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2021 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Pakistan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pakistan is a federal parliamentary republic. In 2018 the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party won the most National Assembly seats in the general elections, and the party's leader, Imran Khan, became prime minister. While independent observers noted technical improvements in the Election Commission of Pakistan's management of the polling process itself, observers, civil society organizations, and political parties raised concerns regarding preelection interference by military and intelligence agencies that created an uneven electoral playing field. Some political parties also alleged significant polling day irregularities.

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

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings by the government or its agents; forced disappearance by the government or its agents; torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government or its agents; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary detention; political prisoners; politically motivated reprisal against individuals in another country, including killings, kidnappings, or violence; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; support to the Taliban, a nonstate armed militant group that recruited and used child soldiers; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including violence against journalists, unjustified arrests and disappearances of journalists, censorship, and criminal defamation laws; serious restrictions on internet freedom including site blocking; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws for the operation of nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations; severe restrictions of religious freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement; serious government corruption; lack of investigation of and accountability for gender-based violence; trafficking in persons; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting members of racial and ethnic minorities; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; the existence or use of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; restrictions on workers' freedom of association; and use of the worst forms of child labor.

There was a lack of government accountability, and abuses, including corruption, often went unpunished, fostering a culture of impunity among perpetrators, whether official or unofficial. Authorities seldom punished government officials for reported human rights abuses or acts of corruption.

Violence, abuse, and social and religious intolerance by militant organizations and other nonstate actors, both local and foreign, contributed to a culture of lawlessness. Terrorist violence and human rights abuses by nonstate actors contributed to human rights problems, with terrorist violence exceeding that of the prior year. Terrorist and cross-border militant attacks against civilians, soldiers, and police caused hundreds of casualties. Military, police, and law enforcement agencies continued to carry out significant campaigns against militant and terrorist groups. As of September 30, terrorism fatalities stood at 495, compared with 506 fatalities in all of 2020, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, a database compiled by the public interest advocacy organization Institute for Conflict Management, which collects statistics on terrorism and low intensity warfare in South Asia.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

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

There were numerous reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. Security forces reportedly committed extrajudicial killings in connection with conflicts throughout the country (see section 1.g.). Government entities investigate whether security force killings were justifiable and whether to pursue prosecutions via an order either from the inspector general of police or through the National Human Rights Commission.

On January 20, a local court sentenced Frontier Corps (FC) soldier Shadiullah to death for the August 2020 murder of university student Hayat Baloch in Turbat, Balochistan. Baloch activists protested that courts did not punish senior FC personnel for their role in the murder and said the senior leadership of the paramilitary forces fostered an institutionalized culture of violence against the Baloch people. On February 27, the body of missing Awami National Party leader Asad Khan Achakzai was found in Quetta, Balochistan.

On March 7, police killed university student Irfan Jatoi in Sukkur, Sindh, claiming he was a criminal. Jatoi's family denied these allegations and accused law enforcement agencies of kidnapping him on February 10 because of his political beliefs. An autopsy determined that Jatoi's body had sustained four to five bullet wounds to the chest from five feet away, suggesting he was executed while in custody. Inspector General of Sindh Police Mushtaq Mahar ordered an investigation following a public outcry over the killing.

A cross-border firing incident near the country's Torkham border crossing to Afghanistan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on August 27 resulted in several civilian casualties on the Afghan side of the border. According to reports, Pakistani military stationed at the border fired at several persons approaching the border fence from the Afghanistan side of the border as they were attempting to enter Pakistan.

Asad Khan went missing in September 2020 while travelling to Quetta from Chaman to attend a political party meeting. In February police arrested a Levies Force official who confessed to the killing.

Physical abuse of criminal suspects in custody allegedly caused the death of some individuals. Lengthy trial delays and failure to discipline and prosecute those responsible for killings contributed to a culture of impunity.

On August 10, a fact-finding mission of the Ministry of Human Rights recommended charges against police officers for mismanaging the July 30 murder case of Hindu laborer Dodo Bheel in Tharparkar, Sindh. Bheel, a worker hired by a mining company, died after “intense torture” over several days by the company's guards for alleged theft. Bheel's postmortem report showed 19 injuries inflicted on him with a blunt object.

There were numerous reports of attacks against police and security forces. Terrorist groups and cross-border militants killed more than 100 soldiers or Frontier Corps members and injured hundreds more. On February 18, five soldiers were killed and another injured when militants attacked a security post in the Sara Rogha area of South Waziristan District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. On February 22, four female aid workers were shot and killed by unidentified assailants in North Waziristan District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

On April 4, a Swat District antiterrorism court judge, Aftab Afridi, was among four persons shot and killed in Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. On May 4, a roadside bomb killed two soldiers and injured two others in Bajaur District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

On June 14, four FC personnel were killed in an improvised explosive device attack at the Marget-Quetta Road in Balochistan. On June 25, militants killed five FC soldiers in Sibi, Balochistan. The banned Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for the attack. On August 8, two policemen were killed and 21 others injured in an explosion near a police van in Quetta, Balochistan.

In August and September there was a significant increase in attacks on police in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claiming responsibility for most of the attacks, including several on police police-protection details.

Militants and terrorist groups killed hundreds and injured hundreds more with bombs, suicide attacks, and other violence. Casualties increased compared with the previous two years (see section 1.g.). On April 21, five persons, including a police official, were killed and 12 others injured when a bomb exploded in the parking area of the Serena Hotel in Quetta, Balochistan. The TTP claimed responsibility for the blast.

b. Disappearance

Kidnappings and forced disappearances of persons took place across the country. Some officials from intelligence agencies, police, and other security forces reportedly held prisoners incommunicado and refused to disclose their location. The governmental Missing Persons Commission reported that it had opened 8,100 missing-person cases during the year and had solved 5,853 of these cases as of July.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa human rights defender Idris Khattak was held incommunicado by law enforcement from November 2019 until June 2020. Authorities had charged him under the 1923 Official Secrets Act, a British-era law, that could result in a lengthy prison term or death sentence. Khattak, whose work monitored human rights violations in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), disappeared after his car was stopped by security agents in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Human rights organizations reported some authorities disappeared or arrested Pashtun, Sindhi, and Baloch human rights activists, as well as Sindhi and Baloch nationalists without cause or warrant. Some children were also detained to pressure their parents. Activists claimed 500 Sindhis were missing, with more than 50 disappearing in 2021 alone. On August 26, the Sindh High Court ordered law enforcement agencies to recover all missing persons in Sindh by September 11. A lawyer representing the Sindh Rangers informed the court that of 1,200 missing persons, 900 had already been recovered in the province. Of these, Sindh police located 298 in the last six months.

On 26 June, Seengar Noonari, a political activist affiliated with the Awami Workers Party, was abducted from his home in Qambar-Shahdaddkot, Sindh. His family members alleged that the Sindh Rangers kidnapped him in reprisal for his activism against expropriation of land owned by indigenous communities. On August 2 he returned home, 35 days after his abduction.

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

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

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

On April 28, a police inquiry into the death of a young man at the Criminal Investigations Agency police center in Tando Allahyar, Sindh, revealed that police filed false charges against the deceased and falsely classified his cause of death as suicide while in custody. The report found a police constable responsible for harassment and extortion and recommended closing the special police center.

On June 26, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) said that 19 persons, including two teenagers, died in police custody due to torture since June 2020. HRCP expressed concern over the use of torture by civilian and military agencies and the absence of a legal framework to effectively prosecute police brutality.

Media and civil society organizations reported cases of individuals dying in police custody allegedly due to torture. On June 26, four police officers were charged for killing a man in custody at Tibba Sultanpur police station in Vihari District of Punjab. On July 18, Ejaz Alias Amjad was allegedly tortured to death in police custody in Wahando police station of Gujranwala, Punjab. A case was registered against six policemen, and an investigation committee was formed to investigate the death. On August 31, the body of a young prisoner, Ayaz Sial, was found in a police cell in Jarwar, Sindh. His family claimed Sial was tortured to death by the police, although police claimed the deceased suffered a cardiac arrest while in custody.

According to the United Nations' Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance Conduct and Discipline Service online portal, there were no new misconduct allegations against Pakistani peacekeepers serving in United Nations peacekeeping operations during the reporting period. The last allegation was submitted in February 2020 concerning sexual exploitation and abuse by a Pakistani peacekeeper deployed to the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur, allegedly involving the rape of an adult. As of October, the Pakistani government was still investigating the allegation.

There were reports police personnel employed cruel and degrading treatment and punishment. HRCP reported police used excessive force on citizens during at least 20 protests from January to August in different parts of the country. The incidents resulted in the death of four protesters and injury to many others. Multiple sources reported police abuse was often underreported. Impunity was a significant problem in the security forces due to politicization, corruption, and a lack of effective mechanisms to investigate abuses. The government provided limited training to increase respect for human rights by security forces.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Conditions in some civilian prisons and military detention centers were harsh and life threatening due to overcrowding, inadequate food and medical care, and unsanitary conditions.

Physical Conditions: Prison conditions often were extremely poor. Overcrowding remained a serious problem, largely due to structural problems in the criminal justice system that led to a high rate of pretrial detention. According to prison authorities, as of September the total nationwide prison population stood at 85,670 persons in 116 prisons across the country. The designed capacity of these prisons was 64,099, putting the occupancy at 30 percent above capacity.

Inadequate food and medical care in prisons continued to cause chronic health problems. Malnutrition remained a problem, especially for inmates unable to supplement their diets with help from family or friends. In many facilities the sanitation, ventilation, lighting, and access to potable water were inadequate. Most prison facilities were antiquated and had no means to control indoor temperatures. A system existed for basic and emergency medical care, but bureaucratic procedures slowed access. Prisoners with disabilities usually lacked adequate care. Representatives of Christian and Ahmadi Muslim communities claimed prison inmates often subjected their members to abuse and violence in prison. Civil society organizations reported prison officials frequently subjected prisoners accused of blasphemy violations to poor prison conditions. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)

reported many individuals accused of blasphemy remained in solitary confinement for extended periods, sometimes for more than a year. The government asserted this treatment was for the individual’s safety, in view of the likelihood that prisoners accused of blasphemy would face threats from the general prison population.

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

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

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

Although the Islamabad High Court decided to release vulnerable, pretrial, or remand detainees during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Supreme Court overturned the ruling on March 30, halting the detainees’ release.

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

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

As of September 1, a total of 4,043 inmates and prison officials had been infected by COVID-19 since the first infection was reported in the country’s prisons, with most cases reported in Sindh. In that province in April, health authorities inoculated 2,500 prisoners 50 years of age or older against COVID-19.

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

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

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

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

In April the Supreme Court criticized the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) for “randomly” arresting individuals and waiting over one year to file charges against them. On June 3, police in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s Kohat District released Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) leader Manzoor Pashteen after keeping him in detention for almost eight hours. Pashteen had planned to attend a sit-in in Bannu District in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to protest the killing of a local resident.

On September 4, during a hearing on money laundering charges against detained National Assembly leader of the opposition Shehbaz Sharif and his son Hamza Sharif, the judge criticized the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) for the unusually slow pace of its investigation.

On September 22, law enforcement officials took a senior journalist, Waris Raza, from his home in Karachi, Sindh. Raza’s family alleged that he was arrested for expressing his political views. He was released after several hours of detention. Ali Wazir, a Member of the National Assembly representing South Waziristan and a prominent activist of the PTM, remained in Sindh police custody in Karachi. He was arrested in Peshawar in December 2020 and extradited by Sindh police on charges of criminal conspiracy and defamation of state institutions and the army. Local activists cite his confinement as illegal and arbitrary, and as reprisal for his criticizing state institutions. On June 1, the Sindh High Court denied his request for bail.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

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

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

A functioning bail system exists. Human rights groups noted, however, that judges sometimes denied bail until bribes were paid. NGOs reported authorities sometimes denied bail in blasphemy cases because defendants who faced the death penalty if convicted were likely to flee or were at risk from public vigilantism. Officials often simultaneously charged defendants facing lower-order blasphemy charges with terrorism offenses, which are nonbailable. NGOs also reported that lawyers representing individuals accused of blasphemy often asked that their clients remain in custody pretrial to protect them from vigilante violence.

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

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

In some instances, police held detainees incommunicado.

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

Pretrial Detention: According to provincial prison departments, as of September an estimated 70 percent of detainees were either awaiting or currently under trial. Reports indicated prison authorities did not differentiate between pretrial detainees and prisoners being tried when collecting prison data. Police sometimes held persons in investigative detention without seeking a magistrate’s approval and often held detainees without charge until a court challenged the detention. Magistrates generally approved investigative detention at the request of police without requiring justification. When police did not produce sufficient evidence to try a suspect within the 14-day period, they generally requested that magistrates issue another judicial remand, thereby further extending the suspect’s detention.

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

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

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

Detainee’s Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court: There were reports of persons arrested or detained who were not allowed to challenge in court the legal basis or nature of their detention, obtain relief, or receive compensation.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

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

Extensive case backlogs in the lower and superior courts undermined the right to effective remedy and to a fair and public hearing. Given the prevalence of pretrial detention, these delays often led defendants in criminal cases to be incarcerated for long periods as they waited for their trial to be heard. Antiquated procedural rules, unfilled judgeships, poor case management, and weak legal education caused delays in civil and criminal cases. According to the National Judicial Policy Making Committee, more than two million cases were pending in the court system, with COVID-19 related conditions slowing the case clearance process. A typical civil dispute case may take up to 10 years to settle, although the alternative dispute resolution process may reduce this time to a few months.

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

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

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

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

Trial Procedures

The civil, criminal, and family court systems provide for a fair trial and due process, presumption of innocence, cross-examination, and appeal. The constitution protects defendants from self-incrimination. There are no trials by jury. Although defendants have the right to be present and consult with an attorney, courts must appoint attorneys for indigents only in capital cases. Defendants generally bear the cost of legal representation in lower courts, but a lawyer may be provided at public expense in appellate courts. Defendants may confront or question prosecution witnesses and present their own witnesses and evidence. Due to the limited number of judges, a heavy backlog of cases, lengthy court procedures, frequent adjournment, and political pressure, cases routinely lasted for years, and defendants made frequent court appearances.

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

The law mandates the creation of juvenile courts and “juvenile justice committees,” intended to expedite the administration of justice for minors by resolving cases that involve minor offenses without resorting to formal judicial proceedings. Despite a directive that the government create these courts and committees within three months of the law’s passage in 2019, implementation has been slow. As of April the government had established three child courts in Lahore and eight in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including one in the former FATA.

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

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

The law allows the government to use special, streamlined antiterrorism courts (ATCs) to try persons charged with terrorist activities and sectarian violence. In other courts, suspects must appear within seven working days of their arrest, but ATCs may extend that period. Human rights activists criticized this parallel system, claiming it was more vulnerable to political manipulation. Authorities continued to expedite high-profile cases by referring them to ATCs, even if they had no connection to terrorism. The frequent use of ATCs for cases not involving terrorism, including for blasphemy or other acts deemed to foment religious hatred, led to significant backlogs, and despite being comparatively faster than the regular court system, ATCs often failed to meet speedy trial standards.

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

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

In some cases police arrested individuals after acts of vigilantism related to blasphemy or religious discrimination. Also see the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were reports of political prisoners and detainees. The NAB continued to press corruption charges against opposition figures, but corruption charges were rarely pursued against Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party figures. In September 2020 authorities arrested National Assembly opposition leader and Pakistani Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N) president Shehbaz Sharif on charges of accumulating assets beyond his means and money laundering. On April 23, Shehbaz Sharif was released from prison on bail. On August 5, the NAB approved a new inquiry of Shehbaz Sharif relating to an allegedly illegal allotment of land. On July 5, the NAB opened an investigation into former president and Pakistan Peoples Party leader Asif Ali Zardari regarding his acquisition of property.

Many ethnic and religious groups claimed authorities detained their members based on political affiliation or beliefs. The federal government announced a general amnesty in 2015 for Baloch insurgents who gave up arms. On July 7, Prime Minister Imran Khan appointed National Assembly member Shahzain Bugti as Special Assistant on Reconciliation and Harmony in Balochistan to hold talks with Baloch insurgents on behalf of the government. Despite the amnesty offers, illegal detention of Baloch leaders and the disappearance of private Baloch citizens continued. Nonetheless, human rights activists said the commission’s numbers were unreliable and that more cases remained than were reported. Baloch activists complained the commission served no purpose other than to help security agencies identify victims’ families for harassment. According to the NGO Voice for Baloch Missing Persons, 84 missing persons were recovered between January and July; however, another 103 Baloch persons were forcibly disappeared in the province during the same period. On March 17, the Human Rights Council of Balochistan claimed 480 individuals were forcibly disappeared and 177 were killed in the province during 2020. The NGO Voice for Missing Persons of Sindh claimed that 90 persons, mostly workers of nationalist political parties, remained in government or military custody due to political ties.

Politically Motivated Reprisal against Individuals Located Outside the Country

Journalists and civil society members in exile in Europe reported targeted harassment and physical violence they believed was linked to their investigative work into the military’s actions and into human rights abuses. In August media reported that law enforcement agencies in the UK warned Pakistani dissidents living in London of credible information of threats against them. The threatened individuals included individuals who have criticized Pakistan’s military in their writings.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

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

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

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

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

g. Conflict-related Abuses

The military and paramilitary organizations conducted multiple counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations to eradicate militant safe havens. The military's Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad, launched in 2017, continued throughout the year. Radd-ul-Fasaad is a nationwide counterterrorism campaign aimed at consolidating the gains of the 2014-17 Operation Zarb-e-Azb, which countered foreign and domestic terrorists in the former FATA. Law enforcement agencies also acted to weaken terrorist groups, arresting suspected terrorists and gang members who allegedly provided logistical support to militants. In raids throughout the country, police confiscated caches of weapons, suicide vests, and planning materials. Police expanded their presence into formerly ungoverned areas, particularly in Balochistan, where military operations had become normal, although such operations often were unreported in the press.

Poor security, intimidation by both security forces and militants, and limited access to Balochistan and the former FATA impeded the efforts of human rights organizations to provide relief to victims of military abuses and of journalists to report on any such abuses. In June, PTM's national leader was detained on his way to address a Jani Khel tribe sit-in and jirga in Bannu, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, following a series of targeted killings of three teenagers and a tribal elder. The Jani Khel tribal conflict continues following the government's failure to satisfy a settlement agreement to investigate the killings, remove militants from the area, and compensate the families.

Militants carried out numerous attacks on political party offices and candidates. On May 21, armed men attacked a National Party politician in Turbat, Balochistan. The Balochistan Liberation Front claimed responsibility for the attack.

Political, sectarian, criminal, and ethnic violence in Karachi continued, although violence decreased and gang wars were less prevalent than before security operations in the city that started in 2013. On March 30, a religious scholar was shot and wounded in a suspected sectarian attack in Karachi. On June 27, police arrested a suspected Lashkar-i-Jhangvi militant for his alleged involvement in several attacks, including the 2013 assassination of Sajid Qureshi, a prominent leader of the political party Muttahida Qaumi Movement. On August 6, unidentified persons attacked a Shia place of worship in the jurisdiction of Bahawalnagar, Punjab. On August 19, three persons were killed, and 59 others injured in a grenade attack on a Shia procession in Bahawalnagar, Punjab.

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

There were numerous media reports of police and security forces killing terrorist suspects in “police encounters.” The trial against Rao Anwar, accused of the extrajudicial killing of Naqibullah Mehsud in a staged counterterror operation in 2018, continued at year's end. In August, Sindh police reported they arrested or killed 61 terrorists, while they arrested or killed 9,628 suspects in 960 police encounters in Sindh between January and August.

Security forces in Balochistan continued to disappear pretrial terror suspects, along with human rights activists, politicians, and teachers. The Baloch Human Rights Council noted 37 individuals had disappeared and assailants killed 25 persons, including one woman, in the month of June. The NGO Voice for Missing Baloch Persons claimed police killed 27 persons in Balochistan as of August.

There were numerous reports of criminal suspects killed in exchanges with police and the military. On April 20, police in Gujranwala District, Punjab, killed Atif Lahoria in a violent encounter. Five other suspected criminals were killed in police encounters in the Gujranwala region from February through April. On May 31, four FC soldiers and five suspected militants were killed in an exchange of fire in Quetta, Balochistan.

Militants and terrorist groups, including the TTP, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and Islamic State Khorasan Province, targeted civilians, journalists, community leaders, security forces, law enforcement officers, foreigners, and schools, killing and injuring hundreds with bombs, suicide attacks, and other forms of violence. Throughout Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the newly merged districts, there continued to be attacks by militant groups on security forces, tribal leaders, and civilians. Militant and terrorist groups often attacked religious minorities. On January 3, Islamic State militants claimed responsibility for an attack on a coal mine in Macch, Balochistan, that killed 11 coal miners belonging to the Shia Hazara community.

On August 26, three personnel of the paramilitary force Balochistan Levies and a member of the FC were killed in two separate attacks in Ziarat and Panjgur, Balochistan. The Levies were attacked during a mission to rescue four laborers, who were kidnapped by militants while working on a dam construction site. The BLA claimed responsibility for the attack. The attack in Panjgur was claimed by the Baloch Raji Ajoin-e-Sangar. On August 14, a total of 12 members of an extended family, all women and children, were killed and several others injured in a grenade attack on a truck in Karachi. No group claimed responsibility for the incident, but police suspected an extremist group was behind the attack.

Militant groups targeted Chinese nationals in multiple attacks. On March 9, a Chinese national and a passerby were injured after armed men opened fire at a vehicle in Karachi. On July 14, at least 13 persons, including nine Chinese engineers and two FC soldiers, were killed in a bus explosion near Dasu hydropower plant in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A Chinese engineer was injured when unidentified assailants opened fire on his car in the Shershah area of Karachi on July 28. On August 20, two children and a man were killed and three persons, including a Chinese national, were injured in a suicide attack on a vehicle in Gwadar, Balochistan. A low-intensity separatist insurgency continued in Balochistan. Security forces reportedly committed extrajudicial killings in the fight against militant groups.

Child Soldiers: The government provided support to the Taliban, a nonstate armed militant group that recruited and used child soldiers. The government operated a center in Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, to rehabilitate, educate, and reintegrate former child soldiers.

Other Conflict-related Abuse: On February 22, militants shot dead four women aid workers near Mirali in North Waziristan. Police said the women were working for an NGO to give vocational training to local women. In August and September, the TTP claimed responsibility for several attacks on police protection teams securing polio workers. The TTP particularly targeted girls' schools to demonstrate its opposition to girls' education but also destroyed boys' schools. Militants closed key access roads and tunnels and attacked communications and energy networks, disrupting commerce and the distribution of food and water; military operations in response also created additional hardships for the local civilian population. On June 20, four female teachers were injured after unidentified assailants opened fire on a school van in Mastung, Balochistan.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

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

The law provides for freedom of expression, including for members of the press, but constitutional restrictions exist. In addition, threats, harassment, abductions, violence, and killings led journalists and editors to practice self-censorship. Government failure to investigate and prosecute attacks on human rights defenders and peaceful protesters led to de facto restrictions on freedom of assembly and association.

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

On January 8, an antiterrorism court (ATC) sentenced three men to death for sharing blasphemous content through YouTube videos and fake social media profiles. According to media sources, this was the country’s first case in which the accused were convicted for sharing blasphemous content on social media.

Freedom of Expression for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: Threats, harassment, and violence against journalists who reported on sensitive topics such as civil-military tensions or abuses by security forces persisted throughout the year. Both the military, through the director general of the Inter-Services Public Relations, and government oversight bodies, such as the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) and Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), enforced censorship. By law the government may restrict information that might be prejudicial to the national interest. Authorities used recently passed laws to prevent or punish media criticism of the government and the armed forces. To publish within Pakistan-administered Kashmir, media owners continued to require permission from the Kashmir Council and the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs, and journalists had to depend largely on information provided by the government and military. There were limitations on transmission of Indian media content. Journalists also protested their inability to report freely on rights violations and forced disappearances in Balochistan, the Pashtun movement’s activities and protests, and the military’s involvement in political affairs and business enterprises. Rights activists reported the government contacted Twitter and asked them to take down accounts of activists deemed problematic.

Journalists alleged PEMRA issued editorial directives to television stations, and media outlets claimed the government pressured stations to halt broadcasting of interviews with selected opposition political party leaders. The Islamabad office of Radio Mashaal, the Pashto language service of Radio Free Europe, which the Interior Ministry closed in 2018, remained closed at the end of the year and Voice of America’s Pashto and Urdu websites remained blocked.

In January PEMRA suspended privately owned broadcaster BOL News following a program that criticized the appointment of judges to the country’s highest court. The criticism was considered insulting to the judiciary and thus in violation of the constitutional provision that protects the honor of the judiciary. The ban was later suspended by the Supreme Court. On June 28, the Sindh provincial assembly enacted the Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Bill 2021. The law protects journalists against unlawful or arbitrary restrictions on their ability to work and requires the provincial government to take steps to protect media persons from harassment, violence, and threats of violence in both physical and online spaces. It also prevents government officials and institutions from forcing journalists to disclose the identity of their professional sources. The law establishes a Commission for the Protection of Journalists and other Media Practitioners.

In July journalist organizations strongly opposed a law passed by the Punjab Assembly that allowed the Assembly to penalize journalists for offenses including misrepresenting a speech made by members before the assembly or publishing a report or debate prohibited or expunged by the speaker of the assembly. The government reportedly later withdrew the clauses related to penalizing journalists.

Violence and Harassment: Security forces, political parties, militants, and other groups subjected media outlets, journalists, and their families to threats and harassment. Female journalists in particular faced threats of sexual violence and harassment, including via social media, where they had a particularly strong presence. Security forces allegedly abducted journalists. Media outlets that reported on topics authorities viewed as sensitive were often the targets of retribution. Additionally, journalists working in remote and conflict-ridden areas lacked basic digital and traditional security skills, which increased pressure to self-censor or not cover a story.

According to observers, journalists were subjected to a variety of pressure tactics, including harassment and intimidation. Assailants killed journalists during the year, but it was unclear whether their journalism was the motive for the killings.

On March 19, a group of armed men shot and killed Ajay Laalwani, a reporter for Royal News TV in Sukkur, Sindh. On April 24, unknown attackers shot and killed a 23-year-old journalist, Abdul Wahid Raisani, in Quetta, Balochistan. Raisani worked for Balochistan’s largest Urdu daily newspaper, *Azadi*. Journalists also said they were subject to violent reprisals for reporting on cases of gender-based violence. On May 25, unidentified men attacked journalist Asad Ali Toor at his residence in Islamabad. According to the journalist, the attackers warned him against reporting on the Inter-Services Intelligence agency. Toor is a well-known critic of the country’s military and its role in the country’s politics.

On June 7, veteran journalist and member of the Punjab Assembly, Syeda Maimanat Mohsin, was attacked while returning home after addressing a public rally in Okara’s Hujra Shah Muqem area. Journalists were also subject to enforced disappearances and arrests.

In July prominent journalist and television host Nadeem Malik was summoned by the counterterrorism wing of the FIA concerning his comments involving a high-profile case regarding former prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

On August 7, the FIA cybercrime wing took into custody two journalists, Amir Mir and Imran Shafqat, allegedly for their public criticism of the military. They were later released on personal bond.

On August 13, armed men attacked and seriously injured a journalist, Ghulam Qadir Shar, in Sanghar, Sindh, allegedly as reprisal for reporting on a community-sanctioned attack on a woman.

Freedom Network, a media freedom advocacy group, reported an overall 40 percent increase in attacks on journalists during the year, with 39 cases from January to April alone in Punjab.

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

Both local and foreign journalists complained of harassment and intimidation by government officials. Blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi laws restricted publication on certain topics. Government censors reviewed foreign books before they allowed reprinting. Imported movies, books, magazines, and newspapers were subject to censorship for objectionable sexual or religious content. Obscene literature, a category the government defined broadly, was subject to seizure. The government fined private television channels for alleged violations of the code of ethics and for showing banned content. Authorities reportedly used PEMRA rules to silence broadcast media by suspending licenses or threatening to do so or by reassigning the cable channel number of a targeted outlet without notice so that

its programming would be hard or impossible to find on most televisions. Many outlets resorted to self-censorship, particularly when reporting on religious or security topics. The Central Board of Film Censors previewed and censored sexual content and any content that glorified Indian heroes, leaders, or military figures in foreign and domestic films.

The government continued to use network access as a tool to exert control over media outlets. Media outlets reported the government increasingly used the infrastructure of the media system, as well as government advertising, which made up a large portion of media revenue, to suppress information deemed threatening. The economic contraction caused by COVID-19 decreased private revenue further, rendering outlets more dependent on government advertising. A new policy that would allow media outlets to tap into subscription revenues was stalled in a Supreme Court battle. The government pressured distributors into restricting distribution or changing channels of outlets deemed problematic, incentivizing media companies to censor their content. Media houses also reportedly fired outspoken journalists deemed to be a threat to their revenues or continued ability to operate. In April the Association of Electronic Media Editors and News Directors rejected a PEMRA notification that asked television channels to rely only on press releases and official notifications to report on cabinet meetings. In May, Geo News suspended Hamid Mir, longtime television host and one of the country’s most prominent journalists, following Mir’s public outcry against the country’s military and the intelligence agencies.

Libel/Slander Laws: Defamation and blasphemy are treated as criminal offenses. Blasphemy is punishable ranging from a two-year imprisonment to death. On January 8, an antiterrorism court gave death sentences to three persons for social media posts deemed insulting to the Prophet Muhammad under the blasphemy laws.

On March 12, the Lahore High Court agreed to hear a petition seeking the death sentence for a Christian previously jailed for life after being convicted of sending text messages defaming the Prophet Muhammad.

For more on blasphemy laws, please see the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report at* <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>

In Peshawar the Awami National Party chairman filed a civil case accusing a political rival and three newspapers of defamation in 2019. The case remained pending during the year.

National Security: Some journalists asserted authorities cited laws protecting national security to censor and restrict media distribution of material that criticized government policies or military or public officials, or that described the country’s security situation in a negative light. The Electronic Media (Programs and Advertisements) Code of Conduct included a clause that restricted reporting in any area where a military operation was in progress.

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

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

Internet Freedom

The Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) is responsible for the establishment, operation, and maintenance of telecommunications and has complete control of all content broadcast over telecommunication channels.

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

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

Authorities, particularly in the military, increasingly sought to restrict online space to silence dissidents and curtail content deemed critical of the military. In January, the PTA required social media platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, to remove trailers for an allegedly sacrilegious movie titled “Lady of Heaven.” On April 16, the federal government through the PTA temporarily blocked access to social media sites and applications such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube. The PTA stated the services were blocked as part of a crackdown on the religious extremist party Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan.

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

The PTA also continued to try to control social media and video-streaming services such as YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok. In April the PTA asked Twitter to immediately block or remove content that criticized the country’s judiciary and informed the company that such content was not part of “freedom of expression” and could be a punishable crime under “contempt of court.”

The PTA asked YouTube “to immediately block vulgar, indecent, immoral, nude, and hate speech content for viewing in Pakistan.” Although the PTA claimed its intentions were to stop the spread of pornography and vulgar content, users alleged it was actively targeting critics of government policies, especially those critical of the army. Internet service providers also claimed the PTA wanted to regulate political voices that spread what it deems indecent content. Online users continued to report they feared increasing censorship trends.

On June 28, the Sindh High Court ordered the suspension of access to TikTok in the country until July 8, but subsequently lifted the ban on July 2. The order was issued on a petition filed by a citizen aggrieved by the “immorality and obscenity” spread by content on the mobile app. The federal government did not lift the overall ban on TikTok until November 19, after the government and TikTok had reached agreement on the removal of the objectionable content from the platform.

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

Long-term communications shutdowns were imposed in rural areas of the former FATA as well as Balochistan, where several districts reportedly have had no mobile internet service since 2017. Others insisted connectivity was hampered by lack of infrastructure, poor internet, and slow service, often provided by the military-operated Special Communication Organization in certain regions.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government interfered with academic freedom by restricting, screening, and censoring certain cultural events based on limiting dissemination of antistate content and obscenity. The government sometimes required government-issued permits, which were frequently withheld.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The government restricted freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the government continued to use the West Pakistan Maintenance of Peace Order and the British-era Section 144 of the criminal code. These statutes effectively allow authorities to continue the long-standing practice of suspending the right to assemble or speak in the newly merged areas. By law district authorities may prevent gatherings of more than four persons without police authorization. The law permits the government to ban all rallies and processions, except funeral processions, for security reasons.

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

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

On March 10, a doctored video of organizers of a women’s march in Karachi chanting allegedly blasphemous slogans went viral on social media. Organizers quickly released the original video clarifying the actual slogans in subtitles. The religious extremist party Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan called the march a foreign-funded conspiracy against religious values and condemned the alleged blasphemy. The TTP issued threats against march organizers, and a Karachi-based cleric associated with Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), Manzoor Mengal, publicly called for marchers to be gang raped. The NGO HRCF said the doctored videos and blasphemy allegations were incitement to violence against women and demanded action against those responsible.

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

On March 17, Sindh police filed charges against 60 political workers, journalists, and activists in Sukkur city for protesting the extrajudicial killing of Sindh University student Irfan Jatoi. Human rights organizations condemned the charges under the antiterror law and accused police of conflating the right to peaceful assembly with treason. Following the June 6 protest in Karachi against the Bahria Town housing development project, police arrested more

than 120 individuals, including political activists and workers, for incitement. Some of the arrested political leaders were reportedly kept at undisclosed locations for days until police brought them before a court. On August 1, under pressure from city officials, organizers cancelled a women’s march in Faisalabad, Punjab. The march had been called to protest recent brutal murders of women.

Freedom of Association

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

Slow government approvals of NOC requests, insecure finance, and operational uncertainty significantly constrained INGO activity. The onerous NOC requirements, frequent and arbitrary requests for information from the security apparatus, as well as periodic harassment, impeded project operations, particularly in areas that could greatly benefit from support, such as the newly merged districts.

INGOs faced additional barriers to fundraising, opening bank accounts, and obtaining tax-exempt status from the Federal Board of Revenue, as well as visa denials for international staff and consultants. The online registration protocol made the process for obtaining registration laborious, nontransparent, and ultimately elusive for many INGOs. Registration requires extensive documentation, including financial statements, a detailed annual budget, and a letter outlining donor support, among many other requirements. Organizations were subject to constant investigation and harassment by the security apparatus and other government offices during and after the registration process. Organizations targeted often included those that focused on topics the government deemed sensitive, such as democracy promotion, press freedom, religious freedom, and human rights.

Eighty-five INGOs signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Ministry of Interior to obtain foreign funding and implement programs. In 2019 a total of 20 INGOs whose applications for registration were denied by the Ministry of Interior in 2018 appeared before an interagency committee to appeal those initial rejections. At the hearings the reasons for the original rejections were not disclosed, nor did the INGOs receive a clear explanation of actions they could take to restore their legal standing. In 2020 the ministry invited several NGOs that had previously been denied registration to reapply, but local sources reported that many of these decisions were still pending. While foreign assistance to the country has declined in recent years, the lack of transparency and unpredictability of the registration process and operational constraints also contributed to some INGOs withdrawing their registration applications and terminating operations. Local observers reported that approximately two-thirds of INGOs have departed the country since the new registration process was introduced in 2015. In September the Ministry of Finance’s Economic Affairs Division (EAD), which oversees registration for domestic NGOs, circulated a proposal to revise NGO registration policy with stakeholders.

In March 2020 the EAD eased requirements for registered domestic and international NGOs engaged in COVID-19 relief activities. The EAD also issued new Standard Operating Procedures to facilitate INGO projects related to the pandemic. Under these procedures, the government would immediately issue NOCs to INGO projects related to the pandemic, subject to their compliance with new guidelines. Only INGOs with signed MOUs would be allowed to work, and these NGOs would be required to submit four sets of their plan of action with explicit mention of funding sources and areas of operations in the country.

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

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

c. Freedom of Religion

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

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

The law provides for freedom of internal movement and for uninhibited foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, but the government limited these rights. On March 1, authorities expelled PTM leader Manzoor Pashteen from Balochistan after he attended a condolence meeting for a killed politician in Chaman District. The Balochistan government had banned Pashteen in December 2020 from entering the province for security reasons.

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

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

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

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

The government prohibited persons on an exit control list from departing the country. The stated purpose of the list was to prevent departure from the country of “persons involved in antistate activities, terrorism, or related to proscribed organizations and those placed on the orders of superior courts,” but according to civil society, authorities also included human rights defenders and critics of the government and military on the list. Those on the list have the right to appeal to the courts to have their names removed.

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

e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

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

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

There were no reports of involuntary returns. Many IDPs reportedly wanted to return home, despite the lack of local infrastructure, housing, and available service delivery and the strict control that security forces maintained over returnees’ movements through extensive checkpoints. Other IDP families delayed their return or chose to stay with family members and remain in the settled areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where regular access to health care, education, and other social services was available. For IDPs who were unwilling or unable to return, the government coordinated support with the United Nations and other international organizations.

Despite large-scale recurring displacements of individuals due to natural disasters and disruptions caused by terrorist activities and counterterrorist operations, the government had not adopted specific legislation to tackle internal displacement problems. In addition, the law does not provide any definition of IDPs or their rights.

f. Protection of Refugees

The country is not a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1967 Protocol) and has not enacted national legislation for the protection of refugees or established procedures to determine the refugee status of persons who are seeking international protection within its territory. The government cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations to provide protection and assistance to more than 1.4 million refugees (all of whom arrived in the country prior to 2007), asylum seekers, and other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law does not provide for granting asylum or refugee status and the government has not established a system for providing protection for refugees. The law also does not exclude asylum seekers and refugees from provisions regarding illegal entry and stay. In the absence of a national refugee legal framework,

UNHCR issued asylum seeker certificates and conducted refugee status determination under its mandate, and the country generally accepted UNHCR decisions to grant refugee status. The country generally allowed asylum seekers, as well as recognized refugees, to remain in the country pending identification of a durable solution.

Abuse of Migrants and Refugees: The government provided temporary legal status to more than 1.4 million Afghan refugees who arrived prior to 2007 by issuing proof of registration (POR) cards that expired on December 31, 2015. Since then, POR cards were renewed intermittently through cabinet decisions but expired without further renewal on June 30, 2020. The country also hosted approximately 878,000 Afghans with Afghan Citizen Cards but did not grant them refugee status. The government typically extended the validity of the Afghan Citizen Cards in short increments but allowed these cards to expire on June 30, 2020, and the government has not since renewed the cards. The government issued a notice in June 2020 directing agencies and departments to ensure that no harassment or adverse action be taken against POR and Afghan Citizen Card holders until the federal cabinet made a formal decision.

In March in collaboration with UNHCR, the government started the Document Renewal and Information Verification Exercise to update information on, and provide biometric cards with June 30, 2023, validity, to registered Afghan refugees and their immediate family members in Pakistan.

UNHCR reported 374 arrests and detentions of refugees by security authorities from January to June, a 38 percent increase from the same period in 2020, when 271 refugees were detained. This increase may be attributed to lockdown measures enforced by the government due to COVID-19. Among this year’s arrests, 81 percent of refugees detained were released without formal charges, 8 percent were charged and detained under the Foreigners Act, and 11 percent were charged with violating administrative orders regarding COVID-19, maintaining law and order, preventing vagrancy, and preventing imminent criminal activities.

Media and civil society reported police in Peshawar arrested 194 Afghan nationals (including POR cardholders, Afghan Citizen Card holders, visa or passport holders, and undocumented Afghans) on Afghanistan’s independence day in August. Media reported Pakistan began deportation proceedings and charged members of the group with rioting, damaging public property, and publicly displaying anti-Pakistan sentiments. Media also reported in September that Pakistan deported more than 200 Afghan nationals, including women and children, who reached Quetta via the Chaman border crossing. Another media report said 750 individuals who entered Balochistan from Afghanistan “illegally” had been taken into custody and deported to Afghanistan as of September 16.

Employment: There is no formal document allowing refugees to work legally, but there is no law prohibiting refugees from working in the country. Many refugees worked as day laborers or in the informal economy, and local employers often exploited refugees in the informal labor market with low or unpaid wages. Women and children were particularly vulnerable, accepting underpaid and undesirable work.

Access to Basic Services: Thirty percent of registered Afghan refugees lived in one of 52 refugee camps or villages, while the remaining 70 percent lived in host communities in rural and urban areas and sought to access basic services in those communities. Afghan refugees could avail themselves of the services of police and the courts, but some, particularly the poor, were afraid to do so. There were no reports of refugees denied access to health facilities because of their nationality. In 2019 the government permitted Afghan refugees to open bank accounts using their POR cards. According to UNHCR, POR cardholders can obtain SIM cards for mobile phones under the law, although some encountered difficulties due to the 2015 expiration date printed on POR cards. The new POR cards with a 2023 expiration date streamlined the process of getting SIM cards for Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

The constitution stipulates free and compulsory education for all children between the ages of five and 16, regardless of their nationality. Any POR cardholder refugee child could be, in theory, admitted to public education facilities after filing the proper paperwork. For older students, particularly girls in refugee villages, access to education remained difficult. In 2020, out of the 417,000 school-aged children, only 83,839 (20 percent) were enrolled in school, of which one-third were in public schools. These enrollment levels translated into a literacy rate for Afghan refugees of 33 percent, with a 7.6 percent rate for girls, and dropout rates as high as 90 percent. Afghan refugees were able to use POR cards to enroll in universities, although there were reports that some universities refused to enroll POR cardholders following the card expiration in June 2020. Afghan students were eligible to seek admission to Pakistani public and private colleges and universities.

g. Stateless Persons

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

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

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

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In 2018 the country held direct elections that resulted in a Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf-majority national government led by Prime Minister Imran Khan. EU observers assessed voting was “well conducted and transparent” but noted “counting was sometimes problematic.” Civil society organizations and political parties raised concerns regarding preelection interference, including restrictions on freedom of expression, allegedly creating an uneven electoral playing field.

In 2018 the Electoral College (made up of the members of both houses of parliament, and of the provincial assemblies) held presidential elections and selected Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf member Arif Alvi to succeed Mamnoon Hussain of the PML-N. Following the passage of the 25th amendment merging the former FATA with the rest of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2019, the government held special elections that gave representation in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial assembly to residents of the former FATA for the first time in its history. Politically, the only remaining hurdle for full integration of the former FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is elections for local leaders.

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

On July 25, Ali Pur Chattha police arrested dozens of PML-N workers, including the party’s deputy secretary general, a member of the National Assembly, and a member of the provincial assembly, ahead of a by-election in Gujranwala District, Punjab. The local magistrate granted bail to the PML-N leader and three other arrested party activists.

In November 2020, police arrested at least 25 activists of the opposition party alliance Pakistan Democratic Movement, including Pakistan Peoples Party leader Ali Qasim Gilani, after clashes between Punjab police and the opposition alliance’s workers ahead of a rally in Multan. After the rally Multan police registered two separate FIRs against 3,150 known and unknown Pakistan Democratic Movement workers under the Punjab Infectious Diseases Ordinance.

Judges ordered media regulatory agencies to enforce constitutional bans on content critical of the military or judiciary, compelling media to censor politicians’ speeches and election-related coverage deemed “antijudiciary” or “antimilitary.” Organizations that monitored press freedom reported direct pressure on media outlets to avoid content regarding possible military influence over judicial proceedings against politicians and to refrain from reporting on PML-N leaders in a positive way. In most areas there was no interference with the right of political parties and candidates to organize campaigns, run for election, or seek votes. In Balochistan, however, there were reports that security agencies and separatist groups harassed local political organizations, such as the Balochistan National Party and the Baloch Students Organization.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: The Elections Act of 2017 stipulates special measures to enhance electoral participation of women, religious minorities, transgender persons, and persons with disabilities. By law women must constitute 5 percent of party tickets, and if less than 10 percent of women vote in any constituency, authorities may presume that the women’s vote was suppressed, and the results for that constituency or polling station may be nullified. The government enforced the law for the first time in Shangla, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, when the Election Commission canceled the district’s 2018 general election results after women made up less than 10 percent of the vote.

Women’s political participation was affected by cultural barriers to voting and limited representation in policymaking and governance. According to an August survey by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, female legislators reported that discriminatory cultural norms and stereotypes hindered their entry into politics and impacted their performance as members of legislative assemblies.

Cultural and traditional barriers in tribal and rural areas impeded some women from voting. Authorities used quotas to ensure a minimum level of participation of women in elected bodies. Sixty seats in the National Assembly and 17 seats in the Senate are reserved for women. Authorities apportioned these seats based on total votes secured by the candidates of each political party that contested the elections. Women and minorities also may contest directly elected seats, but both women and minorities struggled to be directly elected outside of the reserved seats. Authorities reserved for women 132 of the 779 seats in provincial assemblies and one-third of the seats on local councils. Women participated actively as political party members, but they were not always successful in securing leadership positions within parties, apart from women’s wings. Of 48 members of the federal cabinet, only five were women. There were no religious minorities in the federal cabinet.

Some conservative political parties discouraged women’s participation in political rallies. In August JUI-F secretary general Maulana Rashid Soomro asked women not to attend a public gathering organized by the opposition alliance Pakistan Democratic Movement in Karachi.

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

The government requires voters to indicate their religion when registering to vote. To vote, Ahmadis are required to either swear Muhammad was the final prophet of Islam and denounce the Ahmadi movement's founder or declare themselves as non-Muslims. Ahmadis consider themselves Muslims, and many were unable to vote because they did not comply with this requirement.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

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

The NAB serves as the highest-level anticorruption authority, with a mandate to eliminate corruption through awareness, prevention, and enforcement. The NAB and other investigative agencies, including the Federal Board of Revenue, the State Bank of Pakistan, the Antinarcotics Force, and the Federal Investigation Agency, conduct investigations into corruption, tax evasion, and money laundering.

Corruption: The government continued its corruption investigations and prosecutions of opposition political party leaders during the year, with high-profile actions brought against former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, former president Asif Ali Zardari, and senior members of opposition parties, including the JUI-F. Opposition parties alleged these prosecutions selectively targeted their leadership. On April 27, the NAB filed a fifth case against former president and cochairperson of the Pakistan Peoples Party Asif Ali Zardari as part of a probe into a multimillion-dollar banking scandal.

On May 18, citing an ongoing investigation, the Ministry of Interior placed National Assembly opposition leader and PML-N president Shehbaz Sharif on the Exit Control List. Shehbaz continued to face several investigations. He remained free on bail.

On August 3, retired lieutenant general Asim Saleem Bajwa resigned from his position as chairman of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Authority's due to media allegations he had amassed a family fortune linked to his positions in the military.

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

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

Some domestic and international human rights groups operated without significant government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. The government increasingly restricted the operating ability of NGOs, however, particularly those whose work revealed shortcomings or misdeeds of the government, military, or intelligence services, or that worked on matters related to conflict areas or advocacy. These groups faced numerous regulations regarding travel, visas, and registration that hampered their efforts to program and raise funds. International staff members of organizations, including those from the few registered INGOs, continued to face delays or denials in the issuance of visas and no-objection certificates for in-country travel. The domestic NGO registration agreement with the government requires NGOs not to use terms the government finds controversial – such as countering violent extremism; peace and conflict resolution; IDPs; reproductive health; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) persons – in their annual reports or documents. The agreement also prohibits NGOs from employing individuals of Indian or Israeli nationality or origin. Few NGOs had access to certain parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the former FATA, or certain areas in Balochistan.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The 2012 National Commission for Human Rights Bill authorized the establishment of an independent committee, the National Commission on Human Rights (NCHR). The first commission's term expired in 2019, and authorities established a second commission in November. In April the Islamabad High Court asked the federal government to appoint members to the NCHR. Activists stated the government delayed the appointment of NCHR leadership positions to avoid facing accountability for human rights violations. A stand-alone Ministry of Human Rights was reconstituted in 2015. The Senate and National Assembly standing committees on law, justice, minorities, and human rights held hearings on a range of human rights problems.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape is a criminal offense, with punishment for conviction that ranges from a minimum of 10 to 25 years in prison and a fine to the death penalty. The penalty for conviction of two or more persons of rape is death or life imprisonment. The law does not explicitly criminalize spousal rape and defines rape as a crime committed by a man against a woman. Although rape was frequent, prosecutions were rare. The law provides for collection of DNA evidence and includes nondisclosure of a rape survivor's name, the right to legal representation of rape survivors, relaxed reporting requirements for female survivors, and enhanced penalties for

rape of survivors with mental or physical disabilities. On January 4, the Lahore High Court declared virginity tests, including the so-called “two-finger test” for examination of sexual assault survivors, “illegal and against the Constitution,” and without forensic value in cases of sexual violence.

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

The Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act provides legal protections for domestic abuse victims, including judicial protective orders and access to a new network of district-level women’s shelters. Centers provided women a range of services including assistance with the completion of first information reports regarding the crimes committed against them, first aid, medical examinations, post trauma rehabilitation, free legal services, and a shelter home. The Punjab government funds four women’s career centers in Punjab universities, 12 crisis centers that provide legal and psychological services to women, and emergency shelters for women and children. The Punjab government established 16 women’s hostel authorities in 12 districts to assist women in finding safe, affordable, temporary lodging while looking for work. It also established 68 additional day care centers, bringing the total to 137 by year’s end. The provincial government also launched other economic empowerment programs, including the Punjab Small Industry Cooperation Development Bank and the Kisan Ki Beti (Farmer’s Daughter) project, which aim to improve living standards of rural women through skill development.

Lahore used a special court designed to focus exclusively on gender-based violence crimes. The Lahore Gender-Based Violence Court receives the most serious cases in the district, such as aggravated rape, and offers enhanced protections to women and girls.

In the first six months of the year, Lahore reported 76 cases of domestic violence against women, 249 cases of rape of women, 1,609 cases of kidnapping of women, three cases of so-called honor killings of women, and 617 cases of violence against women.

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

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa passed the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Domestic Violence Against Women (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2021, on February 15. There were no reliable national, provincial, or local statistics on rape due to underreporting, and no centralized law enforcement data collection system existed.

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

On March 20, a Lahore antiterrorism court sentenced two men, Abid Malhi and Shafqat Ali, to death for the September 2020 robbery and gang rape of a woman in Lahore. The two men broke into the vehicle of the woman who, with her two children, had stalled on the road outside of Lahore. Both culprits were also given a life imprisonment sentence and fined.

On August 14, a woman was assaulted and groped by more than 100 men at a public park in Lahore, Punjab. A video of the attack circulated on social media. Police arrested 24 men and suspended area police officers.

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

No specific federal law prohibits domestic violence, which was widespread. Police may charge acts of domestic violence as crimes pursuant to the penal code’s general provisions against assault and bodily injury. Provincial laws also prohibit acts of domestic violence. Forms of domestic violence reportedly included beating, physical

disfigurement, shaving of women’s eyebrows and hair, and – in extreme cases – homicide. While dowries were banned in October 2020, dowry and other family-related disputes sometimes resulted in death or disfigurement by burning or acid.

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

A report by the nonprofit Aurat Foundation found that violence against women increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The NGO Sustainable Social Development Organization also cited an increase in domestic violence and abuse against women and children due COVID-19 related lockdowns. To address societal norms that disapprove of victims who report gender-based violence, the Islamabad Capital Territory Police (ICTP) created desks at some police stations, staffed by female officers, to offer women a safe place to report complaints and file charges. The ICTP also established a Gender Protection Unit in May, designed to handle cases related to gender violence, domestic and child abuse, and harassment. Cases can be reported through a designated telephone number.

In August, responding to an increase in cases of violence against women, Punjab police introduced a cellphone application that enabled women to contact police surreptitiously in cases in which calling by voice would invite retaliation from a male suspect. Punjab police also established anti-women-harassment and violence teams in all districts across the province. These teams, which included female officers, attempted to respond to complaints within 15 minutes.

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

Government centers lacked sufficient space, staff, and resources. Many overcrowded dar-ul-amans did not meet international standards. Some shelters did not offer access to basic needs such as showers, laundry supplies, or feminine hygiene products. In some cases individuals reportedly abused women at the government-run shelters, and staff severely restricted women’s movements or pressured them to return to their abusers. There were reports of women exploited in prostitution and sex trafficking in shelters. Some shelter staff reportedly discriminated against the shelter residents, based on a belief that if a woman fled her home, it was because she was a woman of ill repute.

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

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: Women were victims of various types of societal violence and abuse, including so-called honor killings, forced marriages and conversions, imposed isolation, and used as chattel to settle tribal disputes.

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

On January 21, a man in Gujranwala District, Punjab, killed his wife and four children as a so-called honor killing. On January 30, a man confessed to killing four women of his family in Shahkot area of Sheikhupura District as a so-called honor killing.

In July, Noor Mukadam was sexually assaulted and beheaded by a male acquaintance. Police arrested a suspect, but the suspect’s family used their influence to pressure local police and the family of the victim to settle out of court. After the victim’s family and friends highlighted the case on social media, police arrested and charge all accomplices, who were facing trial.

On July 15, Quratul Ain Baloch was beaten to death by her husband Umar Memon in Hyderabad, Sindh, in front of their four children. Police arrested Memon and the trial was ongoing. The killing led to calls to effectively implement the 2013 Sindh Domestic Violence Act, which remained poorly enforced. Sindh-based activists stated that, despite the act’s passage, protection committees had not been formed, nor were women protection officers recruited.

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

On June 7, a man threw acid on a woman in Lahore allegedly after she refused to marry him. Police registered a case against the accused. On July 31, a man tortured his ex-wife and later chopped off her nose in Rawalpindi’s Gojar Khan area. Police filed a case against the former husband. On August 31, a man threw acid on a woman for refusing his marriage proposal in Gujranwala District, Punjab. Police filed a case against the accused.

Laws provide legal mechanisms to formally register and prove the legitimacy of Hindu and Sikh marriages and allow for the termination of the marriage upon the conversion of one party to a religion other than Hinduism. Some activists claimed the latter provision weakened the government’s ability to protect against forced marriage and conversion. The law criminalizes and punishes the giving of a woman in marriage to settle a civil or criminal dispute; depriving a woman of her rights to inherit movable or immovable property by deceitful or illegal means; coercing or in any manner compelling a woman to enter into marriage; and compelling, arranging, or facilitating the marriage of a woman with the Quran, including forcing her to take an oath on the Quran to remain unmarried or not to claim her share of an inheritance. Although prohibited by law, these practices continued in some areas.

On July 14, the parliament adopted the Enforcement of Women’s Property Rights (Amendment) Bill 2021 to protect women’s property rights against being violated under duress, force, or fraud. The law, which applies only in the Islamabad Capital Territory, provides a mechanism for redress under which any woman deprived of property may file an appeal to the ombudsperson.

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

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

In 2018 Meesha Shafi and eight others accused pop singer Ali Zafar of sexual harassment. He denied the accusations and filed suit against the women. In 2020 the accusers were charged with defamation; if convicted, they would face up to three years in prison. At year’s end, Zafar’s sexual harassment trial had not resumed, pending the outcome of the defamation case. Women’s rights activists demanded that defamation be decriminalized, as it was used as a tool to silence survivors of sexual harassment.

On April 13, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Ombudsperson for Protection Against Harassment of Women ordered the removal of the political science department chairman at Islamia College University Peshawar after an investigation confirmed allegations of sexual harassment against female students.

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

The government provided limited access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence. Survivors of sexual violence were provided with a clinical exam and treatment; female survivors were offered emergency contraceptives. Other services provided to survivors of sexual violence varied by province. During the year the Lahore High Court declared virginity tests illegal and of no forensic value in cases of sexual violence.

Young girls and women often lacked information and means to access care. Adolescent girls have no access to counseling related to menstrual health. Unmarried individuals may access contraceptive commodities from private pharmacies; however, unmarried persons frequently faced difficulties in seeking reproductive health-care services including access to contraceptives.

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

According to the most recent *Pakistan Maternal Mortality Survey*, the maternal mortality ratio was 186 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2017, a rate attributed to inadequate maternal and newborn care. Women in rural areas had limited access to skilled birth attendants, including essential obstetric and postpartum care. The survey revealed three in 10 births were delivered at home, putting both mother and babies at risk. Moreover, there have been serious delays in contraceptive procurement and limited stocks of most of the contraceptive types across the country. Another report from UNICEF’s *Impact of COVID-19 and Reproductive Health, Family Planning and GBV [gender-based violence] in Pakistan* showed that in the country, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a 14.5 percent increase in child mortality and a 21.3 percent increase in maternal mortality in 2020.

Although fines and punishments exist, laws on child marriage have little impact because they were not well enforced. Almost 21 percent of marriages occurred before the age of 18 and 3 percent before age 15, which resulted in early onset of childbearing in 8 percent of married adolescent girls. The government has not introduced a dedicated program to address the sexual reproductive health services and contraception needs of this age group.

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

The law entitles female children to one-half the inheritance of male children. Wives inherit one-eighth of their husbands' estates. Women often received far less than their legal entitlement. In addition, complicated family disputes and the costs and time of lengthy court procedures reportedly discouraged women from pursuing legal challenges to inheritance discrimination. During the year Khyber Pakhtunkhwa passed a law for the protection of women's inheritance rights and appointed a female independent ombudsperson charged with hearing complaints, starting investigations, and making referrals for enforcement of inheritance rights.

Data from the Punjab Women's Helpline showed the helpline received more than a thousand complaints regarding problems concerning property and inheritance rights from January to May. According to the Secretary Women Development Department Punjab, only seven districts, out of 36 in the province, appointed officials for the protection of women inheritance rights.

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

During the year civil society actors reported that only 7 percent of women had access to financial inclusion services in the country and that women had limited access to credit.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

Article 25 (1) of the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees that “all citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law.” Article 5 provides that “adequate provision shall be made for the minorities to freely profess and practice their religions and develop their cultures.” Article 33 declares that it is the state's responsibility to discourage parochial, racial, tribal, sectarian, and provincial prejudices among citizens.

Members of ethnic minority groups state these provisions have never been fully implemented in practice, however. Contacts cited forced religious conversion and enforcement of Pakistan's blasphemy laws as particular concerns for religious minorities. Article 20 of the Constitution, which enshrines every citizen's “right to profess, practice and propagate his religion” contains the stipulation that this right is not absolute, but “subject to law, public order, and morality.”

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

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

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

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

Sectarian militants continued to target members of the Hazara ethnic minority, who are largely Shia Muslim, in Quetta, Balochistan. Hazaras also continued to face discrimination and threats of violence. According to press reports and other sources, Hazaras were unable to move freely outside of Quetta's two Hazara-populated enclaves.

Community members complained that increased security measures had turned their neighborhoods into ghettos, resulting in economic exploitation. Consumer goods in those enclaves were available only at inflated prices, and Hazaras reported an inability to find employment or pursue higher education. Hazara contacts reported increased surveillance by authorities due to the arrival of Hazaras from Afghanistan following the August 2021 Taliban takeover.

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

Children

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

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

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

Medical Care: Boys and girls had equal access to government facilities, although families were more likely to seek medical assistance for boys than for girls.

Child Abuse: On April 23, the Sindh provincial assembly passed the Child Protection Authority Amendment Act of 2021 to empower the Child Protection Authority to take punitive action against child abusers. The law includes measures to prevent the abduction, trafficking, rape, and killing of children. It also expanded the definition of child abuse to include psychological, physical, and sexual violence, economic exploitation, child marriage, child labor, child trafficking, corporal punishment, injury, and maltreatment. It also declared child abuse as a non-bailable offense.

Child abuse was widespread. Employers, who in some cases were relatives, abused young girls and boys working as domestic servants by beating them and forcing them to work long hours. In January the rape and murder of a seven-year-old maid, Monika Larik, in Khaipur in northern Sindh sparked province-wide protests. On January 20, police announced the arrest of a suspect employed at the same location.

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

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

On April 9, the Peshawar High Court inaugurated child protection courts in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Districts of Kohat, Bannu, Swat, and Dera Ismail Khan, bringing the number of child protection courts active in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to eight. Child protection courts were already present in Peshawar, Abbottabad, and Mardan Districts, and in Mohmand tribal District. There were 12 child protection units operational in Peshawar, Charsadda, Mardan, Swabi, Swat, Bannu, Buner, Abbottabad, Kohat, Lower Dir, Battagram, and Chitral Districts.

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

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

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

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

A children’s rights NGO stated that from January to June, authorities received reports of 51 cases of underage marriage.

On February 16, a court in Faisalabad ordered the release of a 13-year-old Christian girl and allowed her to rejoin her parents after she was abducted, forcibly converted to Islam, and married to a 45-year-old Muslim man in June 2020.

In March a 13-year-old girl was abducted and forced to convert to Islam. On March 16, police recovered the girl and a court ordered her to be moved to a shelter home.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: Various local laws exist to protect children from child pornography, sexual abuse, seduction, and cruelty, but federal laws do not prohibit using children for commercial sexual purposes or pornographic performances, although child pornography is illegal under obscenity laws. Legal observers reported that authorities did not regularly enforce child protection laws. In 2020, according to the NGO Sahil, 2,960 children were sexually abused, including 1,510 girls and 1,450 boys.

On March 6, the body of a 13-year-old religious seminary student was found on the rooftop of a mosque in Pano Aqil, Sindh. According to police, he was tortured and sexually assaulted before being killed. Police arrested four individuals, including three clerics, for their alleged involvement in the incident.

On April 12, police in Chakwal, Punjab arrested a cleric and his accomplice for molesting seminary students and filming the acts over a period of three years. The victims included four girls and a boy who were students at the seminary.

On June 20, Lahore police arrested former Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam leader and renowned cleric Mufti Azizur Rehman after he was found sexually abusing a madrassa student. The cleric was found guilty of the crime, and police asked the court to reject his bail request, which was then denied.

Infanticide or Infanticide of Children with Disabilities: Parents occasionally abandoned unwanted children, most of whom were girls. By law anyone found to have abandoned an infant can be imprisoned for seven years, while anyone guilty of secretly burying a deceased child can be imprisoned for two years. Conviction of murder is punishable by life imprisonment, but authorities rarely prosecuted infanticide.

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

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State’s *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

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

Trafficking in Persons

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

Persons with Disabilities

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

Only 14 percent of persons with disabilities were employed, with job opportunities scarce due to limited access to quality education, little support for job seekers, and business attitudes that regard persons with disabilities as unable to work. Employment quotas at the federal and provincial levels require public and private organizations to reserve at least 2 percent of jobs for qualified persons with disabilities. Authorities only partially implemented this requirement due to lack of adequate enforcement mechanisms. Organizations that did not wish to hire persons with disabilities could instead pay a fine to a disability assistance fund. Authorities rarely enforced this obligation. The National Council for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled provided job placement and loan facilities as well as subsistence funding. Access to polling stations was challenging for persons with disabilities because of severe difficulties in obtaining transportation. The law allows for absentee voting for persons with disabilities. To register for an absentee ballot, however, persons with disabilities were required to obtain an identification card with a special physical disability symbol. According to disability rights activists, the multistep process for obtaining the special identification symbol was cumbersome and challenging.

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

In 2020 the government abolished the 2 percent public and private company employment quota for persons with disabilities. Disability rights groups criticized the hasty way the ordinance was promulgated, without stakeholder feedback or parliamentary debate and oversight. At a joint sitting of the parliament in September 2020, a clause was added to the Islamabad Capital Territory Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill 2020 to restore the quota. Observers noted the clause gives companies loopholes to exempt themselves from the quota, and the act is limited to the Islamabad Capital Territory.

On February 10, the Supreme Court commuted the death sentences of two persons with mental disabilities, Imdad Ali and Kanizan Bibi. The judgment placed a ban at the federal level on applying the death penalty to those with mental disabilities.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

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

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

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

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

In 2019 the inspector general of police announced that the government would provide 0.5 percent of the office jobs in the Sindh police force to members of the transgender community. Transgender activists stated police had not implemented this plan. In 2020 Rawalpindi police launched a pilot project to protect transgender individuals. The project, called the Tahafuz Center, included the first transgender victim-support officer, who was also a member of the transgender community.

On February 11, unidentified assailants shot two transgender persons in the Madukhalil area of Gujranwala District in Punjab. On April 5, armed men entered the house of a 65-year-old transgender person, Mumtaz, and shot and killed her in Karachi. On July 15, the HRCP expressed concern that violence against the transgender community in Karachi was growing.

On April 8, police found the body of a 25-year-old transgender woman who was allegedly burned alive in Nishtar Colony of Lahore. On August 11, police found the body of a transgender person in Shah Khalid colony of Rawalpindi District, Punjab.

A local NGO reported that prison officials in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa held transgender prisoners separately and that the provincial government formed a jail oversight committee to improve the prison situation. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police stations have a dedicated intake desk for transgender persons and have added transgender rights education to police training courses. Local NGOs working in the Islamabad Capital Territory and Punjab conducted transgender sensitization training for police officers. In October the country's first governmental Transgender Protection Center opened in Islamabad to provide legal aid, psychological counseling, and health and rehabilitation services for the transgender community. In June the federal Ministry of Human Rights held an awareness-raising and sensitization workshop for Islamabad police regarding laws related to child domestic workers, child abuse, and transgender persons.

According to LGBTQI+ NGOs and activists, society generally shunned transgender women, eunuchs, and intersex persons, who often lived together in slum communities and survived by begging and dancing at carnivals and weddings. Some also worked as prostitutes. Local authorities often denied transgender individuals their share of inherited property and admission to schools and hospitals. Property owners frequently refused to rent or sell property to transgender persons. The law accords the right of transgender individuals to be recognized according to their

“self-perceived gender identity,” provides for basic rights, prohibits harassment of transgender persons, and outlaws discrimination against them in employment, housing, education, health care, and other services. No such law, however, protects the rights of lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals.

A Supreme Court ruling allows transgender individuals to obtain national identification cards listing a “third gender.” Because national identity cards also serve as voter registration, the ruling enabled transgender individuals to participate in elections, both as candidates and voters.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

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

In March a mob demolished the dome and minarets of an Ahmadi place of worship in Garmola Virkan village of Gurjranwala District, Punjab.

In April an Ahmadi place of worship was vandalized, allegedly with the participation of police, in Muzaffargarh District of Punjab.

In August the Punjab government transferred two Ahmadi officials from Chakwal District after a group of Sunni clerics demanded their expulsion from the district within three days.

On September 2, an Ahmadi British national, Maqsood Ahmed, was shot and killed by unknown assailants in Dharowal area of Nankana Sahib District. No arrest was made.

On September 9, a mob attacked a Pentecostal church in Lahore.

Women’s rights groups faced threats of violence from religious groups. In March organizers of women’s (Aurat) march received threats from extremist groups including a right-wing newspaper *Ummat*, who considered the march to be “vulgar and anti-Islamic.” The march was held amid strict government security, but many NGOs did not participate in the event after receiving direct threats. In the aftermath of the march, several groups accused the organizers of blasphemy and tried to book legal cases against them. On April 15, Peshawar police booked the organizers and participants of the women’s march in Islamabad on the charge of committing blasphemy, but the organizers and participants were not prosecuted.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

Most of the labor force is under the jurisdiction of provincial labor laws. In 2012 parliament passed an industrial relations act that took International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions into account but, due to the 18th amendment, it applied only to the Islamabad Capital Territory and to trade federations that operated in more than one province. The only federal government body with any authority over labor matters was the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, whose role in domestic labor oversight was limited to compiling statistics to demonstrate compliance with ILO conventions. At the provincial level, laws providing for collective bargaining rights excluded banking- and financial-sector workers, forestry workers, hospital workers, self-employed farmers, and persons employed in an administrative or managerial capacity.

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

The law prohibits state administrators, workers in state-owned enterprises and export-processing zones, and public-sector workers from collective bargaining and striking. Nevertheless, state-owned enterprises planned for privatization faced continuous labor strikes. Provincial industrial relations acts also address and limit strikes and lockouts. For example, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Act specifies that, for power distribution, gas, and other essential public service providers, when a “strike or lockout lasts for more than 30 days, the government may, by order in writing, prohibit the strike or lockout” and must refer the dispute to a labor court. The government did not effectively enforce applicable laws, and the penalties were not commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights, such as discrimination.

Federal law defines illegal strikes, picketing, and other types of protests as “civil commotion,” which carries a penalty if convicted of up to life imprisonment. The law also states that gatherings of four or more persons may require police authorization, which is a provision authorities could use against trade union gatherings. Unions were able to organize large-scale strikes, but police often broke up the strikes, and employers used them to justify dismissals. Enforcement of labor laws remained weak, in large part due to lack of resources and political will. Most

unions functioned independently of government and political party influence. Labor leaders raised concerns regarding employers sponsoring management-friendly or only-on-paper worker unions – so-called yellow unions – to prevent effective unionization.

There were no reported cases of the government dissolving a union without due process. Unions could be administratively “deregistered,” however, without judicial review.

Labor NGOs assisted workers by providing technical training and capacity-building workshops to strengthen labor unions and trade organizations. They also worked with established labor unions to organize workers in the informal sector and advocated policies and legislation to improve the rights, working conditions, and wellbeing of workers, including laborers in the informal sector. NGOs also collaborated with provincial governments to provide agricultural workers, brick kiln workers, and other vulnerable workers with national identification so they could connect to the country’s social safety net and access the benefits of citizenship (such as voting, health care, and education). The federal government, with financial support from the World Bank, created approximately 100,000 jobs for youth to plant trees in their local areas.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, cancels all existing bonded labor debts, forbids lawsuits for the recovery of such debts, and establishes a district “vigilance committee” system to implement the law. The ILO raised concerns, however, that laws prohibiting some workers in essential services from leaving their employment without the consent of the employer allowed for criminal penalties that included prison labor.

The law defines trafficking in persons as recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining another person (or attempting to do so) through force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of compelled labor or commercial sex. The penalty for conviction of trafficking in persons is sufficient to deter violations. Regarding sex trafficking, however, by allowing for a fine in lieu of imprisonment, penalties were not commensurate with those for other serious crimes, such as rape. Lack of political will, the reported complicity of officials in labor trafficking, as well as federal and local government structural changes, contributed to the failure of authorities to enforce federal law relating to forced labor. Resources, inspections, and remediation were inadequate.

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

Ties among landowners, industry owners, and influential politicians hampered effective elimination of the problem. For example some local police did not pursue landowners or brick kiln owners effectively because they believed higher-ranking police, pressured by politicians or the owners themselves, would not support their efforts to carry out legal investigations. Some bonded laborers returned to their former status after authorities freed them, due to a lack of alternative employment options. In Sindh the Bonded Labor Act of 2015 has no accompanying civil procedure to implement the law. Of the 29 district vigilance committees charged with overseeing bonded labor practices, 14 were active as of November, and the Sindh Government had signed an MOU with the International Labor Organization for the purpose of activating the remaining committees.

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

The government of Punjab funded the *Elimination of Child Labor and Bonded Labor Project*, under which the Punjab Department of Labor worked to combat child and bonded labor in brick kilns. They did this by helping workers obtain national identity cards and interest-free loans and providing schools at brick kiln sites. NGO contacts noted that the Punjab government’s 2020 order setting standard wages for brick kiln laborers wages continued to be poorly implemented. In addition, many brick kiln laborers continued to lack national identity cards.

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

Also see the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/> and the Department of Labor’s *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law does not prohibit all of the worst forms of child labor. The federal government prohibited child domestic labor and other hazardous labor via an amendment in 2020 to the Child Employment Act of 1991, which covers the Islamabad Capital Territory but requires the same amendment be passed by each province to be adopted. No province had adopted similar legislation as of October 19. The constitution expressly prohibits the employment of children younger than age 14 in any factory, mine, or other hazardous site. The national law for the employment of children sets the minimum age for hazardous work at 14, which does not comply with international standards. Provincial laws in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh set the minimum age for hazardous work at 18, meeting international standards.

In August, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa raised the minimum wage for daily wage workers (from (16,000 rupees (\$103) to 17,900 rupees (\$115) per month), and mandated women and transgender workers receive pay equal to that of male workers. The government also banned child employment in domestic home-based jobs.

In May the Balochistan government passed the Balochistan Forced and Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Bill of 2021. The law defines and prohibits bonded and forced labor and provides for two to five years' imprisonment and fine as punishment for the crime.

On April 26, the Balochistan Assembly passed the Balochistan Employment of Children Prohibition and Regulation Act, providing protections for children, setting the minimum age for hazardous work at 14 years and setting the minimum age for coal mining at 15 years. Despite these restrictions, there were nationwide reports of children working in areas the law defined as hazardous, such as leather manufacturing, brick making, and deep-sea fishing. Most domestic workers were still hired informally with no limits put on their hours.

By law the minimum age for nonhazardous work is 14 in shops and establishments and 15 for work in factories and mines. The law does not extend the minimum age limit to informal employment. The law limits the workday to seven hours for children, including a one-hour break after three hours of labor, and sets permissible times of day for work and time off. The law does not allow children to work overtime or at night, and it specifies they should receive one day off per week. Additionally, the law requires employers to keep a register of child workers for labor inspection purposes. These national prohibitions and regulations do not apply to home-based businesses or brickmaking.

Federal law prohibits the exploitation of children younger than 18 and defines exploitative entertainment as all activities related to human sports or sexual practices and other abusive practices. Parents who exploit their children are legally liable.

Child labor remained pervasive, with many children working in agriculture and domestic work. There were also reports that small workshops employed many child laborers, which complicated efforts to enforce child labor laws. Poor rural families sometimes sold their children into domestic servitude or other types of work, or they paid agents to arrange for such work, often believing their children would work under decent conditions. Some children sent to work for relatives or acquaintances in exchange for education or other opportunities ended in exploitative conditions or forced labor. Children also were kidnapped or sold into organized begging rings, domestic servitude, militant groups and gangs, and child sex trafficking. Media reported that due to COVID-19, more children were dropping out of school and that many children turned to the workforce to lessen the economic burden their parents experienced due to the pandemic. The NGO Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child claimed that more than 12 million children were forced to practice child labor.

School closures resulting from the pandemic affected more than 30 million children, with the school dropout rate in urban areas increasing from 10 percent to 25 percent during the year.

Coordination of responses to child labor problems at the national level remained ineffective. Labor inspection was the purview of provincial rather than national government, which contributed to uneven application of labor law. Enforcement efforts were not adequate to meet the scale of the problem. Inspectors had little training and insufficient resources and were susceptible to corruption. Authorities registered hundreds of child labor law violations, but they often did not impose penalties on violators; when they did, the penalties were not a significant deterrent. Authorities generally allowed NGOs to perform inspections without interference.

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

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

While regulations prohibit discrimination in employment and occupation regarding race, sex, gender, disability, language, gender identity, HIV-positive status or other communicable diseases, or social status, the government did not effectively enforce those laws and regulations. Discrimination with respect to employment and occupation based on these factors persisted. Women constituted only 22.5 percent of the labor force despite representing 49.2 percent of the population. The Special Economic Zones Act of 2012 provides for limited protections, and the status of national laws dealing with labor rights, antidiscrimination, and harassment at the workplace remained ambiguous. Penalties were not commensurate with laws related to civil rights, such as election interference.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The 2010 passage of the 18th amendment to the constitution dissolved the federal Ministry of Labor and Manpower and devolved labor matters to the provinces. Some labor groups, international organizations, and NGOs remained critical of the devolution, contending that certain labor matters – including minimum wages, worker rights, national labor standards, and observance of international labor conventions – should remain within the purview of the federal government. Observers also raised concerns regarding the provinces’ varying capacity and commitment to adopt and enforce labor laws. Some international organizations, however, observed that giving authority to provincial authorities led to improvements in labor practices, including inspections, in some provinces.

Wage and Hour Laws: The minimum wage as set by the government exceeded its definition of the poverty line income for an individual, which was 9,500 rupees (\$60) per month. The minimum wage was 20,000 rupees (\$127) per month. The minimum wage was greater than the World Bank’s estimate for poverty-level income. Authorities increased the minimum wage in the annual budget in 2020, and both federal and provincial governments implemented the increase. Minimum wage laws did not cover significant sectors of the labor force, including workers in the informal sector, domestic servants, and agricultural workers; enforcement of minimum wage laws was uneven.

The law provides for a maximum workweek of 48 hours (54 hours for seasonal factories) with rest periods during the workday and paid annual holidays. The labor code also requires time off on official government holidays, overtime pay, annual and sick leave, health care, education for workers’ children, social security, old-age benefits, and a workers’ welfare fund. Many workers, however, were employed as contract laborers with no benefits beyond basic wages and no long-term job security, even if they remained with the same employer for many years. Furthermore, these national regulations do not apply to agricultural workers, workers in establishments with fewer than 10 employees, or domestic workers. Workers in these types of employment also lacked the right to access labor courts to seek redress of grievances and were extremely vulnerable to exploitation. The industry-specific nature of many labor laws and the lack of government enforcement gave employers in many sectors relative impunity regarding working conditions, treatment of employees, work hours, and pay.

Provincial governments have primary responsibility for enforcing national labor regulations. Enforcement was ineffective due to limited resources, corruption, and inadequate regulatory structures. The number of labor inspectors employed by the provincial governments was insufficient for the approximately 64 million persons in the workforce. Many workers, especially in the informal sector, remained unaware of their rights. Due to limited resources for labor inspections and corruption, inspections and penalties were insufficient to deter violations of labor laws. Minimum wages and labor law disputes are settled by internal dispute resolution mechanisms as opposed to being dealt with national courts, further contributing to corruption. Penalties were not commensurate with those for similar crimes, such as fraud.

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

The comprehensive occupational health and safety law enacted by Sindh Province in 2017 had not been implemented by year’s end. In 2020 the Punjab government enacted the Medical Teaching Institute (Reform) Ordinance, which amended several existing pieces of health-care legislation and instituted boards of governors composed of private-sector professionals for state-run teaching hospitals. Mayo Hospital Lahore, Punjab’s largest state-run teaching institute, became the first public-sector teaching institute where the ordinance was enforced. A newly formed board of governors took over the administrative and financial control of the hospital.

Occupational Safety and Health: Implementation and enforcement of health and safety standards in multiple sectors of labor remained weak, particularly at provincial levels throughout the country. Given weak implementation of health and safety standards in various sectors of labor, this raised doubts abroad as to its reliability as a source country, for imports, particularly in the garment and textile sectors. The country’s failure to meet international health and safety standards raised doubts abroad as to its reliability as a source for imports. There was a serious lack of adherence to mine safety and health protocols. Many mines had only one opening for entry, egress, and ventilation. Workers could not remove themselves from dangerous working conditions without risking loss of employment. Informal-sector employees, such as domestic and home-based workers, were particularly vulnerable to health and safety dangers. There were no statistics on workplace fatalities and accidents during the year. Factory managers were often unable to ascertain the identity of fire or other work-related accident victims because these individuals were contract workers and generally did not appear in records.

On February 10, a fire in a thread-manufacturing factory in Baldia Town, Karachi, killed three workers. Fire officials stated the deaths occurred due to lack of emergency exits in the building. On August 27, a fire in a Karachi luggage factory, where exits and windows had been barred shut, killed 18 workers. Investigators said the factory had no emergency exits nor fire alarm system, and its fire-extinguishing system was nonfunctional. Labor rights activists claimed the factory was not registered with the government labor department. Police arrested the owners and a supervisor, and the trial continued at year’s end.

Labor rights activists observed that workers often had to work in dangerous conditions and that private-sector mining companies failed to provide workers with health and safety facilities. On March 12, six coal miners died and two miners were rescued in the Marwar coal mine field in Balochistan. The miners were trapped approximately 1,000 feet below ground when a buildup of methane gas exploded. Coal mine workers were also targets of attacks by militants due to their ethnicity or religious affiliation. On January 3, militants killed 11 Hazara Shia coal miners in Macch, Balochistan. On April 9, the remains of 16 coal miners abducted by militants in September were recovered from a mass grave in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. On August 23, militants killed three Pashtun coal miners at a coal mine near Quetta.

According to the Pakistan Mine Worker Federation’s statistics, more than 200 coal miners died nationwide in 2020. The government did not effectively enforce occupational safety and health laws; penalties for violations of such laws were not commensurate with those for crimes like negligence.

Informal Sector: There was a significant number of workers in the informal sector. Although recent data on the size and sectors were unavailable, in 2019 the ILO reported the informal economy was large and that workers had limited access to labor welfare services. A labor force survey from 2017-18 stated that the informal sector accounted for 71.7 percent of the employment in main jobs outside agriculture – more in rural areas (75.6 percent) than in urban areas (68.1 percent). Occupational health and safety laws and inspections do not apply to the informal sector.

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