



Updated May 8, 2024

Pakistan: Human Rights Assessments

Overview

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a federal parliamentary republic. As reported by the State Department's 2023 *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* (also known as Human Rights Reports or HRRs), Pakistan is the site of numerous human rights abuses, many of them significant, some seen to be perpetrated by agents of the government. According to the 2023 HRR, "The government rarely took credible steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses." United Nations bodies and many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) convey related concerns. In recent decades, congressional legislation and U.S. law have included attention to the status of democracy and human rights in Pakistan. The following sections describe selected areas of concern.

Democracy and Civil-Military Relations

Democracy and constitutionalism have fared poorly in Pakistan since its 1947 independence. The 2022 HRR conveyed that, "While military and intelligence services officially report to civilian authorities, they operate independently and without effective civilian oversight." The State Department joined other observers in assessing that Pakistan's February 2024 national elections "included undue restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly," and it condemned "electoral violence, restrictions on the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms." The United Nations, European Union, and United Kingdom expressed similar concerns.

U.S.-based nonprofit Freedom House designates Pakistan as "Partly Free," on a downward trend since 2017, with a military that "intimidates the media" and a "politicized" judiciary. The Sweden-based Varieties of Democracies project has classified Pakistan as "an electoral autocracy" since 2015 and ranks it 119th of 179 countries on a 2024 "Liberal Democracy Index." In early 2024, the *EIU Democracy Index 2023* downgraded Pakistan from a "hybrid regime" to an "authoritarian regime," saying Pakistan's "regression" in 2023 was the worst in the region.

Religious Freedom

Pakistan's population is approximately 96% Muslim. The State Department's 2022 *Report on International Religious Freedom* reports on abuses affecting religious minorities there—including Shia and Ahmadi Muslims—as well as "the increasing frequency of attempts to kidnap, forcibly convert, and forcibly marry young women and girls from religious minority communities, especially Hindus and Christians." In a 2024 report, the nongovernmental Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) said, "Violence in the name of religion has increasingly become the status quo in Pakistan. Regrettably, the sentiments of majoritarian

Muslims remain sacrosanct and given discriminatory preference over religious minorities and sects."

The U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHRC) also has expressed concern over "continued persecution and acts of violence perpetrated by state and non-state actors" in Pakistan, some of it "fueled by claims of apostasy and blasphemy." The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) decried "the increasing use of Pakistan's blasphemy law in 2023," including its "disproportionate" use against religious minorities. USCIRF has since 2002 recommended annually that Pakistan be designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act "for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief." The State Department has designated Pakistan as a CPC since 2018 while waiving any related country sanctions.

Press Freedom

The 2023 HRR states that "threats, harassment, abductions, violence, and killings [including by security forces] led journalists and editors to practice self-censorship and follow editorial directives from the government," adding, "Journalists suffered high levels of violence, or threats of violence, from state and nonstate actors, including political parties." U.S.-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) similarly reports that, in 2023, "Government threats and attacks on the media created a climate of fear," and, "Authorities pressured or threatened media outlets not to criticize government institutions or the judiciary." Paris-based Reporters Without Borders' 2024 *Press Freedom Index* ranks Pakistan 152nd of 180 countries, down from 150th in 2023, asserting that "the political-military elite retains broad control over the media," and "Pakistan is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists."

Freedom of Expression

According to the 2023 HRR, there are "serious restrictions" on free expression and on internet freedom in Pakistan. 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." On the internet, "The government uses a systematic, nationwide, content-monitoring and filtering system to restrict or block 'unlawful' content," including materials deemed un-Islamic or critical of the state or military forces. HRW claims Pakistani authorities "routinely use draconian counterterrorism and sedition laws to intimidate peaceful critics." Freedom House rates Pakistan's internet as "Not Free." It also criticizes Pakistani authorities for "a long history of using the education system to portray Hindus and other non-Muslims negatively and to rationalize enmity between Pakistan and India," assessing that, "Past attempts

to modernize education and introduce religious tolerance into school textbooks have made little progress.”

Civil Society

The 2023 HRR reports “overly restrictive laws for the operation of [NGOs] and civil society organizations” in Pakistan: “The government increasingly restricted the operating ability of NGOs ... 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.” Freedom House similarly reports that both domestic and foreign NGOs face “intrusive registration requirements and vetting by military intelligence officials.” The HRCP argues that Pakistan’s government had “gone so far as to prevent prominent members of civil society from expressing their views” on the country’s Afghan refugee deportation policy in 2023.

Corruption

The 2023 HRR finds that in Pakistan “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.” Berlin-based Transparency International’s *Corruption Perceptions Index 2023* ranks Pakistan 133rd of 180 countries, with a slightly improved score and “strong judicial oversight” halting a four-year downward trend. Freedom House calls official corruption in Pakistan “endemic in practice.”

Enforced Disappearances and Extrajudicial Killings

From the 2023 HRR: “Kidnappings and enforced disappearances of persons took place across the country,” and, “There were numerous reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings” in 2023. London-based Amnesty International similarly reports: “As in previous years, enforced disappearances of journalists, human rights defenders and critics of the government and military establishment were carried out by authorities with impunity.” The HRCP’s *State of Human Rights in 2023* found “short-term disappearances being used increasingly to silence dissent” and, along with extrajudicial killings and torture by state agencies, “showed no signs of abatement.”

Human Trafficking and Bonded Labor

The State Department’s *2022 Trafficking in Persons Report* places Pakistan in the “Tier 2” category, meaning its government “does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, but is making significant efforts to do so.” It finds the government did not meet standards in areas including “inadequate” law enforcement efforts against labor trafficking and “inadequate” action on “credible reports of official complicity in trafficking.” The HRCP finds that “a serious lack of coordination among law enforcement agencies continues to allow [human] traffickers to operate with impunity.” The U.S. Department of Labor says “children in Pakistan are vulnerable to the worst forms of child labor, including commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking.”

Women’s Status

There continues to be “extensive gender-based violence” in Pakistan, as per the 2023 HRR: “Women faced legal and economic discrimination. The law prohibited discrimination based on sex, but authorities did not enforce it.... Women were victims of various types of societal violence and abuse, including so-called honor killings, forced marriages and conversions, imposed isolation, and usage as chattel to settle tribal disputes.” Freedom House assesses that “Women face discrimination in employment despite legal protections and are placed at a disadvantage under personal status laws. Many perpetrators of gender-based violence and sexual harassment or discrimination enjoy impunity.” The World Economic Forum *Global Gender Gap Report 2023* ranks Pakistan 142nd of 146 countries, just above Iran, with an especially low score in the “Economic Participation and Opportunity” subcategory.

Human Rights in Kashmir

In 2019, the UNHRC assessed that the people of Pakistan-administered Kashmir are “deprived of a number of fundamental human rights, particularly in relation to freedoms of expression and opinion, peaceful assembly and association.” Freedom House continues to designate Pakistan-administered Kashmir as “Not Free,” arguing that “any political activity deemed contrary to Pakistan’s policy on Kashmir” is restricted. The 2023 HRR notes that, to publish in the region, media owners continued to require permission from federal government agencies, and that citizens of the region have no representation in the national parliament. The HRCP concludes that “crackdowns” on economic demonstrations in Pakistan Kashmir in 2023 included “severe human rights violations.”

Other Issues

The 2023 HRR also finds significant human rights issues in Pakistan included, among others, “credible reports of” torture and cases of cruel or inhuman treatment by the government or its agents; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; transnational repression against individuals in another country; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; enforcement of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and significant or systematic restrictions on workers’ freedom of association.

Issues for Congress

For 15 years, from FY2009 through FY2023, Congress formally linked U.S. foreign assistance to Pakistan to improvements in that country’s democratization and human rights conditions (all but one of the limitation provisions provided the Administration with waiver authority). The Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024 (P.L. 118-47) contains no such linkages. Also in the 118th Congress, H.Res. 901—expressing support for democracy and human rights in Pakistan—was passed unanimously by the House Foreign Affairs Committee in March 2024.

The Biden Administration requests \$103 million in foreign assistance to Pakistan for FY2025. Congress could consider

whether or not to condition some or all of such aid on improvements in democracy and human rights in Pakistan.

K. Alan Kronstadt, Specialist in South Asian Affairs

IF12215

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.