1.2. Demographics

The UN estimated Pakistan’s population to exceed 255 million at the end of 2025, making it the world’s fifth most populous country, marked by rapid population increase.41 The most recent census was carried out in 2023 by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and produced a population figure of about 241.5 million, with a growth rate of 2.55 % between 2017 and 2023.42 The urban population, which made up roughly 39 % of the overall population, expanded at a rate of 3.67 % – around twice the pace of the rural population. Only about 1 % of Pakistan’s people lived in the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) in 2023,43 with other cities in the country being significantly larger than its capital: the largest urban centre by a wide margin was Karachi with approximately 18.9 million residents.44 Situated on the Arabian Sea coast, it is the capital of Sindh province and functions as the principal port and a key hub for trade and industry.45 Lahore, the capital of Punjab province,46 came next with 13 million residents.47 Punjab was Pakistan’s most populated province with approximately 52.9 % of the total population, followed by Sindh with around 23.1 %, and KP with around 16.9 %; the least populous of Pakistan’s four provinces was Balochistan, with an approximate proportion of 6.2 % of the total population.48

Pakistan is a culturally, ethnically and linguistically varied country,49 with its division into four provinces reflecting the country's traditional regions, each defined by its distinct ethnic and linguistic profile.50 The 2023 Census does not provide data on ethnic affiliation. However, it is estimated that 44.7 % of the population is Punjabi, 15.4 % Pashtun (mainly living in northwestern Pakistan51), 14.1 % are Sindhi, 8.4 % Saraiki, 7.6 % Muhajirs, and 3.6 % Balochis, with the remaining 6.3 % belonging to other ethnic communities.52 Each of the ethnic groups is further broken down into multiple subgroups and some groups may span more than one category.53 Languages used in Pakistan include Punjabi (37 %), Pashto (18.2 %), Sindhi (14.3 %), the Punjabi variant Saraiki (12 %), Urdu (9.3 %), Balochi (3.4 %), Hindko (2.7 %), and Brahvi (1.2 %). A further 1.9 % of the population speak other languages.54 (For more information, see section 6.1.1. Ethnic minorities). Pakistan is characterised as broadly multilingual, with no single language being shared by all its peoples. The main languages are largely anchored in particular regions, although some are spoken across multiple provinces. The 1973 constitution introduced a transitional phase from English to Urdu for official purposes, a shift that has not been fully implemented, as English remains in use, particularly within educational and government institutions.55 Official Pakistani websites describe Urdu as the national language and English as the official language.56

Pakistan as a Muslim-majority state was established through the partition of the Indian sub-continent in 194757 and the later secession of Bangladesh in 1971.58 The 2023 national census found that about 96.4 % of Pakistan’s population is Muslim.59 Sunnis are estimated to comprise 85 to 90 % of the Muslims,60 while Shiites (including ethnic Hazara, Ismaili, Bangash, Turi and

Bohra61) are considered to account for around 10 to 15 %.62 Among the non-Muslim population, the main religious affiliations are Christian and Hindu, alongside other smaller religious groups. 63 For more information, see section 6.1.2. Religious minorities.

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