6.1.7. Critical voices and individuals perceived as opposing the state

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○ (a) Members and supporters of opposition parties

The Pakistani Constitution allows every citizen to form or be a member of a political party ‘subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the sovereignty or integrity of Pakistan’.1732 As of February 2026, there were 171 registered political parties in Pakistan.1733 Freedom House notes that while political parties participate in national, provincial and local elections, the army, which is regarded as more powerful than the elected politicians, is able to influence the outcome.1734 For more information see section 2.1.1. Landscape of political parties in Pakistan.

In 2025, political opposition continued to be subjected to crackdown in the country. 1735 The exclusion of Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf (PTI) candidates from formally participating in the 2024 general elections by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) was allegedly influenced by the Pakistani army.1736

By December 2024, military courts sentenced several individuals linked to PTI to prison terms following the May 2023 unrest after the arrest of Imran Khan.1737 The use of military courts to try civilians raised significant concerns among international observers.1738 Human Rights Watch expressed serious concerns regarding the right to a fair trial,1739 while the European Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom condemned Pakistan’s use of military courts to prosecute civilians.1740

By August 2025, thousands of supporters of Imran Khan continued to protest across Pakistan, demanding his release from prison.1741 During these demonstrations, more than 240 PTI supporters were reportedly arrested1742 and 122 detained.1743 Pakistani courts subsequently convicted nearly 200 supporters for their involvement in

the violent protests that followed Khan's 2023 arrest.1744 In addition, an anti-terrorism court sentenced 108 members of the PTI to prison for protesting against the military after Khan's arrest and also disqualified six PTI legislators.1745

As of 12 December 2025, Imran Khan tasked Secretary General Salman Akram Raja with forming a 23-member political committee of PTI, with the restructured body including senior leaders such as party chairman Gohar Ali Khan.1746 On 27 December 2025, over 1 000 PTI supporters were detained in Pakistan ahead of protests demanding the release of Imran Khan.1747 Military courts were reportedly used for trials related to PTI.1748 By 30 January 2026, Imran Khan continued to be imprisoned in isolation with no visitors allowed for weeks.1749

On 12 February 2026, PTI leaders Raja Azhar and Faheem Khan were reportedly subjected to custodial torture at Awami Police Station in Sindh, where they were blindfolded, beaten, verbally abused, and humiliated.1750 On 19 February 2026, a Pakistani opposition alliance called off nationwide sit-ins over jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's health, while his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf launched a new mobilisation campaign, including the formation of an 'Imran Khan Release Force'.1751 During the same period, police launched a crackdown on workers of PTI removing protesters from the Peshawar–Islamabad Motorway (M-1) and reopening the road after a five-day blockade by supporters demanding medical treatment for jailed former prime minister Imran Khan.1752

News reports informed that on 9 December 2024, the police in Karachi arrested 24 workers of Muttahida Qaumi Movement–London (MQM-L) including women and stopped their rally commemorating the party's martyrs' day in Azizabad. 1753 Similarly, on 11 December 2024, the police charged and arrested several supporters of MQM-L in Hyderabad during a commemoration gathering, where authorities blocked access to the memorial site with barbed wire, accused participants of chanting anti-Pakistan slogans and supporting exiled party leader Altaf Hussain, and registered criminal and anti-terrorism charges against dozens of supporters.1754 During the same period, a judicial magistrate in Karachi released 24 supporters of MQM-L arrested for holding rallies, while in Hyderabad six activists were imprisoned for sedition and anti-terrorism charges.1755 Meanwhile, Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan (MQM-P) reorganised as a Karachi-based party, formally cutting ties with the London-based MQM-L faction, which has operated independently since August 2016, 1756 a separation reiterated by MQM-P in January 2026.1757

In addition, the National Awami Party (NAP), a Pashtun political party, continues to be targeted by militant groups including the TTP, which has killed many of its leaders,1758 resulting in 1 225 deaths among its members and workers by December 2025.1759 The party continues to oppose the TTP, and criticise Pakistani military operations for their high security and economic costs to Pashtun-inhabited areas.1760 In July 2025,

Maulana Zeb Khan, a leader of the ANP, was killed by unknown gunmen in KP.[1761]

Meanwhile, political exclusion and opposition in Balochistan have fuelled an ongoing insurgency,[1762] with the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) carrying out attacks against security personnel.[1763] In response, the government has killed over 150 BLA militants.[1764] On 2 September 2025, a suicide bombing targeted a Balochistan National Party (BNP) rally in Quetta, killing 15 people and injuring 32.[1765] Daesh, which maintains presence in Balochistan, has claimed the attack.[1766] For more information see section 4.2.1. Balochistan.

○ (b) Human rights defenders and activists

The right to freedom of assembly is enshrined in the constitution,[1767] while the 2024 Peaceful Assembly and Public Order Act regulates public gatherings in Islamabad.[1768] Moreover, the Peaceful Assembly and Public Order Act permits the authorities to limit demonstrations in Islamabad on broad grounds including 'disruption of daily activities' and increases punishments for taking part in 'unlawful assemblies' from six months to three years imprisonment.[1769] In 2024, Amnesty International expressed concern that the Peaceful Assembly and Public Order Act may threaten the right to protest in Pakistan.[1770] According to a scholar Tehreem Sultan, the Act permits the Government to designate a specific area of Islamabad as a 'red zone' or 'high security zone', and consequently declare a blanket rule and ban all forms of gatherings.[1771]

In November 2024, the United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed concern regarding legislation restricting the right to assembly as reported by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH).[1772]

Based on the 2026 Global Organized Crime Index developed by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, restrictions imposed by the government on Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and freedom of press remain significant.[1773]

The CIVICUS Monitor rated the state of civic space in Pakistan as 'repressed'. Ongoing concerns include attacks on peaceful protests held by the opposition and human rights movements. Other ongoing concerns include the criminalisation, threats and harassment of human rights defenders and the failure to hold perpetrators to account. There have also been violations documented against women's rights activists.[1774] According to the same source, authorities are targeting activists, stifling protests and restricting digital spaces.[1775] Human rights defenders are arbitrarily criminalised on terrorism charges, while Pashtun rights movement was banned, and crackdowns on

opposition and ethnic minority protests are ‘rampant’.1776

Between February 2025 and November 2025, CIVICUS Monitor reported on repression of human rights groups, and targeting and criminalising Baloch and Pashtun activists by the government. Moreover, the government continued with unlawful mass surveillance and censorship and failed to address enforced disappearance.1777 The crackdown on protests by the opposition in Jammu and Kashmir and criminalisation of protesters was also reported.1778

FIDH indicated that the ‘systematic crackdown on peaceful protests’ and targeting of Baloch defenders, especially the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC), continued in 2025. 1779

Human rights defenders in Pakistan are subjected to a range of attacks and abuses, including extra-judicial killings and violence, arbitrary arrest and detention, brutal sectarian violence, abduction and enforced disappearance, surveillance, threats and judicial harassment.1780

In 2024 and 2025, minority rights defenders in Pakistan, including from Baloch, Pashtun and Sindhi communities, were reportedly subjected to harassment, arrest, terror and treason charges, violence and travel bans, as reported by Front Line Defenders.1781

In March 2025, Amnesty International reported on systematic attacks on Baloch activists.1782 Reportedly, police used tear gas1783 and water cannon and fired blank shots to disperse protesters from the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC).1784 In July 2025, a civil rights organisation, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reported on ‘arbitrary, illegal and unjustified actions’ by the Pakistani authorities directly affecting the HRCP’s operations.1785 Sources reported on cases of arrest of human rights defenders, activists, and protesters between December 2024 and April 2025 in Pakistan.1786 Notably, in August 2024, a leader of PTM, Ali Wazir, was arrested in Islamabad on fabricated charges.1787 Ali Wazir remained jailed in December 2024 1788 under the Maintenance of Public Order (MPO) Ordinance.1789

Volunteer activities, including social work, carried out by human rights defenders and activists, including the PTM,1790 in areas affected by conflict, are subjected to targeting by the Pakistani army.1791 The PTM, which is a civil society group supported by many Pashtun youth, has organised *uloosi pasoons* (‘people’s uprisings’) in areas affected by militant violence and military operations, opposing militancy while also criticising the human and economic costs of counterinsurgency measures.1792 The PTM also documents human rights abuses in areas affected by conflict such as enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and landmine explosions.1793

The Pakistani government designated PTM as a ‘proscribed organisation’, and over 200 of its activists were arrested prior to a *jirga* (Pashtun elders’ assembly).1794 Two PTM

workers went missing on 13 November 2025 following their attendance in a peace *jirga,*[1795] and the PTM continued to remain banned as per the Peshawar High Court order issued in February 2026.[1796] The court upheld the government's decision to ban PTM and several of its leaders, including Manzoor Ahmad Pashteen.[1797] On 20 February 2026, the Punjab Home Department included the PTM among 89 proscribed organisations, warning that providing financial support or charity to these groups would constitute an offence under the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997.[1798]

On 22 March 2025, police arrested Mahrang Baloch, chief organiser of the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC), for 'inciting' violence, terrorism and creating disorder.[1799] On 24 March 2025, at least six activists were detained for reportedly disobeying a ban on gatherings in the city[1800] with the UN experts demanding their release.[1801] In July 2025, six Baloch activists, including Mahrang Baloch, Bebarg Zehri, Beebow Baloch, Shah Jee Sibghat Ullah, Ghaffar Qambarani and Gulzadi Baloch, were arbitrarily detained by the government, as reported by AI.[1802]

In April 2025, a lawyer advocating for the rights of Baloch people has faced repeated FIRs, travel bans, arrests, threats, and harassment.[1803] In January 2026, Amnesty International reported on judicial harassment of two human rights lawyers, Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir and Hadi Ali Chattha ,[1804] who were arrested[1805] and sentenced to 17 years of imprisonment under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) by the Sessions Court in Islamabad in January 2026.[1806]

In 2024, Amnesty International reported on activists being subjected to enforced disappearance. By June 2024, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances received 197 missing persons' cases. In contrast, the Defence of Human Rights recorded 2 332 cases of enforced disappearances in 2024 as reported by Amnesty International.[1807] In 2024, Front Line Defenders recorded seven human rights defenders killed in Pakistan.[1808]

Arbitrary inclusion of 32 individuals, including Baloch activists, as "proscribed persons" under section 11-EE of the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997. The Balochistan authorities, through notifications issued on 2 and 16 October, have designated 32 individuals from Khuzdar, Kech and Chagai districts in Balochistan province under the Fourth Schedule of the Anti-Terrorism Act as "proscribed individuals". These include women activists such as Dr. Sabiha Baloch, Sammi Deen Baloch, Naz Gul and Syed Babi Sharif and Shalee Assa.[1809]

The designation places the individuals under heavy surveillance and severely restricts their freedom of movement and ability to take part in public life. Proscribed individuals are forbidden from traveling without permission from the local police. Moreover, the proscription grants powers to the authorities to investigate and freeze financial assets of the person or their immediate family members.[1810] For instance, in January 2024, Sindhi human rights defender Amar Sindhu was reportedly subjected to cyber-

harassment and intimidation through fake social media accounts, while in January 2025 the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders raised concerns about an online smear campaign targeting her.1811

○ (c) Protestors

The constitution of Pakistan states that 'Every citizen shall have the right to assemble peacefully and without arms, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of public order'.1812 Peaceful protests are allowed in the country,1813 and during the period between 1 November 2024 and 24 April 2026, ACLED recorded 1 114 protests across the country with majority in Sindh, followed by Punjab, KP, Balochistan. During the same period, 274 riots were also recorded, with most occurring in Sindh, followed by Punjab, Balochistan, and KP.1814

The UN Human Rights Committee raised concerns about restrictions on peaceful assembly in Pakistan, including blanket bans on gatherings and the use of sedition and unlawful assembly provisions to detain protesters.1815 These measures reportedly affected human rights defenders, activists, political opponents, and ethnic or religious minorities.1816 The committee also indicated reports of intimidation, enforced disappearances, torture, excessive force, and mass arbitrary arrests during protests such as the Aurat March, the Baloch Long March, the Baloch Raji Machi, and the Pashtun Qaumi Jirga.1817 Freedom House noted that authorities continued to retain broad legal powers to prohibit gatherings deemed threats to public order and use structured law enforcement to suppress assemblies viewed by the military as harmful to national security or as challenges to its authority.1818

In February 2025, several protesters have been killed in clashes with police in Pakistan-administered Kashmir.1819 In October 2025, Amnesty International reported that Pakistani authorities used excessive force against protests in Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir, and called on the government to protect the right to peaceful assembly and lift the communications blackout.1820

In April 2025, UN experts 'condemned reports of widespread torture, ill-treatment, extrajudicial killings and indiscriminate violence by security forces, especially against peaceful protesters, and Baloch human rights defenders.'1821

On 1 March 2026, over 26 protesters were killed in Pakistan when security forces1822 used live fire, tear gas and rubber bullets.1823 Most of the demonstrations took place in the cities of Skardu, Gilgit, Karachi, Islamabad, Lahore, and Peshawar1824 including

protests by the Pakistani Shia community[1825] in response to the killing of Iran's Supreme leader, Ayatullah Ali Khamenei, in a US-Israel attack.[1826]

○ (d) Journalists and media workers

Article 19 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of the press; however, this right is subject to 'to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, [commission of] or incitement to an offence'.[1827]

Despite the opposition by journalists and media bodies,[1828] the amendment to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) was passed by the National Assembly[1829] and signed into law by the president Asif Ali Zardari in January 2025.[1830] The amendment empowers government agencies with the authority to imprison individuals for up to three years for spreading disinformation on social media. The law also authorises the government to impose fines of up to two million rupees [around 6 000 EUR] for spreading disinformation on social media; and introduces the requirement to register social media platforms with the new Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority.[1831] According to the president of Pakistan's Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), Afzal Butt, no journalistic body was consulted by the government before enacting the law.[1832] Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), Dastoor President Haji Muhammad Nawaz Raza, and Secretary General, AH Khanzada, termed the law amendments as an 'attack on freedom of expression'.[1833] Following the Senate's approval of the PECA amendments, journalists staged protests across the country, and specifically in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, Quetta, Faisalabad, Bahawalnagar and Sukkur.[1834]

In November 2025, the government established a 12-member Commission for the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals, including journalists from across the country. The aim of the commission is to safeguard the rights and safety of journalists as per the 2021 Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act.[1835]

In 2025, Pakistan fell six places, from 152nd in 2024 to 158,th according to World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders (RSF).[1836] The Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors (CPNE) expressed concerns over the state of media freedom in Pakistan, specifically with journalists and media organisations being subjected to pressure, censorship, and punitive actions.[1837]

The state of civic space in Pakistan has been categorised as ‘repressed’ by CIVICUS Monitor since 2018.[1838] According to the same source, in 2025, Pakistan continued to criminalise activists, target journalists, and suppress protests.[1839]

In the period between November 2024 and December 2024, sources reported on partial suspension of internet by the government.[1840] The internet and mobile services were suspended in Balochistan Intermittently in 2025.[1841]

As reported by CIVICUS Monitor in 2025, journalists were targeted under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) and accused of allegedly spreading ‘false narratives against state institutions.’[1842] Furthermore, PECA has been allegedly used to silence dissent, as reported by Amnesty International.[1843] In 2025, Human Rights Watch reported that government threats and attacks on journalists created ‘a climate of fear’ with many journalists exercising self-censorship. Moreover, journalists faced harassment, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and physical attacks for reporting critically of the government and security forces.[1844]Journalists in Pakistan continue to face threats and censorship, which limits investigative reporting on organised crime and corruption. Pakistan’s media environment has further deteriorated, with increasing state surveillance, legal intimidation and press censorship. The government’s control over information flow raised concerns about freedom of expression and access to independent reporting.[1845]

According to Pakistan Press Foundation’s (PPF) Impunity Day Report 2025, at least 137 attacks on journalists were documented between January and October 2025. These included 35 physical assaults, five detentions, two abductions, and four attacks on media property. Journalists also continued to face legal pressures, with eight arrests, 30 cases registered—including 22 under PECA— and 23 actions from investigative and cybercrime agencies. The report also noted 19 incidents of intimidation and harassment.[1846]

In the period between January 2024 and December 2024, PPF documented at least 168 confirmed attacks on journalists and media professionals in connection to the work and attempts of censorship to regulate and restrict free expression either through punitive measures or regulation including two murders, 76 instances of assault, four instances of abduction, 12 attacks on property, five arrests, 12 detentions, 15 instances of case registration, eight documented instances of FIA action and two of other legal action, two instances of placement on the Exit Control List, 15 instances of online harassment, five threats, 31 instances of censorship including 19 instances of internet, mobile connectivity and social media platform disruptions including the ban on X, four restrictive directives by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) – the broadcast regulator –, and eight other directives, orders or actions tantamount to censorship.[1847]

Between 2024 and 2026, sources reported that journalists in Pakistan were subjected to harassment,1848 intimidation,1849 and surveillance by the Pakistani government. 1850 In addition, Voicepk.net reported that television journalism in Pakistan experienced increased restrictions in 2025, with a number of anchor persons reportedly taken off-air or forced to leave their programmes, including Kashif Abbasi, Habib Akram, Paras Jahanzeb, Samina Pasha, Sami Ibrahim, Arif Hameed Bhatti, and Khalid Jamil.1851

In November 2025, PPF condemned the circulation of an AI-generated video targeting and harassing journalist Benazir Shah.1852

In 2025, local news media Dawn reported on attacks against journalists in Pakistan. 1853 In the period between January 2025 and October 2025, Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) documented at least 137 confirmed attacks on journalists and media professionals.1854 In January 2026, Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) expressed concern about a trend with journalists being subjected to violence while reporting during large political rallies or gatherings.1855 On 11 January 2026, the vehicle of Aaj News media was attacked by the PTI supporters.1856

In 2025, CIVICUS Monitor reported on a raid on a press club.1857 Specifically, on 2 October 2025, Islamabad police carried out a raid at the National Press Club (NPC) and reportedly attacked several journalists.1858

Local and international media reported on several arrests of journalists between the end of 2024 and beginning of 2026 in Pakistan. In November 2024, a journalist Matiullah Jan was arrested on narcotics and terrorist charges.1859 According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the arrest of Matiullah Jan was allegedly due to his reporting on casualties during Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) protests,1860 which were denied by the government.1861

In March 2025, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) in Karachi arrested a journalist and the founder of media agency Raftar, Farhan Mallick over the content of his YouTube videos. The charges included activities involving ‘several programmes against the security establishment’.1862 In December 2025, the journalist Sohrab Barkat was arrested in Islamabad over allegedly spreading misinformation about state institutions. 1863 In addition, reports indicate that journalists were also subjected to movement restrictions, including placement on the Exit Control List, preventing them from travelling abroad.1864

In January 2026, Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) expressed concern over arrest of the freelance journalist Muhammad Aslam Shah by the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA).1865 Reportedly covering the topic of Karachi’s water,1866 journalist Aslam Shah was arrested under the 2025 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 1867 and charged with allegedly ‘defamation through social media’.1868

In 2025, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported on widely documented kidnappings and forced disappearances of journalists in Pakistan, including the cases of Imran Riaz Khan and Sami Ibrahim, who were abducted in May 2023 and later released. 1869

According to news outlet ANI News and CPJ, a Balochistan journalist, affiliated with the Barkhan Press Club, Asif Kareem Khetran allegedly forcibly disappeared in March 2025. 1870

In 2024, RSF described Pakistan as one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists.1871 Out of a total of seven journalists killed, two journalists were killed by Tehrik-e-Taliban in Pakistan (TTP) in 2024.1872 In the period between 1 January 2025 and 30 December 2025, three Pakistani journalists were killed in the line of duty according to IFJ.1873 In October 2025, multiple sources reported on killing of the journalist Imtiaz Mir1874 by a militant group Lashkar Sarullah, an offshoot the Zainabiyoun Brigade, an alleged Iranian-backed Shia militant group. 1875

As noted by Balochistan coordinator for Freedom Network – an NGO working on journalist safety – Hameedullah Sherani, the situation in Balochistan remains hostile to journalists. Moreover, at least 40 journalists were killed in Balochistan since 2005.1876 In May 2025, the journalist Latif Baloch was shot dead in Balochistan.1877

In December 2025, RSF reported on Pakistani government continuous harassment and persecution of a journalist and the founder of the investigative website Fact Focus, Ahmad Noorani, who has been living in exile since 2020.1878

In January 2026, a Pakistani anti-terrorism court sentenced several journalists and social media commentators to life imprisonment *in absentia* after convicting them of terrorism-related offences linked to online activity in support of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan.1879 According to CPJ, the convicted persons were allegedly guilty of anti-state and terrorism offences under Pakistan's Penal Code and the Anti-Terrorism Act.1880 Most of these convicted persons live outside Pakistan.1881

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