, targeted civilians, journalists, community leaders, security forces, law enforcement officers, foreigners, and schools, killing and injuring hundreds with bombs, suicide attacks, and other forms of violence. Throughout Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the newly merged districts, there continued to be attacks by militant groups on security forces, tribal leaders, and civilians. Militant and terrorist groups often attacked religious minorities. On March 4, at least 62 worshippers were killed and 194 others injured when a suicide attacker detonated a bomb inside a Shia mosque in Peshawar. The ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) claimed responsibility for the bombing.

On March 7, a detonation by a suicide bomber along the route of President Arif Alvi's motorcade in Sibi, Balochistan, killed seven security personnel and injured 22 others. ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the attack.

Militant groups continued to target Chinese nationals. On April 26, three Chinese nationals and a local driver were killed and four others including a Chinese national were injured in a suicide bombing carried out by a woman in the University of Karachi. The terrorist group Baloch Liberation Army claimed responsibility for the attack. On September 28, a Chinese national was killed and two others injured when an unidentified assailant opened fire inside a dental clinic in Karachi.

On October 10, unknown assailants on a motorcycle opened fire on a van in Swat District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, killing the driver and injuring two children. The attack prompted days of protests and street sit-ins as thousands of protesters demanded the government arrest the culprits and take action against the rise in militant attacks in Swat.

Other Conflict-related Abuse: Personnel protecting polio vaccination teams remained a target of attacks. On August 15, unknown attackers killed two police officers providing security to polio workers in Kachagraha, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. On June 27, unidentified assailants shot and killed a polio worker and two police officers assigned to polio vaccination teams in Datta Khel, North Waziristan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A child bystander was also injured during the incident. The TTP particularly targeted girls' schools to demonstrate its opposition to girls' education but also destroyed boys' schools. Militants closed key access roads and tunnels and attacked communications and energy networks, disrupting commerce and the distribution of food and water; military operations in response created additional hardships for the local civilian population. On June 20, suspected militants killed two laborers from Sindh working on a road under construction in Hoshab, Balochistan.

According to the UN Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, there was one new misconduct allegation against a Pakistani peacekeeper serving in a UN peacekeeping operation. In June, it was reported that a Pakistani military officer deployed to the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo was involved in a sexual assault. Pakistan was leading the investigation, which continued as of November. The last prior allegation was submitted in 2020 and concerned sexual exploitation and abuse by a Pakistani peacekeeper deployed to the African Union-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur, and it allegedly involved the rape of an adult. As of November, the Pakistani government was still investigating that allegation.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

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

The law provides for freedom of expression, including for members of the press, but constitutional restrictions exist. In addition, threats, harassment, abductions, violence, and killings led journalists and editors to practice self-censorship and follow editorial directives from the government. The government's failure to investigate and prosecute attacks on human rights defenders and peaceful protesters led to de facto restrictions on freedom of assembly and association. Journalists suffered high levels of violence from both state and nonstate actors, including political parties.

Freedom of Expression: The constitution provides for the right to free speech and a free press, subject to "any reasonable restriction imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam" or the "integrity, security, or defense of Pakistan, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality." The law permits citizens to criticize the government publicly or privately, but court decisions interpreted the constitution as prohibiting criticism of the military and judiciary. Such criticism may result in legal, political, or commercial reprisal. Blasphemy laws restrict individual rights to free speech concerning matters of religion and religious doctrine. According to the penal code, punishments for conviction of blasphemy include the death sentence for "defiling the Prophet Muhammad," life imprisonment for "defiling, damaging, or desecrating the Quran," and 10 years' imprisonment for "insulting another's religious feelings." The courts enforced the blasphemy laws, and although authorities did not execute any person for committing blasphemy, allegations of blasphemy often prompted vigilantism and mob lynching. The government restricted some language and symbolic speech based on hate speech and terrorism provisions in the law.

On May 17, the FIA arrested Muhammad Usama Shafiq and Maisam Abbas in Lahore for committing blasphemy on social media. They had allegedly insulted the Prophet and defiled the Quran on Facebook and WhatsApp groups.

Violence and Harassment: Security forces, political parties, militants, influential landlords, and other groups subjected media outlets, journalists, and their families to threats and harassment. Women journalists in particular faced threats of sexual violence and harassment, including via social media, where they had a particularly strong presence. Security forces allegedly abducted journalists. Media outlets that reported on topics authorities viewed as sensitive were often the targets of retribution. Additionally, journalists working in remote and conflict-ridden areas lacked basic digital and traditional security skills, which increased pressure to self-censor or simply not publish a story. Women journalists lamented that the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act of 2021 was flawed and urged the government to amend the law.

In both urban and rural areas, journalists continued to face heinous crimes, including a report of an acid attack on a woman media worker. According to Freedom Network, a media advocacy group, between May 2021 and April, there were 86 cases of attacks and other forms of violence against journalists and other media workers. While the overall number of documented violence in the preceding year decreased, the trend of targeting journalists working for digital media continued, according to Freedom Network, a domestic media rights watchdog that tracks violence against journalists and attacks on freedom of expression.

Independent media NGOs reported incidents of gender-based harassment against women journalists in the country. One NGO pointed out that at least three of 86 reported abuses from May 2021 to April were against women journalists. At least 12 of the 86 abuses were against digital media users. These included two of the four journalists killed.

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

Journalist Arshad Sharif fled the country in August after he was charged with several violations of law for antimilitary comments he made on his television show. On October 23, Sharif was killed when Kenyan police shot at his car in an alleged case of mistaken identity in the outskirts of Nairobi. His death led to strong public condemnation, and the prime minister ordered an investigation. In a report released on December 8, investigators alleged the killing was a “planned assassination.” On December 6, police registered a formal rebuttal after the Supreme Court criticized the government for its delays in filing and directed the government to submit its report immediately. On December 7, the Supreme Court ordered the government to form an independent joint investigation team.

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

Journalists alleged PEMRA continued to issue editorial directives to television stations and media outlets, compelling them to refrain from critical reporting on state institutions. On August 9, broadcaster ARY News went off air in many parts of the country. The channel blamed PEMRA for the move. On August 11, media reported PEMRA issued fresh directives to warn all satellite television channels, specifically news and current affairs programs, of legal action for either running a “propaganda” campaign or spreading “misinformation and disinformation” against state institutions.

Journalists accused the existing and former governments of harassing and threatening journalists producing critical analyses. On May 22, media reported charges were filed against journalists Imran Riaz, Sabir Shakir, and Arshad Sharif for alleged criticism of state institutions and “abetting mutiny.”

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

Both local and foreign journalists reported harassment and intimidation by government officials. Blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi laws (laws prohibiting Ahmadis to self-identify as Muslims) restricted publication on these topics. Government censors reviewed foreign books before allowing for reprinting. Imported movies, books, magazines, and newspapers were subject to censorship for objectionable sexual or religious content. Obscene literature, a category the government defined broadly, was subject to seizure. The government fined private television channels for alleged violations of the code of ethics and for showing banned content. Authorities reportedly used PEMRA rules to silence broadcast media by suspending licenses, threatening to do so, or by reassigning the cable channel number of a targeted outlet without notice so that its programming would be hard or impossible to find on most televisions. Many outlets resorted to self-censorship, particularly when reporting on religious or security topics.

The government continued to use network access as a tool to exert control over media outlets. Media outlets reported the government increasingly used the infrastructure of the media system, as well as government advertising, which made up a large portion of media revenue, to suppress information deemed threatening. The economic contraction caused by COVID-19 decreased private revenue further, rendering outlets more dependent on government advertising. A policy that would allow media outlets to tap into subscription revenues was stalled in a Supreme Court battle. The government pressured distributors into restricting distribution or changing channels of outlets deemed problematic, incentivizing media companies to censor their content. Media houses also reportedly fired outspoken journalists deemed to be a threat to their revenues or continued ability to operate.

Libel/Slander Laws: Defamation and blasphemy are criminal offenses. Blasphemy is punishable by a minimum of two years' imprisonment or death. On January 19, a Rawalpindi court sentenced a woman to death for insulting the Prophet Muhammad through caricatures, remarks, and posts she made on WhatsApp and Facebook. The woman denied the blasphemy charges and told the court the complainant deliberately dragged her into religious discussions to collect "blasphemy" evidence against her after she refused "to be friendly with him."

On July 4, a Lahore court sentenced a man to death for allegedly stating that "Christ was the only 'true prophet,'" interpreted as a blasphemous insult against the Prophet Muhammad. The man, who had been jailed on the charges since 2017, denied committing blasphemy and claimed his landlord and a rival business owner encouraged his accuser to instigate a blasphemy case against him for personal and financial reasons.

For more on blasphemy laws and notable cases, please see the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at .

National Security: Some journalists asserted authorities cited laws protecting national security to censor and restrict media distribution of material that criticized government policies or military or public officials, or that described the country's security situation in a negative light. The law includes a clause that restricts reporting in any area where a military operation is in progress.

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

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

Internet Freedom

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

The government used a systematic, nationwide, content-monitoring and filtering system to restrict or block “unlawful” content, including material it deemed un-Islamic, pornographic, or critical of the state or military forces. The restrictive 2016 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act gives the government sweeping censorship powers regarding internet content, which authorities used as a tool for the continued clampdown on civil society.

On February 20, President Arif Alvi enacted amendments to the 2016 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act that increased the prison term for online defamation on social media platforms from three to five years. The amendment also required an expedited trial that would conclude preferably not later than six months of taking cognizance of the case. On April 8, the Islamabad High Court struck down the ordinance.

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

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

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

The PTA also continued to try to control social media and video-streaming services such as YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok. Media reported the PTA asked various social media platforms, including Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok, to block or remove content that criticized the country’s institutions and informed the companies such content was not “freedom of expression” and could be a prosecuted as a crime under “contempt of court.”

The PTA asked YouTube to block “vulgar, indecent, immoral content” and hateful speech and content viewing in Pakistan. Although the PTA claimed its intentions were to stop the spread of pornography

and vulgar content, users alleged it was actively targeting critics of government policies, especially those critical of the army. Internet service providers also claimed the PTA wanted to regulate political posts that spread what it deemed indecent content. Online users continued to report they feared increasing censorship trends.

On March 16, the Peshawar High Court ordered the owners of TikTok to remove immoral, vulgar, and indecent content from the platform. The ruling came during the hearing of a case that sought a complete ban of the platform until the removal of objectionable content.

On July 19, media reported TikTok removed nearly 12.5 million videos from Pakistan in the first quarter of the year – reportedly the second-largest volume removed from any country.

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

Long-term communications shutdowns were reportedly imposed in many rural areas of Balochistan. Others insisted connectivity was hampered by lack of infrastructure, low internet bandwidth, and slow service, often provided by the military-operated Special Communication Organization in certain regions.

On May 18, hundreds of residents protested the disruption of cellular services in Bajaur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, blocking the Peshawar-Bajaur highway for several hours. District administrators stated they blocked internet access via cellular providers in response to a worsening security situation.

Restrictions on Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government interfered with academic freedom by restricting, screening, and censoring certain cultural events based on limiting dissemination of antistate content and obscenity. The government frequently refused to issue the permits that it sometimes required groups to obtain for events and gatherings. The Central Board of Film Censors previewed and censored sexual content and any content that glorified Indian heroes, leaders, or military figures in foreign and domestic films.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

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

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the government relied less on the use of the West Pakistan Maintenance of Peace Order and the British-era criminal code to maintain order. These statutes effectively allow authorities to continue the long-standing practice of suspending the right to assemble or speak in the newly merged areas. By law district authorities may prevent gatherings of more than four persons without police authorization. The law permits the government to ban all rallies and processions, except funeral processions, for security reasons. More rallies and peaceful sit-ins were reported

during the year in merged districts, including South and North Waziristan and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The constitution states, “A person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves Ahmadis) is a non-Muslim.” Authorities generally prohibited Ahmadi Muslims from holding conferences or gatherings. Ahmadi Muslims cited the refusal of local authorities to reopen Ahmadi mosques damaged by anti-Ahmadi rioters in past years as evidence of the continuing severe conditions for the community.

The PTM mobilized its predominantly ethnic-Pashtun supporters to participate in sit-ins and demonstrations to demand justice and protest abuses by government security forces. The PTM operated and held massive rallies, although under much greater scrutiny after the 2020 arrest of PTM’s national leader in Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Security agencies continued to arrest, detain, and file charges against PTM leaders in connection with protests and speeches.

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

Freedom of Association

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

There was a lack of transparency and unpredictability of the INGO registration process. The Ministry of Interior did not have enough trained human and financial resources to process the manual registration application within a defined time. Slow government approvals of INGO registration requests, NOC requests, and nonprofit tax status applications significantly constrained INGO activity. Some INGOs received income tax notices to pay income tax (even years after completion of assistance projects) on funds received from donors under bilateral agreements with the host government. To avoid paying VAT (sales tax), INGOs are asked to apply for tax exemptions before incurring a transaction, which is impractical and cumbersome and often results in project delays and payment of taxes on donor assistance. The onerous NOC requirements, frequent and arbitrary requests for information from the security apparatus, as well as periodic harassment, impeded project operations, particularly in areas that could greatly benefit from support, such as the newly merged districts.

INGOs faced additional barriers to fundraising, opening bank accounts, and obtaining tax-exempt status from the Federal Board of Revenue, as well as visa denials for international staff and consultants. The registration process was laborious, nontransparent, and ultimately elusive for many INGOs. Registration requires extensive documentation, including financial statements, a detailed annual budget, and a letter outlining donor support, among many other requirements. Organizations were subject to constant investigation and harassment by the security apparatus and other government offices during and after the registration process. Targeted organizations often included

those that focused on topics the government deemed sensitive, such as democracy promotion, press freedom, religious freedom, and human rights.

Eighty-five INGOs signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Ministry of Interior to obtain foreign funding and implement programs. Per government policy, this MOU should be renewed every three years, but most INGOs are required to renew it more often. In 2018, authorities ordered 18 INGOs to leave the country after rejecting their final appeals. According to observers, most of these INGOs resumed operations and were at different stages of obtaining an MOU from the Ministry of Interior. In 2020, the ministry invited several INGOs that had previously been denied registration to reapply. After floods heavily affected the country, the ministry began issuing some NOC and MOUs to INGOs within two weeks, some within 48 hours.

Local NGOs complained that strict government regulations hampered their ability to respond to the flood crisis that started in June. On August 13, the federal government announced permission for all local NGOs to conduct relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction activities in flood-affected areas for six months – from August to February 2023 – without restrictions under the 2013 NGO policy. In 2020, the Ministry of Economic Affairs' Economic Affairs Division that oversees registration of domestic NGOs receiving foreign funding, eased requirements for registered domestic and international NGOs engaged in COVID-19 relief activities. The Economic Affairs Division also issued standard operating procedures to facilitate INGO projects related to the pandemic. Under these procedures, the government would immediately issue NOCs to INGO projects related to the pandemic, subject to their compliance with guidelines. Only INGOs with signed MOUs would be allowed to work, and these NGOs would be required to submit four sets of their plan of action with explicit mention of funding sources and areas of operations in the country.

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

In November, Pakistan's Federal Cabinet approved a new policy governing registration process for local NGOs seeking to receive foreign funding. The new policy aims to modernize registration processes through the introduction of an online portal for applications for MOUs for projects, clarify timelines for government decisions on applications, and eliminate the need for subsequent provincial-level project approvals in most cases. Some NGO representatives have welcomed the new policy; others have expressed confusion or concern over some gray areas, including whether the policy applies to for-profit entities and when exactly NGOs may begin operations on foreign-funded projects. A backlog of applications remained as of the end of the year.

Under directives from federal institutions on security and financial oversight, the Sindh government introduced measures governing registration renewals of NGOs. In 2020, a group of NGOs challenged the Sindh Charities Registration and Regulation Act of 2019 through a petition at the Sindh High Court. The petition argued the government was curbing freedom of association beyond what was permissible under the constitution. It further argued the purpose of the law was not to regulate NGOs but to incapacitate and debilitate them. As of September, the case continued. NGO representatives reported increased government restrictions and harassment by security agencies resulted in major NGOs reducing staff and activities.

c. Freedom of Religion

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

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

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

On July 14, journalist and television host Imran Riaz Khan was barred from boarding a flight to Dubai at Lahore airport. Media reported the FIA placed Khan's name on its watch list at the request of the Punjab Police.

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

Foreign Travel: The law prohibits travel to Israel, and the country's passports include a statement that they are "valid for all countries except Israel."

Passport applicants must list their religious affiliation, and those wishing to be listed as Muslims must swear they believe the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet and denounce the founder of the Ahmadi movement as a false prophet. Ahmadi Muslim representatives reported authorities wrote the word "Ahmadi" in their passports if they refused to sign the declaration.

According to policy, government employees and students must obtain NOCs from the government before traveling abroad. Authorities rarely enforced this requirement for students, however.

For most of the year, the government prohibited persons on an exit control list from departing the country. The stated purpose of the list was to prevent departure of "persons involved in antistate activities, terrorism, related to proscribed organizations, or placed on the orders of superior courts." According to civil society, authorities also included human rights defenders and critics of the government and military on the list. Those on the list have the right to appeal to the courts to have their names removed; however, on April 23, the Federal Cabinet announced changes to the rules to automatically remove names from the Exit Control List (ECL) after 120 days. The government retained authority to extend the exit prohibition for another 90 days. Those involved in terrorism cases, considered a threat to national security, under court order, or involved in large-scale public cheating would continue to stay on the list.

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

e. Protection of Refugees

The country is not a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1967 Protocol) and has not enacted national legislation for the protection of refugees or established procedures to determine the refugee status of persons who are seeking international protection within its territory. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and

other humanitarian organizations to provide protection and assistance to approximately 1.34 million refugees, asylum seekers, and other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law does not provide for granting asylum or refugee status, and the government has not established a system for providing protection for refugees. The law also does not exclude asylum seekers and refugees from provisions regarding illegal entry or presence in the country. In the absence of a national refugee legal framework, UNHCR issued asylum seeker certificates and conducted refugee status determination under its mandate. Authorities generally respected UNHCR-issued documentation, which effectively protected against refoulement. During the year authorities instructed UNHCR to suspend issuing documentation and refer all asylum applications to the government. As of June, UNHCR publicly stated it was “discussing with the government the way forward on registration and documentation of asylum seekers.” The government generally allowed asylum seekers, as well as recognized refugees, to remain in the country pending identification of a durable solution, although there were reports of deportations of undocumented Afghans, which may have included undocumented individuals in need of international protection.

Abuse of Migrants and Refugees: The government provided temporary legal status by issuing proof of registration (POR) cards to more than 1.28 million Afghan refugees who registered in 2006 as well as to their children. The POR cards expired in 2015, were renewed intermittently through cabinet decisions, and expired without further renewal in 2020. In March 2021, in collaboration with UNHCR, the government started the Document Renewal and Information Verification Exercise to provide updated biometric cards to registered Afghan refugees dated June 30, 2023. The final data from the renewal process, released in June, revealed that 1.28 million POR cardholders in 308,000 households resided in the country.

The country also hosted approximately 840,000 Afghans with Afghan Citizen Cards but did not grant them refugee status. The government typically extended the validity of the Afghan Citizen Cards in short increments but allowed these cards to expire in June 2020, and the government did not renew the cards. The government issued a notice in June 2020 directing agencies and departments to ensure no harassment or adverse action be taken against POR and Afghan Citizen Card holders until the federal cabinet made a formal decision.

UNHCR reported 446 arrests and detentions of persons of concern by security authorities from January to June, a 19 percent increase from the same period in 2021. Among the arrests, 67 percent of detained individuals were released without formal charges, 28 percent were charged and detained under the Foreigners Act, and 5 percent were charged and detained under preventive and rental restriction laws. With UNHCR legal assistance, 436 detained individuals were released, most within 24 hours and before they were formally charged by law enforcement agencies. UNHCR’s Advice and Legal Aid Center partners represented 147 individuals in courts who were charged under the Foreigners Act (dealing with unauthorized stay of foreigners) and other laws allowing preventive detention of persons “acting in a manner prejudicial to the integrity, security, and defense of the country and public order,” subsequently resulting in their court-ordered release.

Many Afghan families staged a protest outside the National Press Club in Islamabad, where they had been living in tents since the Taliban captured Afghanistan’s capital, Kabul, in August 2021. The protesters used the slogan “Kill Us” to draw attention to their situation, including their lack of legal status and desire to relocate to Western countries. In June, some of the protesters tried to enter Islamabad’s restricted “red zone,” where the city administration does not permit protests. Police and protesters clashed, and 11 protesters were arrested, although most were subsequently released.

Employment: There is no formal document allowing refugees to work legally, but there is also no law prohibiting refugees from working in the country's informal and private sectors. Many refugees worked as day laborers or in the informal economy, and local employers often exploited refugees in the informal labor market with low or unpaid wages. Women and children were particularly vulnerable, accepting underpaid and undesirable work. On May 15, a joint team in Rawalpindi composed of a court official and police officials freed 30 Afghan nationals, including women and their children detained illegally, following a raid on a brick kiln. Acting on court directives, authorities rescued the individuals, who had been forced into bonded labor without pay or sufficient food and presented them before the court.

Access to Basic Services: The constitution stipulates free and compulsory education for all children between ages five and 16, regardless of their nationality. Any POR cardholding refugee child could be, in theory, admitted to public education facilities after filing the proper paperwork. Generally, undocumented Afghans could not access public education institutions, while Afghan citizen card holders could reportedly enroll in public education facilities in some parts of the country, such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. For older students, particularly girls in refugee villages, access to education remained difficult. In 2020, of 417,000 school-age children, only 20 percent were enrolled in primary schools, of which one-third were in public schools. Afghan refugees were able to use POR cards to enroll in universities, although some universities limited seats available to refugees. Afghan students were eligible to seek admission to public and private colleges and universities.

f. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

Large population displacements occurred beginning in 2008 because of militant activity and military operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former FATA. Returns continued amid improved security conditions. The government and UN agencies such as UNHCR, UNICEF, and the UN World Food Program collaborated to assist and protect those affected by conflict, who generally resided with host families, in rented accommodations, or to a lesser extent, in camps. Several internally displaced persons (IDP) populations settled in informal settlements outside of cities such as Dera Ismail Khan, Bannu, Peshawar, Lahore, and Karachi.

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

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

Despite large-scale recurring displacements of individuals due to natural disasters, terrorist activities, and counterterrorist operations, the government had not adopted specific legislation to tackle internal

displacement problems. In addition, the law does not provide any definition of IDPs or their rights.

g. Stateless Persons

Statelessness continued to be a problem. There is no national legislation on statelessness, and the government does not recognize the existence of stateless persons. International and national organizations estimated there were at least hundreds of thousands of stateless persons largely because of the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan and the 1971 partition of Pakistan and Bangladesh. UNHCR estimated there were sizable populations of ethnic Bihari, Bengali, and Rohingya living in the country, concentrated in Karachi, a large percentage of whom were likely stateless, although comprehensive data did not exist.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

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

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In 2018, the country held direct elections that resulted in a Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-majority national government led by Prime Minister Imran Khan. EU observers assessed voting was “well conducted and transparent” but noted “counting was sometimes problematic.” Civil society organizations and political parties raised concerns regarding preelection interference, including restrictions on freedom of expression, allegedly creating an uneven electoral playing field. Although authorities did not hold another national election, on April 11, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) President Shehbaz Sharif became prime minister after a parliamentary vote of no confidence against Imran Khan succeeded.

In 2018, the Electoral College (made up of the members of both houses of parliament and of the provincial assemblies) held presidential elections and selected PTI’s Arif Alvi to succeed Mamnoon Hussain of the PML-N. Following passage of the amendment merging the former FATA with the rest of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2019, the government held special elections for seats in the provincial assembly to represent the former FATA areas. Politically, the only remaining hurdle for full integration of the former FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was elections for local leaders. In December 2021, the first round of elections took place, and on March 31, the second round took place.

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

On May 25, PTI chairman and former Prime Minister Imran Khan led a “Freedom March” from Peshawar to Islamabad to protest his removal from office. Khan stated his march to Islamabad was impeded due to barriers imposed by the federal government, and participants were subjected to tear gas and arrests. Two participants reportedly died, and thousands were arrested by security forces.

Judges ordered media regulatory agencies to enforce constitutional bans on content critical of the military or judiciary, compelling media to censor politicians’ speeches and election-related coverage deemed “antijudiciary” or “antimilitary.” Organizations that monitored press freedom reported direct pressure on media outlets to avoid content on possible military influence over judicial proceedings

against politicians and positive reporting of opposition leaders. In most areas there was no interference with the right of political parties and candidates to organize campaigns, run for election, or seek votes. In Balochistan, however, there were reports security agencies and separatist groups harassed local political organizations, such as the Balochistan National Party and the Baloch Students Organization.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: The law stipulates special measures to enhance the electoral participation of women, religious minorities, transgender persons, and persons with disabilities. By law women candidates must constitute 5 percent of party tickets, and if women voters cast less than 10 percent of the total votes in any constituency, authorities may presume the women's vote was suppressed, and the results for that constituency or polling station may be nullified. The government enforced the law for the first time in Shangla, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, when the Election Commission canceled the district's 2018 general election results after women made up less than 10 percent of the vote. The HRCP continued to report, however, that the right of women to cast their votes was still being denied in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's local bodies' elections and that arrangements made for the maintenance of law and order and smooth polling were grossly inadequate.

Women's political participation was affected by cultural barriers to voting and limited representation in policymaking and governance. In a 2021 survey by the HRCP, women legislators reported discriminatory cultural norms and stereotypes hindered their access to politics and impacted their performance as members of legislative assemblies when access was achieved.

Cultural and traditional barriers in tribal and rural areas impeded some women from voting. Authorities used quotas to ensure a minimum level of participation of women in elected bodies. Sixty seats in the National Assembly and 17 seats in the Senate are reserved for women. Authorities apportioned these seats based on total votes secured by the candidates of each political party that contested the elections. Women and minorities also may contest elected seats directly, but both women and minorities struggled to be directly elected outside of the reserved seats. As of November, there were 10 women and one Hindu member of the National Assembly in nonreserved seats. There were three women senators in nonreserved seats in the Senate. Authorities reserved for women 132 of the 779 seats in provincial assemblies and one-third of the seats on local councils. Women from minority groups had limited representation in elected bodies; only three seats of 200 reserved for women across all provincial and federal assemblies were held by minority women.

Women participated actively as political party members, but they were not always successful in securing leadership positions within parties or positions in the decision-making bodies within parties apart from women's wings. Of 73 members of the federal cabinet, including Special Advisors to the prime minister, only eight were women. There was one member of a religious minority in the federal cabinet.

Some conservative political parties discouraged women's participation in political rallies.

The law requires expedited issuance of identification cards (that also serve as voter identification cards) for non-Muslims, transgender persons, and persons with disabilities.

The government requires voters to state their religion when registering to vote. To vote, Ahmadi Muslims are required to either swear the Prophet Muhammad was the final prophet of Islam and denounce the Ahmadi movement's founder or declare themselves as non-Muslims. Ahmadis consider

themselves Muslims, and many were unable to vote because they did not comply with this requirement.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

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

The NAB serves as the highest anticorruption authority, with a mandate to eliminate corruption through awareness, prevention, and enforcement. The NAB and other investigative agencies, including the Federal Board of Revenue, the State Bank of Pakistan, the Antinarcotics Force, and the FIA, conduct investigations into corruption, tax evasion, and money laundering. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) also has jurisdiction to scrutinize funding to political parties and tax returns of lawmakers.

Corruption: Trials of corruption cases filed by the NAB and FIA during the previous government continued, including against Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in alleged money laundering. The government continued its corruption investigations and prosecutions of opposition leaders. Opposition parties alleged these prosecutions selectively targeted their leaders. On August 24, a lawmaker of the ruling PML-N petitioned the ECP to permanently disqualify former Prime Minister Imran Khan from politics for concealment in tax returns of official gifts he received and sold. Concealment of assets could violate the disqualification clauses of the constitution. The ECP concluded its investigation and deliberations, and a decision was pending.

On August 2, after an eight-year-long investigation into the funding sources of the PTI, the ECP ruled the party had received foreign and domestic funding in violation of the law. Consequences could include banning the party, confiscation of illegally collected funds, and prohibition of Imran Khan's participation in elections. The constitution requires all political parties to account for funds collected and submit details to the ECP annually, and the law provides for action in case of violations. The ECP was also scrutinizing funds received by PML-N and Pakistan People's Party.

Reports of corruption in the judicial system persisted, including reports that court staff requested payments to facilitate administrative procedures. Lower courts reportedly remained corrupt, inefficient, and subject to pressure from higher-ranking judges as well as prominent, wealthy, religious, and political figures.

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

Some domestic and international human rights groups operated without significant government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. The government increasingly restricted the operating ability of NGOs, however, particularly the work of those that revealed shortcomings or misdeeds of the government, military, or intelligence services, or that worked on matters related to conflict areas or advocacy. These groups faced numerous regulations regarding travel, visas, and registration that hampered their efforts to program and raise funds.

International staff members of organizations, including those from the few registered INGOs, continued to face delays or denials in the issuance of visas and NOCs for in-country travel. The domestic NGO registration agreement with the government requires NGOs not to use terms the government finds controversial, – such as: countering violent extremism; peace and conflict resolution; IDPs; reproductive health; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) persons – in their annual reports or documents. The agreement also prohibits NGOs from employing individuals of Indian or Israeli nationality or origin. Few NGOs had access to certain parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the former FATA, or certain areas in Balochistan.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The 2012 National Commission for Human Rights Bill authorized the establishment of an independent committee, the National Commission on Human Rights. The first commission's term expired in 2019, and authorities established a second commission in 2021. Activists stated the government delayed the appointment of commission leaders to avoid facing accountability for human rights abuses. Observers stated a limited budget, lack of continuation between commission board members, who must be elected unanimously by a bipartisan parliamentary committee, and limited mandate over security agencies or armed forces restricted their effectiveness. A stand-alone Ministry of Human Rights was reconstituted in 2015. The Senate and National Assembly standing committees on law, justice, minorities, and human rights held hearings on a range of human rights problems.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape is a criminal offense, with punishment for conviction that ranges from a minimum of 10 to 25 years' imprisonment and a fine to the death penalty. The penalty for conviction for rape of two or more persons is death or life imprisonment. The law does not explicitly criminalize spousal rape and defines rape as a crime committed by a man against a woman. Although rape was frequent, prosecutions were rare. The law provides for collection of DNA evidence and includes nondisclosure of a rape survivor's name, the right to legal representation of rape survivors, relaxed reporting requirements for female survivors, and enhanced penalties for rape of survivors with mental or physical disabilities. In 2021, the Lahore High Court declared virginity tests, including the so-called two-finger test for examination of sexual assault survivors, "illegal and against the Constitution," and without forensic value in cases of sexual violence.

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

The Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act provides legal protections for domestic abuse victims, including judicial protective orders and access to a network of district-level women's shelters. Centers provided women a range of services, including assistance with the completion of first information reports regarding the crimes committed against them, first aid, medical examinations, post-trauma rehabilitation, free legal services, and a shelter home. The Punjab government funded

four women's career centers in Punjab universities, 12 crisis centers that provide legal and psychological services to women, and emergency shelters for women and children. The Punjab government established 16 women's hostel authorities in 12 districts to assist women in finding safe, affordable, temporary lodging while looking for work. On October 3, the Board of Governments approved establishment of another 30 centers across Punjab. The provincial government also launched other economic empowerment programs, including the Punjab Small Industry Cooperation Development Bank and the Kisan Ki Beti (Farmer's Daughter) project, which aim to improve living standards of rural women through skill development.

On October 5, the Gilgit-Baltistan government launched a "Pink Bus Service" to provide three free women-only bus services in the area between morning and afternoon hours. Lahore used a special court designed to focus exclusively on gender-based violence crimes. The Lahore Gender-Based Violence Court receives the most serious cases in the district, such as aggravated rape, and offers enhanced protections to women and girls.

In the first eight months of the year, Lahore reported 176 cases of domestic violence against women, 337 cases of rape of women, 1,782 cases of kidnapping of women, three cases of so-called honor killings of women (the killing of a relative who is perceived to have brought dishonor on the family), and 746 cases of violence against women.

The Pakistan National Judicial Policy Making Committee directed all provincial high courts to establish special gender-based violence courts to provide justice to victims of sexual and gender-based violence on a priority basis and in a gender-sensitive manner. At year's end, special courts for gender-based violence operated countrywide.

All provinces and the Islamabad Capital Territory had enacted domestic violence bills as of 2021, but observers reported implementation was slow due to lack of resources and awareness, gender and cultural biases, and weak federal and provincial coordination. There were no reliable national, provincial, or local statistics on rape due to underreporting, and no centralized law enforcement data collection system existed.

According to reports compiled by the Sustainable Social Development Organization and the Centre for Research, Development and Communication, at least 557 women were kidnapped, 381 were subjected to physical assault, 304 were raped, and 47 women killed in so-called honor killings across the country from May to August. In November, the social development organization reported 3,088 cases of rape of women and 4,503 cases of child abuse were filed with Punjab police from January 1 to October 31.

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

against women often faced pushback and harassment, including by police officials, who, according to civil society activists, discouraged survivors from coming forward.

According to the HRCP, 0.3 percent of offenders charged with rape were convicted between 2015 and 2021. The Punjab Information Commission reported 2,439 women were raped in Punjab Province in the first six months of the year.

On May 27, a station manager and four ticket checkers raped a woman on a Karachi-bound Multan train. They also filmed the sexual assault as intended blackmail against her reporting them to police. The incident sparked outrage on social media, which criticized the Pakistan Railways authorities for failing to place safety measures for female passengers nationwide.

The use of rape medical testing increased, but medical personnel in many areas did not have sufficient training or equipment to gather evidence and undertake investigations, which further complicated prosecutions. Most survivors of rape, particularly in rural areas, did not have access to the full range of treatment services. There were a limited number of women's treatment centers, funded by the federal government and international donors. These centers had partnerships with local service providers to create networks that delivered a full spectrum of essential services to rape survivors.

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

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

On September 23, the son of a journalist killed his wife of three months in Shahzad, Islamabad. After a domestic disagreement, Shahnawaz Amir allegedly bludgeoned his Canadian-Pakistani wife to death with a dumbbell and then hid the body in his bathtub.

The government continued to operate the Crisis Center for Women in Distress, which referred abused women to NGOs for assistance. Numerous government-funded Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Centers for Women across the country provided legal aid, medical treatment, and psychosocial counseling. These centers served women who were victims of exploitation and violence. Officials later referred victims to *dar-ul-amans* – shelter houses for abused women and children – of which there were several hundred throughout the country. The *dar-ul-amans* also provided access to medical treatment. According to NGOs, the shelters did not offer other assistance to women, such as legal aid or counseling, and often served as halfway homes for women awaiting trial for adultery, but who in fact were survivors of rape or other abuse.

Government centers lacked sufficient space, staff, and resources. Many overcrowded *dar-ul-amans* did not meet international standards. Some shelters did not offer access to basic needs such as showers, laundry supplies, or feminine hygiene products. In some cases, individuals reportedly abused women at the government-run shelters, and staff severely restricted women's movements or

pressured them to return to their abusers. There were reports of women exploited in commercial sex and sex trafficking in shelters. Some shelter staff reportedly discriminated against the shelter residents, based on a belief that if a woman fled her home, it was because she was a woman of ill repute.

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

Other Forms of Gender-based Violence: Women were victims of various types of societal violence and abuse, including so-called honor killings, forced marriages and conversions, imposed isolation, and usage as chattel to settle tribal disputes.

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

In 2021, Noor Mukadam was sexually assaulted and beheaded by a male acquaintance after being tortured and held hostage for two days in Islamabad. Police arrested Zahir Jaffer, but his family used its influence to pressure local police and the victim’s family to settle out of court. After the victim’s family and friends highlighted the case on social media, police arrested and charged all accomplices. On February 22, an Islamabad trial court convicted Zahir Jaffer, sentencing him to death, and it sentenced two codefendants to 10 years in prison. As of October, the case remained on appeal in the Islamabad High Court.

In June, the Punjab Information Commission reported 90 women were victims of honor killings in Punjab Province during the first six months of the year.

In August, a study conducted by a women rights group revealed that 123 persons, including 88 women, were killed during the past six months in the name of so-called honor or *karo kari* in Sindh. Balochistan also had reports of many cases of so-called honor-related crimes. On February 13, three women and two men were killed in the name of so-called honor in Jaffarabad, Mastung, and Hub areas of Balochistan during a single day.

On May 20, two Pakistani sisters with Spanish residency were killed by their husbands, uncle, and brother in a so-called honor killing. The two were strangled and shot after they allegedly refused to help apply for spousal visas for their husbands, whom they were reportedly forced to marry in 2021. The men involved were arrested and charged with murder.

On February 14, the Lahore High Court acquitted Waseem, the brother of social media star Qandeel Baloch who was killed in the name of so-called honor in 2016. The acquittal followed Qandeel’s parents’ action under Section 311 of the penal code. Prior to acquittal, Waseem had served less than six years in prison. The public outrage concerning Waseem’s strangulation of his sister led to

parliament passing legislation in 2016 mandating a sentence of 25 years' imprisonment for so-called honor killings and closing a loophole allowing relatives of victims the right to forgive the convict.

According to the HRCP, more than 470 so-called honor killing-related cases were reported in 2021.

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

On May 9, unidentified men in Kot Addu, Punjab, broke into the home of a woman and threw acid on her and her son, allegedly because she rejected the advances of one of the attackers. The woman died 17 days later from her injuries.

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

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

Sexual Harassment: Although several laws criminalize sexual harassment in the workplace and public sphere, the problem was reportedly widespread. The law requires all provinces to have provincial-level ombudsmen. All provinces and Gilgit-Baltistan had ombudsmen. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly passed its provincial law for the prevention of the harassment of women.

In 2018 Meesha Shafi and eight others accused pop singer Ali Zafar of sexual harassment. He denied the accusations and filed suit against the women. In 2020 the accusers were charged with defamation; if convicted, they would face up to three years in prison. At year's end, Zafar's sexual harassment trial was suspended pending the outcome of the defamation case. Women's rights activists demanded that defamation be decriminalized, as it was used as a tool to silence survivors of sexual harassment.

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

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

Young girls and women often lacked information and means to access care. Adolescent girls had no access to counseling related to menstrual health. Unmarried individuals could obtain contraceptive

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

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

According to the most recent *Pakistan Maternal Mortality Survey*, the maternal mortality ratio was 186 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2019, a rate attributed to inadequate maternal and newborn care. Women in rural areas had limited access to skilled birth attendants, including essential obstetric and postpartum care. The survey revealed three in 10 births were delivered at home, putting both mother and babies at risk. Moreover, there were serious delays in contraceptive procurement and limited stocks of most of the contraceptive types across the country. UNICEF's *Impact of COVID-19 and Reproductive Health, Family Planning and GBV [gender-based violence] in Pakistan* reported the COVID-19 pandemic led to a 14.5 percent increase in child mortality and a 21.3 percent increase in maternal mortality in 2020.

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

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

The law entitles female children to one-half the inheritance of male children. Wives inherit one-eighth of their husbands' estates. Women often received far less than their legal entitlement. In addition, complicated family disputes and the costs and time of lengthy court procedures reportedly discouraged women from pursuing legal challenges to inheritance discrimination. The Punjab Women's Helpline received 1,424 complaints on problems concerning property and inheritance rights from January to August.

Media reported imams and other marriage registrars illegally meddled with *nikah namas*, Islamic marriage contracts that often detail divorce rights, to limit rights of women in marriage. In other instances, women signing contracts were not fully informed of their provisions.

Civil society actors reported only 7 percent of women had access to credit and financial services. Women also faced discrimination in employment.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

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

Members of ethnic minority groups state these provisions had never been fully implemented. Observers cited forced religious conversion and enforcement of blasphemy laws as particular concerns for religious minorities. The constitution enshrines every citizen’s “right to profess, practice and propagate his religion,” but contains a stipulation that this right is not absolute, but “subject to law, public order, and morality.”

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

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

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

The PTM and secular Pashtun political leaders claimed Pashtuns were targeted and killed by both antistate militants and security forces because of their political affiliation or beliefs, antimilitancy stance, or criticism of the government. PTM leaders and activists claim they had been threatened, illegally detained, imprisoned without trial, banned from domestic and international travel, and censored. Anti-Taliban Pashtun activists and political leaders were targeted and killed, allegedly by militants, in Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Pashtuns from the former FATA complained they were frequently profiled as militants, based on their tribe, dress, appearance, or ancestral district of origin. Pashtun activists claimed they were subject to military censorship and sedition laws were used to stifle PTM and other Pashtun critics of the government.

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

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

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship is generally derived by birth in the country, although children born abroad after 2000 may derive their citizenship if either the mother or father is a citizen. Children of refugees and stateless persons do not derive citizenship by birth in country.

Education: The constitution mandates compulsory education, provided free of charge by the government, to all children between ages five and 16. Despite this provision, government schools often charged parents for books, uniforms, and other materials.

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

Child Abuse: Child abuse was widespread. The NGO Sahil said a total of 2,211 cases of child abuse were reported across the country from January to June. Employers, who in some cases were relatives, abused young girls and boys working as domestic servants by beating them and forcing them to work long hours.

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

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

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

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

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

On May 31, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assembly passed the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Protection and Welfare (Amendment) Act, 2022, which stipulates that convicted child abusers be sentenced to life in prison or the death penalty. According to the law, those convicted of child pornography or child trafficking shall be fined and face a minimum of 14 to 20 years' imprisonment. Anyone convicted and whose name is entered into the Register of Sexual Offenders shall not be employed in any organization relating to or dealing with children in the province. The law also stipulates those cases of

child sexual abuse be heard in child protection courts and that cases be completed within 30 days. The person named in the Register of Sexual Offenders is prohibited from using public transportation.

On August 16, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Home and Tribal Affairs Department reported to the Provincial Assembly that, despite increased legislation and awareness, child sexual assault and abuse in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa had risen during the previous three years, with Peshawar alone reporting 120 cases. According to the department, Peshawar recorded 44 cases of child assault and sexual abuse between 2019 and 2021. The report also said 13 children in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were killed after being sexually assaulted.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: Despite legal prohibitions, child marriages occurred. Federal law sets the legal age of marriage at 18 for men and 16 for girls, and a law in Sindh sets 18 as the legal age of marriage for both boys and girls. According to UNICEF, 21 percent of girls were married by age 18. Nearly 19 million were child brides; one in six young women were married in childhood. An individual convicted of child marriage may be imprisoned for no less than five years and no more than 10 years and may also be fined. At times, men evaded Sindh's child marriage law by traveling to a different province for marriage.

The Council of Islamic Ideology declared child marriage laws to be un-Islamic, noting they were "unfair and there cannot be any legal age for marriage." The council stated Islam does not prohibit underage marriage since it allows the consummation of marriage after both partners reach puberty. Decisions of the council are nonbinding.

In rural areas poor parents sometimes sold their daughters into marriage, in some cases to settle debts or disputes. Although forced marriage is a criminal offense, in many filed cases, prosecution remained limited.

A children's rights NGO stated authorities received reports of 26 cases of child marriage from January to June.

On July 13, a court in Rawalpindi ruled against the parents of a 13-year-old Christian girl and allowed her to remain with her 40-year-old Muslim husband. The family alleged she was abducted from a market on April 30, forcibly converted to Islam, and married to Imran Shahzad, who already had a wife and three children.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: Various local laws exist to protect children from child pornography, sexual abuse, seduction, and cruelty, but federal laws do not prohibit using children for commercial sexual purposes or pornographic performances, although child pornography is illegal under obscenity laws. Legal observers reported that authorities did not regularly enforce child protection laws. From January through June, according to the NGO Sahil, there were 2,211 reported cases of child abuse, including 1,207 cases (55 percent) involving girls and 1,004 (45 percent) involving boys. The abuses included child sexual abuse, abduction, missing children, and child marriages.

On July 27, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police arrested a person suspected of sexually assaulting and killing multiple girls in Peshawar. Police stated the suspect confessed during the investigation. According to the Central Police Office, 360 cases of child sexual abuse were recorded in 2021 across the province.

Infanticide, Including Infanticide of Children with Disabilities: Parents occasionally abandoned unwanted children, most of whom were girls. By law, anyone convicted of abandoning an infant may

be imprisoned for seven years, while anyone convicted of secretly burying a deceased child may be imprisoned for two years. Conviction of murder is punishable by life imprisonment, but authorities rarely prosecuted infanticide.

Displaced Children: Civil society reported it was difficult for children displaced by military operations to access education or psychological support upon their return to former conflict areas. Nonetheless, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial government reconstructed some of the 1,800 schools in the former FATA districts, where large numbers of internally displaced persons had returned. The government prioritized rehabilitating schools and enrolling children in these former conflict areas, and the overall number of out-of-school children decreased, according to international organizations.

Antisemitism

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

Trafficking in Persons

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

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

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

Violence against LGBTQI+ Persons: Violence, discrimination, and stigma continued against LGBTQI+ persons. The crimes often went unreported, and police generally took little action when they did receive reports.

In 2019, the inspector general of police announced the government would provide 0.5 percent of the office jobs in the Sindh police force to members of the transgender community. Transgender activists stated police had not implemented this plan. In 2020, Rawalpindi police launched a pilot project to protect transgender individuals. The project, called the Tahafuz Center, included the first transgender victim-support officer, who was also a member of the transgender community. In February, the Islamabad police established the Tahafuz Police Khidmat Markaz and Reporting Center to handle cases perpetuated against transgender individuals. The Islamabad Transgender Protection Unit reported 44 complaints were filed, with more than half the complaints involving violence or harassment against transgender persons.

A local NGO reported that prison officials in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa held transgender prisoners separately and that the provincial government formed a jail oversight committee to improve the prison situation. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police stations had a dedicated intake desk for transgender persons and added transgender rights education to police training courses. Local NGOs working in the Islamabad Capital Territory and Punjab conducted transgender sensitization training for police officers. In July, the Sindh Assembly unanimously passed a law addressing a 0.5 percent hiring quota for transgender persons at public institutions in Sindh. In August, the first school for transgender persons from primary to higher secondary education was established in Punjab's Dera Ghazi Khan District with the collaboration of Japan.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa saw an increase in violence against transgender persons. Transgender activists complained police did not act against targeted attacks on the community and remained indifferent despite several protests. On March 12, five transgender persons suffered critical injuries when a man opened fire at them in the Upper Chania area of Mansehra District. The transgender union later staged a protest and demanded authorities to control the increasing violence in Mansehra District. On March 17, men riding motorcycles opened fire on the vehicle of several transgender persons near the city museum in Mardan, killing one and injuring another.

On March 26, two transgender persons were killed in two separate shooting incidents in Peshawar and Mardan Districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It was the fourth incident of killing a transgender person in just one week in Peshawar.

Discrimination: According to LGBTQI+ NGOs and activists, society generally shunned transgender women, eunuchs, and intersex persons, who often lived together in slum communities and survived by begging and dancing at carnivals and weddings. Some were also engaged in commercial sex. Local authorities often denied transgender individuals their share of inherited property and admission to schools and hospitals. Property owners frequently refused to rent or sell property to transgender persons. The law also provides for basic rights, prohibits harassment of transgender persons, and outlaws discrimination against them in employment, housing, education, health care, and other services. No such law, however, protects the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: A Supreme Court ruling allows transgender individuals to obtain national identification cards listing a "third gender." Because national identity cards also serve as voter registration, the ruling enabled transgender individuals to participate in elections, both as candidates and voters. The 2018 Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act, challenged during the year in Federal Shariat Court, ensures the rights of transgender or third-gender persons, sometimes referred to as Hijra or Khawaja Sira, are protected. The law accords the right of transgender individuals to be recognized according to their "self-perceived gender identity," but the government only allows the registration of gender changes to an "X" third gender and not to a different binary male or female gender.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices Specifically Targeting LGBTQI+ Individuals: There are no laws addressing or forbidding so-called conversion therapy. Societal, family, religious, and community discrimination reportedly means most LGBTQI+ individuals do not self-identify. Psychiatric services were reportedly limited and some families of LGBTQI+ persons consulted traditional or religious healers for exorcisms. Occasionally these may involve forceful beatings, physical violence, or forceful detention in homes as coercive punishment or an attempt to force a change to the person's sexual identity or expression.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly: Gatherings or events such as the women's march sometimes faced hardships in obtaining assembly permits because of alleged support to sexual minorities or the alleged support of LGBTQI+ activists. Public venues were reportedly more reluctant to host transgender events as religiously based anti-LGBTQI+ protests increased in the latter half of the year. The government continued to review movies, books, magazines, and newspapers, which were subject to censorship for objectionable sexual content. On November 15, the government banned the showing of the film *Joyland* for "highly objectionable content," but it lifted the ban two days later after public protest. The film explored the relationship between a married man who works for and is in love with a transgender dancer.

Persons with Disabilities

The law provides for equal rights for persons with disabilities, and provincial special education and social welfare offices are responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities; nonetheless, authorities did not always implement its provisions. Each province has a department or office legally tasked with addressing the educational needs of persons with disabilities. According to civil society organizations, despite these provisions, most children with disabilities did not attend school.

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

Those with disabilities commonly encountered daily obstacles such as barriers to community mobility, reduced access to education and health-care services, and higher risk of suffering from depression. These persons faced additional problems related to employment and economic opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions on acquiring goods and services and limitations on the use of transportation were additional challenges due to COVID-19.

In 2021, the Supreme Court commuted the death sentences of two convicted persons with mental disabilities, Imdad Ali and Kanizan Bibi. The judgment placed a ban at the federal level on applying the death penalty to those with mental disabilities.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

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

On February 7, a 31-year-old Ahmadi Muslim doctor was killed, and three members of his family injured, in an attack on their home in Punjab's Nankana Sahib District. A spokesperson from the Ahmadi Muslim community reported the family was attacked after they attended Friday prayers.

On March 5, a 35-year-old doctor was killed and another wounded when unidentified assailants attacked a medical clinic owned by an Ahmadi Muslim doctor in the Scheme Chowk area of Peshawar. Dr. Muhammad Shahid Ahmad was working at a clinic owned by a member of the minority Ahmadi

Muslim community in Peshawar's Bazid Khel village. The Ahmadi Muslim community stated the attacks on members of the minority community and places owned by them were on the rise and that during the prior two years at least five members of the community were targeted and killed in Peshawar.

On May 17, Abdus Salam, a member of the Ahmadi Muslim community, was stabbed to death in what activists described as a religiously motivated attack.

Women's rights groups faced threats of violence from religious groups. The annual *Aurat* (Women's) March events conducted throughout the country continued to receive threats from extremist groups, including a right-wing newspaper *Ummat*, which considered the march to be "vulgar and anti-Islamic." The march was held amid strict government security, but many NGOs did not participate in the event after receiving direct threats. In the aftermath of the march, several groups accused the organizers of blasphemy and tried to book legal cases against them. In 2021, Peshawar police booked the organizers and participants of the women's march in Islamabad on the charge of committing blasphemy, but the organizers and participants were not prosecuted.

A concentrated HIV epidemic persisted among drug-injecting users, who had an infection rate of 21 percent, while the estimated prevalence in the general population was less than 0.1 percent. Stigma and discrimination by the general population and by health-care providers against persons with HIV remained a significant barrier to treatment access. An estimated 14 percent of persons with HIV knew their status, and approximately one-tenth of them were on antiretroviral treatment, according to the 2018 Joint UN Program on HIV/AIDS report. Transgender advocacy organizations and activists reported HIV was particularly prevalent in their community, with little medical help available.

In some cases police arrested individuals after acts of vigilantism related to blasphemy or religious discrimination. On August 21, Hyderabad police prevented an enraged crowd from lynching a Hindu sanitation worker following allegations he threw burned pages of the Quran from a six-story apartment building. A large contingent of police and paramilitary Rangers placed him in protective custody. Police issued warrants for 200 persons and arrested 42 for participating in the attack. On February 12, police were unable to stop a mob from beating to death and hanging an alleged mentally ill man accused of blasphemy in Khanewal, Punjab. Police later arrested nearly 80 persons in connection with the killing.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The constitution covers a range of basic labor provisions, but most of the labor force is under the jurisdiction of provincial labor laws. The 1968 Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Ordinance addresses the relationship and contracts between employer and employee. The ordinance applies to all industrial and commercial establishments employing 20 or more workers. The Factories Act, 1934, governs the conditions of industrial labor in factories, amended by the provincial governments in 2010 to include factories employing five or more workers. In 2012, parliament passed an industrial relations act that took International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions into account but, due to the 18th amendment, it applies only to the Islamabad Capital Territory and to trade federations that operate in more than one province. The only federal government body with any authority over labor matters is the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, whose role in domestic labor oversight is limited to compiling statistics to demonstrate compliance with ILO conventions.

The law provides some private-sector workers the right to form and join unions but denies this right to public servants, workers in Export Processing Zones, agricultural workers, and workers in a broad list of essential services. At the provincial level, laws providing for collective bargaining rights exclude banking- and financial-sector workers, forestry workers, hospital workers, self-employed farmers, and persons employed in an administrative or managerial capacity. In 2021, the ILO expressed regret that federal and provincial labor laws exclude numerous categories of workers from having collective bargaining rights, in a manner inconsistent with relevant ILO conventions. There are limits on the number of unions that may exist with an enterprise. Unions representing less than one third of workers in an enterprise do not have standing to bargain collectively. The law does not protect workers from antiunion discrimination.

Without any federal government entity responsible for labor law enforcement, the continued existence of the National Industrial Relations Commission remained in question. The law stipulates the commission may adjudicate and determine industrial disputes within the Islamabad Capital Territory to which a trade union or federation of trade unions is a party and any other industrial dispute determined by the government to be of national importance. This provision does not provide a forum specifically for interprovincial disputes but appears to allow for the possibility the commission may resolve such a dispute. Worker organizations noted the limited capacity and funding for labor relations implementation at the provincial level.

The law prohibits state administrators, workers in state-owned enterprises and export-processing zones, and public-sector workers from collective bargaining and striking. Authorities may prohibit strikes if they find them “prejudicial to the national interests” and refer disputes to arbitration.

Provincial industrial relations acts also address and limit strikes and lockouts. For example, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Act specifies that, for power distribution, gas, and other essential public service providers, when a “strike or lockout lasts for more than 30 days, the government may, by order in writing, prohibit the strike or lockout” and must refer the dispute to a labor court. The government did not effectively implement laws that protect the right to organize, bargain collectively, and the right to strike, and the penalties were less than those for other violations involving denial of civil rights, such as discrimination. Penalties were rarely applied against violators.

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

Authorities had broad discretion to administratively deregister, suspend, or dissolve unions without judicial review. There were no reports of the government dissolving unions during the year. With respect to the national airline’s unilateral derecognition of the Pakistan Airline Pilots Association and other workers associations and its termination of all working agreements, the ILO urged the government in 2021 to ensure pilots from both private and public companies could negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment through organizations that genuinely represented their

interests and to ensure the principle that freely concluded collective agreements should be binding on the parties, as required by relevant ILO conventions.

On August 12, women workers from across the country convened to celebrate the registration of the country's first all-women trade union. The registration of the Women Workers Unity (WWU) in Lahore marked a first in the struggle for workers' rights. The WWU operated in 14 major industrial districts, and the process of registration of similar trade unions in remaining districts was underway.

On April 11, the Balochistan Provincial Assembly unanimously passed the Home-Based Workers Bill aimed at providing legal protection to cottage industries. Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa passed similar laws in 2018 and 2021, respectively. Nevertheless, the International Federation for Human Rights and the HRCP noted workers' registration levels remained low across all provinces, inhibiting the right to unionize. Union parties reportedly lacked capacity and workers had little incentive to register because of corruption in contract bidding led to the perception that unions were ineffective in obtaining better paying jobs for their members.

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

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, cancels all bonded labor debts, forbids lawsuits for the recovery of such debts, and establishes a district "vigilance committee" system to implement the law. The ILO raised concerns, however, that laws prohibiting some workers in essential services from leaving their employment without the consent of the employer exposed these workers to potential criminal charges and that conviction could include prison labor. NGOs and labor lawyers said labor laws and regulations did not adequately protect workers due to weak and inconsistent enforcement. NGOs reported that despite domestic laws and international labor rights standards, workers were often exposed to exploitation and subject to a range of labor abuses. The law defines trafficking in persons as recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining another person (or attempting to do so) through force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of compelled labor or commercial sex. Allowing for a fine in lieu of imprisonment in cases involving adult male victims of sex trafficking meant penalties were not commensurate with those for other serious crimes, such as rape. Lack of political will, the reported complicity of officials in labor trafficking, and federal and local government structural changes contributed to the failure of authorities to enforce federal law relating to forced labor. Resources, inspections, and remediation were inadequate.

In 2021, the ILO noted some public security laws provided for restrictions on the expression of political views, with potential penalties if convicted of imprisonment involving compulsory labor. The ILO urged the government to bring its practices into compliance with relevant ILO conventions on forced and compulsory labor by taking measures to ensure no form of compulsory prison labor may be imposed on persons who, without using or advocating violence, express certain political views or opposition to the established political, social, or economic system.

The use of forced and bonded labor was widespread and common in several industries across the country. An NGO focusing on bonded labor estimated 4.5 million workers nationwide were trapped in bonded labor, primarily in Sindh and Punjab, but also in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The UN Development Program estimated more than 70 percent of bonded laborers were children. Traffickers also targeted lower-caste Hindus as well as Christians and Muslims with lower socioeconomic backgrounds especially for forced and bonded labor. Bonded labor was reportedly present in the agricultural sector, including the cotton, sugarcane, and wheat industries as well as the brick, coal, and carpet industries. Bonded laborers often were unable to determine when their debts were paid in full, in part because contracts were rare, and employers could take advantage of bonded laborers' illiteracy to alter debt amounts or the price laborers paid for goods they acquired from their employers. In some cases, landowners restricted laborers' movements with armed guards or sold laborers to other employers for the price of the laborers' debts.

Ties among landowners, industry owners, and influential politicians hampered effective solutions. For example, some local police did not pursue landowners or brick kiln owners effectively because they believed higher-ranking police, pressured by politicians or the owners themselves, would not support their efforts to carry out legal investigations. Some bonded laborers returned to their former status after authorities freed them, due to a lack of alternative employment options. In Sindh the Bonded Labor Act of 2015 has no accompanying civil procedure to implement the law. Of the 30 district vigilance committees charged with overseeing bonded labor practices 128 bonded labor cases were created but remained inactive as of August.

Boys and girls were bought, sold, rented, or kidnapped to work in illegal begging rings, as domestic servants, or as bonded laborers in agriculture and brickmaking (see section 7.c.). Illegal labor agents charged high fees to parents with false promises of decent work for their children and later exploited them by subjecting the children to forced labor in domestic servitude, unskilled labor, small shops, and other sectors.

The government of Punjab funded the Elimination of Child Labor and Bonded Labor Project, under which the Punjab Department of Labor worked to combat child and bonded labor in brick kilns. They did this by helping workers obtain national identity cards and interest-free loans and providing schools at brick kiln sites. NGO representatives noted the poor implementation of the Punjab provincial government's 2020 order setting standard wages for brick kiln laborers. Many brick kiln laborers continued to lack national identity cards.

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh ministries of labor reportedly worked to register brick kilns and their workers in order to regulate the industry more effectively and provide workers access to labor courts and other services. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, kilns with fewer than 10 employees do not qualify as "factories," so many employed fewer than 10 workers to avoid registration.

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

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/> and the Department of Labor's *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor* at <http://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/reports/child-labor/list-of-goods/>.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

While regulations prohibit discrimination in employment and occupation regarding race, sex, gender, disability, language, gender identity, HIV-positive status or other communicable diseases, or social status, the government did not effectively enforce those laws and regulations. Discrimination with respect to employment and occupation based on these factors as well as religion, religious caste, and gender identification, persisted (also see section 6.).

Women constituted only 20 percent of the labor force despite representing 48.5 percent of the population, earned lower wages than men for similar work, and represented 88 percent of workers in the informal sector. In 2021, amendments to provincial level laws were adopted to decrease barriers for women being in the workforce. For example, on July 5, the Factories Law and the Shops and Commercial Establishment Law in Sindh were amended to permit and enable women to work at night, requiring employers to provide transportation to women employees who, on a voluntary basis only, stayed at workplaces after 7 p.m.

Only 10 to 12 percent of persons with disabilities were employed, with job opportunities scarce due to limited access to quality education, little support for job seekers, and business attitudes that regard persons with disabilities as unable to work.

In 2020, the government abolished the 2 percent public and private company employment quota for persons with disabilities. Disability rights groups criticized the abolition, which was promulgated without stakeholder feedback or parliamentary debate. In 2020, a clause was added to the Islamabad Capital Territory Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill of 2020 to restore the employment quota. Observers noted the clause is limited only to the Islamabad Capital Territory and gives companies loopholes to exempt themselves.

The Special Economic Zones Act of 2012 provides for limited protections, and the status of national laws dealing with labor rights, antidiscrimination, and harassment at the workplace remained ambiguous. Penalties were less than those for violations of other laws related to civil rights, such as election interference. Penalties were rarely applied against violators.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: On April 11, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif announced a minimum wage of 25,000 rupees (\$110) per month. The minimum wage exceeded the poverty line income for an individual, as well as the World Bank's estimate for poverty-level income. Both federal and provincial governments implemented the increase. Minimum wage laws do not cover significant sectors of the labor force, including workers in the informal sector, domestic servants, and agricultural workers.

The law provides for a maximum workweek of 48 hours (50 hours for seasonal factories) with rest periods during the workday and paid annual holidays. The labor code also requires time off on official government holidays, overtime pay, annual and sick leave, health care, education for workers' children, social security, old-age benefits, and a workers' welfare fund. Many workers, however, were employed as contract laborers with no benefits beyond basic wages and no long-term job security, even if they remained with the same employer for many years. Furthermore, these national regulations do not apply to agricultural workers, workers in establishments with fewer than 10 employees, or domestic workers. Workers in these types of employment also lacked the right to access labor courts to seek redress of grievances and were extremely vulnerable to exploitation.

The private sector did not always comply with orders regarding the minimum wage. Media reported labor departments struggled to enforce minimum wage laws across all provinces.

In August, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Labor Department filed motions in the District Labor Court against more than 50 industrial and commercial entities for violating the Minimum Wage Act 2013. Acting on complaints of workers of different industries at the Hattar Industrial zone, the deputy director of labor, Hazara Division, inspected the financial record of different industrial units and compressed natural gas stations. During the inspection, the official reported the companies were paying less than the minimum wage set by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government during the year. The workers were receiving 15,000 to 18,000 rupees (\$67 to \$81) per month, an amount that did not meet the provincial government's minimum wage for unskilled workers.

The 2019 Sindh Women Agriculture Workers Act recognizes the rights of women who work in farming, livestock, and fisheries. The law provides for minimum wages, sick and maternity leave, set working hours, written work contracts, the right to unionize, collective bargaining, and access to social security and credit, among other protections.

Occupational Safety and Health: There is no independent legislation on occupational safety and health (OSH) regulation, although the Factories Act, 1934, the Hazardous Occupations Rules, 1963, and subsequent provincially derived legislation provide OSH standards for industries with employees in factories and related workplaces. The Ministry of Overseas Pakistan and Human Resource Development is the government agency responsible for implementing these laws at the federal level, while provincial labor ministries do it in provinces. The laws do not cover informal sectors implementation, and enforcement of OSH standards in multiple sectors of labor remained weak, particularly at provincial levels throughout the country. There was a serious lack of adherence to mine safety and health protocols. Many mines had only one opening for entry, egress, and ventilation. Workers could not remove themselves from dangerous working conditions without risking loss of employment. Informal-sector employees, such as domestic and home-based workers, were particularly vulnerable to health and safety dangers. There were no statistics on workplace fatalities and accidents. Factory managers were often unable to ascertain the identity of fire or other work-related accident victims because these individuals were contract workers and generally did not appear in records.

Labor rights activists stated workers often had to work in dangerous conditions and that private-sector mining companies failed to provide workers with health and safety facilities. Coal mine workers were also targets of attacks by militants due to their ethnicity or religious affiliation.

On April 19, three workers in Orakzai, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, died after a reservoir of water collapsed inside the mine, filling the workspace. On July 6, eight miners died after rainwater accumulated nearly 60 feet deep in the mines.

According to the Pakistan Central Mines Labor Federation's statistics, as of July at least 90 workers had lost their lives in 60 mine-related accidents. The government did not effectively enforce OSH laws; penalties for violations of such laws were not commensurate with those for crimes such as negligence.

On May 31, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly passed The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Occupational Safety and Health Bill, 2022.

The comprehensive OSH law enacted by Sindh Province in 2017 had yet to be implemented by year's end. In 2020, the Punjab government enacted the Medical Teaching Institute (Reform) Ordinance, which amended several existing pieces of health-care legislation and instituted boards of governors composed of private-sector professionals for state-run teaching hospitals. Mayo Hospital Lahore, Punjab's largest state-run teaching institute, became the first public-sector teaching institute where the ordinance was enforced. A board of governors took over administrative and financial control of the hospital.

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

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

The number of labor inspectors employed by the provincial governments was insufficient for the workforce of approximately 64 million persons. Many workers, especially in the informal sector, remained unaware of their rights.

Informal Sector: A Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives labor force survey covering 2020 and 2021 stated the informal sector accounted for 72.5 percent of employment in main jobs outside agriculture – more in rural areas (76.2 percent) than urban areas (68.5 percent). OSH laws and inspections do not apply to the informal sector.

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