



KEY ISSUES

Covid-19 crisis

- On the last day of the year, the virus death toll had risen to 10,105 and confirmed cases to 479,715, with fears increasing over the emergence of a new, more contagious variant.
- Hundreds of thousands of factory workers and private employees were laid off during the pandemic lockdown, with daily wage earners the hardest hit.
- Overcrowding and lack of hygiene in most jails increased prisoners' risk of exposure to infection, with the Ministry of Human Rights admitting that standard operating procedures in the jails it had visited were being implemented 'loosely.'
- The pandemic was a huge blow to educational institutions, with students compelled to attend online classes to the detriment of thousands in Balochistan, the tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Gilgit-Baltistan, who had little or no access to reliable internet connections.
- The high-level National Coordination Committee and National Command and Operation Centre—set up at the outset of the Covid-19 crisis—was established without parliamentary approval.
- The Sindh Covid-19 Emergency Relief Ordinance 2020 was an important response to the Covid-19 crisis in terms of providing relief to workers, tenants and parents of school-going children.
- Freedom of movement was necessarily curtailed to a significant degree in all provinces and federal territories to reduce the risk of contagion, although such restrictions were reportedly applied arbitrarily in some instances.
- Action to curtail assembly during the pandemic was erratic, with political gatherings facing more restrictions than large religious congregations.

Laws and law-making

- A total of 85 acts were passed by Parliament and the provincial assemblies: 20 federal acts and 65 provincial acts. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly passed 38 acts—more than any other provincial assembly this year.

- The federal government continued to issue presidential ordinances – eight in 2020 – thereby circumventing correct constitutional and parliamentary procedures.
- A key achievement of the National Assembly was the approval of the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act on 10 March. The act is expected to help curb crimes against children through a prompt response mechanism.

Administration of justice

- By year-end, there were over 2.1 million cases pending in the judiciary, as against almost 1.8 million in 2019.
- The National Accountability Bureau continued its operations as an instrument that violates fundamental human rights, including the right to fair trial and due process, the right to dignity, freedom of movement and privacy, and the freedom to trade and do business.
- News reports confirmed that 196 men convicted by military courts for alleged terrorism were ordered freed by the Peshawar High Court in a verdict that included a scathing indictment of the miscarriage of justice.
- A presidential reference filed against Justice Qazi Faez Isa of the Supreme Court of Pakistan – on charges of holding assets beyond justifiable means – was seen as a means of intimidating dissenting judges.

The death penalty

- According to data collected from press reports, the death penalty was awarded to at least 177 persons in 2020 – a substantial fall from at least 578 persons in 2019. No executions were reported to have been carried out.

Pakistan and international human rights mechanisms

- While Pakistan completed its review of the fifth periodic report CEDAW, the shadow report submitted by civil society at the 75th session of CEDAW in February made a number of critical recommendations, including the need for a functional, effective national machinery to protect women’s rights.

- As in 2019, requests for country visits from UN Special Rapporteurs – on extrajudicial executions; the situation of human rights defenders; the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism; freedom of religion or belief; and torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment – remained pending.

National human rights institutions

- The National Commission for Human Rights has been dysfunctional since May 2019, pending the appointment of a new chairperson.
- The post of chairperson of the National Commission on the Status of Women has lain vacant since November 2019.
- The Ministry of Human Rights finally notified the National Commission on the Rights of the Child after over a year since the law was enacted.
- Although the AJK Legislative Assembly constituted a commission to document the human rights situation in the region, it was still not functional as of the end of the year.

Law and order

- Militant attacks increased in Sindh, Punjab, and the former tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa witnessed a decline, according to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies.
- The year saw a significant reduction in suicide attacks but an increase in targeted killings, with 49 such attacks compared with 24 in 2019, based on press reports.
- Police personnel – especially in Punjab – were accused of a variety of transgressions, including deaths in custody.
- In October, the inspector general of police in Sindh was abducted by security agencies and forced to issue arrest orders for an opposition party politician, reflecting unjustified pressure on the police even at the highest levels.
- The extrajudicial killing of Hayat Baloch, an unarmed student, by a Frontier Corps soldier in Turbat, Balochistan, sparked bitter condemnation.

Jails and prisoners

- Prisons in Pakistan remain sorely overcrowded, with 79,603 inmates in 116 jails against a sanctioned capacity of 64,099 – an occupancy rate of 124 percent, according to the federal ombudsman.
- Decisions by the high courts to release certain categories of prisoners on bail to reduce the risk of contagion at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic were, unfortunately, cancelled by the Supreme Court.
- Revisions to the Punjab Prison Act and Rules were still pending approval by the government at the end of the year.

Enforced disappearances

- The long-awaited bill aimed at criminalising enforced disappearance as a separate, autonomous offense, has still not been passed despite commitments to this effect by the incumbent government since 2018.
- Since the inception of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (COIED), KP has topped the list in terms of numbers of missing persons. At end-December 2020, the total number of cases registered in the province stood at 2,942.
- The official figures released by the COIED remain an inaccurate reflection of the situation on the ground, with anecdotal reports indicating that people were picked up and released throughout the year and that many families were reluctant to pursue such cases for fear of reprisal.
- Despite a scathing review from the International Commission of Jurists, which maintained that the COIED had failed entirely to address entrenched impunity, the government extended the latter's mandate by another three years.
- On 16 June 2020, more than six months after his disappearance and following an international campaign, the Ministry of Defence confirmed that rights activist Idris Khattak was in their custody and had been charged with treason.
- Senior journalist Matiullah Jan was abducted in Islamabad, allegedly by security agencies, and detained illegally for at least 12 hours, in an attempt to curb political dissent and create an environment of constant fear.

Democratic development

- Local government elections were delayed long past the deadline in all four provinces, thereby violating the Elections Act 2017 and negating the spirit of the 18th constitutional amendment.
- According to the Election Commission of Pakistan, the gender gap in voters has been reduced, with women comprising the majority of new voters added to the rolls.
- When Sindh witnessed a near-breakdown of civic amenities during the monsoon rains, the province's fractured local governance was cited as a key factor.
- The mainstreaming of the newly merged districts (former Federally Administered Tribal Areas) into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province remained a largely unkept promise.
- After initially being postponed from August due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly elections were held in November, with the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf forming the new government.

Freedom of movement

- In October, Mohsin Dawar, a member of the National Assembly and a leader of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), was barred from entering Quetta city allegedly because of 'security risks.'
- Reports that the federal government planned to fence the port town of Gwadar for security reasons compounded fears among residents that their freedom of movement would be curtailed.

Freedom of assembly

- The Karachi Police registered a first investigation report against several PTM leaders in December – including on charges of 'inducing persons to commit offences against the state' – a day after the PTM held a public meeting in the city. Subsequently, Ali Wazir, a member of the National Assembly, was arrested and remains incarcerated as of the end of the year.
- Students in Balochistan and the tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa held vigorous protests demanding better internet connectivity to attend online classes, although scores of demonstrators were arrested under Section 144 of the Pakistan Penal Code, imposed to contain the spread of Covid-19.

Freedom of association

- Although Sindh took a promising lead in approving a bill to restore student unions in 2019, there was no further progress on this in 2020 and none of the other provinces followed suit.
- A strict registration policy continued to govern the operation of non-government organisations across the country, with many fearing that the aim of the various provincial charities acts was to curtail freedom of association far beyond what was permissible under either the Constitution or Pakistan's international legal obligations.

Freedom of expression

- At least ten journalists were murdered and several others threatened, kidnapped, tortured, and arrested while discharging their professional responsibilities, according to the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors.
- The arrest of the head of the Jang group of publications, Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman—on the grounds of a 34-year-old property allotment case—was widely seen as an attempt to pressurise media groups into towing the line.
- In a concerted campaign to gag independent voices, Bilal Farooqi, a journalist with the *Express Tribune*, was arrested on charges of sedition and detained for several hours before being released on bail.
- The murder of journalist Anwar Khetran in Balochistan was linked to his reportage, which had allegedly irked influential tribal lords in the region.
- The passage of the Punjab Tahaffuz-i-Bunyad-i-Islam Bill 2020 was widely condemned as yet another move to quell independent expression and dissent. The bill was eventually reined in under pressure from civil society.
- Curbs on the media continued through the year, with many journalists complaining that they were compelled to self-censor for fear of being persecuted by either non-state or state actors.

Digital rights

- Internet connectivity remained poor or non-existent in a number of districts in Balochistan and the former tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on grounds of 'national security.'

- In Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir, the continued management of internet services by ‘special communications organisations’ affected connectivity to the detriment of students in both regions.
- The notification of the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules in November under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 gave the government legal cover to issue blanket bans on digital content.
- In October, the popular digital app TikTok was temporarily banned on the grounds that it encouraged ‘obscenity’ and ‘immorality.’

Freedom of religion or belief

- Accusations of blasphemy, forced conversions and marginalisation of religious minorities and sects continued through the year.
- HRCP documented at least 31 forced conversions in 2020, six of which involved minors.
- Police data shows that at least 586 persons were booked on charges of blasphemy in 2020, with the overwhelming majority from Punjab.
- Data from the Ahmadiyya community indicates that at least 24 cases were registered against members on religious grounds, including a jeweller who was booked in Toba Tek Singh for having sacrificed a cow and distributed the meat among Sunni Muslims.
- At least three members of the Ahmadiyya community were killed in separate targeted attacks, including an elderly person accused of blasphemy, who was shot dead inside a courtroom.
- The right to worship freely continued to be constricted: when the government announced that a Hindu temple was to be built in Islamabad, extremist groups and mainstream political parties allied with the government protested and vowed to prevent the construction.
- To the consternation of civil society, the National Commission for Minorities constituted under the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony was neither autonomous nor a statutory body as envisioned by the Supreme Court’s 2014 judgment.

Women

- Pakistan was ranked at 151 out of 153 by the World Economic Forum on the global gender gap index.

- HRCP registered a rise in complaints of domestic and online violence, indicating the increased vulnerability of women during the pandemic.
- Based on reports in the press, HRCP recorded 430 cases of honour killing in 2020, involving 148 male and 363 female victims.
- The gang-rape of a woman on the Lahore-Sialkot motorway in September, in the presence of her children, elicited shock and outrage, compounded when the capital city police officer in Lahore callously suggested that she should have ‘chosen her route more carefully.’
- An important victory was won by women’s rights activists who challenged the archaic and demeaning ‘two-finger test’ for virginity in the Lahore High Court.
- In a particularly shocking incident in Turbat, three men gunned down a woman in her home and wounded her four-year-old daughter during an armed robbery. Claims that the men had been sent by the alleged local leader of a ‘death squad’ ignited waves of anger across Balochistan.

Children

- At least 2,960 cases of child abuse were documented across the country, according to one estimate, although the number is likely higher.
- The ages of children abused were particularly disturbing – infants as young as a year old were not spared – and the crimes particularly heinous, ranging from abduction and rape to gang-rape and murder.
- A family in Rawalpindi who beat their eight-year-old maid Zohra Shah to death after she released some caged parrots, sparked an outcry in June.
- In an especially gruesome case in Balochistan, the body of an eight-year-old boy was found hanging from a tree in Killa Abdullah. The post-mortem report confirmed that he had been sexually assaulted by two people.

Labour

- Pursuing its privatisation programme, the management of Pakistan Steel Mills removed over 4,500 workers in a move that was strongly condemned by labour rights activists.

- The Punjab government exempted factories from inspections, in contravention of internationally ratified conventions and local labour laws.
- According to one estimate, 2,437 people working as bonded labourers were released under orders from the Sindh High Court in 2020.
- According to estimates from the Pakistan Central Mines Labour Federation, 116 miners died in accidents onsite during the year, despite which Pakistan has still not ratified ILO Convention 176, which specifies a maximum depth that is deemed safe for miners.
- There were renewed calls for the provincial governments to hold tripartite labour conferences under ILO Convention 144.

Education

- In general, online classes—made necessary by the Covid-19 pandemic—benefited only those fortunate enough to have digital access, with others left to fend for themselves.
- Education observers expressed concerns that the disruption to learning caused by lockdowns would increase the proportion of children out of school.
- University students across the country protested against hikes in tuition fees and demanded fee waivers, with the police using force to dispel many such demonstrations.

Health

- The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the shortcomings of the health sector, both in preparedness and facilities. Mixed messages by the government and lax implementation of standard operating procedures (SOPs) failed to persuade the public of the severity of the pandemic.
- The closure of out-patient departments at major government hospitals during the Covid-19 lockdown contributed to the health crisis.
- The decisions taken in the pandemic crisis were largely economy-driven, aided by an overwhelming majority believing they were protected by their faith and stubbornly eschewing even the basic protection of a mask.

- During the temporary lull in infections after the first wave, observance of SOPs became increasingly relaxed and the anticipated second wave of the virus took its inevitable toll.
- When the pandemic diverted focus from other health issues, the polio vaccine and dengue control drives were virtually suspended till the end of the year, raising concerns about a resurgence.

Environment

- After a brief respite from air pollution during the pandemic lockdown, by the end of the year Faisalabad and Lahore had overtaken Delhi as the world's most polluted cities, with air quality reaching hazardous levels.
- The Sindh government declared 20 districts 'calamity-hit' areas after heavy monsoon rainfall across the province caused at least 30 deaths.
- An official inquiry investigating encroachment and illegal forest clearing in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa revealed that huge swathes of endangered forests had been illegally turned into commercial and residential schemes by land developers and builders in Haripur.