

350 Fifth Avenue, 34<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10118-3299  
Tel: +1-212-290-4700  
Fax: +1-212-736-1300; 917-591-3452

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March 11, 2024

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif  
Prime Minister's Secretariat  
Constitution Avenue  
Islamabad, Pakistan  
Via email at: [info@pmo.gov.pk](mailto:info@pmo.gov.pk)

**Re: Human Rights Agenda for the New Government**

Dear Prime Minister Sharif,

Congratulations on being sworn in as prime minister of Pakistan. As your new government takes over, we write to you about the human rights situation in Pakistan and urge that you take some key steps to help address current and longstanding problems.

Human Rights Watch is an independent nongovernmental organization dedicated to defending and protecting human rights. We monitor and report on violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in about 100 countries around the world. We have been addressing human rights issues in Pakistan for more than three decades.

The February election provides you and your government an important opportunity to promote and protect human rights, advance the rule of law, and strengthen democratic institutions in Pakistan.

As you know, the country faces many human rights challenges. We urge you to take concrete steps to defend fundamental civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights in the areas specified below. We believe a proactive human rights agenda is crucial toward achieving this.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to a constructive relationship with your government and would be pleased to discuss these and other matters of mutual concern with you and members of your administration at any time.

Yours sincerely,

Elaine Pearson  
Asia Director  
Human Rights Watch

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## **1. Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**

With poverty, inflation, and unemployment soaring, Pakistan faces one of the worst economic crises in its history, jeopardizing millions of people's rights to health, food, housing, water, and sanitation, among others. The insistence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on austerity and the removal of energy subsidies without adequate compensatory measures has resulted in particular hardship for low-income groups. The government should fulfill the economic, social and cultural rights of all Pakistanis without discrimination by taking effective measures to fully realize the right to social security, in particular by ensuring universal access to benefits including health insurance, parental and disability benefits, unemployment insurance, retirement pension, and child benefits.<sup>1</sup> Any actions taken to address the crisis should be taken in accordance with international human rights law, taking into account the United Nations human rights office "guiding principles on human rights impact assessments of economic reforms,"<sup>2</sup> and avoid harm to marginalized people.

Moreover, Pakistan is among the countries most vulnerable to climate change. It faces rates of warming considerably above average as well as more frequent and intense extreme climate events. Such events have a disproportionate impact on women and girls and are particularly threatening for marginalized and at-risk populations, including older people, people with disabilities, people in poverty, and rural populations. Pakistan's government has a human rights obligation to prevent foreseeable harm from climate change and extreme weather events. It should provide assistance to those communities already affected and take preventive measures to protect the most at-risk groups from climate-related harm. As one example of the kind of efforts the government should expand on, in 2023 the Sindh provincial government initiated a program to rehabilitate those who suffered catastrophic losses in the 2022 floods by providing land titles and funds to construct houses for people who were previously landless. There are 2.1 million eligible beneficiaries of this program.

The Benazir Income Support Program, a government cash transfer program that targets assistance to women living in extreme poverty, is another important initiative assisting millions of households. The government should expand it significantly to move toward universal social protection that would provide benefits to a broader range of people at heightened risk of income insecurity, including children, older people, and people with disabilities.

## **2. Electoral Reforms**

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<sup>1</sup> See United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 19 "The right to social security (art. 9)," E/C.12/GC/19, February 4, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, "Guiding principles on human rights impact assessments of economic reforms," December 19, 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc4057-guiding-principles-human-rights-impact-assessments-economic>.

Various political parties and candidates have alleged that irregularities took place in the February elections. Pakistan has had a history of elections that have raised serious concerns as to whether they were free and fair. Similar election irregularities marred the 2013 and 2018 elections.

Actions by successive Pakistan governments to clamp down on critical voices in the media, nongovernmental organizations, and the political opposition have eroded the infrastructure for upholding human rights and democratic governance. Structural obstacles, such as requirements for computerized identification cards, have effectively disenfranchised many women and members of marginalized groups, including in the recent election.

The incoming parliament should adopt electoral reforms to remove structural barriers to political participation and guard against improper interference in the electoral process.

### **3. Digital Rights**

The Pakistani government should immediately end its crackdown on the right to freedom of expression on the internet. The authorities should cease intimidating internet critics of the government, and release those arbitrarily detained for non-violent comments on social media. The increasingly frequent practice of shutting down mobile phone and internet signals and blocking social media websites should immediately stop.

Internet shutdowns undermine a number of fundamental rights, most immediately the rights to freedom of expression and access to information. However, access to the internet is not only essential for free expression and association, but also for a range of economic and social rights. As governments continue to digitize and automate core social security programs, internet access has and will increasingly become vital for the realization of the rights to social security, education, health, work, and the right to food, among others.

In Pakistan, most shutdowns involve cutting off access to the internet on mobile phones within a certain area. But this translates into an internet blackout for most of the population within this area, because the majority of internet subscribers in Pakistan access the internet by using their mobile devices. Mobile connectivity is even more critical in rural areas, and these shutdowns especially harm people who live in areas where there is little to no access to fixed line internet.

Access to the internet is increasingly recognized as an indispensable enabler of a broad range of human rights guaranteed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and other human rights instruments to which Pakistan is a party.

Article 19(2) of the ICCPR, echoing article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, protects everyone's right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information of all kinds, regardless of frontiers. Governments have the obligation

to respect and ensure the right to freedom of expression without distinction of any kind. Under ICCPR article 19(3), restrictions on the right to freedom of expression are only permissible when they are provided by law and are a necessary and proportionate response to a specified national security or other threat. The restriction must also be the least intrusive option available and must not impair the essence of the right. Restrictions must not be discriminatory and the onus to show that restrictions comply with these conditions is on the government seeking to restrict rights.

#### **4. Freedom of Expression and Attacks on Civil Society**

Media coverage of abuses both by government security forces and militant groups in Pakistan has long been impeded by a climate of fear. Journalists have increasingly practiced self-censorship after numerous attacks by militant groups including the Tehrik-i Taliban in retaliation to criticism, particularly concerning extremist diktats they have issued. Media outlets remain under pressure from the authorities to avoid reporting on certain issues including criticism of government institutions and the judiciary. An independent media is key to robust dialogue that reflects public concerns. Human Rights Watch hopes that your government will foster a culture of political tolerance for media criticism.

The government should also act to end the harassment, intimidation, use of coercion, violence and other abuses against civil society activists by state security forces and militant groups. On October 1, 2015, the government announced the “Policy for Regulation of INGOs in Pakistan,” which requires all international human rights and humanitarian organizations to register and obtain prior permission from the Ministry of Interior to carry out any activities in the country, and to restrict their operations to specific issues and geographical areas. The ministry is broadly empowered to cancel registrations on grounds of “involvement in any activity inconsistent with Pakistan’s national interests, or contrary to Government policy”—terms that have vague meanings and can be broadly used for political reasons.

Human Rights Watch has received several credible reports of government authorities using intimidation, harassment, and surveillance of various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Previous governments have used the “Regulation of INGOs in Pakistan” policy to impede the registration and functioning of international human rights and humanitarian groups. Your government should revise the policy for international NGOs so that it does not contravene the rights to freedom of expression and association and cannot be misused for political reasons to restrict the peaceful activities of nongovernmental organizations.

In August 2016, the Pakistan government enacted the Prevention of Cybercrimes Act, which allows the government to censor online content and to criminalize internet user activity under extremely broad and vague criteria. The law also permits government authorities to access data of internet users without judicial review or oversight.

Human Rights Watch urges your government to review and amend the Prevention of Cybercrimes Act to ensure that it does not criminalize peaceful use of the internet, safeguards privacy rights, and facilitates free expression.

## **5. Prison Reform**

Historically, in Pakistan's severely overcrowded prisons, prisoners have lacked access to legal assistance and adequate health care, food, and other necessities. Poor health care intersects with a range of other rights abuses against prisoners, including torture and mistreatment, and reflects a broken judicial system. Corruption among prison officials and impunity for abusive conduct contribute to serious human rights abuses.

Human Rights Watch strongly supported your visit last April to the Lahore Central Prison in Punjab province and the inspection of the healthcare facilities and kitchen for women prisoners. While visiting the prison hospital, you directed measures to improve sanitation and access to health care and also ordered a dedicated hospital for the prison and expressed the intention for prison reform throughout the country, using Lahore Central Prison as a pilot project. It is crucial that these reform attempts are completed and followed up all over the country to improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis in prisons.

## **6. Freedom of Religion and Belief**

Several people remain on death row in Pakistan after being convicted under the draconian blasphemy law, and hundreds await trial. Most of those facing blasphemy are members of religious minorities and are usually victims of personal disputes.

In recent years, Pakistan has witnessed an increase in blasphemy-related violence while the government continued to encourage discriminatory prosecutions and other forms of discrimination against vulnerable groups by failing to repeal discriminatory laws and using religious rhetoric inciting hatred against minority communities. On February 26, a mob accused a woman of blasphemy because she was wearing a dress with Arabic calligraphy that the crowd mistook for verses from the Quran; the actions by a policewoman to escort the woman to safety saved her from violent attack. In 2023, eight people were killed by violent mobs who accused them of blasphemy.

Human Rights Watch urges the Pakistani government to amend the blasphemy law as a first step towards its repeal.

Members of the Ahmaddiya religious community continue to be a major target for blasphemy prosecutions and subjected to specific anti-Ahmadi laws across Pakistan. They face increasing social discrimination as militant groups and extremists use provisions of the law to prevent Ahmadis from "posing as Muslims."

Human Rights Watch calls on the Pakistani government to repeal the ban on Ahmaddiya religious practice and hold to account all who engage in or incite violence against Ahmadis.

## **7. Violence Against Women and Girls**

Violence against women and girls—including rape, so-called “honor” killings, acid attacks, domestic violence, online gender-based violence, and child and forced marriage—remains a serious problem in Pakistan. Activists estimate that there are about 1,000 so-called “honor” killings every year.

Women from religious minority communities are particularly vulnerable to abuse. A report by the Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan found that at least 1,000 girls belonging to Christian and Hindu communities are forced to marry Muslim men every year. The government has failed to act to stop such child and forced marriages.

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) estimates that 18.9 million girls in Pakistan are married before the age of 18 and 4.6 million before 15. Many married girls experience serious health risks including the risk of death due to pregnancies at a young age and pregnancies that are too closely spaced. Women from religious minority communities remain particularly vulnerable to child and forced marriage. Successive Pakistan governments have done little to stop such child and forced marriages.

Human Rights Watch urges you to take steps to enforce legislation against domestic violence, create and fully implement a comprehensive national action plan to end child marriages, do more to tackle online gender-based violence, and take measures to improve investigation and prosecution of “honor” killings and acid attacks, including reforming all laws that facilitate impunity for these crimes.

## **8. Barriers to Education for Girls and Women**

Women and girls in Pakistan face significant barriers that prevent them from enrolling or staying in school, particularly after they reach puberty. Secondary schools are in shorter supply than primary schools, and colleges are even more scarce, especially for girls. Poorer families are unable to afford school costs such as books, exam fees, stationery, uniforms, school bags, and shoes. Child marriage is both a consequence and a cause of girls not attending school. In Pakistan, 21 percent of girls marry before age 18, and 3 percent marry before age 15.

We urge that your government increase its expenditure on education in line with UNESCO recommended levels needed to fulfill obligations related to the right to education, and to strengthen oversight of provincial education systems’ progress toward achieving parity between girls and boys and universal primary and secondary education for all children. We also ask that you raise the national minimum age of marriage to 18 with no exceptions and

develop and implement a national action plan to end child marriage, with the goal of ending all child marriage by 2030.

## **9. Terrorism and Counterterrorism**

Suicide bombings, armed attacks, and killings by the Tehrik-i Taliban, Islamic State affiliates, and other militant groups continue, targeting politicians, journalists, and religious minorities, as well as state security personnel. Human Rights Watch calls on your government to promptly investigate, fairly prosecute, and appropriately punish the perpetrators of these violent attacks.

Pakistan faces a serious security threat and has deployed measures to contain attacks by armed militants. However, there are serious allegations of human rights violations including torture, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings during counterterrorism operations. Suspects are frequently detained without charge or tried without proper judicial process. Counterterrorism laws also continue to be misused as an instrument of political coercion.

Human Rights Watch urges your government to take all necessary measures to end arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and other ill-treatment, and extrajudicial killings, and appropriately prosecute those responsible. Independent monitors need to be provided access to all detainees and detained terrorism suspects should be provided access to lawyers and to communicate with family members.