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FREEDOM ON THE NET 2024

Pakistan

NOT FREE

27
/100

A. <u>Obstacles to Access</u>	6/25
B. <u>Limits on Content</u>	13/35
C. <u>Violations of User Rights</u>	8/40

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

26 /100 Not Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). See the research methodology and report acknowledgements.



Key Developments, June 1, 2023 – May 31, 2024

Internet freedom remained restricted during the coverage period as the Pakistani government shut down the internet, blocked platforms, and proposed restrictive legislation ahead of, during, and after the February 2024 general elections.

- Internet penetration in the country increased, though power outages and damaged infrastructure continued to impede people's access to internet (see A1).
- The government restricted access to the internet and blocked social media platforms, including on days when the opposition party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) held virtual rallies ahead of the elections (see A3).
- Authorities blocked social media platforms ahead of and during the February 2024 general elections. At the end of the coverage period X (formerly Twitter) had been blocked since mid-February (see B1).
- In July 2023, the cabinet approved a string of draconian laws, including the E-Safety Bill and Personal Data Protection Bill, all of which were awaiting parliamentary approval at the end of the coverage period (see B3, C2, and C6).

Political Overview

Pakistan holds regular elections under a competitive multiparty political system. However, the military exerts enormous influence over government formation and policies, intimidates the media, and enjoys impunity for indiscriminate or extralegal use of force. Relations between military and civilian leaders have grown more contentious in recent years, culminating in former prime minister Imran Khan's 2022 ouster and subsequent criminal charges. The authorities often impose selective restrictions on civil liberties. Islamist militants have conducted terrorist campaigns against the state and regularly carry out attacks on members of religious minority groups and other perceived opponents.

Editor’s Note: Pakistani Kashmir is not covered in this report. Certain territories that are assessed separately in Freedom House’s Freedom in the World report are excluded from the relevant country reports in Freedom on the Net, as conditions in such territories differ significantly from those in the rest of the country.

A. Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections?	2/6
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Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 due to evidence that internet penetration improved during the coverage period.

Internet penetration in Pakistan steadily increased in recent years. Rural localities lack adequate infrastructure, limiting broadband access (see A2).

According to the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA), as of May 2024, internet penetration in the country stood at 56.51 percent, compared to 53.81 percent in May 2023. **1** According to the speed-testing company Ookla, Pakistan’s median mobile internet download speed was 17.17 megabits per second (Mbps) in March 2024, while the median fixed-line broadband download speed stood at 14.04 Mbps. **2**

The Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication (MOITT) announced in May 2024 that the government is preparing to launch a 5G mobile network spectrum in the country, though it currently lacks the necessary infrastructure. **3**

Damaged submarine cables and inadequate infrastructure periodically disrupt internet access. Internet users experienced slowed speeds or service disruptions throughout this and the previous coverage period, **4** including in March and April 2024, due to damage to submarine fiber-optic cables in the Red Sea. Both the Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL) and Transworld reported being impacted by the damaged cables. **5**

Power outages are a serious problem in Pakistan, especially during the summer, ⁶ and prevent individuals from accessing routers and charging their devices. ⁷ For 10 days in April 2024, residents of Peshawar and adjacent areas experienced cellular service and internet disruptions between 9:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. due to ongoing repair work. ⁸ Additionally, residents of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), a region that has special status due to border disputes with India and is not covered in this report, experienced severe power outages during the coverage period. The outages lasted for approximately 22 hours per day and went on for months, affecting internet and mobile services for all residents in the region. ⁹

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons?	0/3
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There are serious geographic, gender, and socioeconomic inequalities in access to information and communications technology (ICT). Though mobile data costs have fallen in recent years, new taxes and high inflation rates continue to restrict internet affordability. ¹⁰

According to UK-based company Cable, the average price of 1 GB of data was \$0.12 as of September 2023, while broadband services cost an average of \$15.52 per month, an amount that is prohibitive for many Pakistanis. ¹¹

In August 2023, some internet service providers (ISPs) increased the cost of their services by between 10 and 15 percent, citing inflation. ¹² Additionally, in December 2023, the PTCL declared a tariff hike, increasing monthly rates by over 10 percent for its landline and broadband services. ¹³

There are severe disparities in internet access and infrastructure among different regions of the country. Many parts of Balochistan lack internet connectivity, and in areas where there is coverage, mobile internet speeds are lower than the national average. ¹⁴ Lack of high-speed internet is also a perennial problem in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and GB, regions that have special status due to border disputes with India and are not covered in this report. ¹⁵

The government has adopted some initiatives designed to provide internet access to remote areas. For instance, a Universal Service Fund (USF), established in 2006, has launched projects to install high-speed internet in underserved areas of Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, ¹⁶ and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and has completed infrastructure projects in southern Punjab, Sindh, parts of Balochistan, and northern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. ¹⁷ Meanwhile, the PTA plans to implement national roaming ¹⁸ in parts of Balochistan experiencing connectivity issues. ¹⁹ In August 2023, the PTA installed fiber-optic cables on mobile towers in Nathia Gali, a popular northern hill station in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. ²⁰

Low literacy, difficult economic conditions, and conservative cultural norms have also created inequalities in how Pakistanis access the internet. ²¹ The digital divide between men and women in Pakistan is among the highest in the world; religious, social, and cultural norms discourage women from owning devices and inhibit independent and safe access to internet (see C7). ²² According to the PTA's 2023 Annual Report, as of June 2023, of Pakistan's 122.9 million mobile broadband subscribers, 29.8 million are women, making up 24.2 percent of all subscribers. ²³

There have been some government initiatives to promote gender parity in access to the internet and communications technology. ²⁴ In March 2024, the PTA drafted the Digital Gender Inclusion Strategy to address the country's digital gender divide with a particular focus on women's limited access to digital technologies, as well as the norms that affect the inclusion of women in digital spaces. ²⁵ The USF has also launched some projects that promote gender inclusion. ²⁶

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?

1/6

Authorities frequently shut down or throttle telecommunication and internet services during protests, ²⁷ elections, ²⁸ and religious and national holidays, often citing security concerns. Section 54 of the 1996 Pakistan Telecommunications Act grants authorities the power to suspend internet services. While the law as written may only be invoked during a state of

emergency, in practice it has been used to justify routine shutdowns, prompting several court cases in which the courts have reaffirmed the PTA's authority to suspend services. **29**

During the coverage period, the government reportedly throttled internet services nationwide during a January 2024 virtual *ja/sa*, or rally, hosted by the opposition PTI party, during which social media platforms like X, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube were also inaccessible to users. **30** Additionally, social media platforms were reportedly unavailable ahead of virtual *jalsas* in December 2023 and January 2024 (see B1). **31**

In January 2024, the Sindh High Court ruled that the PTA had to provide uninterrupted internet access to citizens until February 8, the day of general elections. **32** Despite this, on February 8, mobile internet services were suspended nationwide for 10 hours. **33** Soon after, the Public Interest Law Association of Pakistan, as well as lawyers Jibran Nasir and Hyder Raza, filed petitions with the Sindh High Court against the PTA for suspending services. The court requested that internet be restored and that the federal government explain why the internet was suspended ahead of and during the elections. **34** During a subsequent hearing in March, the PTA explained that the Ministry of Interior had requested that the PTA suspend mobile services and that the regulatory body is legally obligated to comply with such directives. **35**

Districts and provinces can submit security-related requests to the PTA to shut down mobile and internet services locally. On February 7, internet services were suspended in the Makran area of Balochistan due to undisclosed security threats.

36 In April 2024, at the direction of the Ministry of Interior, mobile services were suspended in various provinces in Punjab and Balochistan during by-elections. **37** In May 2024, 4G broadband internet service was suspended in Mirpur, Rawalakot, and other cities in AJK, a region that has special status due to border disputes with India and is not covered in this report. The suspensions took place during protests and demonstrations against rising electricity bills. **38** Starting on May 12, mobile internet services were shut down for five days, and internet was only restored once the protests were called off. **39**

During the previous coverage period, authorities frequently restricted mobile and broadband internet. **40** Internet access was restricted nationwide for four days in

May 2023 following the arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan. During this time the government also blocked Facebook, X, and YouTube. **41**

Long-term internet shutdowns have been implemented in restive border regions, including one lasting more than five years in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which are now incorporated into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. **42** Though officials have restored internet services in some parts of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, services have not been fully restored, particularly in the districts bordering Afghanistan. **43**

The state exerts considerable influence over the internet backbone, and the predominantly state-owned PTCL controls the country's largest internet exchange point (IXP), the Pakistan Internet Exchange (PIE). The PIE operated the nation's sole internet backbone until 2009, when additional bandwidth was offered by TransWorld Associates on its private fiber-optic cable, TW1. **44** In March 2023, German company DE-CIX signed an agreement with PTCL to establish an IXP in Pakistan, **45** and in January 2024 PTCL announced the launch of the country's first carrier-neutral internet exchange, referred to as the "Pakistan Internet Exchange (PIE) Karachi powered by DE-CIX." **46**

PTCL also controls access to international undersea fiber-optic cables, including Southeast Asia–Middle East–Western Europe (SEA-ME-WE) 3, SEA-ME-WE 4, India–Middle East–Western Europe (I-ME-WE), **47** and the Asia-Africa-Europe-1 (AAE-1) cable system. **48** Another cable, the Pak-China fiber-optic cable, is owned by the military-run Special Communications Organization (SCO) and runs from Rawalpindi to Khunjerab. **49** Additionally, the Pakistan & East Africa Connecting Europe (PEACE) fiber-optic cable—which is owned by Peace Cable International, a subsidiary of Chinese fiber optic cable manufacturer Hengtong Group—was completed in September 2022. **50**

The internet rights group Bolo Bhi has raised concerns regarding the dangers of terrestrial cables between Pakistan and China, given China's highly restrictive internet model. **51** In January 2024, Pakistan and China signed an agreement to route Chinese internet traffic through Pakistan, effectively turning the country into "a regional hub for connectivity."

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers?

3/6

Pakistan has a combination of private and publicly run service providers. The PTA, the government regulator, exerts significant control over internet and mobile providers through hefty licensing fees and various bureaucratic processes **52** — powers it is granted under section 5(2)(a) of the Pakistan Telecommunication (Re-organization) Act, 1996. **53**

There are four major mobile service providers in Pakistan: Pakistan Mobile Communication Limited (PMCL, also known as Jazz), which held 37.31 percent of the market as of January 2024; China Mobile Pakistan (CMPak, also known as Zong), which held 24.93 percent of the market; Telenor Pakistan, which held 23.55 percent, and Pak Telecom Mobile Limited (PTML, also known as Ufone), which is a PTCL subsidiary and held 13.29 percent. **54** In AJK and GB, regions that have special status due to border disputes with India and are not covered in this report, there are two more operators: the military-run Special Communications Organization (SCO), which holds 0.92 percent of Pakistan’s total market, and Warid Pakistan. **55**

The predominantly state-owned PTCL has long dominated the broadband market. **56** The most recent national broadband policy, which aimed to encourage investment in broadband infrastructure and greater connectivity, was issued by the PTA in 2004. **57** In early 2022, the MOITT issued a draft National Broadband Policy 2021, which aims for “every citizen in any corner of the country to gain universal access to high speed affordable internet.” In April 2024, the MOITT held the first round of stakeholder consultation on the draft policy. **58**

In May 2022, the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) imposed regulations requiring service providers to have a 100 percent cash margin. The PTA and industry experts raised concerns that the regulations will adversely impact network expansion efforts in Pakistan. **59**

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner?

0/4

The PTA—which oversees the internet and mobile industry and has broad powers over online content and the licensing of service providers—has historically implemented policies that undermine internet freedom, removed content without a transparent process, and instituted wholesale bans on platforms, **60** as it did during the coverage period.

The members and chair of the three-person PTA are appointed by the president and report to the MOITT. **61** The current chair of the PTA is retired major general Hafeezur Rehman. It is common practice to appoint retired military personnel as the heads of government departments, part of the military’s efforts to expand its regulatory capacity in most spheres of Pakistani governance.

The PTA was established under the Pakistan Telecommunication (Re-organization) Act, 1996. Section 8 of the act gives the federal government the power to issue policy directives regarding the PTA’s work and functions. Since March 2015, the PTA has been formally responsible for internet content management. Additionally, Section 37 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA) and the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2021 **62** further grant the PTA the power to block and remove online content, largely without oversight or transparency (see B3).

In August 2023, the Federal Cabinet of Pakistan approved the E-Safety Bill 2023. The bill would redistribute some of the PTA’s existing content management powers—such as granting licensing to websites and web channels and regulating news and media websites—to an E-Safety Authority established under the proposed legislation (see B3). The PTA would maintain its role overseeing regulators and telecom providers. **63** The bill was awaiting parliamentary approval at the end of the coverage period.

B. Limits on Content

B1 o-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?

1/6

Authorities frequently block content that is critical of Islam or the military, content that is deemed a threat to national security, sites that host pornography or nudity, and sites related to or offering circumvention and privacy tools, in addition to other political and social content. **64**

Starting in mid-February 2024, after the general elections and amid widespread protests against alleged vote rigging by the military, X has been largely blocked in Pakistan. **65** In March 2024, journalist Ehtisham Abbasi filed a petition with the Islamabad High Court against the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MOIB) and the PTA, challenging the ban. **66** Pakistan's interior ministry had initially denied that the platform was banned in the country. However, in April, at the court's request, **67** the ministry submitted a report in which it admitted to ordering the blocking, allegedly due to national security reasons, the platform's failure to register under the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2021, and the platform's violation of local laws (see B3 and B6). **68** At the end of the coverage period X remained blocked in Pakistan, though it was accessible by virtual private network (VPN).

Additionally, ahead of, during, and immediately after the February 2024 general elections, internet users nationwide were intermittently unable to access social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. Many of these one- to two-day blocks—including restrictions that took place on December 17, January 7, and January 20—coincided with virtual jalsas and fundraising events hosted by the opposition PTI party (see A3).

Since July 17, 2024, after the coverage period, WhatsApp has been inaccessible in Pakistan. Though government representatives attributed the disruption to greater global internet outages, Meta, the communications platform's parent company, refuted the claims, sharing that WhatsApp was unavailable "due to the country's internal internet issue" and that "Meta has nothing to do with this." **69**

Since the PTA does not publish a list of blocked websites, information about blockings is often anecdotal and only accessible on a case-by-case basis. In January 2024, in its 2023 annual report, the PTA reported blocking 1.4 million URLs for a range of unlawful activities, including those related to the security and defense of Pakistan, decency and morality, the glory of Islam, and defamation and impersonation. **70** In January 2024, the PTA blocked two of the PTI party's

websites ahead of the general elections; both sites remained blocked as of the end of the coverage period. **71** The regulator also blocked Fact Focus, an investigative news platform, eight days before the elections, and the site remained blocked at the end of the coverage period. **72** Fact Focus was previously blocked for less than a day in November 2022, after it published leaked tax records of ex-army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa and his family. **73**

The PTA has previously blocked social media and communications apps, including brief blocks of TikTok in 2020 and 2021. **74** The dating apps Tinder, Grindr, Tagged, Skout, and SayHi have been blocked since 2020. **75** The PTA previously blocked Facebook, X, and YouTube for nearly a full week in May 2023 following the arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan. **76** Access to YouTube was also intermittently disrupted in August and September 2022 **77** amidst a larger August 2022 ban on broadcasting Khan’s speeches on television. **78** Additionally, the PTA restricted access to Wikipedia for two days in February 2023 because the platform refused to remove content the PTA deemed “sacrilegious.” **79**

The government also allegedly has access to censorship equipment. Pakistan is one of several countries reported to have purchased website blocking and filtering equipment from Sandvine, a Canadian-based network equipment company. **80** In January 2024, the PTA confirmed that it was planning to upgrade its WMS surveillance systems, which use deep packet inspection technology to assist the PTA’s censoring and blocking of content at the gateway level (see C5).

81

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?	1 / 4
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State and other actors are known to exert extralegal pressure on publishers and content producers to remove content, and these instances frequently go unreported. The PTA also directs social media platforms and content hosts to remove content it deems illegal (see B1).

During the coverage period, YouTube reported that it received requests from the government to “remove the official channel of a key Pakistani political figure and three videos hosted on the channel.” YouTube did not remove any of the requested content, saying that the videos contained political speech. YouTube also received a request from the PTA to remove four videos “related to Balochi separatist movements.” YouTube removed two of the reported videos, which it reported were in violation of local laws. **82**

Between July 2022 to June 2023, Meta restricted access to 7,665 items reported by the PTA for allegedly violating local laws. **83** Between January and June 2023, TikTok received 189 removal requests related to 11,772 pieces of content. TikTok removed 96.8 percent of the flagged content, which the platform found to be in violation of community guidelines or local laws. **84**

During the previous coverage period, the PTA held meetings with social media companies, **85** and continued the process of registering companies under the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2021 (see B3). In April 2022, the PTA inaugurated the Central Domain Name System (CDNS) to automate content removal under section 37 of the PECA. **86**

Section 38 of the PECA limits service providers’ civil and criminal liability for content posted by users, unless it is proven that the service provider had knowledge of cybercrimes or intended to proactively participate in them. The controversial Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2021 include financial liability for social media platforms that do not comply with takedown requests within short timeframes, as specified by Rule 5(7)(c) (see B3). **87**

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process?

1 / 4

The PTA, the regulatory authority for online censorship, routinely restricts content in a nontransparent and arbitrary fashion. Historically, the PTA has been responsible for monitoring content online and enforcing laws related to individuals’ online activities.

Various laws criminalizing defamation have enabled politically motivated censorship of dissenting voices, as well as of information perceived as damaging to the military or political elites. Though the PECA legally mandates that the PTA issue notices when it restricts content, in practice the agency rarely does, limiting opportunities for appeals or judicial review. Additionally, some laws passed or proposed during the coverage period, while ostensibly aimed at limiting harmful speech, contain broad definitions and lack independent appeals mechanisms, leaving them similarly ripe for abuse.

In May 2024, the Provincial Assembly of Punjab passed the Punjab Defamation Bill 2024, which the acting governor signed in June 2024, after the end of the coverage period. Under the act, defamation—which is vaguely defined and can be determined “without proof of actual damage or loss”—is an offense punishable by fines of up to 3 million rupees (\$10,500)(see C2). Under the act, the government will establish tribunals to hear defamation cases, and will also appoint tribunal members in consultation with the Chief Justice of the Lahore High Court. These tribunals can compel those found guilty of spreading defamation to provide “an unconditional apology.” They also have the authority to direct regulatory authorities, like the PTA, to suspend or block a defendant’s social media account, as well as “any other medium or platform covered by this Act through which the defamatory content was disseminated.” **88**

In July 2023, the federal cabinet approved the E-Safety Bill 2023, which would criminalize a wide range of vaguely defined speech, including content which promotes terrorism or violence against the state, is false or defamatory, “passes derogatory remarks about any religion, sect, community,” “incites hatred or contempt,” or is “against the Islamic values and ideology of Pakistan.” The proposed bill, which is currently awaiting parliamentary approval, would establish an E-Safety Authority responsible for regulating content on social media platforms, streaming services, and communication platforms. The authority is also tasked with enforcing platform registration requirements (see B6), fining platforms that violate the bill, and blocking access to content found to be promoting, inciting, providing instructions for, or depicting violent conduct. **89** Additionally, the E-Safety Authority would have the power to access “any material” connected to activities that violate the bill, including communication devices, and

to “carry out inspection[s] of premises owned or occupied by the Social Network Platform(s)” (see C6). **90**

The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Amendment) Bill, 2023, which was signed in August 2023, empowers the organization to regulate disinformation and misinformation, potentially influencing online broadcasting. **91**

The Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2021—enacted in October 2021—expanded the PTA’s powers to block and remove content on the internet. The rules give the PTA vast powers to censor content considered offensive under Pakistan’s penal code, including content containing indecency, blasphemy, or false information, without providing any definitions of these terms. **92** Under the rules, the government may block the platforms of social media companies who do not comply with the content moderation decisions of the PTA within 48 hours under regular circumstances and within 12 hours in emergency situations. **93**

The rules were challenged at the Islamabad High Court in November 2021, **94** and in September 2022 **95** the federal government put together a committee to review the rules. **96** At the end of the coverage period there were no further updates on the committee’s findings. Social media companies have warned that the rules could impact their ability to operate in the country (see B6). **97** Though the status of the rules is unclear, some social media companies, like TikTok and Google, have started to register under them. **98** In January 2023, the PTA recommended that other government regulators, including the SBP, the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP), and the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), take action against unregistered social media platforms. **99** In April 2024, the government cited X’s failure to register under the rules as a reason the platform had been blocked (see B1).

In May 2024, under Section 51 of the PECA, the government established a National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA), replacing the Federal Investigative Agency (FIA) as the investigative agency responsible for the PECA. **100** That same month, the government finalized the draft of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) Amendment Bill 2024, which would establish a Digital Rights Protection Authority to monitor violations of the act.

Broad provisions in the 1996 Pakistan Telecommunications Act support censorship for the protection of national security or for religious reasons. ¹⁰¹ A telecommunications policy approved in 2015 enables the PTA to monitor and manage content that is blasphemous or otherwise in conflict with the principles of the Islamic way of life, as well as content that is “detrimental to national security, or any other category stipulated in any other law.”²⁸ Section 99 of the penal code separately allows the government to restrict information that might be prejudicial to the national interest. ¹⁰²

As a condition of their licenses, ISPs and backbone providers must restrict access to individual URLs or internet protocol (IP) addresses upon receipt of a blocking order. ¹⁰³ Since 2012, successive administrations have sought to move from less sophisticated manual blocking toward technical filtering, ¹⁰⁴ despite widespread civil society protests. ¹⁰⁵ In 2013, the University of Toronto–based research group Citizen Lab reported that technology developed by the Canadian company Netsweeper, as well as domain name system (DNS) tampering, ¹⁰⁶ filtered political and social content at the national level on the PTCL network. ¹⁰⁷

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship?

1 / 4

Most online commentators exercise a degree of self-censorship when writing on topics related to religion, blasphemy, the military, separatist movements, women’s rights, and the rights of marginalized communities. ¹⁰⁸

Journalists and activists increasingly practice self-censorship due to the persistent pressures and threats they face, including high levels of violence (see C7) and civil and criminal cases related to online activity under the PECA (see C3). ¹⁰⁹ During a hearing at the Islamabad High Court in 2022, the judges pointed out that there was apprehension that broad regulatory powers and licensing systems could result in self-censorship. ¹¹⁰

During the coverage period, authorities unofficially reached out to various journalists, prohibiting them from reporting that candidates were affiliated with the PTI, requesting that the candidates be covered as independents, and asking journalists to remove PTI party symbols from election coverage (see B5).

Self-censorship is also exacerbated by government surveillance (see C5).

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest?

2 / 4

Increasingly, coordinated and inauthentic accounts are manipulating online content and spreading disinformation. False, misleading, and manipulated online content on political subjects surged during the 2024 general elections this coverage period and surrounding the 2023 political crisis during the previous coverage period.

In the days before the 2024 general elections, deepfake audio clips and videos circulated in which PTI officials—including former prime minister Imran Khan, ¹¹¹ Khan’s legal advisor Nadeem Haider Panjutha, ¹¹² and PTI candidate Muhammad Basharat Raja ¹¹³—were falsely depicted as calling for a boycott of the elections, a message which could have limited PTI voter turnout. The PTI has employed similar technology in their campaigning: at a December 2023 virtual rally, the party showed an AI-generated video of Khan addressing PTI supporters from jail. ¹¹⁴

Regulators in Pakistan also frequently issue official and unofficial directives to media outlets in relation to their reporting on PTI. In January 2024, three journalists confirmed to news outlet Al Jazeera that they had received instructions from military officials to not use the PTI party’s flags or mention any PTI candidate’s party affiliation in the journalists’ coverage of the general elections. ¹¹⁵

Pakistan’s military manipulates the content that appears in digital spaces, including on social media platforms. ¹¹⁶ Online journalists and activists, especially those scrutinizing the military or intelligence agencies, have also testified to the existence of state-sponsored “troll armies” being employed to silence dissent. ¹¹⁷

Foreign governments have also sought to shape Pakistan’s information space. The former head of trust and safety at Twitter, Yoel Roth, disclosed in September 2023 that Twitter had linked a network of accounts which claimed to be Kashmiri to the Indian military. The accounts spread pro-India and anti-Pakistan narratives. ¹¹⁸ In

February 2023, EU DisinfoLab similarly uncovered a network of inauthentic online sources—regularly quoted by Indian news outlets—that were being used to spread anti-Pakistan and anti-China narratives. **119**

Throughout the coverage period, transgender individuals continued to be subjected to organized online disinformation campaigns related to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2018, particularly by the religious party Jamaat-e-Islami, social media influencers, and public figures like Maria B. **120**

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users' ability to publish content online?

2/3

While some digital media outlets struggle to stay financially viable, the online landscape is generally free of major economic or regulatory constraints intended to prevent users from publishing independent political news and opinions. However, government advertisement revenue is disbursed selectively based on outlets' editorial positions. **121** The government has suspended its advertisements with Dawn and Jang, two media groups known to be critical of the government, which led to downsizing by both groups.

Ahead of the February 2024 general elections, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) published the Code of Conduct for National Media 2023. The code applies to journalists, media outlets, and social media influencers, and prohibits the publication of “any opinion prejudicial to the ideology, sovereignty, uprightness or security of Pakistan, public order or the integrity and independence of the judiciary of Pakistan,” and any identity-based “aspect which might be construed as personal attack on candidates or political parties.” Journalists, media outlets, and social media influencers found in violation of the code could lose their media accreditation. **122**

The proposed E-Safety Bill establishes an E-Safety Authority, responsible for granting, renewing, and revoking registration from “Social Network Platforms,” which include social media and streaming platforms. The authority would also “determine fees including fees for grant of registration and renewal, annual fees,

base prices and other charges at such rates,” which could potentially limit platforms’ ability to operate in the country (see B3).

Outside of obligations imposed under section 38 of the PECA (see B2), the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2021 also impose additional obligations on social media companies and service providers. The rules require companies and providers to set up local offices, develop and deploy mechanisms to moderate livestreams, and ensure uploads and livestreams do not contain content related to terrorism, extremism, hate speech, pornography, incitement to violence, or any subject detrimental to national security.

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability?

2/4

Despite content restrictions and high data costs, most Pakistanis have access to international news outlets and other independent media, as well as a range of websites representing political parties, local civil society groups, and international human rights organizations. **123**

Over the years, many digital, nonlegacy news outlets **124** and content creators have emerged on applications such as YouTube and TikTok. While there are several outlets producing content in regional languages, there is still a disproportionate amount of Urdu- and English-language content. Urdu content online is limited because of the challenges presented by digitizing the nasta‘liq script. **125** Additionally, content online is largely dominated by users with the greatest access—generally those in urban areas with the means to afford internet service. False information, often disseminated in coordinated and targeted campaigns, increasingly affects the reliability of content on the internet. **126**

Social taboos and the criminalization of same-sex relations mean that local content addressing the interests of LGBT+ people is limited and that some people avoid organizing around issues related to these identities (see B1, B5, and C7). **127**

B8 0-6 pts

Social networking, blogging, and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) applications are available and widely used. However, digital activism is limited by a government ban on crowdfunding, ¹²⁸ restrictions on internet and mobile connectivity, intermittent blocking of social media platforms, and restrictive laws (see A3 and B3).

The internet has provided a space for individuals to discuss issues censored in the mainstream media, though users mobilizing around controversial topics online increasingly face repercussions for their activism. For instance, to circumvent widespread censorship of Imran Khan and the PTI in the mainstream media, ¹²⁹ the opposition party hosted virtual jalsas and created their own generative AI chatbot to continue engaging with their supporters ahead of the 2024 elections. The PTI claimed that a jalsa they hosted in December 2023 was attended by 1.4 million people on Facebook, 1.2 million on YouTube, and 1.5 million on X. ¹³⁰ At the same time, authorities also use social media posts and messages to arrest and detain PTI members (see C3). ¹³¹

Transgender activists have also leveraged digital platforms to cultivate community spaces. For example, when the Sindh High Court denied permission to hold "Scrap Fest"—a festival consisting primarily of transgender performers—in Karachi in February 2023, the event was moved online. ¹³² Organizers of the annual Aurat (Women's) March leverage social media to mobilize support, including ahead of the March 2024 march during the coverage period, ¹³³ though in previous years, organizers were targeted by coordinated misinformation campaigns (see B5) and accused of blasphemy (see C3), ¹³⁴ forcing some to go underground. ¹³⁵

C. Violations of User Rights

C1 o-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?

2/6

Article 19 of Pakistan’s constitution establishes freedom of speech and freedom of the press as fundamental rights, and Article 19A guarantees access to information. However, these rights are subject to several broad restrictions, including for “the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defense of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, commission of or incitement to an offence.” ¹³⁶ Exceptions for online spaces are codified under section 37 of the PECA. ¹³⁷ Pakistani courts have not clearly interpreted terms such as “national interest,” “decency,” and “morality,” and parameters of the constitutional articles are largely seen as inapplicable to the most powerful institutions in the country.

The judiciary in Pakistan has a history of rubber-stamping military regimes under the doctrine of necessity. During the coverage period the Supreme Court was embroiled in controversies related to the country’s political crisis, including attempts to curb the broad powers of the chief justice. ¹³⁸

However, some rulings have affirmed online expression and other fundamental rights. For example, the Lahore High Court struck down a colonial-era sedition law used to target journalists and activists in March 2023. ¹³⁹ Previously, the Supreme Court reaffirmed the constitutional right to free expression and press freedom in a February 2019 ruling, stating that the government could not restrict the fundamental rights of freedom of speech, expression, and press beyond the limitations defined in Article 19. ¹⁴⁰

Pakistan became a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)—which protects freedom of expression, among other rights—in 2010 but does not consistently uphold it in practice. ¹⁴¹ The applicability of international law in local courts is a contentious issue. Pakistan is a dualist country, making international treaties legally binding only once they are specifically incorporated into local law.

The federal government ¹⁴² and the Sindh provincial government each passed a journalist protection bill in 2021. Both laws include online content creators and bloggers in their provisions. ¹⁴³ The laws have been criticized by civil society and journalists' unions for containing broad language about good faith requirements for sharing information that can result in punitive sanctions, ¹⁴⁴ and the extent of the implementation of the journalist protection provisions remains unclear. ¹⁴⁵

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?

0 / 4

Several laws restrict the rights of internet users.

In May 2024, at the end of the coverage period, the Provincial Assembly of Punjab passed the Punjab Defamation Bill 2024, under which individuals found guilty of spreading “false, misleading, and defamatory” content—in print, electronically, or on social media—can face fines up to 3 million rupees (\$10,500). Under the act, claimants can file defamation charges “without proof of actual damage or loss.” Cases will be heard by government-established tribunals, whose members will be appointed by the government in consultation with the chief justice of the Lahore High Court (see B3). Civil society organizations have raised concerns that the act will enable further restrictions on press freedom in the country. ¹⁴⁶

The PECA, which was implemented in August 2016, contains excessively broad language and disproportionate penalties—including a 14-year prison term—for acts of cyberterrorism, hate speech, and defamation. ¹⁴⁷ The law also punishes preparing or disseminating electronic communications that glorify terrorism or information that is likely to advance religious, ethnic, or sectarian hatred, an offense that is punishable with up to seven years in prison. Section 20 criminalizes online defamation with a maximum three-year prison term, a fine of 1 million rupees (\$3,500), or both. ¹⁴⁸ The criminal defamation section has been used to target journalists, dissidents, and survivors of sexual harassment. ¹⁴⁹

February 2022 amendments to the criminal defamation section of the PECA ¹⁵⁰ expanded the definition of a person to include companies, associations, public authorities, and any government office. Additionally, the amendments increased

the maximum prison sentence for defamation from three to five years. After the national journalists' union challenged the ordinance that amended the PECA in the Islamabad High Court, ¹⁵¹ the court struck down both the ordinance and a clause in section 20 of the PECA as unconstitutional. However, the legislation continues to be applied in criminal cases against individuals (see C3). ¹⁵²

In the past, the Islamabad High Court has issued directions to include pornography and blasphemy as offenses under the PECA, though no legal changes have been made to this effect. ¹⁵³

In July 2023, the government proposed amendments to the PECA which would further criminalize the sharing of false information or information that might instill “a sense of fear, panic or disorder or unrest in general public or in society.” Individuals found to be in violation of the act could face up to five years in prison and penalties up to 1 million rupees (\$3,500). Additionally, Section 37 of the PECA would be expanded to include 16 new categories of content that social media platforms would be mandated to block or remove. ¹⁵⁴ As of the end of the coverage period, the amendments are still awaiting parliamentary approval. ¹⁵⁵

In August 2023, the National Assembly and Senate passed amendments to the Official Secrets Act (OSA) and the Pakistan Army Act (PAA). Amendments to the OSA, under which intelligence agencies could already seize any document which is evidence of violations of the act, expanded the law's definitions of documents to include “any written, unwritten, electronic, digital, or any other tangible or intangible instrument.” ¹⁵⁶ Experts have voiced concerns that the amendments will have the potential to further criminalize online activities.

Sections of the penal code that cover blasphemy—including 295(c), which imposes a mandatory death sentence—are frequently invoked to limit freedom of expression online, though such sentences have historically not been enforced (see C3). ¹⁵⁷ In March 2017, the Islamabad High Court ruled that those accused of posting blasphemous content on social media should be barred from leaving the country until their name is cleared. ¹⁵⁸ Any citizen can file a blasphemy complaint against any other, leaving the accused vulnerable to violent reprisals regardless of whether the complaint has merit.

The 2002 Defamation Ordinance—which continues to be invoked despite being effectively replaced by the PECA—can impose prison sentences of up to five years. Furthermore, sections 499 and 500 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) also deal with criminal defamation and can be applied online. Section 124 of the PPC on sedition is broadly worded and covers acts of sedition “by words” or “visible representation,” which could include digital speech, though it has not yet been applied to an online context. ¹⁵⁹ Additionally, section 505 of the PPC, which deals with “statements conducing to public mischief,” has been used to penalize and arrest dissidents speaking out against public institutions.

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?	1/6
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People are frequently prosecuted for their online activities, especially online blasphemy, ¹⁶⁰ and often receive harsh sentences.

The death penalty was imposed in five cases of online blasphemy during the coverage period, and in three cases during the previous coverage period. ¹⁶¹ Additionally, death penalty convictions from previous coverage periods remained pending or on appeal.

In September 2023, a court sentenced four individuals to death for blasphemy and sharing blasphemous content regarding the prophet Muhammad in a WhatsApp group. ¹⁶² In March 2024, a judge sentenced a 22-year-old law student to death for sharing derogatory pictures and videos of the prophet Muhammad over WhatsApp. A 17-year-old codefendant was sentenced to life in prison. ¹⁶³

Political speech, such as criticism of the government, judiciary, or the armed forces, is sometimes subject to legal action. ¹⁶⁴

In November 2023, Adil Raja, a YouTuber and former lieutenant colonel in the Pakistani army, was sentenced to 14 years in prison. Raja had been arrested in June 2023 for “inciting people to attack military installations, spread terrorism and create chaos in the country,” and his social media posts were cited in the case against him. Raja was arrested alongside two US-based Pakistani journalists, Wajahat Saeed Khan and Shaheen Sehbai. Sehbai and Khan were similarly

investigated for terrorism charges under the penal code for their May 2023 reporting on the arrest of Imran Khan and its aftermath; their social media posts were also cited in the complaint against them.

In February 2024, Asad Ali Toor, a prominent online journalist with a large following, was arrested for his reporting on that month's elections, which allegedly constituted a "malicious campaign" against judges in the country. ¹⁶⁵ Toor was released in March 2024 on bail. ¹⁶⁶

In September 2023, Muhammad Khalid Jamil, bureau chief of Ausaf Broadcast Network (ABN) News, was arrested under Section 20 of the PECA for allegedly spreading an "anti-state narrative by sharing false misleading and baseless information" on X. ¹⁶⁷ He was remanded for 14 days before being released on bail. ¹⁶⁸

Senior party leaders of the PTI have previously been targeted under the PECA, most prominently Senator Azam Swati, who was arrested for a critical Twitter post about the army. ¹⁶⁹ Swati alleged that he was tortured in custody ¹⁷⁰ and that an intimate video of him and his wife was shared with family members to intimidate him. ¹⁷¹ He was rearrested in November 2022 ¹⁷² and released in January 2023. ¹⁷³ In March 2023, the PTI's social media head, Azhar Mashwani, was arrested on unclear charges and detained for eight days. ¹⁷⁴

During the previous coverage period, PTI supporters were arrested for expressing their support for Imran Khan or criticizing the military and government, including online. ¹⁷⁵

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption?	1/4
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Requirements that users link their internet and mobile connections to their national identity card limit anonymous use of the internet. ¹⁷⁶ Increasingly stringent security measures mean that users must register fingerprints along with other identifying information when applying for wireless local loop (WLL) internet packages and mobile service. ¹⁷⁷ Mobile phones must be linked to national identification card numbers through the PTA's Device Identification, Registration

and Blocking System (DIRBS), and unregistered phones have been subject to disconnection. **178**

The government has previously moved to restrict encrypted communication. In June 2020, the PTA announced that it would instruct internet users to register their VPNs or face legal action, and the agency introduced an online portal for VPN registration in October 2020. **179**

The Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2021 contain provisions mandating that social media companies provide decrypted information to designated investigation agencies, which could allow for an unprecedented clampdown on encrypted communications. **180**

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' right to privacy?	1/6
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Government surveillance is a serious concern for activists, bloggers, and media representatives, as well as ordinary internet users. The PECA grants broad surveillance powers both to agencies within Pakistan and potentially to foreign governments, since it includes provisions that permit the sharing of data with international agencies without adequate oversight **181** and grants powers to law enforcement to seize digital devices and content. **182**

In recent years, there have been regular leaks of audio recordings with various political actors, **183** raising concerns about widespread wiretapping. In December 2023, audio recordings of a conversation between Imran Khan's wife, Bushra Bibi, and Khan's lawyer, Latif Khosa, circulated on social media. **184** In early 2024, after audio recordings between Bibi and former chief justice Saqib Nisar's son, Najam Saqib, aired on TV, Bibi and Saqib filed a petition against the PTA in the Islamabad High Court. **185** In March 2024, a council of telecom operators informed the court that the PTA has access to audio recording systems and that the regulatory body can subsequently grant system access to any intelligence agency. **186**

During May 2023 protests, law enforcement agencies reported using a range of tactics to surveil people allegedly involved in attacking military installations,

including geofencing, obtaining call records, seeking footage from safe city cameras, and collecting social media posts. **187**

In July 2021, a phone number associated with then-prime minister Imran Khan was identified on a list of potential targets of the spyware Pegasus. **188** In December 2019, malware from the Israel-based NSO Group was reported to be used against at least two dozen Pakistani government officials via WhatsApp, prompting the MOITT to advise government officials against using WhatsApp for official correspondence. **189** State officials have also come under malware attacks through fake smartphone apps, according to a 2019 report by BlackBerry Research. **190**

According to 2019 reporting by Coda Story, the government contracted a “web-monitoring system” from Canada-headquartered surveillance technologies firm Sandvine, which employs deep packet inspection (DPI) to monitor communications and measure and record traffic and call data. **191** A 2015 Privacy International report found that the government has had access to network surveillance technology from companies like Ericsson and Huawei since 2005. A 2013 report by Citizen Lab indicated that Pakistani citizens may be vulnerable to FinFisher spyware, which collects data such as Skype audio, key logs, and screenshots, though the extent of its use and who may be using it remained unclear. **192**

The Investigation for Fair Trial Act (IFTA), passed in 2013, **193** allows security agencies to seek a judicial warrant to monitor private communications sent from Pakistan, received in Pakistan, or sent between Pakistani citizens, whether they reside in the country or not, in order “to neutralize and prevent [a] threat or any attempt to carry out scheduled offences.” Warrants can be issued if a law enforcement official has “reason to believe” there is a risk of terrorism; warrants can also be temporarily waived by intelligence agencies. The provisions contravene the constitution and international treaties that the Pakistani government has signed. **194**

Data collected by the state’s National Database Registration Authority (NADRA), which maintains a centralized repository of information about citizens, is not subject to any privacy rules and has previously been compromised. **195** Pakistanis are also vulnerable to surveillance from overseas intelligence agencies. **196**

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users' right to privacy?

1/6

Companies are required to aid the government in monitoring internet users. Technology companies have previously complied with government requests for user data. **197** Registration under the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2021, as well as the draft E-Safety Bill, if passed, (see B3) may lead to compliance rates increasing significantly. There is no data privacy law in Pakistan, though the right to privacy is recognized under Article 14 of the constitution.

In July 2023, the federal cabinet passed the Personal Data Protection Bill, **198** which aims to govern the storage and use of data collected through online services and digital platforms. The bill has been criticized for containing vague language, requiring onerous data localization, and giving the federal government the authority to make exceptions. **199** The bill, which was awaiting parliamentary approval at the end of the coverage period, defines personal data as any identifiable information which contains sensitive and critical data about an individual. The bill also includes provisions that mandate local storage of such data. Under the legislation, all entities that maintain and collect data must register themselves with the National Commission for Personal Data Protection (NCPDP). Some digital rights activists have raised concerns that the bill's data-localization requirements might be used to bypass platforms when they refuse to share user data about content that the government wants removed or blocked. **200**

Under the IFTA, service providers face a one-year jail term or a fine of up to 10 million rupees (\$35,000) for failing to cooperate with warrants (see C5). Section 32 of the PECA requires service providers to retain traffic data for a minimum of one year and allows for that period to be extended with a warrant issued by a court. Section 54 of Pakistan Telecommunication (Re-Organization) Act, 1996 empowers the federal government "to intercept calls and messages or to trace calls through any telecommunication system." **201** Furthermore, regulations introduced in 2018 require all Wi-Fi hotspot service providers to retain user data, including users' names, national identity card or passport numbers, mobile phone

numbers, login and log-off times, IP addresses, media access control (MAC) addresses, and internet access logs. **202**

Telecommunications companies, ISPs, and SIM card vendors are required to authenticate the Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) details of prospective customers with NADRA before providing service. **203** The government added a biometric thumb impression to the registration requirements for SIM cards in 2014 **204** and 26 million SIM cards that failed to meet the new requirement were subsequently blocked in 2015. **205**

The Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2021 require “significant social media companies,” defined as those with over 500,000 users, to register with the PTA, establish a permanent registered office in Pakistan, and appoint an in-country representative. Companies are required to comply with any future data localization laws. **206** In August 2020, the National Assembly passed the Mutual Legal Assistance (Criminal Matters) Act 2020, **207** which details a procedure for the government to acquire data from a foreign authority in order to prosecute an individual charged with a criminal offense, including under the penal code. **208**

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in relation to their online activities?

1/5

Users continue to face intimidation, blackmail, hate speech, and at times violence in response to their online activism, reporting, debate, and even apolitical online activities like socializing.

The military routinely abducts individuals for their reporting or activism, and in recent years it has used this practice on social media activists. In May 2024, freelance journalist Syed Farhad Ali Shah, who has a large following on X, was abducted by four unidentified men **209** and has since been declared a missing person. **210**

In August 2023, reporter Fayaz Zafar was arrested for spreading “fake, offensive and hatred contents to defame and incite the public” against the government on social media. Zafar was reportedly beaten by six police officers, who were allegedly

attempting to coerce him into signing an affidavit promising he would stop reporting on the police. **211**

Journalist Imran Riaz Khan, who was previously disappeared following his May 2023 arrest by the FIA in connection to the crackdown on PTI supporters and workers, **212** was returned in September 2023. The circumstances of his disappearance remained unclear, **213** and all police and intelligence agencies had claimed that he was not in their custody. **214** In March 2024, Khan was arrested on corruption charges and remanded to police custody for five days. On the day of Khan's release, March 6, he was rearrested on terrorism charges and again remanded to police custody for five days. Though neither charge was related to his online activities, some press freedom organizations have noted the government's history of fabricating charges against vocal government critics and journalists, as well as Khan's critical reporting on the government on YouTube.

The military has also used intimidation tactics to force people to publicly denounce their online criticism of the military. Several PTI social media workers were made to publicly apologize during the previous coverage period for their critiques of the country's military. **215** In April 2023, journalist Gohar Wazir was abducted by a group of men and electrocuted, allegedly for his reporting on Facebook and for Khyber News on human rights issues in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the treatment of Pashtun communities. The men, who Wazir believes to be progovernment militants, warned him to cease reporting and forced him to record a video praising progovernment militants. **216**

Free expression activists, bloggers, and online journalists have reported being attacked and receiving death threats online and offline. Pakistan is one of the world's most dangerous countries for traditional journalists. **217**

Women journalists have frequently been on the receiving end of government-backed harassment and disinformation campaigns online. In February 2024, the Network of Women Journalists for Digital Rights (NWJDR) issued a statement on gender-based online harassment and abuse against journalist Meher Bokhari and other women journalists. **218** Additionally, organizers and participants of the Aurat March, which celebrates International Women's Day, are subjected to intense online attacks each year, including death and rape threats. **219**

Women's use of digital tools is heavily controlled by families (see A2), and some have been murdered for their online activities in so-called honor killings. **220** In January 2023, a man murdered his daughter on the pretext of honor after a video of her dancing went viral on social media. **221**

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?	1/3
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Technical attacks against the websites of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), opposition groups, and activists are common in Pakistan, though many go unreported.

Women activists and journalists are frequently targeted by sophisticated email-based phishing attacks aimed at obtaining their private information. **222**

Critical infrastructure lacks essential digital security protections and has resulted in data breaches and the hacking of state websites and databases. In March 2024, after conducting an investigation on a previous data leak, the FIA reported that the personal information of 2.7 million Pakistani citizens from the NADRA office had been leaked and sold between 2019 and 2023. **223** In November 2023, the Google Threat Analysis Group shared that it discovered an email patch flaw used to steal data from governments in Greece, Moldova, Tunisia, Vietnam, and Pakistan. **224**

Cross-border cyberattacks between Pakistan and India continue. **225** For example, cybersecurity researchers at BlackBerry disclosed in May 2023 that an India-affiliated hacking group had targeted Pakistani government and military officials. **226**

Cybersecurity researchers disclosed in March 2023 that a network of "suspected government-backed hackers" had targeted people in Pakistan with a military or political background throughout the coverage period. **227** In December 2022, the official Twitter account of the Pakistani consulate in the Afghan city of Kandahar was hacked. **228**

The PTA plans to set up Computer Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) at the national, sectoral, and organizational level. A CERT focused on the telecommunications sector was launched in February 2023. **229**

Footnotes

- 1** “Telecom Indicators: Overview,” Telecom Indicators, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), last updated May 2024, <https://www.pta.gov.pk/en/telecom-indicators>.
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More footnotes



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Country Facts

Population

235,800,000

Global Freedom Score

35/100 **Partly Free**

Internet Freedom Score

27/100 **Not Free**

Freedom in the World Status

Partly Free

Networks Restricted

Yes

Social Media Blocked

Yes

Websites Blocked

Yes

Pro-government Commentators

Yes

Users Arrested

Yes

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