

Country Summary: Pakistan

Introduction

Pakistan registered its first two cases of COVID-19 on February 26, 2020 (Arab News, [2020](#)). April and May 2020 saw a huge outbreak of COVID-19 cases in the country (ARY News, [2020](#)) and the government imposed a nationwide lockdown on April 1, 2020 in response (Daily Times, [2020](#)). Even after four months of the lockdown, COVID-19 cases grew to 39,261 with 831 deaths (WHO, [2023](#)). The Government of Pakistan lifted the complete lockdown on March 16, 2022 (Times of India, [2022](#)).

In addition to the lockdown, public authorities in Pakistan took several measures to control the surge in COVID-19 cases. These included screening measures and quarantine centers for people entering the country, transitioning education online, and increased surveillance of the population to monitor the spread of information about the pandemic and prohibition of gatherings (Daily Times, [2020](#), Times of India, [2022](#), Cambridge, [2020](#), National Library of Medicine, [2021](#), Friedrich Naumann Foundation, [2020](#)). Other practices implemented by Pakistan and their impact on civic freedoms are discussed below.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Article 19 of the Constitution of Pakistan protects the right to freedom of expression of the people of Pakistan subject to restrictions on specific grounds (National Assembly of Pakistan, [2021](#)). Despite this protection, the government significantly restricted the freedom of expression in Pakistan (International Media Support, [2020](#)).

In fall 2020, the government introduced The Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (RBUOC), Rules, empowering the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to remove and block online contents deemed to be against: (i) "integrity, security and defence of Pakistan"; (ii) "public order", if the online content contains "false information that threatens the public order, public health and public safety"; and (iii) "decency and morality" as defined in the Pakistan Penal Code (Advoc, [2020](#)). The National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC), the chief body overseeing Pakistan's national COVID-19 response, also issued a policy to curb the spread of misinformation about COVID-19 (The Dawn, [2020](#)). The policy directed media regulatory bodies, including the Federal Investigation Agency to arrest those who spread false information about the pandemic, on cyber-terrorism grounds under Section 10 (a) of the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act. The NCOC justified the arrests by explaining that false information could create a sense of fear, panic, or insecurity in violation of Section 10(a).

Guided by the policy, the police arrested a man in Lahore for publishing false information when he posted that one of his family members contracted COVID-19 (The News, [2020](#)); the police also arrested a leader of the Pakistan People's Party for allegedly spreading false information to create public panic when he wrote on social media that a Chinese national working on a project in Pakistan had been hospitalised for COVID-19 (The News, [2020](#)). In another instance, law enforcement arrested two journalists for covering the conditions of the quarantine centres maintained by the government and handed them over to the Anti-Terrorism Force, a group operated by paramilitary police. The Anti-Terrorism Force tortured the journalists and detained them for three days (RSF, [2020](#), RFERL, [2020](#)).

The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) also issued directives and guidelines which restricted content related to healthcare workers. The directives and guidelines prohibited the telecasting of “offensive behavior” and other actions towards healthcare workers,” the airing of information that could amount to “character assassination of frontline healthcare workers,” and the showing of images and videos of “public interference” with healthcare workers’ work related to COVID. These broad prohibitions on showing content related to healthcare workers’ COVID-19 response restricted the ability of individuals and the media to report on certain aspects of the pandemic.

FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

Despite protections of the right to peacefully assemble under Article 16 of the Constitution and international law, the Government of Pakistan also cracked down on protests during the pandemic. In November 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan made a point of stating that the government would not give permission to the opposition to hold its rallies throughout cities in Pakistan (South Asia Monitor, [2020](#)).

National and provincial authorities also imposed Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which grants authorities the power to issue a temporary order in urgent cases of nuisance or apprehended danger, to restrict protests. For example, the NCOC, Punjab government, and Balochistan government all prohibited public gatherings (Arab News, [2021](#); The Frontier Post, [2020](#); South Asia Monitor, [2021](#)), implementing their powers under Section 144. Under international law, blanket bans on public gatherings violate the freedom of peaceful assembly.

Law enforcement also dispersed protests through violence or arbitrary arrest. For example, police arrested and beat garment workers who protested against arbitrary dismissal, inhumane working situations, and non-payment of wages in their workplace (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, [2021](#)). The police also detained students who organized and attended protests criticizing the transition of classes to online platforms when many students did not have full internet access (The Express Tribune, [2020](#)

and ICNL, [2021](#)). Likewise, the Pakistan riot police used force to dispel protesters and arrested more than a dozen medical staff for violating a ban on public gatherings when they protested the lack of personal protection gear for responding to COVID-19 in 2020 (Arab News, [2020](#)).

RIGHT TO PRIVACY

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan protects the right to privacy under Article 14(1). Despite this protection, the government adopted tracking mechanisms during the pandemic that threatened the privacy of individuals. The government asked its intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to deploy surveillance measures originally used to locate militants to track COVID-19 patients. These included personal call-monitoring mechanisms and geofence tracking that identifies when a person leaves a given geographic location (Dawn, [2020](#)). Because the COVID-19 surveillance was implemented by the intelligence agency, the surveillance was not subject to ordinary judicial oversight, leading to increased risks of abuse. Activists voiced concerns that authorities could abuse COVID-19-related surveillance to monitor journalists and activists (Voice of America, [2020](#)).

The Government also introduced an app to alert people who were potentially exposed to the virus. Reports later revealed that this app raised privacy issues and security concerns: for example, the app was collecting the personal information of the applicants, which was later leaked on social media (Coda, [2020](#), Dawn, [2020](#)).

Conclusion

Pakistan authorities' COVID response measures created obstacles for individuals to exercise their civic freedoms. In addition to dealing with health-related challenges, people faced physical and digital threats to fundamental human rights, including limitations on their ability to share and access information, demonstrate for their interests, and maintain their privacy. It will be essential to continue monitoring the country to ensure that the government does not continue to apply pandemic-era restrictions.