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Freedom in the World 2010 - Pakistan

Capital: Islamabad

Population: 180,808,000

Political Rights Score: 4 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Partly Free

Explanatory Note

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

Overview

In March 2009, the civilian government of President Asif Ali Zardari yielded to political pressure and allowed Iftikhar Chaudhry, the chief justice of the Supreme Court who had been ousted by then military ruler Pervez Musharraf in 2007, to reclaim his post. The court subsequently struck down a Musharraf-era amnesty law in December, exposing a number of politicians to possible prosecution. Also during the year, Islamist militants attempted to extend their territorial control in North-West Frontier Province, provoking a sustained military response that began in the spring. This in turn led to the mass displacement of civilians and a wave of retaliatory terrorist attacks throughout the country.

Pakistan was created as a Muslim homeland during the partition of British India in 1947, and the military has directly or indirectly ruled the country for much of its independent history. As part of his effort to consolidate power, military dictator Mohammad Zia ul-Haq amended the constitution in 1985 to allow the president to dismiss elected governments. After Zia's death in 1988, successive civilian presidents cited corruption and abuse of power in sacking elected governments headed by prime ministers Benazir Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in 1990 and 1996, and Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) in 1993.

Sharif, who returned to power in the 1997 elections, was deposed in a military coup after he attempted to fire the army chief, General Pervez Musharraf, in 1999. Musharraf appointed himself "chief executive" (and later president), declared a state of emergency, and suspended democratic institutions. The 2002 Legal Framework Order (LFO) gave Musharraf effective control over Parliament and changed the electoral rules to the detriment of opposition parties. The regime also openly promoted progovernment

parties, such as the newly formed Pakistan Muslim League Quaid-i-Azam (PML-Q), which captured the largest share of seats in the 2002 parliamentary elections and led the new government.

While he managed to contain the secular opposition over the next several years, Musharraf was less willing to rein in radical Islamist groups, with which the military traditionally had a close relationship. These groups gradually extended their influence from outlying regions like the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) to major urban centers, carrying out attacks on both military and civilian targets.

Tensions between Musharraf and the increasingly activist judiciary came to a head in March 2007, when Musharraf suspended Iftikhar Chaudhry, the chief justice of the Supreme Court. The ensuing lawyers' protests sparked wider political unrest, and in July the Supreme Court ruled against Musharraf and reinstated Chaudhry. When the court attempted to rule on the validity of the October presidential election, which had confirmed Musharraf in office, he again took preemptive action and imposed martial law on November 3, suspending the constitution and replacing much of the higher judiciary. More than 6,000 civil society activists, political leaders, and lawyers and judges were arrested, although the vast majority were released after short detentions. The state of emergency was lifted in mid-December and an amended version of the constitution was restored, but some restrictions on the press and freedom of assembly remained in place, as did the emasculated judiciary. Following the December 27 assassination of former prime minister Bhutto, parliamentary elections planned for early January 2008 were postponed until February, and Bhutto's widower, Asif Ali Zardari, assumed de facto leadership of the PPP.

The PPP led the February voting with 97 out of 272 directly elected seats in the National Assembly, followed by Nawaz Sharif's PML-N with 71. The ruling PML-Q was routed, taking only 42 seats, and the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), an alliance of Islamic parties, was also severely weakened. At the provincial level, the PML-N triumphed in its traditional stronghold of Punjab, while the PPP dominated in Sindh and the Awami National Party, a secular and ethnic Pashtun group, won the most seats in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).

In March 2008, the PPP and PML-N reached a power-sharing deal and agreed to the key priorities of reinstating the judges ousted by Musharraf and stripping the president of his power to dissolve Parliament and dismiss the prime minister. A PPP-backed candidate, Yousuf Raza Gilani, was elected prime minister, and he immediately ordered an end to the house arrest of Chaudhry and other suspended Supreme Court justices. However, the coalition partners remained divided over the timing and method of reinstating the dismissed judges, and the PML-N withdrew from the cabinet in May. Musharraf, who had already stepped down as army chief in late 2007, resigned as president in the face of impeachment efforts in August. Less than a week later, the PML-N formally ended its coalition with the PPP, accusing it of breaking a promise to immediately reinstate all of the judges after Musharraf's exit; several of the judges were reappointed that month, but Chaudhry was not included. Zardari was thought to oppose the chief justice's return because it could lead to the revival of long-dormant corruption cases against him. In September, Zardari won the indirect presidential election with 481 of the 702 votes cast; 368 national and provincial lawmakers abstained or boycotted the vote. The PML-N candidate received 153 votes, and the PML-Q took 44.

The PPP and its allies gained a simple majority in the March 2009 Senate elections, but this victory was overshadowed by Zardari's abortive attempt to sideline the opposition PML-N, which continued to push for Chaudhry's restoration. The crisis began with a February Supreme Court decision – widely presumed to have been influenced by the president – to ban Nawaz Sharif and his brother Shahbaz, the chief minister of Punjab, from office. The ruling led to the imposition of direct rule by Punjab's governor and rioting throughout the province. In response, the government filed cases against several hundred PML-N officials and activists, placed Nawaz Sharif under house arrest, and ultimately banned political gatherings. Analysts argued that Zardari's concurrent purge of potential rivals within the PPP was also designed to consolidate his power. However, under pressure from the military and the United States, Zardari relented, ordering

Chaudhry's reinstatement and asking the Supreme Court to review the case against the Sharif brothers. By the end of March, Chaudhry had resumed his position as chief justice and the February ruling had been reversed.

The Supreme Court soon began dismantling the legal actions taken by Musharraf under the 2007 state of emergency, declaring them illegal and calling on Parliament to "regularize" them through ordinary legislation. In December the court specifically annulled the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO), a 2007 amnesty that had eliminated pending legal cases against Zardari and other exiled politicians so that they could return and participate in the 2008 elections. The ruling brought Zardari closer to possible prosecution on the old corruption charges, though he still enjoyed immunity as president. Many officials who lacked such protection, including cabinet ministers, faced immediate court proceedings at year's end.

Although the military had stepped up its operations against Islamist militants in the FATA and NWFP in 2008, terrorist attacks and other violence continued into 2009. In February, the government agreed to a peace deal in the NWFP's Swat district with an affiliate of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, or Pakistani Taliban), a network of militant groups based in the FATA. Under the agreement, the first of its kind outside the FATA, the militants would observe a ceasefire in return for the establishment of Sharia (Islamic law) in the district. President Zardari approved legislation in April that formally imposed Sharia in seven districts of the NWFP, including Swat. Meanwhile, militants seized control of additional districts in the province and began implementing their harsh forms of justice. By May, the government had acknowledged the failure of the peace deal and resolved to retake the affected districts by force. In August, a missile reportedly fired by a U.S. drone aircraft killed TTP leader Baitullah Mehsud, and by year's end the Pakistani military had expanded its campaign by reasserting control in Swat and occupying Mehsud's stronghold in South Waziristan, part of the FATA. Around two million civilians were displaced at various points by these military campaigns. Despite these territorial gains, Islamist militants continued to stage devastating suicide attacks throughout Pakistan.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Pakistan is not an electoral democracy. A civilian government and president were elected in 2008, ending years of military rule, but the military continues to exercise de facto control over many areas of government policy. The political environment is also troubled by corruption, partisan clashes, and Islamist militancy, among other problems.

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

Although the 2008 parliamentary elections marked a distinct improvement over those held in 2002, they were not completely free and fair. The European Union observer mission noted the abuse of state resources and media, inaccuracies in the voter rolls, and rigging of the vote tallies in some areas. Opposition party workers faced police harassment, and more than 100 people were killed in political violence during the campaign period. Private media and civil society groups such as the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) played a significant watchdog role, publicizing incidents of violence, noting numerous irregularities, and otherwise monitoring the conduct of the balloting alongside foreign observers. Despite the irregularities, the balloting led to an orderly rotation of power, and the overall result reflected the will of the people.

Women's political participation is generally ensured by the reservation of legislative seats at the national, provincial, and local levels; women won an additional 16 National

Assemblyseats in the 2008 elections. In some parts of the country, women have difficulty voting and running for office due to objections from social and religious conservatives. Religious minorities also have reserved seats in both the national and provincial legislatures, allotted to different parties based on their share of the vote. However, members of the Ahmadiyya sect, who are required to register on a separate electoral list, largely boycotted the 2008 elections. Separately, a requirement that all candidates hold either a bachelor's degree or madrassa (Islamic school) qualification prevents roughly 95 percent of the population from running for office.

The FATA are subject to special rules that place local governance under the control of the president and unelected civil servants. Elected councils, set up in 2007 with the intention of increasing local representation, have not altered the established decision-making structures. President Asif Ali Zardari announced a reform package in August 2009 that would lift the long-standing ban on political parties in the tribal areas and rein in the arbitrary judicial and financial powers of the FATA's administration, but the necessary order had not been signed by year's end.

Pakistan's government operates with limited transparency and accountability, although this has improved somewhat with the resumption of civilian rule. The military has a stake in continuing to influence both commercial and political decision-making processes, in addition to its traditional dominance of foreign policy and security issues. Serving and retired officers have received top jobs in ministries, state-run corporations, and universities, and they enjoy a range of other privileges, but several thousand active-duty officers were withdrawn from civilian posts in 2008. In the fall of 2009, Zardari accepted an aid package from the United States that included a range of conditionalities, over the objections of the army. The new Parliament has functioned more effectively than its predecessor, holding important policy debates and overturning key decisions of the former government. However, Zardari has been widely criticized for making appointments to top government and diplomatic positions based more on personal loyalty than professional competence.

Corruption is pervasive in politics and government. Under the NRO, issued by then president Pervez Musharraf in October 2007, Zardari and more than 8,000 other politicians, diplomats, and officials were granted immunity in ongoing cases. The Supreme Court's revocation of the NRO in December 2009 cleared the way for the revival of such cases, and though Zardari himself still enjoyed presidential immunity, several other high-ranking ministers were facing the threat of prosecution at year's end. The National Accountability Bureau (NAB), established in 1999 to try corruption cases, was slated to be abolished in January 2009 amid claims that it had grown overly politicized during the Musharraf era. At year's end, the National Assembly was considering legislation that would replace the NAB with a new and redefined anticorruption body. PILDAT criticized several provisions of the bill, particularly its adoption of a narrower definition of corruption and the restriction of the new entity's mandate to holders of political office. Pakistan was ranked 139 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Pakistan's outspoken newspapers and a recent growth in private television stations provide the public with a diverse range of views. However, media freedom in 2009 remained constrained by official attempts to silence critical reporting and by the high level of violence against journalists. In general, the constitution and other laws authorize the government to curb speech on subjects including the armed forces, the judiciary, and religion; blasphemy laws are occasionally used against the media. Particularly harsh ordinances imposed by Musharraf in late 2007 bar any content that defames the military or state institutions, or that is deemed "false or baseless." The penalties for violations include up to three years in prison, fines of up to 10 million rupees (\$165,000), and cancellation of media licenses. Although the rules have been routinely flouted, the new government has yet to act on promises to formally rescind them. Instead it has engaged in its own sporadic efforts to suspend certain broadcasts or programs. For example, during the March 2009 demonstrations against Zardari, authorities temporarily shut down the cable service of the television stations GEO and Aaj, leading Information Minister Sherry Rehman to resign in protest. A number of stations were also blocked for several hours after a terrorist attack on army

headquarters in October. Websites addressing sensitive subjects are periodically blocked. In July 2009, the government responded to a spate of jokes about Zardari that circulated via e-mail by warning that it would trace the messages and confront those responsible with prison sentences of up to 14 years.

The physical safety of journalists remains a concern, and at least four journalists were murdered in 2009, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Intimidation by the security forces – including physical attacks and arbitrary, incommunicado detention – appears to have declined, but Islamic fundamentalists, thugs hired by feudal landlords or local politicians, and police continued to harass journalists and attack media offices during the year. A number of reporters covering the conflict in the tribal areas and parts of NWFP were detained, threatened, expelled, or otherwise obstructed, either by government forces or militants.

Pakistan is an Islamic republic, and there are numerous legal restrictions on religious freedom. Blasphemy laws provide harsh sentences, including the death penalty, and injuring the "religious feelings" of individual citizens is prohibited. Incidents in which police officials take bribes to file false blasphemy charges against Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, and occasionally Muslims continue to occur, with several dozen cases reported each year. No blasphemy convictions have withstood appeal to date, but the charges alone can lead to lengthy detentions, ill-treatment in custody, and persecution by religious extremists.

Ahmadis, who comprise approximately 2.5 percent of the population, consider themselves Muslims, but the constitution classifies them as a non-Muslim minority. The penal code severely restricts their religious practice, and they must renounce their beliefs to vote or gain admission to educational institutions. Authorities occasionally confiscate or close Ahmadiyya publications and harass their staff. During 2009, dozens of Ahmadis faced criminal charges under blasphemy or other discriminatory laws.

Religious minorities also face unofficial economic and social discrimination, and they are occasionally subject to violence and harassment. In a growing trend, particularly in Sindh province, Hindu girls are kidnapped, forcibly converted, and compelled to marry their kidnappers. Terrorist and other attacks on places of worship and religious gatherings occur frequently, leading to the deaths of dozens of people every year; there was a notable upsurge in violence between members of the Sunni Muslim majority and the Shiite Muslim minority in 2009. A wave of attacks on Christians in August 2009, particularly in Punjab, was also attributed to the spread of Sunni extremist ideology. The government often fails to protect religious minorities from sectarian violence, and discriminatory legislation contributes to a climate of intolerance. On a positive note, the new government appointed a Roman Catholic as minister of minorities affairs in late 2008 and reserved 5 percent of federal jobs for religious minorities in May 2009.

The government generally does not restrict academic freedom. However, university student groups with ties to political parties or radical Islamist organizations intimidate students, teachers, and administrators and try to influence university policies. Girls' schools, particularly in the FATA and NWFP, face threats and attacks by Islamist militants; an April 2009 bombing at a girls' primary school in Malakand district killed and injured several dozen students. Girls living under Taliban rule in Swat district were banned from attending school, and during the military's offensive there in the spring, at least 200 schools were damaged or destroyed. Nevertheless, many children returned to classes in August, often attending sessions in tents or outdoors.

Legal provisions for freedoms of assembly and association are selectively upheld. Authorities sometimes restrict public gatherings, disperse protests with excessive force, and use preventative arrest to forestall planned demonstrations. Some Islamist leaders have been held under house arrest or in preventive detention under the Maintenance of Public Order Act, which allows three months' detention without trial. In early 2009, the government banned public demonstrations in the capital for two months in an attempt to prevent marches in favor of the ousted chief justice. On March 10, police in Punjab arrested more than 300 members of the PML-N and other opposition parties to prevent

them from joining such a demonstration; however, the protest ban was lifted in late March when the judicial dispute was resolved.

Authorities generally tolerate the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and allow them to publish critical material. However, NGOs that focus on female education and empowerment, and female NGO staff in general, have faced threats, attacks, and a number of murders by radical Islamists, particularly in the north. Militant groups ordered NGOs to leave the Swat valley after they seized control there in February 2009. Citing security concerns, the government has at times prevented aid groups from operating in Baluchistan, exacerbating the province's humanitarian situation. Pakistan is also home to a large number of charitable or cultural organizations, such as the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JD), that have links to Islamist militant groups.

The 2008 Industrial Relations Act allows workers to form and join trade unions, but it also places restrictions on union membership, the right to strike, and collective bargaining, particularly in industries deemed essential. According to an International Trade Union Confederation report, hundreds of workers have been fired for union activity since the act was passed. Despite legislation designed to combat it, illegal bonded labor is widespread, particularly in Sindh province. News reports have described a growing trend in which bonded laborers sell their organs to repay debts and escape servitude. The enforcement of child labor laws remains inadequate; recent surveys have indicated that there are at least 10 million child workers in Pakistan.

The judiciary consists of civil and criminal courts and a special Sharia court for certain offenses. Lower courts remain plagued by corruption, intimidation, and a backlog of some 1.5 million cases that leads to lengthy pretrial detentions. A new National Judicial Policy that took effect in June 2009 aims to tackle all three problems.

The Supreme Court was brought under the control of the executive during military rule. Increasing activism by the court, particularly by Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, led Musharraf in late 2007 to dismiss a majority of superior court judges (13 from Supreme Court and 30 from provincial courts) and order the detention of Chaudhry as well as other judges, lawyers, and legal activists who opposed the executive's actions. The government elected in 2008 expanded the Supreme Court from 16 to 29 judges, but less than half of the dismissed judges were reinstated. Finally, after the political standoff in March 2009, Chaudhry was reinstated, as well as the remainder of the high court judges ousted by Musharraf. In July, the Supreme Court ruled that the decrees issued by Musharraf during the state of emergency in late 2007 were unconstitutional, and ordered that they be regularized by Parliament. For the judiciary, this meant that all of the appointments that had taken place under Chaudhry's replacement were deemed null and void and were terminated immediately.

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

The justice system in the FATA is governed by the Frontier Crimes Regulation, which allows collective punishment for individual crimes and preventative detention of up to three years. It also authorizes tribal leaders to administer justice according to Sharia and tribal custom. However, reforms announced in August 2009 would exclude women and minors from collective responsibility, establish an appellate tribunal and the right to bail, and curtail arbitrary powers of arrest and detention, according to the International Crisis Group, but these had not come into effect by year's end.

Feudal landlords and tribal elders throughout Pakistan adjudicate some disputes and

impose punishments – including the death penalty and the forced exchange of brides between tribes – in unsanctioned parallel courts called jirgas. Militants in several tribal areas and districts of NWFP have reportedly set up their own parallel courts, dispensing harsh penalties with little regard for due process. After permission was granted to establish an exclusively Sharia-based swift justice system in Swat and several nearby districts in early 2009, many lawyers in the regular court system were left unemployed, and harsh punishments for behavioral transgressions, such as flogging and amputation, became the norm until the militants were ousted from Swat in April. Although the swift justice system remained in force, courts were staffed by judges appointed by the government, according to the U.S. State Department's 2009 human rights report.

Police routinely use excessive force, torture, and arbitrary detention; extort money from prisoners and their families; accept bribes to file or withdraw charges; rape female detainees; and commit extrajudicial killings. Conditions in the overcrowded prisons are extremely poor, and case backlogs mean that the majority of inmates are awaiting trial. Progress on creating an official human rights body empowered to investigate cases and redress grievances has been slow, and although a number of cases are investigated and some prosecutions do occur, impunity for human rights abuses remains the norm. Feudal landlords, tribal groups, and some militant groups operate private jails where detainees are regularly maltreated.

Although cases of politically motivated detention and disappearance have declined under civilian rule, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCPP) – an NGO – estimated that by November at least 1,100 people continued to be illegally detained by state agencies. Some are suspected of links to radical Islamist groups, but the detainees have also included Baluchi and Sindhi nationalists, journalists, researchers, and social workers. The military's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), which operates largely outside the control of civilian leaders and the courts, had faced growing pressure from Chaudhry's Supreme Court to end the practice of secret detentions, but his removal in 2007 stalled progress in this area. Government efforts to place the ISI under the control of the Interior Ministry in July 2008 were swiftly quashed by the military.

Tens of thousands of armed militants are believed to be active in Pakistan. These members of radical Sunni Islamist groups – including the TTP, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, the JD, and the Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) – have varying agendas and carry out terrorist attacks against foreign, Shiite, and Christian targets, killing hundreds of civilians each year. State institutions and security forces have also faced increased attacks in recent years. Sunni and Shiite groups engage in tit-for-tat sectarian violence, mostly bomb attacks against places of worship and religious gatherings. The murder of the SSP leader in August 2009 sparked countrywide riots in which a number of Shiites were killed. The New Delhi-based South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) reported that 190 people were killed and 398 were injured in sectarian violence in 2009, a decrease from the previous year. Islamist militants' expanding influence over territory in NWFP and the FATA has led to severe practical restrictions on local inhabitants' dress, social behavior, educational opportunities, and legal rights. In April, several dozen people were killed in clashes between local Urdu-speakers and refugees from the NWFP in Karachi.

The military's intermittent campaigns against Islamist guerrillas in the tribal areas since 2002 have been accompanied by human rights abuses including arbitrary detention, property destruction, killing or displacement of civilians, and extrajudicial executions. Regular missile strikes attributed to U.S. drone aircraft have also reportedly killed or injured civilians. The authorities are sponsoring tribal militias, or lashkars, to help control the FATA, creating yet another unaccountable armed force. The army's spring 2009 offensive in Swat district and surrounding parts of NWFP led to the temporary displacement of more than two million people. The SATP reported that 11,585 people were killed nationwide in terrorist- or insurgent-related violence in 2009, including 2,307 civilians, 1,011 security force personnel, and 8,267 militants, almost double the figures from 2008. Most were killed in suicide bomb blasts which targeted official installations, as well as religious buildings or events.

In addition to violence stemming from the Islamist movement, the separatist Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) has routinely attacked infrastructure and development projects

since early 2005, and local tribal leaders have demanded greater political autonomy and control over Baluchistan's natural resources. The army in turn has stepped up counterinsurgency operations, leading to human rights violations and the displacement of thousands of civilians. Thousands of activists and other locals with suspected separatist sympathies have been detained, according to the International Crisis Group. In February 2009, a little known militant group, the Baluchistan Liberation United Front (BLUF), abducted U.S. citizen John Solecki, a UN refugee official based in Quetta. The kidnappers demanded the release of some 6,000 Baluchi activists they claimed had been "disappeared," but Solecki was released in April without the demands being met. In October, the BLUF claimed responsibility for the assassination of the province's education minister. Separately, three separatist politicians were killed after being abducted by armed men in April, triggering violence across the province. The unrest led to several deaths and calls for a strike from the Baluch National Front (BNF), a separatist political coalition.

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

According to the HRCP, at least 647 women were killed by family members in so-called honor killings in 2009, although many such crimes may go unreported. Activists have cast doubt on the authorities' willingness to enforce a 2005 law that introduced stiffer sentences and the possibility of the death penalty for honor killings. The incidence of acid attacks on women was also reportedly on the rise in 2009, with several hundred cases noted between April and June alone. The tribal practice of *vani*, in which women are offered in marriage to settle blood feuds, continues to occur in certain areas despite being outlawed in 2004. Other illegal forms of child and forced marriage also remain problems. Most interfaith marriages are considered illegal, and the children of such unions would be illegitimate. Severe restrictions on women's rights in areas controlled by the Taliban – including murders, public floggings, and limitations on dress and behavior – are a growing concern.

Pakistani inheritance law discriminates against women, who also face unofficial discrimination in educational and employment opportunities. The trafficking of women and children remains a serious concern, with female victims facing forced labor, sexual exploitation, or marriage to significantly older men.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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