

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing
on
Human Rights in Pakistan

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Opening Remarks of Tariq Ahmad
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Good morning, everyone, and welcome to today's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission briefing on the human rights situation in Pakistan. My name is Tariq Ahmad, and I am a Foreign Law Specialist at the Law Library of Congress, focusing on South Asia. It is my honor to moderate today's discussion titled "Human Rights in Pakistan." We are privileged to have with us two distinguished experts on Pakistan—one specializing in the legal and judicial fields, and the other in public policy and journalism. Together, we will explore the evolving human rights conditions in the country following the February 2024 national elections, amidst ongoing economic, political, and security challenges in the country.

Since the national elections, which have been marred by allegations of electoral irregularities by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the political party led by former Prime Minister Imran Khan, both international and local human rights groups have raised serious concerns about an increased crackdown on political dissent, escalating restrictions on freedom of expression and the press, and a worsening situation for ethnic communities and religious minorities.

Despite some recent judicial victories, including relief and acquittals in cases such as the political gifts case, the marriage *nikkah* case, and the reserved seats case, Pakistan's former Prime Minister, Imran Khan, remains imprisoned due to ongoing cases related to political corruption, incitement to violence by protesters, among other charges. He and his party describe the charges and convictions against him as politically motivated. Reports indicate that restrictions on the right to political assembly and the targeting of political leaders and workers, particularly those associated with PTI, have persisted. This crackdown reached a peak in July when the government announced its decision to ban PTI and pursue treason charges against Imran Khan. The Pakistani government has justified its actions by citing allegations against Khan and his party, including inciting violent protests, leaking classified information, receiving foreign funding, and engaging in corrupt practices. The government asserts that these actions pose a threat to national security and public order.

In addition, the curtailment of freedom of expression and press freedom has intensified. Journalists and civil society organizations are increasingly facing threats, including arrests under anti-terrorism and sedition laws, as well as the misuse of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act. While this law is ostensibly used to combat cybercrimes, it has also been employed to silence dissent and censor online content. Regulatory bodies, such as the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), continue to restrict online content, enforce internet shutdowns, and censor media outlets. Since the February elections, access to the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) has been blocked, and there is growing concern about the rumored implementation of a national firewall to monitor and regulate internet content and social media platforms. This has reportedly led to significant internet disruptions and financial losses for businesses across the country. The government defends many of these measures by citing national security concerns, fighting misinformation, and the need to prevent the incitement of political violence.

In regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, which are experiencing heightened insecurity, militancy, and insurgency, there has been a violent crackdown on peaceful protest movements representing marginalized ethnic communities. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the protest movement is largely a response to the government's heavy-handed approach to combating terrorism and militancy in the region, governance issues, and feelings of marginalization/disaffection. Meanwhile, in Balochistan, it stems from grievances over the exploitation of natural resources and demands for accountability concerning enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings allegedly committed by security and military forces.

Finally, as highlighted by Amnesty International and other human rights groups, there has been a disturbing escalation in attacks and arrests targeting religious minorities, particularly the Ahmadi Muslim community. This community, which has been constitutionally declared non-Muslim and legally barred from referring to themselves as Muslims, has faced arrests for performing religious rites, such as animal sacrifice during the Eid festival. Their mosques, heritage sites, and cemeteries have also been subjected to continuous attacks. Mob-related blasphemy incidents also remain a grave concern. For example, Amnesty International reports that in May 2024, a Christian man was lynched, and his factory was set on fire in Sargodha, Punjab, after being accused of burning pages of the Holy Quran. In June 2024, a 36-year-old Muslim man was burned to death by a mob in Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, over similar allegations.

Today, our two experts will brief us on these and other important issues. Each panelist will present their remarks, and we hope to have some time for questions at the end. Before we begin, I would like to briefly introduce our distinguished panelists and share their backgrounds.