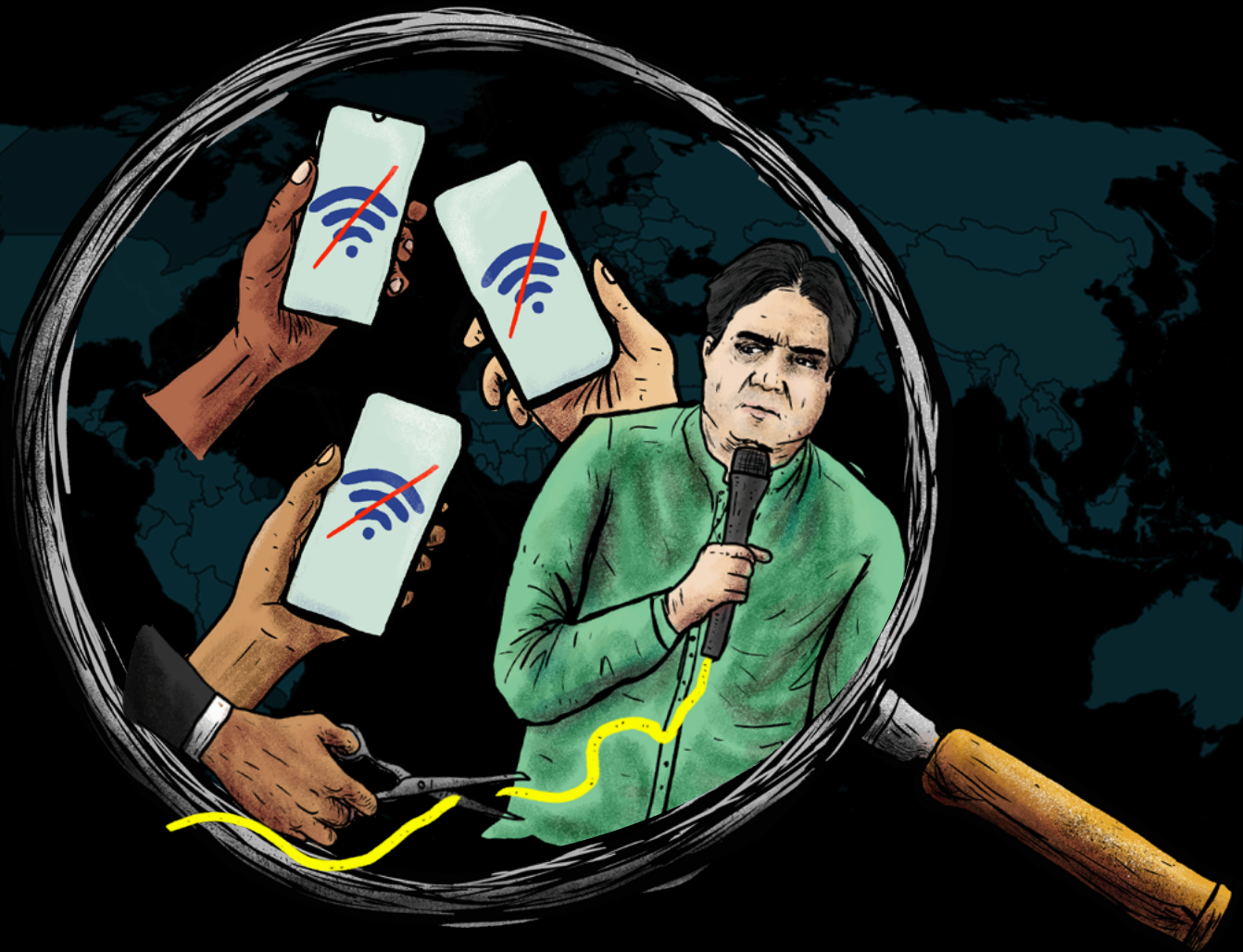




CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

PAKISTAN

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS



INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's civic space is rated as ['repressed'](#) by the CIVICUS Monitor. Ahead of the elections, in February 2024, Shehbaz Sharif - the president of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) - was the [prime minister](#). He came to power in April 2022, following the removal of Imran Khan, who leads the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, in a vote of no confidence. In recent years, the CIVICUS Monitor has documented a [systematic assault](#) on civic space in Pakistan. This includes criminalisation, threats against and harassment of human rights defenders and the failure to hold perpetrators to account. There have also been efforts to intimidate and censor journalists and media outlets and silence online expression, as well as restrictions and attacks on peaceful protests, especially by ethnic Pashtun minorities and women's rights activists. There has also been a lack of accountability for cases of enforced disappearances.

Backed by Pakistan's powerful and influential military establishment, Pakistan PML-N was [expected to win](#) the 8 February legislative elections restoring former prime minister Nawaz Sharif to his old post. However, politicians allied with jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan's PTI party won the most seats and no party achieved a simple majority. At the time of writing, a coalition of six parties led by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) are poised to [form](#) the new government. Khan has insisted that this coalition would [lack credibility](#) and alleged that his PTI party was deprived of a far greater mandate by widespread rigging and the manipulation of results.

The lead up to the elections was marred by a [widespread clampdown](#) on freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association. International observers including the [European Union](#), [United States](#) and the [United Kingdom](#) expressed concern about the fundamental fairness of the elections and called for an investigation into claims of election irregularities.

The country has been added to the CIVICUS Monitor Watchlist due to the civic space violations in recent months. This includes a crackdown on the opposition, internet and mobile shutdowns and the suppression of protests. Human rights defenders and journalists have also been targeted as well as ethnic minority Baloch and Pashtun activists.

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in [Pakistan](#) as **"Repressed"**.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED**REPRESSED****OBSTRUCTED****NARROWED****OPEN**

CRACKDOWN ON THE OPPOSITION AROUND THE ELECTIONS

A [government crackdown](#) on protests in 2023 by opposition parties, primarily the PTI, resulted in hundreds of detentions. Many were charged under [vague and overbroad laws](#) prohibiting rioting and creating threats to public order. A number of PTI party leaders were allegedly detained and resurfaced days after their [disappearance](#) to announce they were leaving the party and distancing themselves from Khan. Dozens were also tried in [military courts](#) in violation of international law before the Supreme Court declared the trials to be [null and void](#).

On 6 February, a spokesperson for the [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) said they were “disturbed by the pattern of harassment, arrests and prolonged detentions of leaders of the PTI party and their supporters which has continued during the election period.”

Ahead of the elections, the nomination papers of some national and provincial leaders of PTI were rejected by the election commission. Therefore they were forced to contest the election as [independent](#) candidates. The commission also [barred](#) the PTI party from using its iconic cricket bat electoral symbol, citing alleged irregularities in recent internal party elections.

Pakistani media were also [barred from reporting](#) Khan’s speeches or rallies on TV. In January 2024 it was reported that multiple journalists working in newsrooms of various TV news channels and web outlets received instructions effectively imposing near-blanket censorship on coverage of the PTI party ahead of the elections.

Police also [imposed](#) a ban around opposition protests in the federal capital Islamabad following the election, under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, a colonial-era provision, and warned they would take strict action. On 12 February, police [fired tear gas](#) to disperse PTI supporters in Rawalpindi city after the party held protests outside election offices where they said rigging had taken place. At least 350 protesters were [charged](#). Another gathering of around 200 PTI supporters in Lahore was dispersed quickly when police moved in with riot shields and batons.

INTERNET AND MOBILE PHONE SERVICES SHUT DOWN

A number of incidents of internet shutdowns were reported around the elections. In December 2023, the authorities in Pakistan [temporarily slowed down internet services](#) and blocked access to major social media platforms - including X/ Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube - amid a rare online rally organised by the opposition PTI. NetBlocks, an independent global internet monitor, [confirmed](#) the internet disruption. Users reported having [difficulty accessing social media platforms](#) in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad.

On 7 January 2024, Internet and social media services across Pakistan were severely disrupted as the PTI prepared to launch a massive online campaign ahead of elections. Netblocks [said](#): “The incident is consistent with previous social media filtering events which have all been imposed during opposition party rallies or speeches by opposition leader Imran Khan. Such nation-scale social media targeting of political activities is almost unprecedented at this scale.”

On 20 January 2024, the authorities [disrupted social media and internet services](#) again to undermine a PTI “virtual” election rally. Independent monitors [reported](#) that internet users could not access YouTube, Facebook, X/Twitter and Instagram in the run-up to and during the evening online event.

Widespread internet disruptions and mobile phone suspensions were again [reported](#) on 8 February, the day of the elections. The Ministry of Interior justified the action by citing recent armed attacks and that such “security measures are essential to maintain the law and order”.

[Amnesty International](#) said that the decision to suspend telecommunications and mobile internet services on an election day was “reckless to impede access to information as people head out to polling stations.” The [Committee to Protect Journalists \(CPJ\)](#) condemned the disruptions, with reports of journalists prevented from coverage in some areas severely undermining citizens’ rights to stay informed.

[Internet outages](#) and restrictions on social media applications were again imposed in Pakistan on 17 February after a senior government official made a public admission of vote manipulation in the elections. VPN services were also [restricted](#).

TARGETING OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND JOURNALISTS

Human rights defenders and journalists remain at risk for undertaking their work in Pakistan. In recent months, a number of incidents were reported.

On 27 November 2023, police, accompanied by plainclothes police officers, raided the home of woman human rights defender Hooran Baloch in Quetta, Balochistan. According to [Front Line Defenders](#), police forcibly entered the premises where they threatened and filmed Hooran Baloch and her family without consent. At the end of the two-hour raid, police arrested Hooran Baloch’s brother-in-law, Ali Nawaz, who was released after being detained for two hours.

Hooran Baloch is a woman human rights defender and the Research Coordinator of the Voice for Baloch Missing Persons (VBMP) based in Balochistan. VBMP, which was established in 2009, is a key organisation that supports victims and relatives of enforced disappearances in Balochistan. It documents violations and is a strong advocate for release, redress and accountability.

Sindhi political activist Hidayatullah Lohar was [killed](#) by unknown gunmen on 16 February 2024. Lohar was an [advocate](#) of religious liberty and human rights for the Sindhis. He had been [forcibly disappeared](#) in 2017 and reappeared two years later.

In August 2023, Pakistan’s media watchdog, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), directed all TV channels to [stop giving airtime](#) to journalists considered close to former Prime Minister Imran Khan and individuals accused of criticising the military or the government.

In the same month, police [arrested](#) Fayaz Zafar, a reporter and Pashto-language broadcaster for Voice of America Deewa and Daily Mashriq newspaper in northwest Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province’s Swat District. They accused him of using social media to spread “fake, offensive and hatred contents to defame and incite the public” against the government and law enforcement agencies. Zafar said six officers also beat him with their guns and fists. He was released the following day without charge. The journalist said he believed that he was targeted for his recent reporting.

Prominent journalist and anchor person Imran Riaz Khan, who had been missing for more than four months, [returned home](#) in September 2023. The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) [arrested](#) Imran Riaz Khan on 11th May 2023 for ‘inciting violence’. The Lahore High Court of Pakistan ordered the police to release him the next day and he disappeared after his release from prison. Enforced disappearances have long been used as a tool by the Pakistani authorities to target critics, dissenting voices, minority groups, journalists and human rights defenders.

SUPPRESSION OF BALOCH AND PASHTUN ACTIVISTS

There has been a long campaign around historic and ongoing violations by the authorities against the Baloch community, including enforced and involuntary disappearance, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention and torture. ‘The Baloch Long March’ was a women led peaceful protest campaign which started on 6 December 2023. It was initiated after the provincial Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) allegedly [killed](#) a 24-year-old man. He had been in custody for a month, accused of possessing explosives.

According to Amnesty International, at least [20 people were arrested](#) on 17th December 2023 while they were moving from the Dera Ghazi Khan district in the Punjab province.

On 20 December 2023, the authorities blocked protesters involved in ‘the Baloch Long March’ from entering Islamabad and put-up barricades to impede them. [Front Line Defenders reported](#) that the authorities used excessive force, including tear gas, batons and water cannon against peaceful protesters including elderly people and minors. [Videos shared on social media](#) showed police dragging women, swinging batons and using water cannon in freezing temperatures. At least 290 Baloch activists were [arrested](#). They were released on 25th December 2023.

On 14th January 2024, police [arrested around 65 participants](#) of a rally held in Lyari to express solidarity with the Baloch Yakjehti Council (BYC’s) sit-in in Islamabad a day before and booked them in multiple cases pertaining to rioting.

Separately, the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) have also been targeted. The PTM is an informal network of Pashtun activists that in recent years has mobilised nationwide against systemic discrimination and human rights violations targeting the ethnic Pashtun people in Pakistan. They have faced [arbitrary arrests and prosecution](#) for their activism. Their protests have been restricted and censored in the media.

In November 2023 Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) leader Ali Wazir was [arrested](#) in Dera. He was picked up by the Daraban police while travelling to Dera from Quetta in a private car. Several cases have been registered against Wazir in different police stations, pertaining to ‘making speeches against state institutions’ and ‘incendiary statements’.

In December 2023, Manzoor Pashteen, leader of the PTM, was [arrested](#) in connection with a shooting incident, as well as for violating a ban on entering Balochistan province. He was detained after authorities said armed men in his vehicle opened fire on police. However, The PTM issued a statement alleging Pashteen’s vehicle was fired at by law enforcement agencies while he was travelling from Chaman to the nearby city of Turbat, where he was scheduled to address a protest. Mohsin Dawar, a former lawmaker and a leader of the PTM, was shot after [police opened fire](#) at a protest in North Waziristan’s Miranshah. Dawar’s supporters were protesting against the delay in announcing election results.

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS

The violations highlighted above are inconsistent with Pakistan’s international obligations, including those under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which Pakistan ratified in 2008. These include obligations to respect and protect the rights to freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. These fundamental freedoms are also guaranteed in Pakistan’s Constitution.

Further, in July 2023, the [UN Human Rights Council adopted](#) the [Universal Periodic Review \(UPR\)](#) of Pakistan. Among the recommendations supported by Pakistan were to investigate all reports of intimidation and violence against journalists and human rights defenders, end the extra-legal use of force as well as the use of enforced disappearances and to guarantee a safe and enabling environment for the work of journalists and human rights defenders. The government is clearly failing to implement these recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF PAKISTAN:

- Halt all forms of restrictions, harassment and intimidation of the political opposition and undertake an independent investigation of all violations of civic freedoms against political candidates and parties committed around the elections. The findings must be made public, and all the perpetrators involved must be brought to justice.
- Remove all restrictions to the right to peaceful assembly including the use of Section 144 of the Criminal Code and unconditionally and immediately release all protesters who have been detained for exercising their right to the freedom of peaceful assembly and review their cases to prevent further harassment.
- Immediately and impartially investigate all instances of extrajudicial killing and excessive force committed by security forces in the context of protests.
- Refrain from ordering the blanket and arbitrary disruption of telecommunications services, social media platforms, or other digital communication platforms after the elections, ensure that telecommunications and ISPs inform the people of Pakistan of any potential disruptions, and take all reasonable steps to remedy any identified disruptions likely to impact their quality of service.
- Provide civil society members, human rights defenders and journalists with a safe and secure environment in which to carry out their work. Conduct impartial, thorough and effective investigations into all cases of killings, enforced disappearances, attacks, harassment and intimidation against them and bring the perpetrators of such offences to justice.
- End the arrest, harassment and intimidation of Baloch and Pashtun activists and their supporters and ensure that they can freely express their opinions and dissent without fear of reprisals. Further, release all Baloch and Pashtun activists arrested for exercising their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and drop all charges against them.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

- Call on the Pakistan government to protect the rights to the freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression, release all those arbitrarily detained for their peaceful activism and ensure an impartial and thorough investigation into the use of force against protesters and civilians during the protests.
- Take steps through embassies and representations to respond to the harassment, arbitrary arrests and prosecution of human rights defenders, journalists, the political opposition and protesters, including by voicing concerns with the authorities, attending trials, issuing statements and visiting activists in detention.
- Make public statements, including at the Human Rights Council, raising the concerns outlined above.