



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Pakistan: Ongoing Political Repression

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Room 2255, Rayburn House Office Building

Co-Chair James P. McGovern

As prepared for delivery

Good morning. I join Co-Chair Smith in welcoming you to today's Human Rights Commission hearing on Pakistan.

Here in Washington, interest in Pakistan often begins and ends with its geopolitical orientation. We are often told that if we push too hard on human rights or democracy, we'll be spending our diplomatic capital the wrong way. I don't think that's how we should look at it.

Pakistan is a nuclear-armed country of more than 200 million people, and it is in crisis. On paper, its economy seems to be stabilizing, but IMF-stipulated austerity measures mean that families are struggling more than ever. Climate change makes Pakistan increasingly vulnerable to deadly weather events. Extremist groups continue to inflict violence on civilians.

The instability engendered by these compounding crises makes the region—and the world—less safe. But, to address them, Pakistan must be led by a government that is responsive to the aspirations and needs of its people. The current Pakistani government is not.

We will hear from our witnesses how, in 2022, the military and intelligence establishment orchestrated the removal from office of former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his imprisonment. The Election Commission of Pakistan repeatedly delayed holding national elections. When Pakistanis finally went to the polls in February of 2024, the results were marred by censorship, fraud, and other irregularities, according to international observers. In June 2024, the military-led government moved to ban Khan's party—the PTI—altogether.

Importantly, the tactics being used to repress Imran Khan and the PTI are not new. Governments of all major parties, whether led by the PML-N, the PPP, or even the PTI, have used the powers of the state to promote their own partisan political interests by weaponizing overbroad and discriminatory laws to silence critics and target religious and ethnic minorities.

Take, for example, the case of Idris Khattak, a Pashtun human rights defender known for documenting abuses in Pakistan's northwest. In 2019, he was abducted off the street by plainclothes intelligence officers. He was held *incommunicado* for seven months, denied due process, and tortured. Eventually, he was convicted by a military court under the colonial-era Official Secrets Act with only dubious evidence. He remains in prison today.

I share Idris's story to highlight two things. First, ill-defined and overbroad laws can be used to target anyone—activists, journalists, or prime ministers—who those in power claim to be threatening the status quo. Idris was convicted under the *same law* as former Prime Minister Imran Khan. Yet, government after government has failed to curtail the expansive powers granted by laws like the Official Secrets Act. In fact, Pakistan's punitive legal infrastructure has only grown, and with it, the number of prisoners of conscience within its borders.

Second, the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities fuels resentment in the population, undermining rule of law and rights-based governance required to foster democratic institutions that are responsive to public needs. When people in power decide that some people don't need due process, or protection from violence, or equal rights under the law, it creates a precedent for extending repression to others. When one class of people is denied their rights, everyone else in society is at risk of losing theirs.

As we'll hear today, the ongoing persecution of Ahmadi Muslims and Baloch activists has helped to entrench antidemocratic norms and behaviors.

In June, I led a bipartisan letter to Secretary of State Rubio calling for actions to address the worsening persecution of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Pakistan.

As a sovereign, U.N.-recognized state and a party to seven international human rights conventions, Pakistan has obliged itself to protect human rights and strengthen its democratic institutions.

Within both international organizations and the bilateral U.S.-Pakistan relationship, we must encourage Pakistan to live up to its obligations. A growing number of Members of Congress agree, and are stepping up to move U.S. policy in the right direction. Representatives Joe Wilson and Jimmy Panetta, for example, have introduced the Pakistan Democracy Act, which would require sanctions to be placed on Army Chief of Staff General Asim Munir and others who undermine democracy. I've cosponsored the bill and hope many more of my colleagues will join me.

Since 2022, Members of Congress have stepped up to say: there should be consequences when Pakistani security forces harass and arrest protesters in the streets of major cities like Islamabad. It disturbs me that some of my colleagues cheer when U.S. security forces harass and arrest protestors in the streets of major cities like Los Angeles.

America should always lead by example.

Among the legislatively mandated functions of this Commission is to “collaborate closely with the President of the United States and the Executive Branch...to promote human rights initiatives in the United States Congress.”

On Friday, Secretary Rubio fired 1,350 employees at the State Department. Many of those employees worked at the bureaus of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and Population,

Refugees and Migration—the very places where many of the policies that respond to the issues we will hear about today would be advanced. These are the experts who do vital human rights work. And now they are gone.

Our relationship with Pakistan and its people is complex. Our interests are broad. To unilaterally disarm our capacity to understand and interact on the human rights dimension is a big mistake.

I look forward to hearing the recommendations of the experts before us today. I will be listening closely to them.