



House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Pakistan: Ongoing Political Repression

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2255 Rayburn

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Chairman Smith, Chairman McGovern, Members, and Commission staff, thank you for this important hearing. Today, I will discuss legal and physical attacks against religious and ethnic minorities in Pakistan. These human rights violations contribute to the erosion of rule of law for all Pakistanis, creating an environment hostile to dissent. The crackdown on freedom of association and expression experienced by the [Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf \(PTI\)](#), as described by my colleagues on the panel, should be understood in the context of this larger assault on human rights.

Attacks on Baloch Activists

The Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) has mobilized thousands to peacefully demand justice, accountability, and an end to enforced disappearances. Yet BYC members who attempt to peacefully protest are arrested, while internet and mobile services are routinely suspended and media coverage of the protests is severely restricted. Dr. Mahrang Baloch, human rights defender and chief organizer of the BYC, as well as BYC leaders Bebag Zehri, Beebow Baloch, Shah Jee Sibghat Ullah, Ghaffar Qambarani and Gulzadi Baloch have been targeted for their activism and held in arbitrary detention since March under Section 3 of the Maintenance of Public Order Act, which allows for preemptive detention of up to 90 days. Provincial authorities frequently invoke the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance to maintain preventative detentions of activists despite them being granted bail, in gross violation of their right to due process and fair trial. Their ongoing detention in excess of 90 days violates local and

¹ Drafted in cooperation with [Amnesty International South Asia, Regional Office](#)

international law. There has also been a larger crackdown on peaceful assemblies in the province. During a protest on March 21st, three protesters were killed through use of unlawful force by law enforcement, according to local activists.

Meanwhile, the Balochistan assembly recently amended its [provincial anti-terrorism law](#) to allow detention for up to 90 days without charges. The detained BYC activists could have their detentions extended further under this law, indicating the weaponization of anti-terrorism and public order laws. Last week the BYC [announced](#) that its detained activists had been relocated and that their families were being denied access, raising grave concerns for their safety and well-being.² They are reportedly being denied adequate healthcare and are at risk of torture while in arbitrary detention. Dr. Mahrang and the other activists have not been given due process and should be freed. Those watching can join Amnesty International in calling for their release by joining our [Urgent Action](#) and writing to Pakistani authorities.

The past six months has also seen a marked increase in enforced disappearances and extrajudicial execution targeting Baloch activists. Just two weeks ago, 21-year-old BYC member Zeeshan Zaheer was abducted. Eight hours later his [bullet ridden body](#) was dumped. Mr. Zaheer's father was forcibly disappeared in 2015. On July 5th, protesters peacefully demanding justice for Mr. Zaheer were met with unnecessary force and five were unlawfully detained under the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance. This cycle of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, unnecessary force, and arbitrary detention of protesters represents a [systematic attack](#) on the rights of the Baloch community and it must end.

Attacks on Religious Minorities

For decades, Section 298-C of Pakistan's Penal Code has placed severe restrictions on the right to freedom of belief and religion for members of the Ahmadi community, including [barring](#) them from calling themselves Muslims, practicing their faith in public, or even calling their places of worship mosques. Harassment of Ahmadis has become a common practice after Friday prayers, leading to arrests outside of their place of worship. As recently as last Friday, July 11th, in Lahore, there was another attempted mob attack on an Ahmadi place of worship, but this time police acted quickly to prevent it. Harassment and restrictions against Ahmadis also spiked around Eid last month, when individuals were forced to sign affidavits to refrain from Eid prayers and rituals. Fewer physical attacks were reported during this year's Eid holiday than in past years, likely because more Ahmadis chose to stay in their houses out of fear. Three Ahmadis have been killed since mid-April in apparent targeted attacks.

Instead of protecting this community, local authorities have [arrested](#) Ahmadis, including children, outside of their places of worship around Friday prayers. Even the [Lahore High Court Bar](#) has lobbied for restrictions on the community. These institutions should be protecting the rights of religious minorities, not attacking those rights. Denying Ahmadis their right to freedom of religion and belief is a violation of Article 20 of Pakistan's Constitution and the government's

² On July 18, the activists appeared at an anti-terrorism court hearing, where their detention was extended by another 15 days.

international human rights obligations, including under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) as well as other instruments.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's vaguely-worded blasphemy laws are increasingly being weaponized by majoritarian religious groups, while the accused have few means to defend themselves. In [2024](#) alone, 344 new cases were opened following blasphemy allegations. This caused widespread harassment and intimidation against religious minorities, though most cases were against the recognized Muslim community. Ten of those accused of blasphemy last year were extra-judicially executed.

This weaponization of blasphemy laws has precipitated a breakdown in the rule of law itself. Although the police at times may rescue accused people from violent mobs, the police are pressured into doing "damage control" by putting the accused into detention. In some cases, law enforcement officers have been involved in the killing of suspects. In September 2024, a police officer in Quetta, Balochistan province, [killed](#) a man in custody on suspicion of blasphemy. The same month, a doctor accused of blasphemy was [killed](#) by police officers in a staged "encounter" in Umerkot, in Sindh province. His body was later violently taken from the family and burnt by a crowd. Meanwhile, judges are afraid to acquit the accused, lest they become targets themselves, and lawyers are afraid to defend those accused. As a result, people are falsely accused of blasphemy, while their accusers and violent mobs are mostly granted impunity.

In 2023, [allegations of blasphemy](#) against two Christian residents of Jaranwala, in Punjab province, led to a mob vandalizing and destroying over 20 churches and more than 80 Christian houses. The two Christian brothers accused of blasphemy were acquitted, but a Christian man was sentenced to death for allegedly sharing a blasphemous TikTok video that was alleged to have incited the riots. Even when the accused are tried, the trial process is often long and drawn out. For example, Anwar Kenneth, a Christian man convicted for blasphemy, was acquitted last month after 23 years on death row.

Amnesty International calls for blasphemy laws to be abolished in their entirety. Their weaponization is an ongoing crisis and nightmare for those living through it. Pending abolishment, Congress and the Trump administration should call on the Pakistani government to drop charges and quash any convictions for blasphemy.

Forced Deportations of Afghan Nationals

In September 2023, the Pakistani government announced a [phased deportation plan](#) targeting Afghan refugees and asylum seekers. Since the announcement, Amnesty International has documented a complete lack of transparency, due process and accountability in the unlawful arrests, detentions and deportations of Afghan nationals in Pakistan, which have been exacerbated by increased harassment and hostility toward them. In that time, more than a million Afghan nationals have been forcibly returned to Afghanistan, constituting what may be one of the largest forcible returns of refugees in modern history. People facing forced return to Afghanistan, including [journalists](#), human rights defenders, [women protestors](#), [artists](#), and former government officials are at imminent risk of persecution and repression by the Taliban.

I would add that Afghan women refugee voices would be of particular value to this commission, and perhaps they could be invited back for another hearing to update this commission.

Amnesty International spoke with a 27-year old journalist from Afghanistan who we call [Parwana Rahimi](#) in our report, though that is not her real name. She focused her journalism on the socio-economic challenges faced by Afghan women but started receiving death threats as the Taliban increasingly restricted women journalists and women in general. She left for Pakistan as a matter of survival, but since then has had to deal with threats of deportation and harassment from authorities despite holding a visa and legal documentation. Parwana has said: “I request the Pakistan government to see us as human beings, not just refugees, and to extend their support to Afghan refugees facing genuine difficulties.” She has also urged agencies such as UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to expedite their process to relocate refugees to safer countries, as the uncertainty and challenges in Pakistan continue to mount.

1.4 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan hold Proof of Registration (PoR) cards issued by UNCHR, but those expired June 30th, leaving those Afghans vulnerable to deportation. Pakistani authorities must extend the validity of those cards. Those watching today can join Amnesty International’s [Urgent Action](#) on our website and send a message to the Pakistani government to respect the rights of refugees, immediately stop all deportations, and renew PoR cards for 1.4 million Afghans.

After the November 2024 PTI protests, the government scapegoated Afghans and announced that Afghans would not be allowed to stay in Islamabad without obtaining a “No Objection Certificate.” Police then began racially profiling ethnic Pashtuns, resulting in arbitrary detention and harassment of Afghan nationals and other Pashtuns. Later the government announced that all Afghan nationals without sufficient documentation or holding Afghan Citizen Cards must leave Islamabad and Rawalpindi before April 1st, 2025. Placing restrictions on Afghans from entering or staying in Islamabad created additional barriers to their access to embassies of third countries where they have applied for humanitarian protection.

Afghan nationals staying in Pakistan live in [constant fear](#) of harassment, arbitrary detention and deportation with no due process or lawyers to represent them. Among them are those in the pipeline for U.S. P1, P2, and Special Immigrant Visas (SIV), some of whom fought alongside U.S.

forces for 20 years. Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar announced in February that Afghan refugees whose resettlement in the United States is denied would be deported from Pakistan back to Afghanistan.

The harms against Afghans in Pakistan are compounding: Deportation orders and their looming deadlines have made Afghan refugees vulnerable to extortion by officials who demand bribes, and parents are afraid to send their children to school in case they are picked up for deportation. Some of those receiving support from NGOs have had their aid cut due to the freeze in U.S. foreign aid, making them even more vulnerable. Due to the ongoing conditions in Afghanistan and the risks facing those who are returned, any deportation or forced return of Afghans to Afghanistan violates the principle of non-refoulement.

Crackdowns on Dissent and Transnational Repression

Attacks on the human rights of ethnic and religious minorities are taking place in the context of a larger assault on freedom of expression and association throughout Pakistan, including through crackdowns on dissent and the use of transnational repression.

Authorities have used [laws and digital technology](#) to [restrict freedom of expression](#). Last year, mobile networks were shut down in Gwadar District for over ten days during the Baloch National Gathering in July and August, and for two days in October and four days in November during protests planned by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. Internet speeds were slowed by up to 40% from July and October while the government allegedly upgraded the national web monitoring system to enhance the ability to block content online. Last year, the social media platform X was blocked in February; the ban lasted more than a year and was only lifted in May of this year. Short-term restrictions were also placed on various social media platforms during the election period, particularly during virtual rallies held by the PTI. In 2024, Authorities summoned at least 32 journalists under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) for alleged propaganda against the judiciary. Last November, the journalist Matiullah Jan was arrested on terrorism and narcotics charges for his critical reporting on the government's handling of protests. A court [directive](#) dated June 24th, 2025, seeks to block 27 opposition and journalist YouTube channels that have been critical of the government, threatening one of the few remaining avenues for dissent.

These restrictions also come amid a broader crackdown using military courts to silence critics. [Idris Khattak](#) was detained in 2019 and forcibly disappeared for months before reappearing, when it became clear he had been tried in secret military courts with limited access to legal counsel. Khattak is a human rights defender (HRD) and a former Amnesty International consultant. His trial by military court demonstrates the unfairness and arbitrariness inherent in the use of military courts to try civilians. He is now 62 and suffering from diabetes without meaningful access to healthcare. We need his voice now more than ever and we are calling for his immediate release. In the years since Khattak was first detained, military trials have become common; 85 people who participated in the [protests](#) following the May 9th, 2023 arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan were sentenced in December 2024 by military courts.

As part of its crackdown on dissent, the government has engaged in extensive use of transnational repression. Three family members of political workers from the PTI were forcibly disappeared in June 2024. [Roshan Khattak](#), the cousin of Idris Khattak and himself a government critic studying at Cambridge in the United Kingdom, recently received threats and has sought protection. We have also seen killings of Pakistani HRDs and journalists abroad under suspicious circumstances, including [Arshad Sharif](#), [Karima Baloch](#), and [Sajit Hussein Ahmad Noorani](#), who testified before this commission last month about the disappearance of his two brothers in Pakistan, had his YouTube channel banned. July 2nd, Noorani reported that the government of Pakistan had blocked access in Pakistan to an investigative website that he runs which had reported on what he characterized as wrongdoings and nepotism by Pakistan's Army Chief Gen Asim Munir.

These cases constitute a pattern of enforced disappearance in Pakistan combined with suspicious instances of intimidation, threats and actual violence against HRDs abroad, seemingly intended to chill dissent by intimidating those critical of the Pakistani government and the military.

Recommendations

U.S. Congress and the Trump administration should:

1. Call for an end to the harassment, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and extrajudicial executions of human rights defenders in Pakistan, in particular Baloch human rights defenders who are just exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly;
2. Call on the Pakistani authorities to release and drop charges against all Ahmadis detained solely for exercising their human rights, in particular their right to worship freely, and take concrete steps to protect the full range of their human rights;
3. Call on the Pakistani government to repeal all blasphemy laws and laws that discriminate against the Ahmadi community;
4. Reverse the ban on Afghan nationals entering the United States and the dismantlement of the State Department's Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE) office, and allow the CARE office and the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) to continue to process P1 and P2 visas and SIVs, fulfilling a bipartisan commitment from Congress to support Afghan allies;
5. Extend temporary protected status for Afghans already in the United States; and
6. Call on the Pakistani government to stop the arbitrary arrests, detentions, and harassment of Afghan nationals, and reverse the decision to forcibly deport Afghan nationals.
7. Demand that the Pakistan government ensure Idris Khattak's access to a fair trial in a civilian court and urgently ensure his access to appropriate healthcare, end the use of military trials for civilians, and amend all laws restricting freedom of expression to bring them in line with Pakistan's international legal obligations including Article 19 of the ICCPR; and

8. Communicate a zero-tolerance policy for threats and violence against HRDs in the United States or anywhere.

Before closing, I want to acknowledge that the work of defending human rights in Pakistan and everywhere requires expertise at all levels of government. Amnesty International is gravely concerned by the reckless reorganization of the State Department, drastic cuts to human rights and humanitarian assistance, and, as of last week, the reduction in force affecting critical human rights positions held by dedicated civil servants at the State Department. Congress should act expeditiously, using all oversight, appropriations, and other powers, to prevent permanent damage to the State Department's long-developed institutional expertise and relationships supportive of human rights and refugee protection around the world.

Thank you for your commitment to human rights and I welcome your questions.